



Secret Baby
for the

MERCILESS

Don

A S H L I E S I L A S

Secret Baby for the Merciless Don

ASHLIE SILAS

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CHAPTER 1

Elena Legan

FOUR YEARS AGO

Growing up, there were two events that shaped me into who I've become. When I was thirteen years old, I watched my father shoot a bullet inside someone's mouth. And when I was fifteen, I watched my older brother beat someone to within an inch of his life.

I don't know the man my father killed. His only relevance to my life is that witnessing his death signaled the end of my innocence. It was the moment my eyes opened and I realized what kind of family I belonged to. I learned a lot of lessons that night. The biggest one was finding out the extent to which my family would go to protect me from the cold, hard truth. I was their little girl, after all. My father went ballistic when he saw me hiding in the corner of the room he'd just killed someone in. I remember being in shock. I remember him talking to me, trying to explain. The next day, he bought me so many presents. Bribes. They got the intended effect. I've never mentioned that night once since it happened. And I've tried hard to forget it ever did.

The second event was a lot tougher to get over. Mostly because the person in question was my first boyfriend, Aiden Cross. He was two years older than me, but that didn't stop me from falling in love with him. Or at least that was what my fifteen-year-old brain thought I was feeling. He didn't know who I was. I went to a rich, private school where all the students were the children of politicians, celebrities, businessmen and women. The elite of New York all sent their kids there. A Legan fit right in. Mostly because no one knew

much about my family. I was able to blend in, to act like I came from a normal family.

Then I met Aiden. He was handsome, rich, and charismatic. I thought he was everything I wanted. I was swept up in my fantasy high-school romance. We were fine, until we had an argument one day and he ended up slapping me across the face. On some level, I could understand that it was an accident, something that happened in the heat of the moment. He tried to apologize, but I broke up with him immediately.

I made a mistake, though, and told my brother what happened. It wasn't like I had much of a choice. Going back home with a busted lip kind of gave it away. My brother showed up the next day with two of his friends. I tried to explain to them that it wasn't necessary but none of them were ready to listen. They managed to corner Aiden. One of the jackasses held me back as I watched my big brother beat him up. Honestly, Aiden got lucky. My dad wasn't aware of the incident—if he had been, Aiden would have been dead. It was hard to watch, though. That was the first time I was exposed to Tony's darkness.

Don't get me wrong, I love my brother. He's my favorite person in the entire world. But he's also the king of raining on my parade. And for the past eighteen years, I've had to deal with it. Until now.

A giggle escapes me as I sway dangerously on the countertop. If I fall, it's likely I'll get a concussion or at least a painful bump in my head. But my whiskey-addled mind isn't at liberty to care about such risks right now.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I look down, and staring up at me are cold, dark blue eyes. For some reason, another giggle escapes me.

“Hey, Jackass Number One,” I greet.

His brows furrow. He takes in the empty glass and bottle on the countertop, before his gaze returns to me. “Really, Elena? Of all the places to get drunk.”

I wrinkle my nose. “It’s a bar with lots of free booze. Where else would I get drunk?”

“Not in my family’s home,” he says through gritted teeth. “You’re underage.”

A snort escapes me. “Dude, you’ve been drinking since you were, like, thirteen.”

“We are not the same.”

At that, a cloud of sadness falls over me. We’re really not. So different, so very fucking different.

“I know. But I got exciting news today,” I say sadly.

He stares at me then, his blue eyes inquisitive. Sometimes, it feels like he’s looking into my mind. I wouldn’t be surprised if he could. Roman De Luca has always felt otherworldly, scary. He huffs out a breath before stepping forward.

“Come on, let’s get you down.”

I slap his hand away from my leg and he glares. “Don’t touch me, I don’t want to break out in hives.”

“Real mature, *lupacchiotta*.”

I roll my eyes at the nickname. He has been calling me that since I dressed up as a wolf for Halloween when I was little. It would be cute, if I didn’t know he was mocking me every time he said it. Very slowly, I lower myself until I’m seated atop the countertop.

Roman is still standing there. We’re eye level now since he’s a six-foot-three giant. I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what the exciting news is?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” he states dryly.

He moves to grab a bottle from the enormous bar, pouring some whiskey into a shot glass before throwing it back.

“Your hypocrisy disgusts me,” I mutter.

He’s underage as well. At least for the next three months, until he turns twenty-one. But no one ever bats an eye at the

amount of alcohol he and my brother consume. It's so unfair. But like he said, we are not the same.

Roman shrugs but doesn't reply to my comment. We both fall silent. I know he's waiting for me to tell him what my exciting news is, but on some level, I don't want to share. I don't want him to know about anything that makes me happy. He'll probably find a way to crush it.

But there's no use withholding this particular information. He'll find out eventually.

"I got into Harvard," I announce.

Briefly, I wonder why he's the first person I'm telling. I just got the news three hours ago. I was in town shopping when I decided to check and I almost screamed my head off in the department store. I'm sure the staff thought I was crazy. I got into my car and drove to my closest home which happens to be the De Lucas'.

It's not my actual home, but it's pretty damn close. Plus, it's the only house with a bar that's not under lock and key. My father doesn't trust me around the alcohol in his house, but here, I knew I'd get easy access. I wanted to come here and tell my brother, but when I couldn't find him, I turned to whiskey to celebrate.

Roman reacts exactly the way I expected him to. He gives me nothing. Not a hint of happiness on my behalf. I'd even take annoyance, but his face is smooth and clear, devoid of emotion. His Adam's apple bobs as he takes another drink.

"What do you want? Congratulations?"

"Like I'd expect congratulations from the devil," I scoff.

He smirks. "You finally got what you wanted. You just couldn't wait to tuck your tail between your legs and run from home."

My stomach clenches. "I'm not running."

"Don't lie to me, Elena. You're terrible at it," he says. "And you are running. It's bad enough your mother left, now you're trying to leave your brother and father as well."

Something tightens in my chest. My fists clench. One thing about Roman De Luca, he's good at reading people and is amazing at saying exactly the right things to make sure they hurt. I hate him. I hate him so much sometimes.

"You'll never understand what it's like to be in my position," I say calmly.

"Oh please, save me the spiel about wanting freedom and space. Your family's meant to protect you. That's all they've done since the moment you were born. If you can't see that, you don't deserve them."

"I'm not talking to you about this."

"Yeah, let's not," he says, taking yet another shot of whiskey.

"You're a horrible person."

At least he's consistent. I just knew he'd find a way to ruin something that made me happy.

He waves his hand at me. "Trust me, *lupacchiotta*, I know. Harvard, though, that's a big deal. Nice to see you putting that big brain to use," he says with a short nod.

I'm not dumb enough to think he's praising me.

"Don't do anything stupid, Elena. Boston's only a four-hour drive."

"Trust me, I'm aware." It's the only reason I was allowed to apply.

"Good. For what it's worth, I hope you have fun. Do everything your heart desires while you're away at college. We both know you'll be back. You'll be a good little Italian girl and return home."

"Fuck you, Roman."

He simply smiles. I decide I've spent enough time in his presence. After one last look, I jump down from the countertop. Unfortunately, I've forgotten that I'm still slightly inebriated. Roman moves fast, reaching me in time to catch me before I face-plant on the floor.

His arms encircle my waist. When those dark blue eyes meet mine, there's only one clear emotion shining through.

Pure, unadulterated hatred.

What did I ever do to you, Roman?

We're both frozen, our eyes locked on each other. I can feel his touch around my waist acutely. I can't remember the last time he willingly touched me. The scent of his cologne surrounds me, musky and a little citrusy. Roman's gaze flickers down to my lips and for a second, the ludicrous idea that he would actually kiss me snakes into my mind.

He lets me go abruptly and I tumble back, my back digging into the countertop. My jaw clenches. I don't thank him for saving me from the fall, and he doesn't say a word either.

I'm about to leave but think better of it, turning around to say one last thing.

“Take care of Jackass Two and Three for me.” He doesn't look at me, but I know he's listening. I continue, “As much as it pains me to admit, you might be the most responsible of the bunch. Keep my brother from getting any STDs and make sure Mike doesn't get himself killed.”

Roman smiles, amused. “And why the hell should I do that for you?”

“Not for me, do it for your best friends. Do it for your family.”

His eyes trail over my face. “As much as it pains me to admit,” he says, parroting my words. “You're part of my family, too. Don't let anything happen to you, Elena. I'll burn Boston to the ground if that happens.”

I nod once in understanding before walking away. I know it's the last time I'll speak to him before leaving for college. He's wrong, though—he said I'd return home like a good little Italian girl. But I have no plans to. Even after graduation, I won't return to New York. I'll find a job and I'll be happy and content. I'll do anything not to fit into the boxes that have been

laid out for me. After all, I wouldn't be Elena Legan if I didn't fight back.

CHAPTER 2

Roman de Luca

PRESENT DAY

A person whose name I can't remember once said that there are four kinds of homicide: felonious, excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy. Growing up in my world, I've learned to add one more kind—the necessary kind. The one where you have no choice. And there's another kind of homicide, one I figured out all on my own. The enjoyable kind. The type of homicide that offers gratification.. Like I'm taking scum off the street.

“THINK VERY CAREFULLY about what you're doing, Vincent,” my father says calmly.

I've known the man my whole life and I can't say I've ever heard him raise his voice. Not even when he's angry. I'm dying to move forward and slam Vincent's head into a wall, but he's surrounded by several men. There aren't any weapons out yet. We don't want this meeting to end in a bloodbath.

Vincent called us here seeking a truce, an end to the battle we've been fighting these past few days. Ever since he managed to convince a few of my father's most trusted capos to turn coat and betray us.

“I have thought carefully,” Vincent says, trying to sound just as calm and confident as my father does.

But he's betrayed by the slight hitch in his voice. I even catch the tremble in his hands. *Fucking coward.* If he wasn't

brave enough to stand up to the Don, then he never should have started this farce of a coup in the first place. I glance around. My father and I might have been a little overconfident by bringing only seven men. Vincent brought twelve. Again, coward.

I'm more furious at the men surrounding him. They used to work for us. Trusted men that benefitted from my family. If they weren't content with the way things were run, they should have come to us. Instead, they decided to side with a dead man.

"And you think this is the right course of action? What are you going to do, Vin? Kill me?" Father questions with a slight curl of his lips.

"You really think I can't do it?" Vincent scoffs.

He's as old as my father with thinning dark hair and brown eyes, a tall, stout man with an eye for trouble. He taught me how to shoot a gun when I was eight years old. That's why all this is pissing me off so much. Because Vincent wasn't just a member of our organization—we considered him family.

"I've been preparing for this for a long time," he continues, and I want so badly to punch the smug smile off his face. "I know the ins and outs of every single part of the De Luca business. I've managed to convince most of our biggest suppliers and investors to back me. I have the support of the Russos. Do you really think there's anything you could do to stop me?"

Outwardly, I don't show any emotion at the mention of the Russos, but inside, I'm seething. The Russos and my family have hated each other for years. Like us, they're one of the five families in the Italian mafia that dominates the underworld in New York City. The only difference is while my family's empire has grown, they've slunk backwards, choosing to retreat to the shadows. They still have some power and influence, but we have much more. It comes as no surprise that they're backing Vincent in his bid to overthrow my father. But it still stings that Vincent went behind our back to broker a deal with them.

“Are you going to tell us why you called for this meeting or are you gonna keep boring us to death?” I question, faking a yawn.

Vincent glares while my father’s gaze cuts sharply to me. He hates it when people speak out of turn. Or when they speak without being spoken to. But I’m getting tired of all the posturing and conversation.

When do I get to break someone’s skull?

Vincent lets out a wry laugh. “Speak only when spoken to, Rome. Or have you forgotten all your dad’s lessons?”

I grit my teeth but don’t reply.

My dad speaks up. “What is it that you want exactly, Vincent?”

“Easy. I want you to step down. Denounce your title and leave me in charge. If you do, I’ll spare you and your family.”

A chuckle escapes me. “That’s a joke, right?”

My dad glares at me again. I inwardly sigh.

“We both know that won’t happen, Vincent. How about I propose another deal? Stop this entire charade, and I’ll even let you live. You’ll only be missing a few fingers by the end.”

He’s smiling by the end of that statement. Anybody who didn’t know the Don would think he was only joking. But he’s being fucking serious. I’ve witnessed first-hand my dad pulling off fingers with pliers. He can be ruthless when spited, and Vincent’s betrayal is the biggest one of all. Considering they’ve known each other for most of their adult life.

“You’re not taking me seriously,” Vincent says with a frown. “How about I let you know just how fucking serious I am?”

It all happens so fast. Vincent pulls out a gun and he aims at the man closest to my father. Before I can reach for mine, a pop cuts through the air. It’s loud. Loud enough to cause a ringing in my ears. Everyone around me stills, and it feels like an eternity before the gravity of the situation hits me. But it’s actually only a second or two before we all move into action.

I grab my gun from the back of my shirt. The weight feels like an added limb. It soothes me, only slightly, as I turn to the person slumped on the floor with blood oozing from his chest. I stare at Miguel for a second. My cousin, my family, and he's dead.

Something chilly rolls through my veins.

"Nobody move," I say, my eyes trained on Vincent.

The men surrounding him have their guns out, as well. We're outnumbered and I have my father to thank for that. He was determined to prove that Vincent wasn't an important enough threat. I think a part of him believed his friend would eventually start to see sense. But he was wrong. And now, there will be hell to pay.

The Don is already prepared, a gun in his hands. His eyes are pitch black, fury rolling off him in waves. There are four men surrounding him, trying to shield him with their bodies. It's the kind of loyalty that can't be bought. Some of the men are our family, others are close enough to be referred to as such. They swore to protect us with their lives, and from the looks on their faces, they plan to do so.

By not joining Vincent, they've proven that they take their vows seriously.

"Fucking *cazzo*," Michael swears beside me.

His muscles are coiled tight. That's our cousin dead on the floor. Our brother. Tony's on my other side, a gun in one hand and a knife in the other. His gaze keeps slipping back to Miguel on the floor. They were close. In our line of business, you have to prepare yourself for death every once in a while. But it's been a long time since we lost anybody.

"I'm going to kill him," I spit. The words are a promise.

"Vincent!" my father roars.

I catch the slight twinge of fear in Vincent's expression. He looks like he can't believe what he just did. He knows better than anybody that he just started a war. The time for negotiations is past. There's no going back after this.

I've always been great at reading people, expressions, body language. I minored in psychology in college. I wanted to understand what made people tick, why they do the things they do. That understanding is the only reason why I'm able to detect the minute Vincent's expression changes to one of resignation and acceptance.

My eyes widen as I watch him whisper something to one of the men guarding him. Then his eyes meet my father's. Time slows. Everything that happens next plays out in slow motion. All it takes is one shot. My dad realizes what's about to happen the exact same moment it happens. All he can do is raise his gun and fire a shot of his own. But it's no use. The bullet meets his forehead and Ricardo De Luca falls down. There's no mistaking the fact that he's dead.

The first thing that comes to mind is that he knew. Vincent knew my father was wearing a bulletproof vest, which is why he shot at the one place he wouldn't be able to survive. He killed him without blinking an eye. A man he has known for several decades. A man that gave him a chance when no one else did, and he shot him without a second thought.

My hand starts to tremble, but I will not fall. I refuse to be broken by this. The last thing I remember is my yell of anguish before everything goes black and all I can think about is murder. The sound of gunshots cut through the air. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tony move away from us, sneaking behind enemy lines. I watch as he slashes the knife across a man's neck before shooting another in the stomach.

The rest of the men who are still alive provide cover as I try my best to reach Vincent. But it's no use. Someone drives a car around. Panic floods through me at the thought of losing the man that killed my father. I shoot as many bullets as I can but none of them hits the mark. Vincent manages to escape.

I empty my last two bullets into the rest of his men, and then my rage tapers out. It's never happened to me before. It's complete and utter depletion that gives way to utter devastation. My chest threatens to cave in on itself as I whirl around.

My dad's right there on the ground, unmoving. Michael is on his knees beside his body, eyes wide with unshed tears. I barely register the blood oozing from the bullet wound on his arm. Out of the four other men who came with us, only one is still alive, fear written across his face.

Very slowly, I lower my body to the ground, kneeling beside my father. I reach for his hand, hoping to feel something, but there's nothing. He doesn't move. I can't feel shit. Not from him and not from myself. My chest is hollow, empty. Someone places a hand on my shoulder.

"Get up," Tony says.

I ignore him.

"Get the fuck up, Rome!" he hisses. "We grieve after revenge."

That opens the floodgates of emotions, and I'm glad rage returns first. *We grieve after revenge*. My father used to say that. It was a consolation, a promise, an encouragement. I know without a doubt he wouldn't want me on the ground crying over him.

There are so many things I have to take care of. But like Tony said, the first is revenge. So I get to my feet. Michael follows suit, and the two of them move to stand beside me.

"You're the Don now, Rome," Michael says, his voice gravelly. "You call the shots."

I've been preparing to become the next Don since I was only a child. I just didn't think it would happen so soon. My dad wasn't set to hand over the position until I was well into my thirties. He should still be alive. Vincent took that away from me. And there will be hell to pay. The De Lucas are famously known for keeping their matters private, but I swear this city will rain blood until the moment my father is avenged.

"Vincent dies before the end of the week," I pronounce.

Beside me, they both nod. We'll do whatever it takes.

CHAPTER 3

Elena

“I ’m gonna go get a drink,” I yell over the loud music thumping in the club.

They all nod in acknowledgment, waving me off. I navigate the crowd, doing my best not to face plant on the floor and slapping off the hands of all the over-eager drunk people. Finally, I find myself in front of the bar. It’s much quieter than the rest of the club, farther from the DJ booth.

The bartender flashes a smile at me. “Hey, what can I get for you?”

“Whiskey on the rocks, please.”

He prepares my drink and I wait, whirling around and staring out at the club. I catch sight of the rest of my friends, or more accurately, my co-workers. We’re not close enough to be friends, but they’re the most meaningful relationship I’ve managed to make since I moved to Boston. I went to college with one or two of them. Once in a while, when we’re all stressed from work, we come here on Fridays. At least I have a unit I can do that with. At least they’ll give a shit if I don’t turn up to work on Monday.

“Here you go, gorgeous,” the bartender says, drawing my attention. I open my purse to hand him some money but he shakes his head. “He already paid for it,” he states, pointing to the end of the bar.

There’s a man there with a flirty smile. He’s Black and covered in tattoos. I’m too far away to make out the color of his eyes, but he’s hot. I raise my drink in thanks and smile

back encouragingly. I came here in search of a hookup. Someone to fuck my brains out and make me forget all the stress from work. I need to release tension and fast. Thankfully, he seems like the right man for the job.

If he wants something, though, he can come over and say it. I stay at the bar longer than I should, taking sips of my drink and doing my best not to glance at him.

He must grow tired of waiting, because a few minutes later, I feel a presence behind me. I whirl around and the tattooed guy is standing there. Some girls might be a little turned off or scared by his menacing physique. But his appearance is exactly what works for me. I've always been drawn to the tattooed, bad-boy type. I suppose a little danger is my thing. Probably because I lived my entire life being bubble-wrapped, treated like fragile glass.

"Hey, beautiful." His voice is a low, deep purr. If I were a weaker girl, I would have melted at the sound.

"Hi," I greet with a wide smile. "Thanks for the drink."

"You're welcome," he says, his brown eyes gleaming. "What's your name?"

"Elena. What's yours?"

"Cal."

"Nice to meet you, Cal."

He settles on the chair beside me and for the next few minutes, he proceeds to ask me about myself. I respect it. Most guys would have immediately asked if I wanted to get out of here and find somewhere private. But he's calm, patient.

"I came here with a couple of acquaintances," I inform him, pointing somewhere behind me.

I have no idea where my co-workers are. My best guess is that they've split off, each of them finding their individual interests to pass the time. We usually come to places like this together but are separate by the end of the night. Still, at least he knows I'm not here alone. Just in case he's a serial killer.

“Hope those friends won’t mind me stealing you away for the night?” Cal questions cockily.

I arch an eyebrow. “Oh, really? And how do you plan to do that? I’m a little too big to fit in your pockets.”

“I can think of somewhere else you’d fit perfectly.” His voice is practically dripping with sexy charm.

Well, there goes my attempt to play hard to get. I place my hand on his shoulder, staring up at him.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. You can steal me all you want.”

My mind is already on the places I would happily let this guy nail me to, starting with a wall in his apartment. I never take men to my place. I like to live life recklessly, but I do keep to certain safety precautions.

Cal’s patience dissipates as soon as we’re outside the club. I let out a giggle as he hauls me over to the wall at the side of the club. One hand is beside my head while the other hand snakes down to my waist. My heart begins to thud in my chest.

This is so stupid, the reasonable voice in my head chants.

His eyes dip to the green cashmere dress hugging my torso, skimming over the expanse of my black-stockinged legs before stopping at my black heels. When he drags his eyes back to meet my green ones, there’s a simmer of desire and heat.

I lift my chin as heat prickles my skin. “You going to kiss me or not?”

He grins. “I knew I was going to get lucky tonight.”

Then his lips land on mine. He’s not the best kisser but he makes up for it with his hands. I moan softly when one slips behind my back, gripping my ass. He squeezes, groaning when I react by digging my nails into the side of his neck. I part my lips to grant him access into my mouth, but before his tongue can sneak in, I get a call.

I let out a huff of frustration. Cal pulls back, eyes dull.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, digging into my purse for my phone.

It’s my brother. *Fuck. I have to answer.*

Tony’s a notorious worrier and there’s a high possibility that if I don’t pick up, he’ll be on the next plane to Boston. It’s not something he hasn’t done before. I still remember the embarrassment when he showed up in the middle of a study session my junior year, looking for me. He wasn’t alone, because he never goes anywhere without his annoying friends. Which means I had three tall, hulking guys show up to disrupt us because my phone was dead and I forgot to charge it.

I offer Cal an apologetic smile before moving away from the wall to answer my phone.

“Tony, I was in the middle of something,” I say, mildly irritated.

He has the worst timing.

“What?” he questions suspiciously.

“Working,” I lie. He doesn’t need to know what I was actually up to. “I have a long list of files to go through before work tomorrow.”

“It’s a Friday,” he says dully. “What’s with all the background noise if you’re working?”

“Tony, tell me why you called,” I say, needing him to move away from this line of questioning.

He pauses for a few seconds. Almost immediately, I know something’s wrong.

“You need to take some time off work. Come home.”

It’s my turn to be suspicious. “What? Why? And why do you sound so sad?”

“Ricardo’s dead.”

Something cracks in my chest. “What?” I ask, my voice coming out in a whisper.

After my mom left, I grew up with two father figures in my life. Ricardo was one of them. To most people, he was the fierce, ruthless Don of the De Luca family. But to me, he was the man that was always patient and kind. He was the only person that was ever on my side when I fucked up. He protected me, and while every single man in my life protects me, Ricardo did it without being too overbearing. I spoke to him on the phone just a month ago.

“Ho-how did it happen?” I question shakily as my eyes fill with tears.

“I’ll explain everything later. It’s all a mess, Lena,” my brother says, sounding so unlike his usual cheery self.

“I know, I know. I’ll be home tomorrow,” I hurriedly tell him. “What about Dad? Is he okay?”

It doesn’t matter how many hang-ups I have about New York, I have to be there for my family.

“Dad’s fine. Listen, I gotta go. Send me a text when you land, I’ll have someone come and escort you from the airport.”

“That’s not—”

“Do not fucking tell me what’s necessary right now, Lena.”

I bite my tongue and grit my teeth. “I understand. See you tomorrow.”

He hangs up, and I exhale a shaky breath. I take a few more seconds to combat my nerves and get a grip on my emotions before turning to Cal, who is leaning against the wall.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

There’s so much I have to do before leaving Boston, first of which is talking to my boss and asking for a leave. The conversation will probably not go over well, but I’ll explain it’s a family emergency. Thankfully, she likes me.

“It’s alright. Need a ride?”

I shake my head and offer him a smile. Cal is a prime example of the fact that appearances can be deceiving. Most

other guys would be pretty sour about the abrupt end of a potential hookup. He's being pretty chill.

"No, it's fine. Get back in there. Maybe you'll get even more lucky and find someone hotter than me," I say teasingly.

He laughs. "I doubt that. Goodbye, Elena."

He walks back toward the club while I order a cab. My mind whirs as I try to imagine what everyone back home must be going through right now.

WHEN I ARRIVE in New York, I'm driven to my family's home first. My dad and brother aren't around, which is typical. They don't spend a lot of time here. I drop off all my luggage before asking to be driven to where I hope they are.

I'm surprised by how empty it is when I arrive on the De Luca property. Usually, there are several men milling about the home, patrolling, talking, scheming. They're usually not allowed into the main home, but they're always around regardless. Today, though, the surroundings are empty. Apart from a few men standing guard, there's no one, no cars and barely any sound.

The guards don't stop me as I walk up to the front door; they know who I am. I haven't been here in over a year, choosing to limit my short visits to the city to my family's home. But once upon a time, I considered this place my second home.

The house is pretty simple. Creamy, smooth walls and modern furniture. There's a lot of art around the place, mostly sculptures and clay figures either made or purchased by Rosario De Luca. The littlest De Luca is one of my friends and an art prodigy. I've always marveled at the things she can create with her hands.

I climb the stairs and head down the hall, choosing to start at Rosa's bedroom in my search for somebody to talk to. I pause in front of the door when I realize she's inside. I can

hear her voice, soft and lyrical, but she sounds horrible right now. She's speaking in low, hushed tones and doing her best to comfort her mother. The door is open slightly, and I can see Rosa on the bed beside her mother, whose head rests against the headboard. Tears stream down the De Luca matriarch's face. My chest cracks a little at the sight.

Maria has never really liked me much. She always said I was too much. Too wild, too loud. I spoke too much and did things carelessly. I was the opposite of a good Italian girl. She hated my recklessness. There was a time after my mother left that Maria stepped up, trying to fill her space. She wanted us to see her as a mother, as well. While Tony was all too happy to do so, I couldn't bear the thought, so I pushed her away. I may have said some hurtful things in the process. I was a thirteen-year-old grieving from being abandoned. Maria listened, though; she backed away, and we've spent the past decade tiptoeing around each other.

Still, I want to move forward and comfort her. I'm woefully unaware of what to do in situations like this. What am I supposed to say to a woman who just lost her husband? Thankfully, Rosa looks up and notices me. She offers me a shaky smile before gesturing for me to give her a minute. I move from the doorway and lean against the wall on the opposite side of the hallway.

Two minutes later, Rosa steps out. She's two years younger than me with long, glossy black hair. She has gorgeous blue eyes and a pretty, doll-like face. She's tall and slim. I've never seen Rosa look anything less than put together. But right now, she's a complete and utter mess. Her eyes are smudged with mascara, her cheeks are wet, and I can tell she's barely holding it together.

I don't hesitate to take a step forward and pull her into my arms.

"Oh, God, Rosa. I am so sorry," I breathe, even though it doesn't feel like enough. It'll never be enough.

She hugs me back for a few seconds before pulling away. "Who told you? Tony?"

I nod. “He was pretty distraught. How are you holding up?”

“Well, I’m still in denial. I keep thinking it’s a joke and my dad will walk up the stairs and hug me, you know?”

“I understand, sweetie,” I say softly.

She has no idea. I spent the first two months after my mother disappeared believing she would come back home and we could be a family again. The situations aren’t comparable, though. My mother abandoned me. Rosa’s father is dead.

“Come on, let’s go downstairs. Mom has asked for space,” she says, taking my arm.

“Are you sure you should leave her alone?” I say hesitantly.

Rosa nods. “She needs it right now. I’m glad none of the men are here. She would have been forced to try her best to keep it together around them. At least now, she can grieve alone.”

“About that. Where did they go?”

She sighs softly. “Roman has ordered that there won’t be any funeral or mourning until they avenge Papa’s death. They’re out there now. Every single man that’s still loyal to the family is trying to capture the man responsible.”

My fists clench. That explains my father and brother’s absence. “Is that really necessary?”

I understand their need for revenge, but shouldn’t they be allowed to mourn the loss of a man who meant so much to all of us?

A sheen appears in Rosa’s eyes. “He’s the Don now. His word is law.”

My eyes bulge as it hits me. I hadn’t even thought about that. “Oh, God. I just realized Roman’s in control now. Everyone’s screwed. There must be a party down in hell.”

It’s a small victory, but I manage to get Rosa to smile at that. A small, tiny smile, but it’s enough.

She bumps her shoulder into my side. “Don’t be mean.”

I shrug. Then my expression sobers. “How is he, though? How’s everybody?”

She sighs. “Well, Roman hasn’t said a word since yesterday except to bark orders at everyone and everything. He has shut down, which is typical. Your dad is pretty much the same. He has this haunted look in his eyes.”

Pain flits across my chest at that. My dad and Ricardo were best friends. He was the closest person to the Don apart from Vincent. I’m sure Dad is blaming himself right now.

Rosa continues, “Your brother hugged me and told me he was sorry. Michael’s walking around with a bullet wound on his shoulder.”

I gasp. “What?”

“He got shot yesterday. He stayed still enough for the doctor to remove the bullet, but he’s refusing any other medical treatment until Vincent is captured. They’re all itching for revenge. We lost Miguel, too. And three other men. I can’t blame them for pushing aside their grief.”

“They’ll be okay,” I murmur soothingly.

We take a seat in the living room and she rests her head on my shoulder. I pull her closer, rubbing her arm. I hate that I returned home in the middle of a disaster. But there’s no other place I’d rather be than by my family’s side during this moment of utter devastation.

We’re still talking when we hear the front door open. We both get to our feet, heading to the foyer. I spot Roman first, followed by Tony and Michael. They all look worse for wear, haggard, tired. I try not to flinch at the sight of the blood spatter on the sleeve of Tony’s shirt. None of them look surprised to see me here. I open my mouth to speak but Rosa beats me to it.

“Is it over? Did you get him?”

Michael’s the one to reply. “Not yet, Rosa.”

“Are you guys okay? Where’s Dad?” I question.

“Dad’s taking care of things on the Upper East Side, problems with a couple investors,” my brother replies. “Good to see you home, *mi hermana*.”

I smile. Roman clears his throat, drawing our attention. I finally look at him—really look at him.

Thick, wavy dark hair, cheekbones so sharp they could chisel ice, and eyes the color of the night sky. His broad shoulders fill out the white shirt he’s wearing. Everything about Roman De Luca screams power and confidence. He exudes sex appeal. He’s probably the most good-looking man I’ve ever seen. He reminds me of the mythological sirens. They reel you in with their beautiful faces and voices and then drown you.

Right now, though, he looks worse than I’ve ever seen him. I open my mouth to ask how he is but decide against it. If I’m lucky, he’ll ignore me; if I’m not, he’ll say something cutting, reminding me how much I dislike him and why. He’s going through a lot. The best thing I can do is keep my distance.

His eyes are also on me, assessing. He hasn’t seen me in over a year. He shakes his head slightly before turning to my brother.

“We don’t have time for pleasantries. You two get changed. We meet the D’Angelos in thirty minutes,” Roman says before walking away.

The D’Angelos? The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it. Before I can question my brother, he shakes his head. He offers me a slight smile and squeezes my shoulder before following the new Don.

Michael stops in front of me to place a kiss on my cheek. “Welcome home, Lena,” he says warmly. Then he’s gone, too.

CHAPTER 4

Roman

There are five mafia families in New York: the De Lucas, the D'Angelos, the Gallos, the Russos and the Mincettis. The Gallos are new. They recently rose to power after the Desantos were crushed into dust by the D'Angelos.

The three most powerful families are inarguably mine, the D'Angelos, and the Mincettis. From what we can tell, the Mincettis are mostly Italians but they have a couple of Russians sprinkled into their mix. They're practically ghosts. Not a lot is known about them. My family is pretty low-key, but the Mincettis are on a whole other level. No one knows the identity of the Don or any members of his family. They conduct their businesses under aliases. What makes them powerful is their invincibility. We have no idea how rich they are, how much power they hold. No one crosses the Mincettis. If you do, you usually don't live to tell the story.

The Russos and Gallos are nothing but snakes. They're the worst of the worst, petty thieves, disorganized. Especially the fucking Russos. My family has hated theirs for years. We're their prime target for crimes. I can't count the number of raids the Russos have orchestrated against our businesses over the years, making away with the majority of our supply of drugs.

The D'Angelo family in the Upper East Side is probably the most popular mafia family in New York. They're high-profile, infamous. The family gets a lot of media attention. They attend galas, society events, and roll with most of the high-class people. We're pretty much the opposite.

Owing to the Russos and their constant interference, our businesses are more international. We have strongholds in Greece, Mexico, China, some parts of Germany, and most of Eastern Europe. Since the D'Angelos businesses are primarily in New York. It's why we're able to keep from stepping on each other's toes.

Our families usually stay out of each other's business. But of the five families, they're the most easily accessible and the only ones I can turn to for help. I hate that I have to ask for help in the first place, but in this case, I have no choice. Sometimes you just have to choke down your pride.

Thankfully, I was able to arrange a meeting with their Don. I know his older brother. Carlo and I met a few years ago when he was in some trouble and I helped him out. I called yesterday asking him to return the favor. He was happy to oblige. Unfortunately, he has retired from the underworld and is currently taking a backseat, but he assured me he would put in a good word to his brother.

Christian D'Angelo is a fucking legend. There aren't a lot of people I would feel inclined to respect, but Christian's definitely one. We might have never spoken but I've heard about his accomplishments. I know who he is and I know what he can do. Our situations are pretty comparable. When his father died, he was also pushed into the position of a Don earlier than expected.

The D'Angelo headquarters is a large building in Bayside. It's prime real estate and would have been fucking expensive to acquire. I'm not surprised they were able to get it, though. Carlo's in-laws own the building. I walk into Christian's office after being searched and discarded of any weapons. Tony and Michael are right behind me. They're the only men I could bring.

Mostly because I don't have any more. Our resources are stretched thin. Some men are doing damage control. Salvador Legan, Tony's dad and my father's advisor, has been busy meeting our suppliers and associates since yesterday. He's our family's consigliere and is great at taking care of delicate situations. We need to know who's on our side and who we're

going to have to kill. Salvador's trying to convince whoever he can to come back to the right side.

Christian doesn't stand as we enter. I didn't expect him to.

"Hello, De Luca," he greets. "Have a seat."

I do as he asks. Silence stretches across the room, each of us waiting for the other to speak first. Seeing as I'm the one in need of something, I decide to break it.

"Thank you for meeting with me. We both know why I'm here," I say, deciding to get right down to the crux of the matter.

He nods. "First off, I'm sorry for your loss. Your father was a great man. I admired him and his efforts."

My throat bobs. "Thank you. Can we move on to business now?" I don't need sympathy.

"Of course." Christian smirks. "You're in a lot of trouble. The worst wars are the ones we fight within ourselves. How does it feel to be betrayed by someone you once trusted?"

My fists clench. I'm pissed he would be so forward with the question, but I can see in his eyes that he's genuinely curious.

"It's feels pretty shitty, D'Angelo. A man my father once trusted killed him without a second thought. I learned a pretty big lesson, though. And you should, too. Even the people closest to you could stab you in the back. Be careful who you trust."

I'm not giving out the advice lightly. With his brother out of commission, Christian probably doesn't have any one else he can rely on. He has another brother, but Topher D'Angelo has always been more interested in partying than murder. Although last I checked, he was happily married with kids.

It might be a bit harsh saying those words with Michael and Tony right behind me—after what happened with my father, I'm less inclined to trust even them completely. But they're my brothers. If I can't trust them, I won't have anyone.

“Thanks for the advice,” Christian says, his jaw clenched slightly. “Now, as to why you’re here. You need my help.”

He says it matter-of-factly but my chest still clenches. I nod once.

“We don’t have enough manpower. I want to take down the people responsible for my father’s death before the end of the week, but the bastard has gone into hiding and I don’t have enough eyes and ears in the city. I know you’re well connected. You can find him in no time.”

Christian leans against his chair as he ponders my words for a few moments. “My brother put in a good word for you. He said you saved his life once.”

“I did.”

“And despite how grateful I am for that, you can understand why I don’t feel like jumping into the fire and getting involved in a gang war. The Russos are involved and we both know things can quickly escalate. Why should I put my family in danger for yours? What can you offer me?”

He’s making solid points. Thankfully, I came prepared. I gesture for Michael to bring the files. He hands it to me and I place it on the table.

“You’re well aware we control the underground heroin fields in Mexico. From what I’ve heard, you’ve been itching to dip your toes into production instead of just supply and demand. If you help us, I’ll relinquish one of our fields to you. And I’ll open trade routes for the D’Angelo family into Mexico.”

Christian arches an eyebrow. “We both know that’s not enough.”

My jaw clenches. I suspected it wouldn’t be.

“I heard you’ve been pushing for James Malone to become the next congressman,” I start.

“Yes, and you’ve been pushing for Coleman,” Christian says, smiling sardonically.

“We’ll back down,” I say through gritted teeth.

The D'Angelos aren't usually involved in politics, but I'm sure their sudden interest has to do with the fact that James Malone is a member of their family. The former director of the FBI is looking to dip his toes into politics, and he's going to use his in-laws to get there.

Christian finally offers me a genuine smile. "Then we have a deal."

We both get to our feet and Christian offers me his hand for a shake.

"For what it's worth, I am sympathetic to your plight. I know exactly how it feels to be thrust into a position you weren't prepared for. The next few months are going to be rough."

"I'm aware. I'll take care of my rough transition as soon as I take care of Vincent," I state. "How long will it take before you find him?"

"Already did. He's hiding out in a warehouse outside of town. I already ordered some men to come along with you. It should be fairly easy to take him down. I got some information before you arrived that the Russos are backing down."

My eyes widen. "What?"

I turn to face Michael. He's already grabbing his phone, trying to see if Christian's words hold any weight. I turn back to the man's steady brown eyes.

"I'm guessing they found out you were meeting me and realized it wasn't a battle they could win. They're pulling out."

"That's not normal Russo behavior," I murmur.

Christian shrugs. "Fight the battles you can fight today."

I blow out a breath and my eyes narrow. "If you knew the Russos were pulling out, why the hell did you let me offer you so much?"

"Why the hell not?" Christian says, smiling.

It's a little odd. From the rumors, he used to be a cold, brutal man. But after meeting his wife and having kids, he's

much warmer. I find it odd that a person could change so drastically, and judging by our meeting, he hasn't.

"Plus, like I said, I'm sure they're pulling out owing to our involvement. You should be grateful, De Luca," he tells me.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. This is still beneficial regardless of his manipulation. "Fine. I hope our partnership holds."

He rounds his desk to stand in front of me. "I hope so, too. Like you said, I need people I can trust. You seem like a good guy, Roman. Friends?"

I consider it for a moment. My eyes drift to my brothers, who both nod encouragingly. It won't hurt to have one of the most powerful mafia families in our corner.

"Sure. If you need anything, you can call me."

He nods. "Good luck."

Leaving the D'Angelo office, I'm feeling much lighter than I came in. The past seventy-two hours have been the worst days of my life, but it's all about to come to an end. I can feel it. As soon as I step outside the D'Angelo building, I'm face to face with about a dozen men. One of them approaches, introduces himself as Slade, and informs me that they're all at my service.

Michael and Tony are already calling whichever of our men are available. We head over to where Vincent is hiding, and when we arrive, it's fairly easy to capture him. He practically surrenders. He always was a smart man. He made some stupid decisions, but he knows when to quit. Some of the men with him put up a fight but are quickly dispatched. It doesn't take long before we've subdued them all. Vincent is moved to our base of operations.

Something inside me simmers and rises. It's almost over.

Salvador's already inside the torture room, which houses a circular table and numerous torture devices. His eyes are hard as I move toward him, offering a short nod. He's an old man in his fifties, graying dark hair and green eyes so much like his daughter's. With the events of the past three days, he has

proven just how honorable and loyal he is. I'm glad he's still here, even if my father isn't.

His jaw clenches as Vincent is brought into the room. The man is surprisingly calm. He has the look of a man who has accepted his own fate. If only it would be that easy. Tony kicks him to his knees before moving to the table and grabbing one of his knives.

He looks like Christmas came early. Tony can be a pretty savage. I've never seen anyone derive as much joy from bloodshed as he does. It's like he has two personalities, choosing to keep his sister and the women in his life away from his darker tendencies.

"Vincent," I start. "Anything to say?"

Jaw clenched, he stares resolutely at the floor and doesn't reply. The anger I had been trying so hard to repress blazes. I walk toward him, grabbing the knife from Tony and digging it into Vincent's side. He howls in pain.

"If I fucking talk to you, you answer. Understand?" I yell.

His face is pale. He finally looks up at me and I'm glad to see some fear in his eyes.

"Fuck you, Roman. I practically raised you."

That was the wrong thing to say. The knife in my hand clatters to the ground and my hands ball into fists. I punch him in the jaw, and I continue hitting him until I'm pulled away.

"Control yourself, Rome," Salvador says into my ear. "He can't die that easily."

I run my hand through my hair in agitation. When I look away, Salvador takes my place, moving to stand in front of the bloodied man.

"You killed Ricardo," he starts. "When I first heard you were planning to go against him, I hoped you wouldn't be stupid enough to cross a line. He would have spared you. Even after what you did, Ricardo would have let you live. You know why? Because you were his brother! You were his brother and you killed him!"

There's heartbreak in his voice. I can understand where Salvador is coming from. The relationship he had with my father and Vincent is similar to the one I have with Tony and Michael. And now one of his brothers is dead, and the other is responsible.

"I didn't want to," Vincent croaks. He spits blood out onto the floor before looking back at Salvador. "I was pressured by the Russos. They wanted me to kill him."

The admission does nothing to dull the embers of my rage. Of course they wanted my father dead.

"You idiot," Salvador says. "And you did exactly what they wanted? Now they've abandoned you."

"Ricardo was a coward. He always wanted to play everything safe. How long have the Russos toyed with us? And he did nothing. I told him time and time again to let us wipe them out. They're growing stronger, Salvador. You have no idea what they're capable of. Something's shifting in that family. I regret what I did to Ricardo—"

Oh, hell no. He doesn't get to fucking say that.

I'm about to move forward again but Michael grabs my arm.

"Don't say his name," Salvador warns. He proceeds to say a few other words in Italian, cursing him out.

Vincent hangs his head in shame. I watch as Salvador clenches and unclenches his fists, like he wants to punch him as well. Instead, he walks away. I move forward again, taking care not to move too close, just in case I lose it and kill him.

"You're going to die today, Vincent. But only after we've made you suffer. When Tony's done with you, I'm going to look you in the eye and put a bullet in your skull, just like you did to my father. I hope you rot in hell."

It's Tony's turn to take over. He's precise in his actions, taking care to stab and poke and slice in all the right places. He's determined to draw out Vincent's anguish, and I'm grateful. I revel in his screams. It goes on for hours. When I'm

sure he's utterly broken, I move forward and keep my promise. I avenge my father.

I wish I could say it dulls the pain. But the truth is, I feel nothing.

THE FUNERAL PASSES IN A BLUR. They speak about my father's achievements. They talk about what a good man he was, fair, honorable. My mother cries. My sister and I have to deal with all the people offering their condolences. It's all fucking overwhelming. And I know that's not the end of it. I'll have so much more to deal with after the funeral is over.

Unfortunately, it seems I made a mistake in not grieving my father's death as soon as it happened. By the time night rolls around, I'm still feeling empty. I should be feeling something. I should be mourning him. Hell, I should probably be crying, but I can't. Everyone else has retreated to their rooms and respective houses. I asked Michael and Tony to leave me alone, and they did so without question. My sister and mother are fast asleep in their rooms, so the house is eerily silent as I try to come to terms with my emotions.

All I feel is this spine-chilling iciness. I want so badly to feel something, anything. I grab a drink from the bar and pour it down my throat, the bitterness a welcome sensation. I take another drink, but this time my movements are jerky, uncontrolled. I can feel myself spiraling out of control.

I exhale a shaky breath. "Fuck."

In my twenty-seven years of living, I've never so much as had a panic attack. I'm not going to start today.

Breathe Roman. Fucking breathe.

It doesn't work, though. All I can see is my father's body on the ground. I didn't even get to say goodbye. One second, he was there, and the next he was just gone. I launch the cup in my hand against the wall. It shatters over the fireplace.

Almost immediately, I hear a squeak of surprise. I whirl around to see Elena Legan standing in the doorway.

If I had to rank the people I would have liked to find me in the middle of a breakdown, she wouldn't be anywhere near the top. Actually, I think she's the last person I want to see me like this. I open my mouth to tell her to fuck off, but she steps forward and enters the room, hypnotizing green eyes fixed on me.

“What did that glass ever do to you?”

CHAPTER 5

Elena

Someone once told me I have no sense of self-preservation. And in this case, I'd like to agree. There's no other explanation for me deciding to interrupt a guy I'm aware is probably a certified psychopath in the middle of an episode.

But he looks like he's in pain. And I can't ignore that.

His eyes flick over my face slowly before he lowers himself onto a chair and leans backward. There's no doubt in my mind that he's trying to give the illusion that he's calm. He always tries so hard to pretend like he's perfect. Because Roman De Luca doesn't get ruffled. Even when he's not at his best, he has to act like he is.

Unfortunately, Roman De Luca is also human. And human beings hurt. Even if they don't want to.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asks.

"I was going home-"

"Good. On your way, then," he says, waving me off.

I shoot him my iciest glare but he simply rolls his eyes, unaffected.

"As I was saying, I *was* going home. But I think I'd like a drink instead," I finish, moving to the bar and taking a seat on one of the stools.

I can feel his dark piercing gaze on me the entire time, but I don't look back. He's trying to unnerve me. And unfortunately, he's very good at it. I want nothing more than to

run from here and not look back. But I can't very well leave him alone.

Why can't I?

I reach for an expensive-looking bottle of whiskey. Whiskey was always Ricardo's beverage of choice, and that sentiment transferred to all of us: me, Roman, Tony, and Michael. Even Rosa likes to indulge occasionally. I guess that's all we've got left of him. The memories he left us, the things he once did.

I feel Roman get to his feet, and a few seconds later, he's sitting beside me. I guess he figured he can't scare me off. He grabs the bottle and after a few seconds of contemplation, pours some of the drink into another glass.

"My dad was saving this for a special occasion," he says, slamming it back in one large gulp. "Guess he can't very well drink it wherever the hell he is now."

My cue to provide comfort. "I'm sure he's in a good place," I say softly.

Roman chuckles. It's a low, mocking sound. "That's very funny, *lupacchiotta*. The only place my father could end up in is hell," he says darkly.

Unfortunately, he's probably right. I pour myself another glass and raise it. *Cheers, Ricardo. I'll miss you.*

I feel Roman's eyes on me as I take a drink. When I turn to him, there's a question dancing in their depths. I arch an eyebrow to prompt it.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Well... I'm trying to save all the glasses in this room. I don't think Maria will be too pleased if she wakes up to find all her expensive glassware smashed."

"No, I mean why are you here? In New York. Aren't you living it up in Boston, doing God knows what?"

"I am. But I also have to be here for my family."

He scoffs. "What? The family you abandoned?"

Irritation flares. I was wondering how long it would take for him to piss me off.

“Don’t you ever get sick of repeating the same things over and over again?”

I never abandoned my family. And I refuse to let him make me feel guilty for going after my dreams. Roman likes to believe I’m this selfish, vapid girl who doesn’t care about anyone but myself.

He shakes his head. “Tell me, what do you do in Boston? I’m assuming you have a boyfriend, probably a boring one. A guy to whisper sweet nothings in your ear. One who makes you feel safe, protected, loved. That’s what you crave, isn’t it, Elena? When it all comes down to it, you’re just a girl with mommy issues. You’ll always wonder why. Why you weren’t enough.”

My fist clenches around the glass. I could keep quiet. Not rise to the bait. He’s hurting right now, and in typical Roman fashion, he’s lashing out. I should be calm and mature about this. But that just wouldn’t be my style.

I flash him a smug smile. “I guess we’re in the same boat now, aren’t we? Your dad died before he could tell you that you were enough. Now you’ll always wonder what he actually thought of you. Just like me.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I want to take them back. He was attacking a wound of mine that’s been there for several years. I just attacked his fresh one. His dad died four days ago.

Yeah, I’m definitely going to hell.

Roman, however, doesn’t look crushed by my words. A normal person would have been heartbroken. But his eyes gleam.

“See, this is why I like you, Elena. You don’t hold back any punches. You’re vicious. A lot like your brother, actually. You murder people with words from that pretty mouth of yours, and he literally murders.”

My mouth opens slightly in surprise. I'm not sure what to say to that.

"You don't like me," I state. The words come out slowly.

He shrugs. "Like, hate, it's all the same. Some days, I can't stand the sight of you. And other days, you're what I crave the most."

I'm sorry, what? Did he just say he craves me?

I have no idea where those words are coming from. But I think I've had enough. I get to my feet, ready to run, to escape from whatever the hell this is.

"Wait," Roman says. Very slowly, I lift my eyes to his. "Don't go."

Another statement that makes no fucking sense.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because you're making me feel something. I can't feel anything right now, *lupacchiotta*."

I study him, taking note of the look in his eyes, the circles beneath them. I let out a soft sigh.

"I think you need to go to sleep," I finally say.

"Trust me, I won't be able to fall asleep."

"Sure you will. All you have to do is lie down on your bed and close your eyes. Even someone like you is capable of basic human action."

I move forward, placing my hand on his arm to pull him up. His skin is a burning furnace. But I don't pull away, despite the electricity pulsing beneath my skin at the contact. "Come on, Roman. Just go to bed, you've drunk enough. I guarantee the bar will still be here when you wake up."

He doesn't budge. His expression is thoughtful.

"You know you're shit at comforting people."

"Yeah, thanks, duly noted," I reply with an eye roll.

He finally gets to his feet. I lead him out of the bar room, toward his bedroom. I've never been inside of it before. I've

always been scared lightning would strike me as soon as I crossed the threshold. But I take a step inside today. Roman's a little unsteady on his feet. My arm is still around his as I lead him toward his bed.

I take in his room, from the dark red and gold of the bed and walls to the wooden floors, large windows, and dark curtains. There's a flat-screen on the wall and a bookcase filled with books at a side of the room. I know it's not just for decoration. Roman's favorite, hobby apart from recreational murder, is reading.

Very slowly, I lower him on to his bed. I know he's not drunk; I've seen the man guzzle down an entire bottle of whiskey without any effect. He only had a few glasses tonight. But he seems exhausted.

Once I have him settled on the bed, his arm goes over his face, shielding his eyes. I stare at him for a second. He's still in his funeral outfit.

"Roman," I say quietly. "You need to take off the suit."

His lips curl into a smirk. "If you wanted to see me naked, all you had to do was ask."

"Of course you'd say that. Don't worry, sweetie, I have no interest in seeing you naked," I say with a smile.

"Really?" he drawls.

His arm slides down from his face, and when I look at his eyes, they spark with a challenge. He sits up on the bed, his hand moving to his suit jacket. He takes it off and I'm treated to the sight of his broad shoulders, the way the shirt stretches over his muscled arms. His eyes are still fixed on me as he begins to unbutton. He starts at the top, taking his sweet time. The buttons come undone one by one until his chest is bare.

My mouth dries. Tattoos have always been my weakness. And unfortunately, Roman's chest is covered in them. It's not like I didn't know he had them. My brother once told me that Roman has been getting a tattoo every year since his sixteenth birthday to commemorate the day. I've just never seen them. The stifling suits he wears hide what's underneath.

Roman has always been dangerous. Now he's dangerous and sexy. It's annoying. My hand itches to reach forward and touch them. Thankfully, I'm not that weak.

My eyes flit over the tattoos. He has one of Maria's name, and Rosalia's too. There are wings on one side of his chest and then there are other things I don't understand. Drawings, phrases in another language. Instead of asking him, I grit my teeth and look away.

"I'm leaving now. Good night, Roman," I tell him.

Faster than I can blink, he reaches out and his hand closes around my wrist. I gasp when he pulls me down onto the bed.

"What the fuck are you playing at?" I ask in surprise, pushing at his chest.

"Don't go," he commands.

"Why not?"

"Because," he says, taking a deep breath. For a minute, I think he's going to say something sincere, but of course, he doesn't. "I said so."

I arch an eyebrow, giving him an unimpressed look. "Because you said so?" I repeat with a scoff. "What are you, four? Let me go."

I try to wrestle my hand from his grip, but my efforts are useless.

"Roman, let me go!" I yell.

"Just stay still for a while," he says softly.

I pause in my attempt to escape him. There's heat simmering in his eyes. He burns hot and cold so fast. Like I said, psychopath.

He's close enough that I can smell the faint, delicious scent of his cologne. I swallow, nerves building up inside of me.

"Roman I—"

Whatever it is I wanted to say is cut off when he places his arm on my neck. The pressure is light, teasing. Like a puppet,

I'm drawn closer to him.

"Elena," he says softly, dark blue eyes fixed on mine.

"Yes?" My voice comes out raspy and wrong.

"I can see that look in your eyes. How badly do you want me to fuck you right now?"

And just like that, the moment shatters. My cheeks flame as I shove at his chest. He lets go of my hand with a chuckle and I immediately stand up.

"I would never fuck you," I hiss.

The annoying part is that for a second, I actually imagined what it would feel like to be with him. It wouldn't be the first time I had such thoughts about him. Twelve-year-old me was infatuated with Roman. But that was a stupid schoolgirl crush. I know who he really is now.

And who he is, is a freaking gorgeous man I'm trying really hard not to fall for right now... damn it.

"That sounds like another challenge, *lupacchiotta*," he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

I keep my eyes on his face instead of letting them trail down to his muscled, tattooed chest. At least he looks like he's in much better spirits. A win is a win. Mission accomplished. He's back to being an ass.

"You know how much I don't like to lose," he drawls.

I lean forward, making sure he's staring straight into my eyes.

"When it comes to me, Roman," I pause for dramatic effect, "trust me, you'll lose every time."

He smirks. "We'll see."

"IT'S ELEVEN P.M., Elena. Where the hell were you?" my brother demands as soon as I appear in the doorway of our

kitchen.

There's a bowl of ice cream in front of him. Mint chocolate chip, which is gross. He shovels down a large spoonful while glaring at me. I roll my eyes.

"Cut the shit, Tony. I have a human locator following me around everywhere I go," I say as I take a seat, referring to Carlos, who doubles as both my driver and bodyguard whenever I'm in New York. "You know exactly where I was."

I'm exhausted after my bizarre conversation with Roman. I was hoping I could get home and sneak into my room for a good night's rest but no such luck.

"Why'd you spend so long at the home base?" he questions.

"I was comforting Rosa," I lie.

I doubt he'd be happy to hear I was with his best friend. For some reason, he doesn't trust me with Roman.

"Hmm, how's she holding up?"

"As well as she can, considering." I shrug.

He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair. My big brother is six feet tall, with lean muscles and hazel eyes. I can't count the number of times over the years that I've been told he's really attractive. I guess if I looked at it from a non-sibling angle, I could agree. But I'd never admit it to him. The man has an ego the size of Texas. Tony's cocky, brash, and prone to picking fights. But he also has the biggest heart, even though he tends to hide it.

"I thought you'd be off getting drunk somewhere," I say, reaching for his bowl of ice cream.

Just because I hate the shit doesn't mean I wouldn't derive some pleasure from taking it from him. Unfortunately, he shifts it away from me, narrowing his eyes in warning.

"I would have, but Rome kicked us out and Mikey's no fun." He pouts. "He's upstairs in the room, sleeping."

I smile. Out of the three of them, Michael's probably my favorite. He doesn't talk much and can usually be found hunched in front of a computer. I'm pretty sure he's a hacker. He has a secret room in the De Luca home filled with gadgets. I stumbled on it accidentally once but I've never admitted that.

Michael's the only one who used to include me when we were younger. He'd ask me to play video games with him or just talk. He's Roman's cousin, a De Luca, but his parents died when he was younger and Maria and Ricardo practically adopted him.

"He has the right idea, I'm exhausted. *Buona notte, fratello.*"

"Actually, *sorella*, I think you should talk to Dad before you go to bed."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"He was just looking pretty rough when I left him. He's in the observatory with a bottle of whiskey."

My heart clenches. Everyone's finding comfort in a bottle of whiskey tonight. I nod once and offer my brother a small smile before heading up the stairs to the attic that my dad turned into an observatory. He did it for my mother, who loved to watch the stars. And he loved her so much. I'm sure he would have done anything for her. In the end, she left.

My dad's standing in the middle of the room when I arrive. He takes a sip of the whiskey in his glass, staring in the direction of the mounted telescope with a faraway expression on his face.

"Hey, Papa," I say, drawing his attention.

He turns, and when he notices me, his face splits into a grin. I walk forward and he immediately pulls me into a hug. We haven't really spoken since I arrived. He was too busy with his duties to the family.

"There's my favorite little girl," he says, ruffling my hair.

I push his hand away with a smile. "I'm your only daughter, Daddy."

“And you’ll always be my favorite,” he retorts. “Come on, let’s sit.”

He leads me to the couch in the room and I take a seat beside him. His arm goes around my shoulders and I lean against his chest, feeling content. We don’t speak for a few minutes.

“You okay, Daddy?” I question softly.

“I’ll be okay, *mia cara*. Eventually.” He sighs.

He lost both of his friends at the same time. Ricardo’s death and Vincent’s betrayal must have hit him hard. But my dad is the strongest person I know. My mom left and he didn’t break. I know he’ll push through this, too.

CHAPTER 6

Roman

I met the Legans when I was fourteen. The family of four moved to New York from Detroit. Salvador's a lawyer.

I'm not sure how he and my father met, but soon after they did, dad hired him to be our family's consigliere. He's been great at keeping most of us out of jail and our illegal activities under the radar. Salvador's the negotiator, adept at getting us out of sticky situations. And it helps that he isn't opposed to getting his hand dirty on occasion. He and my father grew especially close over the years.

Tony and I clicked almost immediately. He and I are the same age, which helped a lot in us becoming fast friends. When I met him, he was pretty normal. I remember he liked to talk a lot. It annoyed me, but it was also pretty endearing. Then his mother left and he changed. He became a brash, quick-to-temper kid who refused to take shit from anyone.

Their mother doesn't exist to me. She left a year after I met the Legans. Then, there's Elena. If I'm being honest, I barely noticed her in the beginning. She was Tony's little sister, and apart from that, I didn't really care.

Like her brother, she also underwent a drastic change when her mother left. Suddenly, the cute little twelve-year-old with a sunny personality became a cold person who was intent on pushing everyone away. I understand she was hurting and deserved to be affected by her mother's abandonment. But I hated the way she treated Tony in those early years. He tried to help her, and at every turn, she would push back. Their relationship may be better now, but a part of me will always

see Elena as that spoiled teenager who wanted to do whatever the hell she wanted without a care about anyone else in her life.

“Roman?” Someone snaps a finger in front of my face and I look up with a glare. “Are you listening to me, son?”

I’m in my father’s office, seated behind his oak desk, while Salvador informs me about my new duties and what’s expected of me. There are several files in front of us. It’s mostly boring paperwork.

“Yes,” I grit out. “You were talking about me signing off on the transfer of the heroin field to the D’Angelos.”

He nods, leaning down to grab a piece of paper. He places it in front of me.

“The contract was sent in this morning. I looked it over and it’s good enough. But did you really agree to back their candidate as the new congressman?”

“We needed their help.”

“But Coleman should have—”

I cut him off. “Salvador, I’m grateful for all the help, I really am. But do not undermine my decisions. I made the deal. It’s done.”

He chuckles. “You sounded like your father just now. Alright, Rome, I’ll back off. I’m sure we’ll find other uses for Coleman. Now, on to our next issue. We need to officially announce that you’ve taken over your father’s position.”

“No.”

He frowns. “Roman...”

“We’re not officially announcing anything. I’m sure anyone who isn’t aware already will find out soon enough. We don’t need to put it on a bulletin that my father’s dead and I’m the new Don.”

“But Rome, our foreign partners need to be made aware. It’s about the principle.”

“No, some of our men were ready to jump ship and abandon us. They betrayed my dad because they weren’t satisfied with the way things were run. I need to quiet the whispers first. There are several of them who believe that I’m not fit for this position. Our house is on fire, Salvador. We need to put it out.”

He stares at me for a couple of seconds. Then his eyes gleam and he nods once. “That’s a solid way of looking at the situation. It’s a good strategy. Your father would have been proud.”

I nod, trying to ignore the lump in my throat at the mention of my father. He’s been dead for two weeks and life has moved on. I need to move on as well.

There’s a knock at the door and Tony walks in without waiting for a reply. Typical. His father lets out a low sigh beside me. At least he knocked. Usually he just barges in, but considering this is the Don’s office, I guess he’s according me more respect.

“Hey, Maria’s calling for you both to get your asses to the dining room.”

I arch an eyebrow. “My mother?”

She hasn’t stepped out of her room since my dad’s funeral. I checked on her this morning and she was still distraught, a shell of her former self. Seeing her like that hurt. A lot more than I’ll admit.

“Yeah. She and Rosa prepared dinner. She said we’re all eating together.”

I look at Salvador, who simply shrugs. When we step outside of the office, we find Elena leaning against the wall. The dress she’s wearing stops at her mid-thigh, offering a view of her long, toned legs. It’s white and hugs every single one of her curves. I grit my teeth and look away. Her gaze shifts from her phone as soon as we step outside.

“*Cara*, I didn’t know you were here,” her dad says.

“I arrived with Tony an hour ago.”

“Hmm, shouldn’t you be in the kitchen assisting Maria and Rosa with the cooking? I’m sure they’d appreciate the help.”

She snorts. “Sorry you lost me at cooking, Daddy.”

He simply sighs. His children are real pieces of work. Ignoring Elena, I take a step toward the stairs, and the Legans follow me to the dining room. Sure enough, there’s a spread of food fit for twenty people on the table. I take in the scenery as we walk in. My mothers already seated, and I study her for a second. She looks much better than she did this morning.

There’s color in her cheeks and a soft expression on her face. Her brown hair is in a messy bun on her head and her blue eyes are clearer. She looks regal, put together. I’m glad for it. I offer her a small smile as I take my seat at the head of the table opposite her, my chest tightening as I lower onto the seat. My father used to sit here.

“Mother, are we expecting guests?” I question once the Legans are seated as well.

Surely she doesn’t expect seven of us to finish all this food. She purses her lips, the movement causing the lines around her face to deepen.

“I might have gone a little overboard. I wanted us to have a good meal. It’s our first one together since your father passed.”

At the mention of him, my chest tightens again. Seriously, why is everyone intent on constantly bringing him up?

“Alright. Thank you, Mother.”

“Thank you, Maria,” Salvador says with a smile.

Michael and Rosa walk in and after they’re seated, we dig into our food. I’m cutting into my steak when my mother breaks the silence.

“Elena, dear,” she calls.

She immediately stiffens, turning to our mother with a forced smile.

“Yes, Maria?”

“How are you doing? I haven’t been able to speak to you since you arrived. How are things in Boston? Your job?”

“My job is fine, Maria. Thanks for asking,” Elena replies, voice airy and light.

“What do you do for work again?”

Almost immediately, the tension in the room goes up a few degrees. My mom and Elena have never really had the best relationship.

“I work in finance. I’m a general manager at my company. We take care of corporate investments.” She’s bragging. I can hear it in her tone.

It’s actually impressive what she’s been able to achieve in such a short time. My mom believes that an Italian woman’s only work should be by her husband’s side, supporting him. It’s pretty antiquated but she’s rigid when it comes to her ideologies.

She frowns, “Well, that’s nice, but you’ll probably have to quit soon.”

“I’m sorry?” Elena asks. Her dark brows pull together as she sits up taller.

“At your age, you have to consider getting married. You’re not getting any younger.”

I watch, amused, as the fork in Elena’s hand clatters to her plate. She turns to her father with a desperate expression, and Salvador clears his throat, shooting my mother an annoyed look.

“We were all actually discussing this a few weeks ago, and you know how you come and go. We just wanted to discuss the matter with you, princess. Before you take off to Boston again.”

“And why is this a necessary discussion in the first place?” Elena asks through gritted teeth. “It’s my life, after all.”

I don’t know why she’s acting so surprised. She didn’t think they’d just leave her alone in Boston to do God knows what? She has duties to fulfill.

“You have to get married eventually,” her brother speaks up, adding his two cents.

She shoots him a cold glare. “Tell me again, why the hell am I even up for consideration?”

“Language, honey,” Mom says calmly.

Elena shuts her eyes briefly and takes a deep breath before speaking,

“Roman and Tony are two years older than me, and Michael’s a year older. How come nobody’s pushing for them to get married?”

“Our situations are not even remotely comparable, *sorella*,” Tony says pointedly.

Out of everyone at the table, Michael’s the only one who’s not the least bit bothered. He continues eating his meal, acting like we’re all invisible. Beside Elena, Rosa places a hand on her arm to calm her down, but it’s never that easy with her.

“No,” Elena states. “It’s not fair.”

“Elena, Tony and Michael are men. They’ll settle down when the time is right. As for the Don, he’ll be expected to marry soon as well. I suspect we’ll be planning two weddings before the year is over.”

I still. Every pair of eyes at the table turns to me. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You’re the Don, Rome. You have to find a wife. It’s mandated,” my mom says.

“In what rule book?” I retort.

There’s a smug smile on Elena’s face at the turn of conversation.

“It might not be expressly stated anywhere, but it’s tradition. You can’t run our family without a woman on your arm. Under normal circumstances, you wouldn’t have been able to get your position without being married. But considering the situation, we need to make do.”

My eyes narrow into slits. The “situation” being my father’s death.

“Don’t worry, *mi amore*. I’ve taken it upon myself to review potential brides for you. All you have to do is pick one you like,” she informs me.

My jaw threatens to hang open. Tony, the bastard, is trying hard not to laugh.

“We’re not talking about fucking chickens, Mother.”

She glares at me, and although I might be the Don and a full-grown adult, my mother scares me sometimes.

“I’m aware of that fact. Now, would everyone quiet down about marriages and eat their food?” she asks, her voice rising slightly.

A chair scrapes back at the end of her sentence and Michael gets to his feet. We all turn to look at him.

“I’m done eating,” he announces, moving to kiss my mother on the cheek. “Thanks for the meal, Maria.”

We all watch as he makes a quick exit. I’m guessing he’s filled his quota for human interaction for the day. Elena takes his cue, getting to her feet as well.

“I’m going home,” she states, green eyes blazing.

Mom sighs, leaning back in her chair. I feel guilty that we ruined dinner. She put a lot of work into it, too. My sister takes a sip of her wine and smiles at me.

“This dinner certainly went well, don’t you think, Rome?” she says sarcastically.

I grit my teeth and look away. One dinner with my family and everything fell apart. If anything, it’s proof of just how fractured things are.

How the fuck am I supposed to fix this? I really wish my father was here.

Someone appears at the doorway of the dining room as Elena walks out. My eyes narrow at the slimy look on Ivan De

Luca's face as she passes beside him, barely offering him a glance.

He steps inside once she's gone, taking in all our faces. None of us move for a second or two. Then Rosa gets to her feet.

"Hi, Ivan," she says. "You missed dad's funeral." Her tone is light and there's a smile on her face.

I swear, half the people in this house are morbid. They aren't sane.

Rosa leaves, going off in the direction of the green-eyed trouble. I'm still seated in my chair, Tony at my side and Salvador at my mother's. I glare at the dark-haired asshole that's still grinning like a damn Cheshire cat.

"Hello, everyone. Miss me?" he questions.

My dad had two brothers. They're both dead. Ivan's my cousin, same as Michael. But while there's not a lot of things I wouldn't do for Michael, just the sight of Ivan's face has me wanting to punch it into a wall. I haven't seen him in years. He usually keeps to himself, staying in Manhattan, doing God knows what.

What the fuck is he doing here?

CHAPTER 7

Elena

We were a happy family once. I remember a time when my dad would come home from work with a grin on his face. He would pick me up and swing me around on his shoulders, then fist bump Tony before kissing my mother. Back when we lived in Detroit, they were in love and everything was perfect. Then we moved to New York and it was honestly the beginning of the end.

Their relationship started having fissures soon after, tiny cracks that neither of them could fix. It's been my biggest life lesson—through my parents, I learned just how quickly you can fall out of love with a person.

I'll never blame my father for what happened, but according to him, one of the reasons my mother left was that she couldn't handle his new job situation. She didn't like that he was working for the mafia. It's always felt like an excuse. One that stung even more due to the fact that she didn't give it to us personally. It wouldn't hurt so much if she had bothered to say goodbye. But she didn't. We woke up one morning to our father's heartbroken face as he told us our mom was gone.

I doubt I'll ever forget that day. I was almost thirteen. Naturally, my first reaction was to laugh in my dad's face. I thought he was joking. Hell, I thought my mother was hiding behind the couches and the two of them were simply playing a prank. I remember Tony accepting it, though. Almost like he already knew what was going to happen. He was older than me, so I guess he was less delusional. It took a while for me to come to terms with our new situation.

I'm pacing the foyer when my dad gets home. The first words I say as soon as he opens the front door of our house is, "I'm not getting married."

I waited for over an hour for him to arrive, needing to get everything I had to say off my chest. But my father barely spares me a look as he takes off his jacket. One of the help spawns from out of nowhere to collect it before disappearing again. I always forget they're around. My father trained them to be invisible. They keep the house clean and cook our meals, during the rare moments when we eat here.

"Dad, did you hear me?" I step in front of him. "The only way you're getting me into a wedding dress is if you're planning to marry off a dead body."

I look him in the eye as I say it, making sure he's aware I'm fucking serious. My dad stares me down for a few seconds until finally he looks away.

"Elena," he says sadly, "I just lost two of my friends. Anything could happen to me at any given moment. I just want to be able to walk you down the aisle, *mia cara*. Before I die, I want you to be happy."

Something in my heart cracks and splinters. I hear him, and it hurts. But I also refuse to back down from this.

"I don't have to be married to be happy, Dad," I say icily. "And you're fine. Nothing's going to happen to you."

There can only be so many bad things, right? I know the universe takes and takes, but eventually, it has to back off. We've been through enough.

"This is all my fault," my dad says, and I can see the exhaustion on his face. This has been weighing down on him. Guilt prods at the bottom of my stomach but I push it further down. "You're so much like your mother. And I let it happen. I raised you to be rash and stubborn. I let you have everything you wanted. Sometimes, I really wish your mother was here."

I stiffen. Any mention of her never fails to cause an ache in my heart. Sometimes it feels like there's a hole there that'll never be filled. She's been gone for years. I have no idea if

she's dead or alive. I'm sure my dad knows, though. A man with his power and influence would be more than capable of finding a woman, even one who doesn't want to be found. I'm sure he knows exactly where she is. He either doesn't care or there's a reason he can't tell us.

“Well, she's not, Dad. And you can't force me to get married. This is the twenty-first century, wake up.”

With those words, I turn and head up to my room. I wasn't joking. I have no interest in getting married, and certainly not any time soon. And even if by some chance I find myself walking down the aisle, it'll be to a man I fucking choose.

A part of me can't help but feel a little sad for whatever poor guy gets stuck with me forever. I hope he likes broken things.

FIVE-INCH HEELS CLACK against the floor as Kiara Coleman walks across the airport, and I watch her for a second in amusement. She's the only person I know who would ever wear sweatpants with heels. Kiara's 5'4" and she's not the biggest fan of her height. She's been wearing deathtraps as heels since she was fifteen. She's also my best friend. Her face splits into a grin when she notices me, and I immediately rush toward her, pulling her into a hug.

“Oh my god, you're here!” I squeal, squeezing the life out of her.

“Lena,” she chokes out. “Can't breathe.”

I laugh before letting go and getting a good look at her. With her pin-straight long black hair, smooth mahogany skin, and brown eyes that are currently hidden behind the enormous sunglasses she's wearing, my best friend is one of the most beautiful women I know. And I haven't seen her in two years.

“I missed you like crazy,” I say on a soft breath.

I'm practically bouncing on my feet. When she called me two days ago, informing me she was returning to the U.S., I

could barely control my excitement. Kiara and I met in high school, and she's the only person who stuck with me throughout the years. She was never put off by my crazy personality. She's acted as my sounding board, my guardian angel. I can't count the number of times Kiara has gotten me out of a terrible situation.

"I missed you too, babe," she says, leaning forward to kiss both my cheeks.

I make a face, fighting a huge grin. "Since when are you so posh? Living in London already turned you into a fancy, high-class princess?" I ask, using a fake English accent.

She rolls her eyes. "And you're still a heathen, good to know."

I chuckle, looping my arm around hers and reaching for her suitcase. I lead her out of the airport, rolling it behind us.

"I can't believe you decided to come back. It's like you knew I needed you. How long are you staying?"

She smiles softly, taking off her sunglasses. "I'm actually back for good, Lena."

My eyes widen. "No way? For real?"

"Yeah. After my breakup, I'm ready to dip my toes back into my reality here in New York. Plus, I missed the city," she informs me.

"Oh, right, the breakup," I say icily. "You have yet to share the details on how you ended things with the royal prat."

Kiara was dating an earl or some variation of that up until a month or two ago. I'm not surprised she was able to snag nobility, the girl is gorgeous. I'm a little upset that their relationship ended. They were together for two years, and he's the reason she stayed back in London after earning her master's degree. She loved him.

Kiara's eyes gleam with amusement. "Did you research British swear words because you knew I was coming back?"

"No." I laugh.

We head to my car. Technically not my car, but the one that's been provided for me to be chauffeured around in.

"Kie, this is my newest bodyguard, Carlos," I say, making the introductions. "Carlos, this is Kiara. If you've been around for long, you'll know her. She's my best friend."

The hulking man doesn't say a word. He simply nods before getting into the driver's seat. I throw Kiara an exasperated look and lead her into the back seat.

"Please tell me you at least had some revenge sex after the breakup," I say to her once the car starts.

She groans. "Lena."

"What? I have a right to know. Who did you snog and shag as a big royal fuck you to his royal dickness?"

"STOP INSULTING HIM," she says, laughing. "I'm the one that broke up with him."

That gives me pause. "Wait, seriously? But you loved him."

"I did. But we were in different places and our relationship wasn't working out anymore. It was the right thing to do."

"Fuck the right thing. You should have chased after him in the rain, snogged the living daylights out of him, and never let him go."

She gives me a look. "For someone who doesn't make the least bit of effort to find love, you're a pretty big romantic, you know that?"

I wave my hand to deny it. "I might not be throwing myself out there, but I know it's real. Just not for me." Kiara's smile thins and she opens her mouth to speak, but I plow on before she can. "Besides, I watch too many rom-coms not to have all these crazy ideas."

"True," Kiara says carefully. "Anyway, tell me about you. How are you coping after Ricardo's death? How's everyone else?"

Kiara's been my best friend since I was fourteen and she knows every single member of my family. I knew she was a true friend when she didn't balk at what my family does. Granted, her dad's a politician who has good relations with the De Lucas, so we've always been interconnected. Our friendship was inevitable.

"Everyone's mostly fine," I tell her.

"And Roman? How's your mortal enemy whom I'm convinced you secretly have a crush on?"

I gasp, my eyes growing wide as I look at Carlos in the front seat. "I most certainly do not. Also, that mortal enemy happens to be the Don now, and Carlos works for him."

Carlos actually speaks up. "Don't worry, Elena. I might work for him but I ain't no snitch. Plus, I only have to report when you're in danger. Private conversations don't count."

That eases my tension slightly. I glare at Kiara.

"Thanks, Carlos. But there's nothing to actually report. I'm sure Kiara's jet lag is the reason she's saying such nonsense. I do not have a crush on Roman," I state forcefully.

Kiara has the audacity to smile. "Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. So, how is he?"

Infuriatingly, Kiara's friends with Roman. She's friends with everyone. There's something about her personality that instantly settles people. I guess they can all tell how much of a good person she is.

"He's fine," I mutter. "The devil's spawn is still the devil's spawn."

She rolls her eyes. "And Michael? Tony? Maria and Rosa? Your dad?"

"Well, Tony's a tremendous ass, as usual. Maria's trying hard to be strong, while also trying to ruin my life on the side." Kiara raises an eyebrow. "We'll circle back to that later. Anyway, Rosa's good, too. She's coping, although she's been shutting herself in her art room more often. My dad's working through it, too. Honestly, out of everyone, I think Michael was

hit the hardest. He's barely talking, Kie. He doesn't spend time with anybody."

"I'm sure it can't be easy for him," Kiara says softly. I can see worry in her eyes. When Michael's parents died, Maria and Ricardo practically adopted him. He was a kid who didn't have anyone until they brought him into their family. "I'll talk to him," she mutters.

She and Michael are close. When we were younger, they dated a while and remained friends after they broke up. They have a bond I'll probably never understand.

"Yeah, I'm sure he'll be happy to see you," I say.

"Now, back to what you said about Maria trying to ruin your life," she prompts.

I sigh, leaning back into the seat. "I was told to quit my job a few days ago. I am apparently eligible for marriage."

Kiara's eyes widen. "What?"

CHAPTER 8

Roman

“Come on, Mikey, get off your ass.”

Michael doesn't so much as glance at me, his attention fixed on the tablet in his hand. I place the pool cue down and walk over to the beanbag where he's currently sprawled. My eyes narrow onto the contents displayed on the screen.

“What are you even doing?”

“I hacked into the surveillance cameras in front of the Russos' hideout,” he murmurs.

My eyes meet his brown ones. “You did what?”

He shrugs. “I was bored and curious. They're being too quiet. Something's going on.”

Tony abandons the darts he was throwing, walking over to us. “Have you found anything?” he asks curiously.

“Nope. No one's walked in or out. The building's practically a ghost town.”

“That's...” Tony trails off.

My mind whirs as I try to think of what could be going on. First they pulled out of a coup that they instigated, and now they're trying to stay under the radar.

“They're planning something,” I state, and my fists clench. “I swear, if they come after us again...”

“We'll be ready,” Tony says firmly.

I scoff, moving to sit opposite Michael. “We barely have any control over our own men, Tony. How the hell would we be ready?”

He frowns, running a hand through his hair. It’s clear he doesn’t have an answer to that question.

“I’ll try to hack into some private files. See if I can get some more intel,” Michael says.

I nod once.

“See? I told you they’d be in their playhouse,” a voice says, drawing our attention.

We look up and trouble’s standing in the doorway. Otherwise known as Elena Legan.

Great.

She grins as she walks into the room, someone else in tow. My eyes widen as they land on Kiara Coleman. Damn, I haven’t seen her in a few years.

Tony laughs and walks over to give her a hug that lifts her off her feet, “Hey, Kie. Missed you.”

I get to my feet to hug her as well. Kiara might be Elena’s best friend, but she’s much more tolerable.

“Hey. How’s it going?”

“I’m good,” she answers in her soft voice. “Sorry for your loss.”

My throat tightens but I manage a small thanks. Elena moves to stand beside me and I shoot her a look.

“Did you just refer to this room as a playhouse?”

She shrugs. “What would you rather I call it?”

“A man cave,” Tony answers, tone serious, as he moves back to his earlier position with the darts.

“Idiot,” I mutter.

Elena’s eyes practically sparkle with amusement as she looks at me. I sigh, moving back to my earlier position on the beanbag. Kiara moves toward Michael. She whispers

something into his ear and he smiles, which is the most emotion anyone has gotten from him in weeks. He and Kiara used to have a thing, which ended due to reasons known to only them.

He shifts slightly, allowing for her to settle on the beanbag beside him.

Elena steps up to the pool table, arranging the balls. She lines them up in a triangle before messing it all up again. I scoff at the grin on her face. The girl thrives on chaos.

“I have an idea,” Tony suddenly speaks up.

I inwardly groan. I love the guy but I’m almost positive I’m not going to like what he has to say.

“What is it?” I prompt. We might as well hear it.

“How about we kill all the bastards?”

The air in the room tenses. Tony’s mind works in mysterious ways. I would be confused by the random statement, but it’s pretty clear he’s talking about the men who aren’t satisfied with the fact that I’m the new Don. His mind obviously hasn’t left our prior conversation.

“Tony,” I say warningly.

“I’m fucking serious. If they’re not happy that you’re in charge, we might as well end them.”

“Of course they’re not happy. They don’t think I’ve done enough to earn my position,” I mutter.

“That’s bullshit. You’ve been training since you were a kid. You were right by your father’s side for every deal, every job. Who deserves the position if not you?” he asks angrily. “Also, they’re all fucking assholes. They willingly sided with Vincent against your father and now they’re doing it to you.”

“We already killed the people responsible for the coup, man. We tortured the rest. If we keep killing our men, we won’t have anyone left.”

“We can always get more,” he huffs.

I let out a breath. “It doesn’t work that way. *La lealta si guadagna.*” Loyalty is earned.

Tony crosses his arms over his chest. “Fuck that. The position is your birthright. They should all be getting down on their knees and kissing your ass.”

That makes me smile. “I’m young, Tony. Dons usually get their position when they’re in their thirties. Most of the capos are much older than me,” I point out.

“Again, bullshit. Christian D’Angelo became the Don of his family in his early twenties. Just like you.”

“Yes, and like me, it only happened so early because his father died. The only difference is that the only people that could have challenged Christian’s position were his brothers, and neither of them gave a fuck. Meanwhile I’ve got opposition coming in from all angles.”

Tony’s jaw clenches. “I still say we kill them.”

“You can’t just kill everyone who doesn’t agree with you.”

“Of course I can,” he says cheerfully.

“Guys!” Michael snaps. “Kie and Lena are still here.”

I look up and find both women’s eyes fixed on us. *Shit, I forgot about that.*

“Don’t worry,” Elena says, fluttering her eyelashes. “You’re not offending our delicate sensibilities with your talk. Carry on.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Kiara mutters.

I lean back in my chair and shoot her an apologetic glance, “Sorry, Kie.”

Elena walks over to me. “Who’s your opposition?”

I stare up at her warily. “What are you talking about now, trouble?”

She rolls her eyes. “You said you’ve got opposition coming in from all angles. Vincent’s dead. And from what I

heard, you tortured the men who sided with him. Who else is opposing you?"

I'm about to tell her to mind her own business when her brother opens his big mouth.

"Ivan."

I look at him sharply and he shrugs.

"Your cousin?" Kiara questions curiously.

"It's just suspicion," I clarify.

"No, it's fucking shady that he came back immediately after Ricardo died," Tony states. "Almost like he was waiting for it. He's also older than you, which means the capos might be liable to trust him more. They might push for him to be the next Don instead of you."

I clench my jaw. "He's not involved in the business. He doesn't know how things are run."

"We both know that's not the issue here. He's a snake."

"Aren't you two a bit too old for conspiracy theories?" Elena questions. We both turn to her. Her hands are on her hips, her eyes hard, "I mean, it sounds like Ivan hasn't done anything wrong."

"Yet," Tony grits out.

"Exactly. Wait till he gives you a reason to be suspicious. He's your cousin," she says to me. "He probably came home to support his family. Give him a break."

"You sound really defensive, trouble," I say, feeling a muscle in my jaw tick.

She shrugs. "I just don't think he's a bad guy."

None of us speak for several seconds after that. Until Kiara does.

"Hey, I have an idea," she says. "How about a party?"

"A party?" I cross my arms over her chest.

"Yes. My ex-boyfriend always used to say even the most hateful hearts can be won with some alcohol and good music."

“He sounds like a snob,” Michael mutters. We all pretend not to hear him.

Kiara’s smile is amused as she continues. “Listen, you’re trying to get these people to like you, right?”

“Not necessarily. I want them to fear me,” I say easily.

“Okay. Regardless of your intent, I think your first course of action should be gathering them all in the same place. Show them you’re capable. Be a good host or a good Don or whatever. I can help you plan it. It could be your official...” She trails off. “Promotion party? Or whatever you want to call it.”

I ponder her words for a second. “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

We’ve never really been the type of people to host or attend parties. My family’s pretty private. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Are you kidding? It’s a great idea,” Tony says on a laugh. “I’ll take any excuse to party. You’re a genius, Kie.”

“I’ll talk to my mother and Salvador about it. We can have the party here,” I announce.

Elena is surprisingly quiet. She’s moved away from the group, a weird expression on her face. While Tony begins discussing ideas with Kiara, I go over to the pool table and grab the ball she was about to place in the triangle.

“What’s up with you?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she mutters.

“Really? I thought you of all people would be happy about a party.”

She shrugs. “It’ll be fun. I might not be here for it, though.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I have to go back to Boston. I have a job, Roman. Responsibilities.”

I stare at her for a second and shrug. “Quit your job. Move back home. Problem solved.”

She stares back at me in disbelief. “That’s not happening.”

“I can see it in your eyes, *lupacchiotta*. You want to come back, too. Nobody’s going to think any less of you if you do.”

“No, but I’ll think less of myself. I’m not quitting,” she says stubbornly.

I grit my teeth. “When are you going back?”

“In about a week.”

“Good because the party’s this weekend.”

She stiffens. “Which day?”

“I don’t know. Saturday, I guess,” I say, confused about her reaction. “Why? Is there something wrong with that?”

“No. Nothing at all. I can’t wait,” she says with a smile on her face that I immediately know is fake.

My eyes narrow and I’m about to question her further when Michael launches to his feet.

“We have a problem,” he announces, staring at his tablet.

I’m already moving toward him. “What is it?”

“The Russos are moving something out of their warehouse right now. It might not be anything important, but it can’t hurt to find out what it is.”

I nod, “Alright. Let’s go.”

The two of them nod and, after telling the girls goodbye, we leave.

OUR LEAD with the Russos ended up being a dead end. By the time we arrived at the hideout, it was all cleared out. There were no clues to be found with regard to what they’re planning. There’s something going on with them, but short of

planting someone to infiltrate them, we have no way of finding out what.

Salvador advised me to stop being paranoid about the Russos and focus on my efforts with my men. It was solid advice and I've done exactly that, placing all my efforts into making sure this party goes well.

There's soft music playing from the band we hired, and the atmosphere is pretty chill. There are about seventy people here, mostly capos with their spouses, laughing, talking, and stuffing their faces with food. The party is outdoors behind our house.

I'm glad my mother and Kiara were able to pull this off. They accomplished all this in three days.

The smile on my face is practically frozen as the capos approach me one by one. Some of them offer congratulations, some offer condolences. I study them, trying to read between the lines, find out who might be harboring any nefarious intentions. This party is as much an effort to make them more comfortable with me as it is to gather information about the men who are supposed to protect me with their lives.

"Thank you for coming, Nolan," my mother says to the balding man in front of us. She has stuck to my side all evening. I'm sure she's trying to keep me in line, make sure I don't say anything untoward to our precious guests, but I've been nothing short of perfect. Perfectly charming and intent on making sure this goes well.

I study Nolan Pike for a few seconds. He's worked for our family for over a decade, and he has two sons—or had. One of them made the mistake of joining Vincent and he paid for it with his life. I can't help but wonder if Nolan wants revenge. The man's face is smooth and devoid of any emotion.

I stretch my hand for a shake. "Yes, thank you for coming, Nolan. My dad considered you an asset to our family and I do, too."

He shakes my hand and offers me a short nod.

“I don’t see Noah around,” I state, looking around pointedly for his only living son.

Nolan shrugs. “I’m sure he’s around here somewhere.”

My mom asks him some more mundane questions about his health before moving us along to the next couple. The Carlsons have always been fiercely loyal to our family. I’m less tense as we speak to them.

“Roman, shouldn’t you be planning on getting married soon? Your mother can’t host events on your arm forever,” Emily teases.

She’s a bubbly young woman in her late twenties. I swear there’s always a wide smile on her face any time I see her. Not that I can blame her for it. If I married an old man close to his deathbed and my kids were in line to inherit his fortune, I’d smile all the time, too.

Still, I’m not in any way pleased by her question. My mom replies for me.

“It’s a work in progress, Emily,” she says gently.

Sensing my mood, she quickly steers me away quickly from the Carlsons.

“What the fuck is their problem? If they’re not trying to curry favor or ask for something, they’re butting into my private life,” I say angrily. My hand goes to the tie on my neck. I hate wearing ties; they’re so fucking constricting.

“This is nothing short of what’s required of you, *mia cara*,” my mom says firmly. “You know this. It’s your duty. Now, I think it’s time for your speech.”

I stare at her. “I have to make a speech?”

Her cool gaze flicks over my face. “Of course you have to make a speech. You need to let these people know what you plan to do for them, how you plan to lead them. You need to show them your strength.”

I open my mouth to tell her that a speech feels unnecessary when we hear a scream from inside the house. My head snaps

up as I look toward the double doors leading inside. The music stops and everyone falls silent.

My heart starts thudding in my chest. Because I'm pretty sure that was my sister.

CHAPTER 9

Elena

I'm in the process of having a conversation with Ivan De Luca when we hear the scream. He looks at me for a second, dark brows furrowed in confusion, before we both turn to the house.

"What the hell was that?" Ivan asks with a frown.

My heart pounds. "It sounded like Rosa."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Roman taking quick steps to the doors leading into the house. Michael leaves Kiara's side as well, following him, and Tony's not far behind. Whispers erupt around me, mutters about what could be going on. I move forward but Ivan's hand goes around my wrist.

"Wait, where are you going?"

I shake my hand out of his grip and offer him a small smile. He's cute, but I really don't need another fucking keeper right now.

"It's fine. I just want to check it out," I tell him.

His frown deepens and he looks ready to argue but I walk away, immediately getting lost in the crowd. Some men move to guard the doors, keeping people away, when a gunshot goes off. My heart lurches at the sound. It came from inside the house.

Pandemonium breaks out, and it's the only reason I'm able to slip past undetected. I'm an idiot for heading somewhere that's probably dangerous, but I've got a bad feeling.

I walk inside the house, turning a corner to a narrow hallway. I let out a short gasp at the scene I find. There's a man I don't recognize on the ground, clutching his leg, which has blood seeping from it rapidly. Roman's on top of him, punching him over and over, and Tony's beside Rosa, who's shaking, eyes wide and terrified. There's a rip in the side of her dress.

I clutch my stomach as I realize what must have happened. Roman is still punching the man on the floor. He's already half dead, unmoving. Without thinking, I head for Rosa. My brother sucks in a sharp breath when he notices me.

“What the hell are you doing here, Elena?”

I ignore him, reaching for my friend. As soon as my arms wrap around her, she begins to cry.

“Shush, it's okay, sweetie, breathe,” I say comfortingly.

I make a mistake. My eyes move to Roman and when he looks up, his gaze connects with mine. My heart stops for a second. Because the person staring back at me isn't someone I recognize. It's Roman, but he's furious and terrifying. Then his eyes flutter closed and he lets out a growl.

He suddenly stops punching the man and gets to his feet, running a hand through his hair. He gets some blood in it in the process but I doubt he cares.

He looks at me again before his eyes move to his sister. They darken even more.

“I'm fucking done with this shit,” Roman spits.

I stare at him in confusion. Even Michael and Tony look unsure about what he means.

“Pick him up,” he tells my brother, gesturing at the man on the floor.

His eyes are swollen shut and I'm pretty sure his nose is broken. He's writhing in pain, making small sounds of agony. Tony picks him up without hesitation. I have no idea what Roman's thinking right now.

“Follow me,” he orders, his voice low and cold.

Rosa's still shaking beside me. I'm ready to lead her up to her room when Roman's gaze meets mine again, stopping me in place.

"My sister's going, too."

"Going where?" I ask, my voice firm despite the erratic beating of my heart.

"We're going back out there," he replies firmly.

My eyes widen. "Are you kidding? Look at her."

Michael speaks up. "Lena's right, Rome. Rosa should go up and rest."

Roman's sharp look in his direction has Michael shutting up immediately. Roman glares at me, too, before looking at his sister.

"Come here, *sorella*," he beckons softly.

Rosa exhales before detaching from me and walking over to her brother. He leans down to whisper something in her ear. She shakes her head in reply and he continues speaking. It takes a minute or two, and once he's done, Rosa nods once. Roman shrugs off his suit jacket and drapes it around her shoulders.

"You're a De Luca," he murmurs. "We're not fucking weak."

The two of them head back out to the party. Tony and Michael haul the half-dead man with them, and I do my best to ignore the blood trailing from his body as I follow. We get back outside and the party has been slightly controlled. My dad's standing in front of everyone with a don't-fuck-with-me expression on his face. His expression shifts slightly into concern as he takes in our entourage.

Roman walks to the front of the crowd. Rosa stands at his side. He gestures for Tony and Michael to let go and the man responsible falls down to the ground with a loud groan.

"I need everyone to listen to me," Roman starts, his voice loud and authoritative. "This man tried to assault my sister tonight. He dared to touch a De Luca and he was stupid

enough to do it in my home. With her entire family right here. His actions aren't just stupid, they're fucking insane."

I can hear the barely controlled fury in his voice. The entire yard is quiet, the only sounds coming from the fucker on the floor.

"There are some of you that consider my family weak. Ricardo De Luca hired every single man here. Some of you were welcomed into this family when you had nothing but the clothes on your back. My father accepted you and he protected you." Roman's jaw clenches.

"He fulfilled his duties to the best of his abilities, and how was he repaid? With a bullet to the skull. Some of you here were involved in the coup that led to his death. I should have murdered every last one of you. But my father taught me to be merciful. And I was trying to honor his wishes and his teachings. My mother asked me to give a speech earlier. She asked me to inform you about my plans to lead. To let you know just how strong I am. Well, I'm going to start by laying down some new rules. There will be no more mercy," he pronounces. "If I catch even a whiff of insubordination or disrespect or betrayal, I promise to make you suffer. It won't be swift or painless. I swear, I'll make you wish you were never born. You knew my father's mercy, now you'll feel my ruthlessness."

There's raw, palpable fear in their eyes as they stare at their Don. Roman is practically saying, "no more Mr. Nice Guy." The kid gloves are off.

He moves to the man on the floor and hauls him to his feet. Then he grabs his gun from the back of his shirt. Roman's expression is nothing short of menacing. I shiver when he smirks slightly.

"I'm going to start with Noah Pike, here. Like I said, he assaulted my sister tonight. He doesn't deserve an easy death, but he does make for a perfect scapegoat so all of you can understand just how fucking serious I am."

"Please," Pike says, starting to shake. I'm surprised he even has it in him to beg. "Please."

Roman kicks him to the ground. He cocks the gun in his hand and points it at him. I think the scariest part of all this is how calm Roman looks. He might as well be picking flowers right now. I've secretly called him a psychopath all these years, but this is the first time he's ever given any real inclination that he could actually be one.

Just as he's about to take the shot, a cry goes out. Everyone watches as an old man with balding hair runs out from within the crowd. He gets on his knees in front of Roman, shielding Pike's body.

"I understand that what my son did was unforgivable," the old man starts, his voice shaking. "But he's the only child I have left. Please, Roman, I'm begging you. You can't kill him."

Roman cocks his head to the side. "I said no more mercy, Nolan," he states calmly.

The old man swallows. "I heard you. Which is why I'm offering myself in his place. Kill me instead."

A tiny gasp escapes me. Oh, god.

"Please," the old man continues. "Your father and I had history. I did everything he ever asked of me. Now I'm begging you to do this one thing."

The scene is absolutely pitiful. Everyone looks on with bated breath. Nobody dares to move a muscle. Noah Pike is still on the ground, tears streaming down his face.

Roman's expression is thoughtful as he looks at the old man. Finally, he comes to a decision.

"Una vita per una vita," Roman breathes. A life for a life.

A second later, he shoots. The bullet meets its mark and the old man falls down dead. My stomach lurches. I'm forced to look away for a second, hoping to control my breathing. When I look back at the scene, Roman's calling for guards to take the man's body away. Noah Pike is also hauled out.

Roman's not done with his speech. "My father died and left me in charge. I've been training to become the Don since I

was seven years old, and I'm aware of the needs of every single man here. My duty is to you, to protect your families. The De Luca family is considered one of the top families in New York City. But right now, the Russos, the Gallos, even the D'Angelos, none of them respect us. They think we're fucking weak. They think we've gone soft, but I'm going to change that. You're all going to help me change that. *Noi ci alzeremo.*"

"*Noi ci alzeremo,*" several people repeat.

They're the De Luca words. The family motto. A promise. *We will rise.*

Roman nods once, content with their reply. The party disperses; the mood is subdued as the guests begin trailing out. I watch Roman for a few seconds as he speaks to Tony.

He actually did it. He won them over. There's not a single soul here today that doesn't fear Roman De Luca. It's exactly what he wanted.

TWO HOURS LATER, the party has dwindled down and there's no one else at the house. I walk over to the bar inside the house, needing a drink. Today did not go how I expected it to and yet it was the best outcome I could have hoped for. The alternative would have been spiraling, so honestly, watching a man get murdered was the better option.

I pause in the doorway, my eyes colliding with dark blue ones.

"We have got to stop meeting like this," I tell Roman.

Just like the other day, the last thing I should be doing is walking into the room and talking to him. I plow on regardless. He arches an eyebrow as I take a seat beside him at the bar, reaching for a glass. When I gesture for him to pour me a drink, he simply smirks before obliging.

I subtly take in his appearance. He's changed his clothes, swapping the bloody ones for a clean white T-shirt and pants.

His hair is still a little damp so I'm guessing he took a shower. He doesn't look like a man who murdered an old man tonight and ruined an entire family. It's a little eerie.

"Do you have something to say, trouble?" Roman questions without looking at me.

I wrench my eyes away from him, facing forward. "Nope. I'm here to sit and drink and wallow about the mess that is my life," I say, taking a large gulp of the drink.

"I'm sorry you had to witness what happened tonight," Roman says tightly, guessing inaccurately that his actions are the cause of my discomfort.

I shake my head. "Just another day in the De Luca household. I already told you, it's not that easy to offend my delicate female sensibilities."

He lets out a chuff of air. "So why the wallowing?"

I pause, wondering if I should say this to him. Then I realize with a jolt that he's the only person I can say this to. It's actually funny. Of all the people in my life, the one person I feel like I can talk to about this is Roman De Luca.

"Today's the anniversary of the day my mom left," I confess.

Roman stills.

"I thought you knew, actually. Then I realized you probably didn't when you said you'd schedule the party for today."

His lips turn down into a frown. "I'm not heartless, *lupacchiotta*, I didn't fucking know."

"It's fine even if you did," I assure him with a smile. "I mean, it's ridiculous that I'm even sad about it. The woman left over a decade ago. I shouldn't even care."

"Of course you care. She's your mother," Roman states firmly.

I look into his eyes and he's actually being sincere. It unnerves me. I raise my glass in his direction

“I know what you’re thinking. Poor little Elena, with her mommy issues,” I shake my head. “Pathetic. I mean, surely there’s something wrong with me. Tony lost his mom, too, and he’s fine. He walks around without a care in the world.”

“Your brother fights his battles in secret. And I wasn’t thinking that, Elena.”

I smile. “You called me Elena. I get worried when you do that. It makes me feel like you’re planning something nefarious.”

“Promise not to kill you,” he says with a smile.

I scoff. “You’d never kill me. But you could do so much worse.”

His brows furrow in confusion, and I want to reach over and smooth out his forehead. I’m having one of those moments again. Moments that seem to stretch on forever with a person I should hate but I really don’t.

I get to my feet, dropping the glass on the countertop. “I should probably get going.”

Roman’s eyes narrow. “It’s ten p.m. Just stay over.”

“I was going to stay with Rosa, but she asked to be left alone. Your mom’s with her anyway. I’ll just head home instead.”

“Where’s Carlos?”

“He drove my dad home earlier. It’s fine. I can catch a cab,” I tell him.

“No, you’re not doing that.”

The words feel like a command. Which is annoying. I open my mouth to argue but he gets to his feet.

“Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

My mouth parts. “You don’t need to.”

“I’m going to,” he says firmly, looking me in the eye.

My heart starts to race. *Fucking hell.*

“But aren’t you worried you’ll combust if you spend too much time in an enclosed space with me?”

Roman peers at me like I’m crazy. He wants to give me a ride home and I’m the crazy one.

“Let’s go, *lupacchiotta*.”

“This is not going to end well,” I mutter under my breath.

I shouldn’t do it. But my legs practically move of their own accord as I trail after Roman.

CHAPTER 10

Roman

The Legan home is a twenty-minute drive from mine. Neither myself nor Elena say a word for the first five minutes of the drive. But not hearing her voice feels odd, so I feel inclined to speak.

“The silence is eerie, trouble. What are you thinking about?”

I glance at her and her eyes are fixed straight on the road. She’s sitting ramrod straight, tension in her shoulders.

“What do you think I’m going to do to you?” I ask, amused.

She shrugs. “Nothing. But have you ever thought about what I could do to you?” she retorts with a mischievous smile.

“Probably not much,” I reply. “You’re a terrible shot, you’re awful at combat, and you’re tiny. I could break you so easily.”

I feel her glare on the side of my face. “Don’t underestimate me, Roman. I’m much stronger than you give me credit for.”

“I know you’re strong. It’s not something I’ve ever doubted. There’s just varying shades of strength.”

“Hmm,” she mutters. “How many people have you killed?”

I’ve known Elena Legan for more than a decade. Which is why I’m utterly unsurprised by the abrupt change in conversation. Her mind works in mysterious ways. And it’s

always working. She never shuts down. It's why she's so good at math and numbers.

Briefly, I wonder why I know so much about a girl I supposedly couldn't give less of a fuck about. But that's a lie that worked when I was a kid. The truth is, she's an important part of my life, one I can't get rid of.

"Roman," she prompts.

I mentally calculate the number of times I've taken a life.

"Fifteen," I say.

She doesn't look shocked or surprised, and I'm glad for it. She accepts the information quietly, and when I glance at her, her expression is thoughtful.

"What? You thought it would be higher?"

"Honestly, yes, but that's still... so many people," she says, shrugging. "Can I ask an invasive question?"

"I have a feeling you'll ask me regardless. Fire away."

"How do you justify it? The killing and all the murder."

I pause to ponder her question for a minute. "I don't think there is any justification for it. But what matters is that I don't kill simply for the fun of it. It's business. I kill for my family, for honor. The world's already hard enough. Everyone does their best to survive. Kill or be killed aren't just the rules of the jungle; ruthlessness is necessary for survival. I kill people that keep me from my goals, from getting to the top, and I refuse to regret it. Because I'm doing it for my family."

"Another question," Elena states.

I shoot her a glare.

"What? This is probably the first time you've ever spoken to me honestly. I plan to take advantage of it."

"Alright, fine. But it's not fair that you get to ask all the questions."

She blows out a breath. "Alright, ask your questions. We might as well be playing truth or dare."

I grin, thinking up a question for her. “Our senior year of high school, Tony snuck out of the house and wouldn’t tell us where. You covered for him that night. Where did he go?”

Elena laughs. “Hold up, you’ve got the chance to ask me literally anything and that’s what you’re curious about?”

I shrug. “He’s always been annoyingly tight-lipped about his whereabouts that night. The guy tells me everything, but when it comes to that, he won’t say.”

“That’s because he broke your precious bro code. He was with the girl you were planning on making a move on. Kimberly something,” Elena informs me.

I roll my eyes. “Of course he was.”

“My brother’s a renowned man-whore. It really shouldn’t come as a surprise.”

“It’s not. But I actually liked that girl. I guess him keeping it a secret makes sense now.”

“You genuinely liked someone?” Elena asks, surprise coloring her tone. “I’m sorry, I just can’t imagine you with actual human feelings.”

“They come and go,” I say dryly.

“Anyway, it’s my turn now. Truth or dare,” she prompts.

“We’re not playing that juvenile game. I’m an adult, trouble.”

“We already started playing. Now come on, choose.”

“Fine, truth,” I say through gritted teeth.

She pouts. “You’re no fun, Roman.”

“You got a question or not?”

“I do. How many girls have you been in a relationship with?”

“Zero.”

Her mouth falls open. She shakes out of it in a second. “Okay then, how many girls have you screwed?”

I smirk as I look at her. “I’m not sure I could give you an exact number.”

“Unbelievable,” she mutters. “You keep track of the number of people you’ve killed but not the women you’ve fucked.”

“When you say it like that...” I trail off with a laugh.

She rolls her eyes. I spot a gas station ahead and pull up in front of it. Elena leans her head against the back of the chair and her eyes flutter shut.

“I need to fill up the tank. You want anything from the store?” I question.

“Maybe some water?”

“Alright.”

I get out and shut the car door. After filling up the tank, I head into the store. A bell dings over my head as I step in. It only takes a minute or two for me to buy some snacks for us, but by the time I step outside, Elena’s not in the passenger seat. I see her across the street, in front of some homeless man who looked like he just crawled out of hell.

My heart speeds up, the pressure increasing when I spot the glinting of a knife from afar. The expression on the man’s face is nothing short of menacing. I walk over there fast, grabbing her wrist before she can hand the man some cash.

“Fucking hell, Elena!” I snap.

She struggles against my grip. “Let me go. What’s wrong with you?”

“Get in the car!”

Her green eyes flare with annoyance. “No. I’m just trying to help him,” she says, gesturing at the man still on the ground in front of us.

His expression is less menacing, more amused. She’s no longer a defenseless girl he can take advantage of because she’s alone. I fight the urge to punch him in the face.

“I’ll do it,” I say, aggravated. She won’t walk away if I don’t. I place the bag filled with the stuff I bought in her arms. “I’ll give him money, now head into the car.”

She lets out a huff before turning around and walking away. I turn to the man on the ground.

“I’m going to give you a hundred bucks,” I start, pulling out my wallet. I throw the money onto the ground in front of him. He scrambles for it, grabbing every dollar. “If I ever fucking hear that you’re responsible for harming anybody that’s kind enough to help you, I’ll find you. And I’ll make it hurt. Do you understand?”

The man’s not that old. I’d say late forties. He has a scruffy beard and dull blue eyes.

He nods once, visibly anxious. He gets to his feet and walks away on thin shaky legs with the money. Once he’s gone, I head back to the car. Elena’s already glaring at me from the passenger seat.

“Your macho protective bullshit is fucking annoying,” she states.

I ignore her, starting the car. I pull away from the gas station and we’re back on the road. We’re about five minutes away from her neighborhood. Good. This has been a hell of a night and I need some fucking peace and quiet.

“Answer me, Roman,” Elena states, refusing to let the issue go. “Does it make you feel good about yourself? Butting into situations that aren’t your fucking business?”

“He had a goddamn knife!” I yell. Tension rolls through me. I pull over onto the side of the road and cut the engine before looking at her, “Is this what you do in Boston? Approach random homeless people alone? Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”

She’s stunned for only a moment or two before her glare sharpens. “How was I supposed to know he had a knife?”

I laugh. It’s borderline hysterical. “That’s your excuse? Jesus, what the hell is wrong with you? There are rules. I know you think you’re doing things out of the goodness of

your heart but even you can't be stupid enough to think it's a good idea to approach homeless men on your own."

"I didn't think—"

"That's the thing," I snap, cutting her off. "You never think."

The look in her eyes as soon as I say the words makes me immediately want to apologize.

"Elena—"

"Fuck you, Roman. You're an asshole," she says quietly.

"I'm sorry," I say, running a hand through my hair. "Fuck. You drive me crazy. I caught sight of the knife and I lost it, okay? I was terrified that you'd get hurt."

Her gaze is soft as she looks at me. "You're not supposed to care, Roman."

"I think we've established the fact that I do."

We're both breathing heavily, chests heaving. When I look at her, our gazes connect and something icy slides down my spine. Elena doesn't break eye contact. Her green eyes are piercing, mesmerizing. My throat dries and I swallow.

"Truth or dare, Roman," she whispers.

"What?"

"Come on, truth or dare. I need to test something out."

I can see it in her eyes that this is different from earlier.

"Dare," I say, my voice low and challenging.

Elena smiles triumphantly like she just won something. "I dare you to kiss me."

I never could back down from a challenge. In this case, though, it has nothing to do with my desire to win but my desire to feel. Because these days, any time I stare at Elena, I can't help but imagine what it would feel like to taste her. I've spent more time than I care to admit fantasizing what it would be like to kiss her. And now she's giving me the opportunity to do so.

I'd be an idiot not to take it. But I'm also fucked if I do.

My car suddenly feels impossibly small. When those mesmerizing green eyes meet mine, I make my decision.

“Screw it,” I mutter.

In the next breath, I'm unhooking my seatbelt and reaching for the side of her face. Only an inch of space separates us. In the end, she's the one who closes it. My hand curls around her neck, tugging her to me. Sparks break out across my skin as our lips touch. Liquid heat spreads through my veins. I feel blood rush through my body, straight to my cock, hardening it.

This is so wrong.

I spent the better part of my teenage years thinking of Elena Legan as the equivalent of a little sister. But somewhere along the road, something changed. I don't know what and I don't know why, but kissing her gives me a thrill I've never felt before with anyone. And I don't ever want to fucking stop.

CHAPTER 11

Elena

You know what's even crazier than kissing Roman De Luca? Kissing Roman De Luca and enjoying it.

I woke up this morning feeling like complete and utter shit. But at least I had a party to look forward to. And it was all going fine. I could put my problems on the back burner for a while. I spoke to people, I mingled, I was actually having fun. Until everything went to hell.

Today was a rollercoaster. And if I'm being honest, kissing Roman De Luca is definitely the last perfect track on the insane train. When I agreed to let him give me a ride home, I never imagined we would end up here.

His grip on my neck is tight but firm as his lips move in tandem with mine. I moan softly when he nips at my bottom lip. Then he suddenly pulls away. His gaze is still fixed on me, hard and filled with unrelenting heat. I watch as it drops down to my body. The black dress I'm wearing is hardly indecent, but the way Roman's eyes darken with lust makes it feel otherwise. Heat zaps through my body.

"Last chance, *lupacchiotta*. Tell me to take you home and I will."

I shake my head. Before I can convince myself otherwise, I'm climbing over the console separating our chairs. And then I'm straddling him. The surprise in Roman's eyes mirrors mine.

"Elena," he says huskily.

"Shh," I mutter. "Just shut up and kiss me."

“I knew you were fucking trouble,” he groans before leaning forward and capturing my lips.

This kiss is much more desperate than the last, passionate. Grabbing my hips, Roman pulls me closer so I’m sitting on his erection. When his hard cock lines up with the damp material of my panties, I’m hit with a wave of lust so potent, my heart practically stops. I’m unable to stop myself from rocking him. Roman grabs my ass, keeping me in place.

“Patience, *lupacchiotta*,” he murmurs, sounding annoyingly calm while I’m here, being driven out of my damn mind.

“I want you,” I breathe.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

When he kisses me again, it’s lazy and sweet. Flutters arise in the pit of my stomach. His hand moves to squeeze my ass. His movements are unbearably slow. His stubble scrapes across my skin as his mouth trails a line of fire down my neck. He closes his teeth around a patch of skin, biting before sucking on it to take the sting away. My nails dig into his arm as I clutch him.

Roman’s hand trails downward until he’s tracing the material of my panties, feeling the dampness. I feel him smile against my skin.

“You’re soaked, Elena.”

“Yeah, it does tend to happen when I’m grinding on someone’s dick,” I say, breathless.

He chuckles and his hand lands on my ass with a smack. I jolt, feeling myself grow even wetter. I force down the whimper that threatens to escape.

“Don’t be a smartass,” Roman states.

“Don’t tell me what to be,” I retort.

I really should stop challenging him. I also shouldn’t be this turned on. My skin is sensitive and every light graze of his body against mine sends a fresh bolt of desire through me. My nipples pebble under my dress.

“Let’s get this off,” Roman says, voice softer than I’ve ever heard it. He reaches for the hem and I lean away so he’s able to pull my dress off. And then I’m seated atop him in nothing but light blue lace panties.

Roman stares for longer than necessary at my naked breasts. I didn’t wear a bra because they don’t deserve that kind of torture for hours on end. When his eyes lift to my face, he grins wolfishly.

“Fuck yes,” he breathes before he sucks one aching nipple into his mouth.

I clutch his arm and let out a soft moan. “Oh god.”

Wetness slides down my thighs, making my panties even wetter. I’m sure he can feel it. But he doesn’t mind me making a mess as he continues sucking my tits while I grind against his cock. I feel my orgasm looming. Roman turns his attention to my other nipple, tugging on it with his teeth.

“You’re so fucking wet I can feel it through my pants, trouble. You want me to fuck you, don’t you? Make you cum so hard you’ll feel me for days. You want me to fuck you like a little slut?”

His words are dirty and depraved, and I shouldn’t be getting off on it. But I am. As is made clear when I orgasm, my mouth opening in a silent scream. I arch my back, leaning against his chest as aftershocks roll through me. A few seconds later, my breathing calms enough that I can look him in the eye.

“You really are a little slut, huh?” Roman asks with sexy confidence. “I didn’t even touch your pussy and you came all over my pants.”

My mouth drops open and I feel myself blush. I never blush.

“Shut up,” I mumble.

He smirks. “Want me to finger you next? You’ll get to come even harder than you just did.”

He's so fucking infuriating and yet my pussy clenches, responding to his words. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know just how much I want it, though.

"It's fine, Rome. I get it, some guys just aren't as good as they think. I came on my own just now, I can do it again."

His eyes narrow. "You're going to regret saying that in a second."

My mouth drops open when he reaches for my panties and rips them off.

"Go on, spread your legs me for," he prompts, and I'm shameless enough to do it, leaning backward so he has a clear view of my pussy. "Fucking perfect."

He rubs his thumb over my clit and I let out a sound that's a cross between a groan and moan. Heat races down my spine as he thrusts a finger inside of me, teasing me with leisurely strokes. His thumb circles over my clit while he continues to pump into me, and I'm practically dripping over his hand, my body aching for release. When he adds another finger, I almost shatter right there. But Roman's a dick because in the next breath, he pulls his hand away.

"No," I whine.

His blue eyes gleam. "Kiss me, Elena," he commands.

I'm so desperate, I do so without hesitation, wrapping my arms around his neck and closing my lips over his. Roman's hand slides into my hair as he kisses me back with passion, his mouth molding to mine like it was made to do it. He explores my mouth with deep, sweeping strokes and I drink in the taste of him. Whiskey and spice.

My hands move down to the collar of his shirt and I start undoing his buttons in a rush while Roman keeps kissing me. I pull away to suck on the side of his neck as my hands roam over the muscles on his chest. His hand grips mine hard and I suddenly can't take it anymore.

"Roman," I gasp. "I need you to fuck me."

“Good thing our needs are aligned,” is all he says before reaching between us for the buckle of his pants.

We manage to free his cock and it stands erect, hard and huge and thick. It’s already dripping with pre-cum. I slowly grip the top, gathering the moisture, and slide my finger down its length.

Roman’s head falls back as he lets out a loud groan. For just a second, I remember that we’re in a car, by the side of a road that is thankfully deserted. Still, anyone could find us here. But when Roman’s eyes meet mine, I forget all about that. Hell, I even forget to breathe.

They’re darkened with so much lust, it sends a shock of electricity through me.

“Lift your hips, Elena,” he whispers.

I do so, rising slightly to the top. He grabs my ass and slowly maneuvers me onto his hard length. My eyes flutter shut as I take him in, inch by inch until I’m seated to the hilt. I’m so impossibly full. Roman doesn’t move for several seconds and neither do I. The only sounds that can be heard is our heavy breathing.

“Fuck, I-I never imagined it would feel like this,” Roman says softly.

My eyes meet his and I’m about to ask why he was even imagining anything at all when he shifts, changing the angle slightly.

“Come on, trouble,” he grins. “You asked to fuck me. Go ahead.”

I grin, lifting up and slamming down onto him. I break out into fresh sweat, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I slam down on him repeatedly. When I start to grow tired, Roman takes over, powering upward and jackhammering into me at a pace that has me seeing stars.

“Yeah, like that,” he breathes. “Take every fucking inch.”

Sensation stretches my skin taut and makes me lightheaded until the world dissolves into nothing more than a symphony

of moans, groans and the slap of flesh against flesh. Time doesn't exist for me anymore. I'm not sure how long he slams into me—minutes, hours, days, it all blurs together. Until Roman reaches forward and pinches my clit. Pleasure spikes.

“Come for me, Lena,” Roman says, voice velvety and smooth.

That's all it takes for me to blast off. We've left the planet, ladies and gentlemen. If you look up at the sky, you'll see me floating somewhere between Mars and Jupiter. I fall against his chest, my mouth open in a silent scream. Roman's not too far behind. He comes with a loud groan and then we're both shaky, mindless messes.

I'M NOT sure how much time passes. I feel Roman smooth some of my hair from my neck before pressing a kiss to the area.

“Good girl,” he praises.

I don't look at him. I can't. This is definitely one of those situations where you float down from a high and realize you've just done something completely terrible. *Oh god, what have I done?*

It seemed like a good idea in the moment but now that I'm thinking clearly, I want to die. I can barely look at Roman as I maneuver out of his lap. My shaky legs are absolutely no help, but I finally manage to climb over to the passenger side. I grab my dress and hurriedly throw it over my head, covering myself. Roman fixes his clothes as well and save for his tousled hair and the color on his cheekbones, he looks nothing like a man who just fucked me hard in his car.

I look away from him, resolutely staring outside the window and doing my best to stave off the blush heating my cheeks.

Roman seems to have the exact same idea as me because he doesn't say a word as he starts the car and drives me the rest of the way home. As soon as we arrive in front of my house, I mumble a thank you and rush out, entering my house

without a backwards glance. Thankfully, my dad's already asleep in his room so I don't have to deal with any questions about my whereabouts.

I simply make my way up to my bedroom and fall face forward onto my bed.

"Merda," I groan.

I SLURP DOWN the milkshake in front of me, my hands on both my cheeks. Flashes from last night play across my vision like clockwork. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. And I can't get Roman out of my mind, either.

Come for me, Lena.

Take every fucking inch.

You want me to fuck you like a little slut?

The thought of what we did, of his dirty words, has me shifting uncomfortably, trying to stave off my arousal. When I look up, Kiara's staring at me intently, a curious look on her face.

"What?" I mutter.

She tilts her head slightly to the side. "Something's up with you. Tell me. Tell me now."

"Nothing is up," I state. "Everything's perfectly fine."

"Hmm. Your voice went up on that last syllable. You're lying, Lena. Did something happen?" she asks, concern clear in her voice.

I shake my head. "Honestly, I'm fine. I'm just thinking about what happened at the party yesterday is all," I say to divert her from the truth.

I'll tell her what really happened eventually. But not today. Not when I can barely make any sense of it myself. I can't count the number of times my gaze has strayed to my phone,

itching to call Roman so we can talk about what happened. But I don't want to be the one to call first.

He's making me feel like he considers what happened nothing more than a mistaken hookup. The thought has my heart clenching. But there doesn't seem to be any other option. Why else hasn't he tried to reach out to me?

When you sleep with your mortal enemy without a condom, it's good manners to call her the next day.

Kiara sighs. "Yeah, I couldn't really sleep. I kept seeing that old man dead on the floor."

I offer her a worried glance. Kiara's much more removed from the intricacies of our world. Her father's a politician and while he might have strong ties to our family, she still grew up with a normal home life. No blood or gore.

"Sorry you had to see that," I say with a grimace.

"It's fine. My dad heard about what went down and he lost it last night. He asked what I was doing at the party in the first place. I told him I was helping out my friends. He was not happy."

"He'll get over it." I shrug.

She opens her mouth to say something else when her phone starts to ring. She picks up and I lean back as she has a conversation with her supplier. Kiara established an online jewelry business a year ago. She creates her own designs and has them manufactured. It's not Pandora yet, but I have complete faith in my best friend's skills. I'm currently wearing one of her designs, a pretty golden bracelet with an intricate design and my name engraved on the inside. It was a gift from her for my birthday last year.

When she hangs up, there's a sour expression on her face.

"What's up?" I ask, taking a sip of my drink.

"Nothing much. A large shipment was just delayed. It'll set work back a few weeks."

"Sorry, honey."

“It’s alright. Enough about my work, though. When are you going back to Boston?”

“In two days,” I reply. “At this rate, I’m going to have to sneak out of the house and onto a flight. My dad doesn’t want me to go and Tony’s being an ass as well. You’d think I haven’t spent the last seven years there alone with the way they’re acting. They keep talking about my safety and whatnot. It’s starting to piss me off.”

Kiara’s expression is thoughtful. “They might be right.”

“What?!”

“Why can’t you just stay here in New York? With me.” She pouts. “It’s not like you can’t get a new job. With your credentials, you’d land a kick-ass job in mere minutes and be running the place in a few months.”

“Kie,” I say slowly, “I love you, but I didn’t spend all these years crafting an independent life away from my family just to throw it all away and start over.”

She sighs. “I know. I’m being selfish. Go live your life. I’ll just be here with the boys.”

“Don’t spend too much time with them, though,” I say worriedly. “We might have grown up with them, but they’re in charge of running a crime syndicate now. I don’t want you to get hurt, so be careful, Kie.”

“I’ve got it.” She laughs. “I’ll be fine.”

We’re talking about a fashion show she attended when my phone buzzes with a text. It’s from Roman.

We need to talk.

Finally.

When?

I’ll come see you tomorrow morning.

Fine.

“Why are you suddenly smiling?” Kiara asks.

“Nothing,” I reply, dropping my phone and doing my best to school my features into normalcy.

Whatever’s wrong with me, I need to fix it. And that’s only going to happen after I’ve made some clarifications with the devil.

CHAPTER 12

Roman

Tony groans as he rubs the side of his neck. It's 7 a.m. and we're walking into his house.

"You still haven't told me why you wanted to come here first," he mutters.

I shrug. We spent last night overseeing a weapons and drug shipment and ensuring that everything was loaded and accounted for. It isn't typical hands-on work, but considering the Russos' behavior, I wasn't taking any chances. If they hijacked those weapons, we'd lose our biggest client in China, which would be unacceptable. I even sent some capos along with the shipment to guard it all the way to China. That's how fucking important this is. It's my first big job since I took over as Don. Which means everyone's watching to see how it'll go.

Tony and I left thirty minutes before the plane took off, after we were sure it would go down without a hitch.

"Rome," Tony says under his breath.

"I need to talk to your sister," I inform him.

His dark eyebrows rise. "Why do you need to talk to Elena?"

"Because we have some unfinished business," I reply vaguely.

He stares at me for a beat, wanting to question me further but also not wanting to seem disrespectful.

"Fine," he says, shrugging. "Just don't kill each other. I'm gonna go get some food."

He walks off to the kitchen while I climb the flight of stairs. I knock on her bedroom door once and wait for a second or two but there's no reply. When I knock again, she yells something indecipherable. Rolling my eyes, I rap my knuckles against the door loudly. I feel something slam against the door, presumably she threw a pillow.

“Go away!” she yells.

“Open the door, trouble.”

She falls silent. A minute later, she's opening the door, revealing sleepy eyes and messy dark hair. My blood heats at the sight of her. She's wearing a large T-shirt that practically swallows her, stopping at her mid-thigh. I let out a breath before tearing my gaze from her legs.

“Not a morning person?” I question, wanting to smile at the ticked-off expression on her face.

“I am,” she retorts. “Just not at seven a.m.”

“Right. Can I come in?”

“That depends. Are you holding any weapons?”

This time I smile. “Nope.” There's a gun at the back of my shirt.

Her eyes narrow like she doesn't quite believe me. But she eventually shifts away from the doorway, giving me access. Her room is neat and tidy. There's a blue and white canopy bed and a few posters hanging on the wall. Two wooden doors stand side by side, one presumably leading into her bathroom and the other her closet. There are barely any pictures in here, which strikes me as odd. Then I remember this isn't where she lives, only a childhood bedroom she occasionally returns to.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” I ask, turning to her.

Green eyes are fixed on me. “You were looking around the room, what do you think? Does it please your highness?”

I roll my eyes. “Whose shirt is that?” I ask, ignoring her and gesturing at the clothing on her body.

It's bothering me and I'm curious. I expect her to say it's Tony's.

"My ex-boyfriend's," she says, letting out a tiny yawn.

I arch an eyebrow. "Don't girls usually burn shit from their exes?"

"That would be a waste of a perfectly good shirt," she says dryly. "Plus, the relationship didn't end badly. We still talk on occasion."

"Of course you do," I mutter.

"Well, go on. You woke me up at this ungodly hour, let's hear what you have to say."

I open my mouth to speak, then hesitate. I've spent the past thirty-four hours fixating on what happened between us. I've thought about what to say to her and what to do about this fucked-up situation, but now that I'm here, words fail me. I cross my arms over my chest and fix her with a stare.

"Why did you sleep with me?"

Her eyes widen at the question and a second later, she laughs.

"Wait, that's the first thing you're going to ask? Why I fucked you? Because let's be honest, Roman, there wasn't any sleeping involved," she drawls.

I grit my teeth, feeling a muscle tick in my jaw. "Just answer the question."

I just had to fuck the one woman who infuriates me to no end. Of course she's not going to make this easy. I shouldn't have come here this morning. I haven't gotten any sleep, and I'm exhausted. I might be a little irritable. There's a possibility I'll snap and this conversation will turn into a yelling match—and knowing Elena, the chances of that are incredibly high.

"Why? Want to do it again?" she asks. She moves closer to me. Her finger lifts to my face and she traces a path down my jaw. My blood heats, but I shrug her hand off.

“Oh, come on, Roman. It’s usually much harder to rile you up,” she pouts.

I run my hand through my hair in agitation. *Breathe, Roman.*

I was trying to gauge where her headspace is with regard to what happened, but since she’s unwilling to do so, I might as well say what’s on my mind.

“It was a fucking mistake,” I begin.

Her expression is carefully blank. “Oh?”

“Do you even grasp the implications of what happened that night?” I question. “Even if you remove the fact that I’m the Don and you’re a woman in my family, or the fact that neither of us like each other, you’re my best friend’s little sister, which makes you off-limits. I broke a rule by having sex with you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Calm down, Roman. I promise you won’t burst into flames just because you fucked me.”

My chest rises and falls. I shouldn’t be having this conversation with her now. She’s well-rested and unrifled. I’m the complete opposite.

“You can’t tell anyone,” I state, saying the words I originally wanted to. “I don’t care what you think about what happened. And I don’t give a fuck why you did it—”

She cuts me off. “Why did you do it?”

My gaze sharpens. I would answer her question if I had an answer. I’ve turned it over in my head so many times. It comes as no surprise that I’m attracted to her; the woman practically radiates sex appeal.

Her eyelashes flutter. “I can tell you why I did it,” she says.

I arch an eyebrow for her to go on.

“Because you were there. I was feeling sad thinking about my mother and you were a warm body that was available. It meant nothing to me. Plus, I’ve always wanted to have hate sex and you’re the prime candidate for that. So get your

panties out of a twist, Roman. As far as I'm concerned, nothing happened between us."

I almost want to laugh because her words hurt more than they fucking should. They shouldn't hurt at all. I should be glad that she thinks that. I *am* glad.

"Good. So you won't tell anyone?"

"What is your fixation with me keeping my mouth closed?" she snaps.

"Your brother is my right-hand man. Your father is my consigliere. I need both of them and I'm not losing them over a mistake."

Her green eyes burn. She clears her throat and looks away.

"Fine, I got it. I won't say a word. I leave for Boston tomorrow anyway."

"Good."

Several seconds pass as I stare at her. I should leave, but something's holding me back. Maybe the thought that I was too harsh. Or the fact that even now, looking into her face that's filled with carefully controlled fury, I want nothing more than to pull her closer and fuck her one last time. Or at least kiss her luscious pink lips.

Insanity. That's what this is. Nothing but insanity.

Then the door opens and her brother walks in. We both look up at him.

"Learn how to knock, Tony!" Elena yells, walking over to her bed and sitting down.

His eyes glide over her before moving to me. There's a hint of suspicion there. He doesn't trust me with his sister. He never has. I don't know why and today's not the day to ask.

"We have a problem, Rome," he states.

I tense. "What is it?"

His throat bobs as he swallows. "The Gallos."

My jaw tightens. "What the fuck happened?"

We walk out of Elena's room without a backwards glance. Honestly, I'm glad she's leaving. She's a huge fucking distraction—one I can't deal with while trying to keep my empire in place.

“EVERYTHING WAS IN PLACE,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I double-checked every last detail for you fuckers. I supervised every single step. I all but handed the shipment to you in a box wrapped with a fucking bow. So where the fuck did I lose you?”

I'm tempted to pull out my gun and shoot the man on one knee in front of me. He averts his eyes, keeping his gaze downcast on the ground. I sent ten men to China with a plane with a plane filled with a two-month supply of drugs and expensive weapons. Only one of them came back.

“We were about to take off when it all went wrong,” Lorenzo says shakily. “They barged inside and started shooting up the inside of the plane. Everyone was dead in a manner of minutes.”

“And how, pray tell, did you fucking survive?” I question, feeling a muscle in my jaw tick.

He still doesn't look at me. “I dropped to the ground and hid. They found me, though. Left me alive to give you a message.”

“Go on,” I prompt.

“They said to tell you that they intend to finish what the Russos started,” he says. “They took all the weapons and the drugs. They said to face them if you wanted it all back. They're not scared of you. What they want is the extermination of the De Luca family.”

Fury billows through me. “I see,” I say calmly. “On your feet.”

He slowly rises to his feet. I see relief shining in his brown eyes. The relief quickly turns to dread when I pull out a gun

and shoot him in the chest without hesitation. His body drops to the ground.

“You should have died with the others,” I murmur without feeling, staring at the blood pooling on the oak floors.

“Roman,” Tony says hesitantly, drawing my attention.

He’s been standing beside me the entire time. Michael’s in my chair, looking a little pale. He should be. He gets to his feet as I move toward him and slam my fist onto the table.

“How did they find out?” I growl.

My best friend’s jaw clenches as he stares at a spot above my head.

“They managed to break into one of my encrypted files. That’s how they got the date and time of the delivery.”

“And how the hell were they able to do that?”

“I was distracted,” he admits. “I’m sorry.”

“Where the hell were you, Michael?”

His throat bobs. He hesitates but ultimately replies. “I was with Kiara. She was going through something at home. I was trying to help her.”

“I don’t give a fuck!” I yell. “You’re supposed to be on top of things like this. That’s your job, Michael.”

My fist flies before I realize it, meeting him square in the jaw. He stumbles back. I go to throw another punch but Tony intercepts me, standing between us.

“Rome,” he says pleadingly.

I close my eyes and run my hands through my hair, trying to calm myself. When I find some semblance of calm, I look at Michael.

“You’re lucky you’re my brother, Mikey,” I state.

He nods once. “It won’t happen again, Don.”

I take a seat on my chair. My brain whirs as I consider the next course of action.

“They still have the weapons and the drugs. We can get it back,” Tony says.

I shake my head. “No. They need to pay for what they did. I’m not letting them get away with this.”

My fists clench as I make a decision.

“Call Christian D’Angelo,” I say to Michael. “Today feels like a good day to wipe out a mafia organization.”

CHAPTER 13

Elena

My period is late.

Five days late, to be exact. I can count on one hand the amount of times I've had a late period. It doesn't happen often.

But it has happened before, the hopeful voice in my head says.

Yes, but not after unprotected sex with a man that I'm pretty sure hates my guts.

I tell myself there's no need to panic. But the truth is, there absolutely is. I left New York a month ago. I slept with Roman a month ago. If I'm pregnant...

I can't even complete the thought. I've been so busy with work that I haven't had time to sleep with anyone else. I manage to stave off the dread I'm feeling as I get dressed for the day. I grab my car keys, my phone, my purse, all the essentials I need and then I'm out the door of my apartment. At work, I'm perfectly balanced, taking care of my tasks with efficiency. I don't think about the fact that I haven't seen my period. I don't even consider the possibility.

Until the work day ends and I find myself in front of the drug store in my neighborhood. I walk inside and pick up a pregnancy test from the aisle. Then I grab five more, just in case. The cashier offers me a sympathetic glance. I ignore it in favor of getting the hell out of there and fast.

When I arrive home, I'm much calmer. If I was pregnant, I'd feel it right? But I'm perfectly fine. No morning sickness

or bloating or whatever the hell symptoms pregnant women display.

It's only been one month, the annoying voice in my head whispers.

“Shut up,” I mutter, running my hand through my hair.

My heart starts to race. I walk into to the bathroom to take the test. After I'm done peeing, I sit on the toilet, waiting for the strip to read.

Please, God. I'm only twenty-five. I'm a complete work in progress. I can't take care of a whole other human being.

I only ever remember to pray to God when I need something from him. Apart from that, I forget he even exists. Which is why I doubt he'll be listening to me right now.

I'm proven correct when the test comes back positive. The plus sign on it can only mean one thing.

I just stare and stare and then I stare some more. I let out a maniacal laugh, reaching for another test. I take all five tests in under twenty minutes. My body provides as much pee as I need. By the time the last one comes back, my mind is done being deluded. I stand up and cross over to my bedroom before falling face down on my bed.

Fuck my life.

“Okay. I'm an adult. I'm twenty-five, I have a career. I can do this.” When I say it out loud, it doesn't sound that bad. But I'm an unmarried Italian girl with a family that has ties to a mafia crime syndicate. And I'm pregnant with the child of the Don of said syndicate.

Before I left home, they were discussing my marriage. I only just managed to convince my dad to give me some more time. And now...

This is a fucking disaster. I turn around on my bed and stare up at the ceiling of my room. My hand trails down to my stomach and I clutch it slightly.

I'm having a baby.

I fall asleep to that thought, unsure of what the next day will bring. And no idea what I'm going to do.

When morning comes, I repeat the entire process of getting dressed and going to work. By the time I get back home however, I'm starting to feel desperate. I need to plan a course of action but I have no clue what to do.

In times like this, when in doubt, I call my brother.

Tony picks up on the third ring.

"Little sister," he says in greeting. My eyes widen when I hear a gunshot followed by colorful swearing.

"What the fuck?" I ask, my heart racing.

More shots are fired in quick succession

"Tony, where the hell are you?"

He's breathing heavily as he replies. "In the middle of a shootout. These Gallo bastards don't die easily."

I clutch onto my hair, trying not to lose it. I swear I can feel my sanity slipping.

"Tony, why are you picking up a call in the middle of a shootout?"

"I haven't spoken to you in two weeks," he says. "Of course I'm picking up my baby sister's call."

I hear a shot that's much louder than the rest and sounds way too close for comfort. "Fuck!" Tony yells.

I lurch to my feet, my heart racing. "Tony? Are you okay? Tony!"

"I'm fine," he says after a few seconds. "The bullet hit one of our guys is all."

He's sounding way too blasé about this situation. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"You know how cats have nine lives?"

"You're human, Tony," I say dryly.

"Sure, but my spirit animal's a cat," he says cheerfully.

“Oh god, you’re insane,” I mutter.

Unhinged is more like it. I really worry about him sometimes.

“I’ll be fine. Why’d you call?”

“I just...” I hesitate. “I wanted to see you. Is there any chance you could come to Boston?”

“Why? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asks worriedly.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I say. It’s not like I can tell him over the phone.

“What the fuck are you doing on the phone, Tony?” Roman yells in the background.

The sound of his voice has my heart stopping.

“Just give me a sec, Rome,” Tony yells back.

Almost immediately, realization dawns on me. I can’t tell Tony the truth. My mind travels back to my conversation with Roman a month ago, when he all but threatened me not to say a word of what we did. Something painful lodges in my throat.

“I’m sorry, *sorella*. We’re in the middle of a gang war. And I’m not sure when it’ll be over. I don’t think I can come,” my brother apologizes.

“No, it’s fine,” I breathe. “Do what you have to do. Just don’t die. Please.”

“I won’t. I love you, sis.”

“I love you, too.”

He hangs up and I stare at the wall for several beats, trying to control my breathing. After a while, I dial my other lifeline. The only other person I know that can help me out of this.

“Lena?” Kiara says after picking up.

“Kie, I need you,” is all I manage to say before the dam bursts and I start to sob.

KIARA ARRIVES in Boston the next day. I take the day off and wait for her in my apartment. When she arrives, she takes one look at my face, before pulling me into a hug.

“You still haven’t told me what’s wrong,” she says five minutes later. “I’m worried, Lena.”

We’re seated on my couch. Kiara’s holding a cup of lemonade.

“I’m not dying,” I mumble. “And I’m not in debt or being chased by a serial killer.”

My first instinct is to make a joke when I feel cornered. It’s a bad habit. Kiara’s eyes narrow and it’s pretty clear she’s not impressed.

“You curled your hair. It’s pretty,” I say in an obvious attempt to buy myself more time.

“Thank you. But stop stalling,” she says.

My chest heaves as I let out a small sigh. Not wanting to draw it out any longer, I say the words.

“I’m pregnant.”

The pronouncement rings around the room. Kiara’s eyes widen in surprise.

“You’re what?”

“Pregnant, Kiara. As in, I am having a baby.”

“You’re pregnant?” she whispers, her eyes still wide and her expression slightly dazed.

“Yep. But you might want to dial it down on the shock a little. I’m not done,” I state.

Her eyebrows furrow and I almost want to laugh. She has no idea what bomb I’m about to drop.

“The baby belongs to none other than Roman De Luca.”

It takes a few seconds for the implications of that sentence to land. Kiara’s expression shifts from confusion to horror and lands on disbelief. It’s pretty comical.

“Very funny,” she says, laughing nervously. “Would you please be serious, Lena?”

“I am being serious,” I say softly. “Roman and I slept together. And now I’m carrying the product of it in my womb. I know it sounds crazy. Believe me, I’m this close to losing it myself.”

Kiara stares at me for a second. “You slept with Roman De Luca!” she practically screams. “As in, you had sex with him?”

“Yes, Kiara. I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept,” I deadpan.

“Oh god,” she says under her breath. “Oh my god,” she repeats, louder this time.

“Trust me, babe. I know. It’s crazy.”

Kiara drops the cup in her hand and runs her hand through her hair. I let her stew in silence for a couple of minutes. When she’s done wrapping her head around it, she looks at me.

“When did this happen? And how? And why? I mean, I know you’ve always had feelings for him—and don’t you dare even try to deny it.”

I shrug. I’m not going to deny it. But after my conversation with Roman, I realized something important. Whatever feelings I might have had for him needed to be smothered by a pillow. And I did do that. I told myself not to care anymore. He made it pretty clear he doesn’t give a fuck about me, so I had to do the same. Now, though, I’m not sure how to feel.

“You need to tell me what happened, Lena,” Kiara says softly.

So I do. I tell her everything. How we slept together, and our subsequent conversation where he told me to never speak of it again.

“He called it a mistake,” I say flatly. “We slept together and he labelled it a mistake. What do you think he’s going to say about this baby?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, Lena. Roman’s not that kind of guy. You should talk to him about it. Maybe—”

“Kiara,” I say cutting her off. “Roman’s the Don. And they’re currently at war. You expect me to just walk up to him and go, ‘Oh hey, remember that time we fucked? Yeah, well there’s a baby growing inside of me right now, surprise.’”

“You think he’s going to turn you away?”

“No,” I say firmly. “I know he won’t. He’ll take responsibility for the baby. And in doing so, I’ll upend his entire life. He just got his position, Kie. You and I both know how much trouble he’s going through to keep it. Adding a baby into the mix would be a disaster.”

Kiara sighs. I can tell she’s starting to see my point.

“Also, before I left home, they were trying to arrange a marriage for me. Our parents try to micro-manage every aspect of our lives. We’re fucking Catholic. Sure, I haven’t been to church in months, but good Catholic girls don’t get pregnant out of wedlock. It just doesn’t happen.”

This is all I’ve been able to think about since yesterday. I’ve thought of every scenario, and in each one, we’re fucked. There aren’t any other options.

“So, what’s your plan?” Kiara questions wearily. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m having this baby,” I announce. There was never any doubt as to that. “But no one can know. I can’t tell my dad or Tony and especially not Roman.”

“How’s that going to work, sweetie? You’ll start showing in a couple of months. Anyone one of them could come see you. How do you plan to hide the baby until then?”

“I already thought that out too, and I was wondering if you wanted to go back to England for a couple of months. With me,” I say nervously. “You don’t have to, but I need my best friend there. I’ll come up with a story as to why I have to leave. Maybe I’ll tell them my company transferred me there temporarily or something. But really, I’m going to quit my job and stay there for a while. Maybe an entire year.”

“Wow,” Kiara breathes. “You’ve really thought this through, huh?”

“Yep. You know me. I always have a plan. So, will you come with me?”

Kiara doesn’t think about it for long. “Of course I’m coming with you. You’re my best friend.”

I let out a soft breath of relief. “What about work, though? You just got back and I hate that you have to leave again so soon. Your parents.”

“My work is mostly remote. I don’t have to be in New York to do it. As for my parents, they’ll just have to deal with it. Honestly, I was getting a little sick of the city. And my dad’s really angry with the De Lucas right now. He says they fucked him over, gave his congressman seat to someone else. And then there’s Michael. He hasn’t been speaking to me much.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. He’s just been keeping his distance since the whole gang war thing began. It’s pissing me off but it’s not like I’m going to confront him or anything like that. There’s nothing keeping me here,” she assures me.

One day, I’ll understand the complicated relationship between her and Michael De Luca. But that day isn’t today.

I move closer and hug her. “You’re the best. Thank you so much. I was worried I’d have to do all this on my own.”

“Never,” Kiara promises. When I pull away, she’s looking at me with a serious expression. “I have to ask, though. Are you sure you’re ready for this, sweetie? Having a child... it’s a lot.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I admit. “But I’ve got about nine months to prepare. I have to be ready by the time my little one comes.”

My eyes well up with tears, but I blink them away. I’ve cried more in twenty-four hours than I have in years. Which is annoying because I’m made of much stronger stuff than that.

“Lena, your heart is in the right place and I understand your motivations, but I just need to be sure you’re thinking clearly. You’re going to hide this man’s baby for an entire year. Roman might not forgive you for that.”

I clench my jaw. “He already hates me anyway.”

“Don’t say that. He doesn’t. I know he doesn’t. He can’t. Because the two of you are going to become parents and even if he doesn’t know it, you’re a permanent fixture in his life from now on.”

My heart hurts to hear that statement but I can’t think of that right now. I can’t think of anything but what’s presently in my path. My relationship with Roman and our parenting issues will have to wait.

“We’ll figure it out,” I say.

“Alright,” Kiara breathes. “I guess we’re moving to London. There’s just one important question I have to ask.”

“Which is?”

She grins. “How was the sex?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?” I ask, even though I’m fighting back a smile of my own.

For the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I can breathe easier. I have my best friend. I have a plan. I’ll be okay.

CHAPTER 14

Roman

I watch as Tony stabs a screwdriver into the man's palm. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Michael wince. He's never really liked torture, preferring to kill someone and be done with it.

I, on the other hand, revel in sounds that fill the air. Once I'm satisfied he has suffered enough, I ask Tony to stop. He does so immediately, turning to face me. His hands are covered in blood and there's even some on his face. And despite it all, he manages to smile. Elena's always calling me a psychopath, but honestly, her brother is more deserving of the title.

Thoughts of Elena have me clenching my teeth and I hurriedly banish them, unwilling to even think about her at a time like this. I walk toward the man in the torture chair. His brown hair is matted with blood. Every visible surface of his body is a clear sign of how much torture he's had to endure. His blue eyes are half-closed. He looks dead, but he's not. Not yet.

He deserves it. If not for anything but the number of lives that were lost because he poked a hornets' nest. Carman Gallo is forty years old and the former boss of the Gallo family. Former, because they don't exist anymore.

I'm surprised when he manages to raise his head, looking me in the eye.

"Please," he croaks. "Mercy."

“How many times do I have to fucking say it?” I mutter. “Mercy’s a foreign concept. It doesn’t exist to me anymore. I can offer you no mercy, but be glad for the fact that your wife and children will be safe.” I can do that much.

He nods once before hanging his head. Not wanting to drag it out anymore, I grab my gun and shoot. He dies instantaneously. And then there were four. With the Gallos exterminated, there are only four prominent mafia families in New York. I’m sure another organization will crawl up in their place, another family of mobsters hoping to make a name for themselves. But for now, I’ve won a war.

I turn around to face my men. Christian D’Angelo is in the room, too. He’s wearing a crisp navy suit, arms crossed, and when I look at him, I can tell he’s impressed. Michael looks relieved and Tony, the idiot, begins a slow clap.

He makes an explosion sound. “And boom go the Gallos.”

I sigh, ignoring him and moving toward Christian. I would have never been able to pull this off without him. He’s been a great help these past few weeks, helping to gather intel and assisting in whatever way he could with the war. Now that it’s over, I’m not sure how to repay him.

He must see it on my face because he smiles. “Consider it a favor for a friend.”

“There aren’t any free favors,” I say gruffly. “Not in our world.”

Although it’s true that he and I have grown closer over the past month, grabbing drinks together and having a few conversations in between talking strategy.

He shrugs. “True. Maybe you’ll get your chance to repay me in the future.”

I nod once. “Thank you.”

“Although I do require something from you,” he states.

“I’m listening.”

“My wife has asked me to bring my new friend over to dinner. She’s excited to meet you.”

I arch an eyebrow. I guess we are friends. Tony was right, he and I are pretty similar. Christian can sometimes be as dry as a cardboard, but he's a good man and I actually like him. As far as friends go, he's not a bad one to have. Not at all.

"I know it's ridiculous," he says, brows furrowed. "But Daniella's stubborn and I've mentioned you a few times. It'll just be dinner with my family. You can bring your friends." His lips curl as he says the last sentence.

I'm sure he's thinking about Tony and whether I'll be able to get him to behave in a dignified manner out in public.

"Thanks, man. Just let me know when and where. I'll be there. It's the least I can do."

"Alright," he says. "Well done, by the way. You've definitely proven yourself. Anybody who thinks less of you can go fuck themselves."

I smile. "Or we can just kill them."

"Yeah." He chuckles. "I have to go. But we'll talk later."

A few seconds after he leaves, Michael sighs. "I'll get someone to clean that up," he says, gesturing at the dead man and the blood and gore surrounding him.

He walks out as well, leaving behind Tony and me.

"Is it just me or is he acting pissier than usual?" I ask.

"Nope. He's sad because Kiara's leaving the country," Tony replies.

"Again?" I frown. "But she just got back."

"Yeah, but Lena got a promotion at work that requires her to go to London for a year and Kiara's going with her."

My brows furrow. "Elena's going to London?"

"Yep. She just managed to convince my dad to let her go. He's only doing so on the condition that she'll come home and settle down in New York when she returns. He wants her to get married as soon as she gets back."

I clench my fists, trying to ignore the way my blood heats at the thought of Elena getting married. “And she agreed?”

“Yeah. I was surprised, too. She said she’d do anything we wanted when she returned as long as we let her go. I guess the promotion’s important to her or something,” he says, shrugging.

My gut tells me that something suspicious is going on. It doesn’t feel right. But I can’t very well question their decision.

“Alright. When do they leave?”

“In two days. Dad and I are going to fly over to Boston to say goodbye since they’re leaving from there. I kind of hate that I won’t see her for a year.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive. Plus, we’ve got a lot of work to do. Starting with appeasing our buyer in China and fixing relations with some of our other investors.”

“Sure, we’ll do all that. But tonight, we celebrate,” he grins, throwing his arm around my neck.

I chuckle, letting him lead me out of the room. He’s right. There’s so much I have to do, but for today, I can breathe easier. Because I just took a monumental step in my journey to ensure that my father is proud of me and continues to be so. There will be other obstacles. But for now, I’ve won.

TONY and I are heading out of the house when we run into Ivan. He drives his motorcycle onto the property, revving the engine twice before stopping in front of us. I don’t miss Tony’s eye roll.

“Dude needs to stop showing off with that thing,” he mutters. I can tell he’s secretly jealous.

Ivan gets off the motorcycle and offers me a short nod. “Roman,” he greets.

“Cousin.”

I'm less suspicious of him now. He did his best to assist us during the war. He's surprisingly good at hand-to-hand combat and is not a terrible shot. In a war where I needed every available man I could get, Ivan was an asset.

"I came to see your mother," he informs me.

"Yeah, alright."

He walks into the house and I turn to Tony, who has a scowl on his face.

"What?" I ask as we walk over to my car.

"I don't like him. Which is unfortunate because he's top of the list of Elena's potential husbands."

I still. Elena Legan has been gone a week and I can admit there's a part of me that misses her.

"They want to marry her off to my *cousin*?" I question, feeling a muscle tick in my jaw.

"I don't like it either. But you said it yourself, he seems like a decent guy," Tony points out.

Before he can see the murderous expression on my face, I look away and force myself to calm down. I have no claim over Elena. I don't give a fuck who she marries.

"Let's just go," I mutter. "The D'Angelos are expecting us."

He and I are the only two attending the dinner because Mikey's an annoying ass that doesn't care to spend time with human beings. He'd rather play video games and hack into NASA. I worry about him sometimes but there's not much I can do. He's been through a lot. We all have.

The street leading up to the D'Angelo home is quiet, almost empty, and full of massive oak trees. There aren't any houses for miles so the home is pretty isolated, which is actually fucking smart. When we arrive at the large mansion, we're shown inside by the help, who lead us to the living room.

Inside, we find Christian and other members of his family. They all fall silent when they notice our appearance. Two kids are seated in front of the flat-screen TV, watching a cartoon.

Christian clears his throat before getting to his feet. I'm glad to see Carlo, who approaches as well.

"Roman," Christian greets.

"Hey. We brought wine," I say awkwardly, gesturing for Tony to hand it to him.

Technically, Mom forced it onto us, saying it was rude to show up to someone's house without a gift. One of the women in the room walks forward and plucks the bottle from Tony's hand.

"Ooh, is this Chambertin?" the red-haired woman asks. Her eyes gleam as she looks up at us. "It's pretty expensive. What year?"

Christian coughs, getting onto his feet. "*Tesoro*, chill."

Her eyes narrow at her husband. "I will *chill* this fancy bottle of wine our guests brought. And who knows, maybe I'll pour you a glass," she says, winking at him.

"It's a 1968 Rossignol Chambertin. Mrs. D'Angelo," I reply politely.

She snorts. "My name's Daniella. And please never refer to me as Mrs. D'Angelo again. I'm not Christian's mother."

The exuberant woman grins while I stare at her, dumbfounded. The D'Angelo men behind her are not nearly as surprised by her actions.

"Of course not, Daniella," Tony says, butting in. "You're too gorgeous to be a mom."

He even winks at her. I inwardly groan, raising my hand to my face. I knew I shouldn't have brought him along. The bastard is oblivious to the way Christian's eyes narrow.

Daniella chuckles. "Actually, I am a mom. Of two. Those little rascals right there," she says, pointing at the kids in front of the TV. "But I appreciate the sentiment..."

“Anthony Legan,” he quickly supplies. “You can call me Tony.”

Daniella smiles. “Nice to meet you, Tony. And you too, Roman. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to check on the food. And by that I mean oversee the cook because I am horrendous at cooking.”

With those words, she walks out. Another woman steps forward from behind the men, taking her place.

“Why are the two of you just standing there?” she asks the D’Angelo brothers with a smile.

Carlo immediately wraps his arm around her. “This is my wife Astoria.”

Astoria’s about to say something when a phone starts to ring. She pulls it out of her jeans and offers us an apologetic smile before moving to answer it. The call only takes a minute or two.

“Babe, I have to go,” she says to her husband once she’s done. “A kid was just brought in and she’s in a critical state.”

“Sure, *mi amore*. Do you need me to drive you?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’ll be fine.”

He kisses her on the lips, despite the three other pairs of eyes fixed on them. It’s a little bizarre to watch. But it’s pretty clear that the man is in love. Carlo’s changed since the last time I saw him.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Astoria says to us once they break apart. “It was nice to meet you. But I really have to go.”

“It’s alright,” I tell her.

She leaves and then it’s just us men. Carlo explains that she’s a doctor—information that I was already privy to, but I nod in understanding all the same.

Christian sighs. “Sorry if all of this is a little overwhelming..”

“Nah, man, it’s fine,” I murmur. “I’ve got a large family as well.”

He smiles. “Come on, let’s introduce you to the kids. My youngest brother and his wife aren’t in the country right now.”

And thank God for that. Like he said, they’re a little overwhelming, and I don’t do well around new people. Tony, though, seems right at home. After we’re introduced to the kids, he starts talking to Carlo about the gym he opened a year ago. I’ve been meaning to check it out but things have been crazy busy.

“Business is going well,” Carlo tells us. “I’ve got clients from all over New York. There are training facilities for MMA fighters and a couple of wrestlers.”

It sounds pretty cool. As surprising as it is that a man like Carlo decided to leave the underworld behind, he seems genuinely happy. And in love, which is something I didn’t think was possible. The Carlo I met those years ago was icy cold. He barely spoke and he didn’t care about anything other than his family. It’s amazing the transformation he has undergone.

We talk for a couple more minutes before Daniella reappears to inform us that dinner’s ready. Her son Daniel immediately gets to his feet at the prospect of food, making me chuckle. Cute kid, and friendly, according to his father—that is, when he’s not distracted by cartoons. He barely even looked at us when his dad made the introductions. Christian moves to lift his little girl onto his shoulders, an adorable three-year-old with blue eyes like her mom. She looks like her, too.

Tony and I fall back as we follow the family to the dining room.

“Pretty weird, huh?” my friend asks.

I look at him in question.

“Seeing them happy and in love,” he corrects. “We didn’t get to see a lot of that growing up.”

My throat closes. “No, we didn’t.”

I guess my parents loved each other, but their marriage sometimes seemed a little clinical. Like it was duty or

something like that. Which makes sense when I consider that fact that it was an arranged marriage between their families.

“You think we’ll ever be in such a position?” Tony asks, sounding a lot unlike himself.

I arch an eyebrow. “Going soft on me, man?”

He chuckles. “Nah. Just wondering if I could get a woman as pretty as Daniella.”

I reach up and smack his head. “Are you trying to start a war?”

He shrugs. “What? She’s hot.”

“She’s married to Christian D’Angelo,” I grit out.

“Still hot.”

I groan softly. We’re shown to seats at the table where there’s a large spread of food.

“Dan,” Daniella cautions when her son reaches for some of the food. “We need to say grace first.”

He sighs, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

“For that attitude, you get to say grace, buddy,” Christian says with a chuckle.

His brown eyes widen. “I don’t want to. Uncle Carlo,” he cries, turning to his uncle beside him.

Carlo snickers, “Sorry, kid. You’re on your own.”

He pouts for a moment or two before sighing. “Fine.” He sits up in his chair, placing his hands on the table and clasping them together. “Thank you, Father for this meal. Thank you for my mom and dad, for my sister and my cousin, Angel. Thank you for my uncles and aunties. Thank you for my daddy’s new friends, too. Amen.”

“Amen,” we all chorus.

“Good job, Danny,” Carlo says, raising his hand for a high five. The kid returns it with a grin.

“Now you get to dig in,” Daniella says to him. “Enjoy the meal.”

“Thank you. For inviting us,” I state.

Daniella grins. I swear the woman never stops smiling.

“You’re welcome, Roman. I don’t really know much about you, though. Or your family. Christian can be annoyingly tight-lipped.”

I shrug. “There’s not much to say. I’ve got a mom and a little sister. Two cousins and this ass—” I quickly stop myself before using a swear word in front of the kids. “Sorry,” I say sheepishly. I’m not used to watching my words.

“It’s fine,” Daniella says easily.

“And then there’s Tony,” I amend.

“Smooth,” the asshole mutters beside me.

“I know your sister, actually. Rosa’s a brilliant potter. We’re in the same circles in the art world.”

“Yeah, she’s mentioned you a couple of times.”

“Darling, you have to see some of Rosa’s art,” she says excited to her husband. “The things that girl can make with her hands.”

“I’ve seen a couple, *tesoro*,” he informs her.

Christian’s eyes practically shine as he looks at her. It’s crazy that he can be so warm and human with them while still ruling his organization with an iron fist. I honestly can’t imagine myself in the same position. With any luck, I’ll be married to a woman I have no feelings for beyond duty and honor, like my parents. Maybe in a couple of years we’ll have kids of our own.

And while a part of me might hope for the kind of life the D’Angelos have come to find, I doubt that’s possible. We all have blood on our hands. Some people get lucky enough to find some semblance of peace and love away from it all.

Others are doomed to a life spent wondering how it feels to truly be alive.

CHAPTER 15

Elena

ONE YEAR LATER

I rev the engine of the car once, twice, three times before taking off. The road is clear, not another car in sight, giving me the opportunity to speed as much as I'd like. Wind billows around me and I take in a deep breath as the clean air flows into my nostrils. Somehow, I even manage a smile. I continue driving down the straight, narrow road, only stopping once my phone starts to ring.

"Hello," I answer, a little breathless as I pull the car over.

"Where are you?"

"I went for a drive, why? What's up?"

Kiara sucks in a breath. I count three seconds before she speaks up.

"They know."

And just like that, my heart stops.

"Who knows what?" I ask, even though I have an idea what she's talking about.

"They know we're back, Lena. I just got a text from Michael asking why we returned to New York without telling anybody. My best guess is he has a tracking device on our phones or he hacked us or he has a program that tells him as soon as we're entered the country. Anyway, he already told your brother. And if I'm pretty sure he's going to call you soon."

My eyes fall shut. "Shit."

“Yeah. I just wanted to warn you about it. I’m sorry, Lena,” she says softly. “But it’s not like you would have been able to avoid them forever.”

I run my fingers through my hair, hating the way my hand trembles.

“I was hoping to have at least a couple of days,” I groan. “Damn Michael and his stupid hacking skills. I’m not ready, Kie.”

We’ve been in New York for five hours. I thought I would have more time.

“I know, sweetie. But we already talked about this. Do you need me to be there?”

“No. No, I’m not telling them yet,” I say, suddenly coming to a decision.

Kiara falls silent for a beat. “Lena, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I need more time. At least let me get a feel of the situation. I need to know how everyone is before dropping a bomb on them. I’ll head over to the house first to see them.”

“Alright,” Kiara says on a sigh. “You have a point. We’ll be here waiting for you.”

“Yeah. Thanks, love. Bye.”

She was right. Almost as soon as I hang up, Tony’s name flashes across the screen of my phone. I take another deep breath before answering.

“Hi, big brother,” I greet, summoning as much cheer as I can.

“First, you don’t let me come visit you in the U.K. And now you come back home without a single word. What the hell is going on, Lena?”

Well, he sounds mad. Nice.

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” I say, my voice low. “And thanks to Michael, it’s ruined. I came home because I missed everyone. Why? Is that a crime?”

“No, but it’d have been nice to know you were getting on a fucking plane and flying across the Atlantic.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Damn right, it won’t. You’re coming home, right?”

I look up at the sky, taking in the view. “Yeah,” I say softly. “I’m coming home.”

“Alright, *sorella*. See you soon.”

He hangs up and I start the car again, this time heading toward home. I wasn’t lying when I said I missed it. The past year of my life has been one of the most challenging ones ever. I didn’t realize how important my family was until I had to go through one of the hardest things without them.

Roman will be pleased to know he was right. I do need them. And I never should have spent all those years trying to ignore that fact. Right now, though, I can only hope he doesn’t kill me first.

Because I’m back in New York. And I brought his baby with me.

THE ENTIRE FAMILY’S there when I arrive. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think they were throwing me a welcome home party. But I do know better. Several men are milling about. Guarding the family, doing their job. A few of them stop to stare at me but otherwise they ignore me. There are a bunch of cars in the driveway, and my heart rate quickens when I spot Roman’s Audi.

Great, he’s home. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to see him yet. Maybe he won’t show his face.

My dad and Maria are the first people I see. They’re in the living room when I walk in. Dad gets to his feet as soon as he spots me. In a matter of seconds, I’m pulled into a hug.

“*Mia cara,*” he breathes. “I’m not letting you out of my sight again.”

I smile against his chest. “I missed you too, Papa.”

He releases me and I face the De Luca matriarch.

“Hi, Maria.”

Her critical blue eyes trail over my face before slowly glancing down. When she looks me in the eye again, there’s a slight frown on her face.

“Hello, dear. You seem to have put on a bit of weight.”

I clench my fists, hoping my expression doesn’t betray the annoyance rolling through me.

“Just a bit,” I say through gritted teeth.

“It suits you, darling,” she states. “I’m glad to see you’ve been taking care of yourself.”

Her tone is light but I can sense the disapproval rolling off her in waves. Yeah, I definitely didn’t miss her. I turn back to my father, my mouth opens to ask about Tony when he walks into the living room. His eyes brighten when he notices me.

“Hey, baby sister,” he says, rushing over and hugging me.

I let out a soft sigh, glad that he’s not as angry as he was on the phone. I need them to be in a good mood for this.

“Hey. Where’s Mikey? And Rosa?”

“Rosa’s on some art retreat. She’s been gone a couple of days. Mikey’s upstairs with Rome, who you didn’t ask after.”

I shrug. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Hmm,” Tony murmurs. Then he fixes me with a stern look. “Are we going to talk about why you arrived home without a word?”

“Actually,” I say softly, “I think you should sit. I have something to say. You too, Daddy.”

My dad’s eyes narrow but he does as I ask, taking a seat beside Maria, whose expression is intrigued. I’d rather she wasn’t here for this conversation, but oh well. Once we’re all seated in the living room, my eyes flutter shut and I intertwine my fingers as I speak.

“I’m not going to be living at home anymore. Kie and I purchased an apartment we’ll be staying at together.”

I watch both my brother and my father’s faces as varying emotions pass through them. First confusion, then surprise. My dad’s expression remains patient while Tony’s unsurprisingly shifts into anger.

“Like hell you are,” he snaps. “Why would you stay in an apartment when we’ve got a perfectly good house?”

I take in a steadying breath. I spent the hours in the plane crafting my argument. Granted, I should have been thinking of how to speak to them about another pressing issue, but today’s definitely not the day, nor the time or place, for me to talk about it. Hell, I can’t even tell them anything yet. There’s someone else I need to talk to first.

“I would like to start by pointing out that I am a full-grown woman who is perfectly capable of making my own decisions.”

“Sure you are,” my dad interjects. “But we’re your family and we also have a right to be involved in those decisions.”

That statement amuses me. It’s going to be hilarious when they find out I’ve completely erased them from the biggest decision of my life. Sure, I won’t be laughing, but it’ll be funny. To some people.

“True, and I’m sorry for not telling you. And for coming back to the country without informing you. You both know I’m prone to taking independent decisions—”

“You mean risky, immature, unnecessary decisions.”

I glare at my brother and he rolls his eyes before falling back onto the couch.

“My move is completely necessary,” I state. They have no idea how much. “Kiara and I need our own space together and our apartment is that space. She had some contacts in New York that helped us to purchase the apartment and set it up. All we had to do today was move in, which we have. It’s an apartment in Brooklyn, the third floor of a really nice building. It’s in a great neighborhood—”

My brother cuts me off again. “All that information is irrelevant, *sorella*. You’re moving back home.”

I clench my jaw, biting back a retort. This conversation will go nowhere if I start yelling at him. I can’t afford to get angry. Instead, I turn to my dad, who has otherwise been quiet. He sighs when he notices my eyes on him.

“Sweetheart, we had a conversation before you left and you promised me that when you came back, you’d be ready to be more obedient.”

My fists clench. I would have said anything back then to get them to let me leave.

“I am ready,” I say, lying through my teeth.

“Good, because our focus should be on getting you married. There’s no reason you should be moving out of the house. I understand your need to be independent, but you’re not growing any younger, *mi amore*. You should be settling down.”

“And I plan to,” I assert, knowing full well none of this will matter in a couple of weeks. “I just want this chance to live on my own. It’s just for a couple of months until I’ve got a secure match, just like you want, Daddy. Please.”

Just like before when I left for London, I’ll say anything for them to let this go. My dad’s expression grows thoughtful. The man is a lawyer; his brain is hardwired to navigate through conversations, looking for loopholes and best possible outcomes.

“Alright,” he finally says.

Tony’s eyes bulge. Sometimes, I really want to kick him. “You’re just going to let her live somewhere else?”

“Stand down, Anthony. She’ll be in Brooklyn. If you’re so worried, go with her today and check out the apartment.”

Yeah, he’s not going anywhere near the inside of the house. I’ll cross that bridge once we come to it, though. Abruptly, I remember that there’s someone else in the living room. Maria hasn’t spoken a word throughout the entire

conversation, and I feel kind of grateful. Usually, she would be providing her two cents on the issue, but I'm glad she's staying out of it. She simply watches on, expression carefully blank.

My dad and brother ask me about my year away and the tension in the room eases slightly. An hour passes and I'm ready to go back home. Tony gets to his feet too, ready to escort me. We step outside the living room and Roman De Luca breezes into my line of sight.

My heart stops, my legs still, I'm pretty sure the entire world holds its breath. One year later and he still looks the same. My mind whirs as my heart travels through several emotions before finally settling on the strongest one.

Guilt.

Roman, for his part, doesn't show any outward emotion at the sight of me. His eyes darken slightly and a muscle tenses in his jaw, but that's it. That's all I get.

"Elena," he says in acknowledgment, a short nod.

I do notice one slight change in him, though. His overall aura, I guess. He's not the man he was a year ago. He's much more confident. Stronger. He's a Don now, one in complete control. I'm glad. I offer him a short nod before my eyes travel to the person beside him.

Michael gets a full-blown smile as he steps forward to hug me.

"Hey," he says, ruffling my hair. "How are you?"

"Good," I say with an eye roll, reaching up to fix the mess he's made. "Thanks for busting us, jerk."

My tone is light and good-natured. Michael's brown eyes narrow.

"Why'd you sneak into the country in the first place?"

"Good question, Mikey," my brother says beside me.

My mouth opens slightly. "We did not sneak in. We bought plane tickets and got on a plane. Legally."

He shakes his head, clearly not convinced by my subpar diversion attempt.

“Where’s Kiara?” he asks, and I notice a slight edge to his voice.

“She’s at our apartment.”

At that, his eyebrows climb.

“Tony will explain,” I say in response to his unasked question. “For now, we’re going to leave. I’ll see you later.”

He shrugs before walking on ahead to the living room. Roman remains. I catch his eye, wondering why he’s still waiting. He looks like he has something to say, but he seems to reconsider it and clenches his jaw.

Then he’s walking, too. My breath hitches when he brushes at my side on his way.

“Welcome home, trouble.”

His voice is a deep, low rumble that does the same strange things to my heart it did a year ago. I smile softly, even though he can’t see me. When I look back up, my brother’s looking at me strangely.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says with a shake of his head. “Let’s go.”

Once we arrive outside the apartment, I spend the next five minutes convincing him not to come up.

“Kiara’s asleep. She’s seriously jet-lagged. Plus, the house is a mess. We don’t want anyone to see it until we’ve got everything in order,” I say, repeating the excuses I’ve been giving for the past few minutes.

They just won’t penetrate his thick, stubborn head. Tony looks really fucking suspicious, which is enough proof that I won’t be able to hide my secret for long. I inwardly sigh, feeling my heart drop.

“Dude, why the hell should I care?”

“*Dude*,” I say, my tone ripe with aggravation, “please just let me go in and rest. I’m exhausted. I’ll come and see you tomorrow.”

He must see on my face that I’m done with the conversation. “Fine. Go. I’m placing one of the men in front of the building, though. To keep watch and keep you both safe.”

I smile. His protectiveness can be sweet. Mostly fucking annoying, but sweet regardless.

“Alright, *fratello*. Goodbye.”

I step out of the car and onto the curb, waving him off as he drives away. My breath leaves me in a rush and I’m left feeling depleted as I trudge into the apartment’s lobby and inside the elevator. I’m delivered to our apartment on the third floor. Kiara opens the door as soon as I ring the doorbell, a worried expression on her face.

“Hey, how’d did it go?”

“I told them we were staying here together,” I say, walking inside. “And no, I didn’t tell them the truth.”

She frowns. “You have to tell them eventually, Lena.”

“And I will,” I say. “As soon as I tell Roman.”

Kiara follows me as I head into my bedroom. There’s a crib at the side of the bed and my heart clenches as I step toward it and peer down at the tiny little baby inside. She’s fast asleep. Cassiopeia De Luca was born three months ago. A happy, healthy baby. She’s the most beautiful, precious thing I’ve ever seen. And she’s mine. And Roman’s, as well.

The future has never seemed more uncertain than it does at this moment, but I’ll do anything to make it right.

For my little girl.

CHAPTER 16

Roman

There's something different about her.

That's all I've been able to think about since Elena Legan showed up at my house earlier today. I haven't seen her in a year. In some ways, she still looks the same, but she's different. I can feel it. I just don't know why.

I did pretty good over the past year. I barely thought about her. The first few weeks after she left, she dominated my thoughts, but over time, it became easier to keep her out of my mind. Unfortunately, her reappearance has led to the blossoming of those thoughts again. And for the past hour, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her.

Michael notices. He squints at me. "What's going on, Rome?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Keep talking to me about the weapons supply."

He doesn't, instead choosing to close his tablet and get to his feet. "You tuned out for half of my brief. I'm tired, and so are you. Time to stop," he states.

I arch an eyebrow. "I say when to stop."

He makes a face. "No pulling rank right now. I'm fucking exhausted and hungry. We've been debating this thing all day. And frankly, I think we need a third opinion. Tony's useless."

He really is. Unfortunately, Tony's capabilities are more suited for the realm of murder and violence than for the more

practical aspects of our business. Sales, finances, he has no interest.

After briefly considering Michael's words, I get to my feet, following him as we head downstairs to the kitchen. I'm pretty sure neither of us is surprised to find Tony there with a sandwich in hand. The guy is almost always eating something.

"How'd the meeting go?" he mumbles through a mouthful of ham.

"Gross, man," Michael says with a groan. "Swallow first before speaking."

Tony rolls his eyes. "You're not my mother, Mikey."

"*Grazie a Dio per questo,*" Michael says in Italian. *Thank God for that.*

I smile, moving to the fridge to see if there's any leftover food. It's way past dinnertime but I'm hoping my mom left something out for us.

"I'm already heating up some mac and cheese for you both," Tony says, gesturing at it.

I nod, waiting for it to be done. Once it is, Tony helps us in dishing out the food. The three of us work quietly as a unit, ensuring we don't make too much noise, considering the majority of the household is asleep.

"My sister moved out," Tony announces once we're done eating.

He then proceeds to explain Elena's bizarre actions. I shrug when he's done.

"She's always been prone to doing weird shit."

"Sure, but she's acting suspicious. Her move to England, her return, everything's suspicious. She barely called home when she was there. I was ready to get on a plane to go check on her but Dad convinced me not to. Said he wanted to give her space and I respected those wishes. Now she's back home and he's giving her even more space? It doesn't make any sense."

“I’m sure your father has his reasons.”

“Yeah, or he’s growing soft. Scratch that—he’s always been soft with her. She can do no wrong in his eyes.” He sighs.

I peer at him, wondering what the source of his grievances is. When I look at Michael, he’s watching Tony intently as well. I give him a look.

“Care to add something?” I ask.

Michael shakes his head. “He’s right. Something’s up with the girls. Kiara wouldn’t tell me anything, but their move to England and back is weird.”

I don’t voice the fact that I absolutely agree with them. But if the girls were in any trouble, I’m sure they’d come to us. Elena’s part of my family, and Kiara is too. Despite any hang-ups between us, I wouldn’t hesitate to help them.

“Your sister can take care of herself,” I say to Tony. “Despite what you may think, she’s not a little kid. She’s mature, even though she sometimes doesn’t act like it. She’s strong, too.”

“I know,” Tony says, running a hand through his hair. “I just worry. All the time. After Mom left, it’s on me to take care of her. Dad does his best, but sometimes it feels like he’s scared of pushing her away like he did to Mom. He lets her do anything she wants. Elena takes advantage of that.”

Tony’s carried the weight of keeping his family together on his shoulders since he was fifteen. His mother left and his father was suddenly a shell of himself, absent in all the ways they needed him to be present. Tony took up the mantle of taking care of Elena. She was stubborn as hell and difficult, but he did everything he could to make sure she was okay. My best friend’s a better man than anyone gives him credit for.

“Just ease up, alright, Tony? They’ll talk to us about whatever’s bothering them when they want to. Don’t push. And don’t be a bull,” Michael warns.

I chuckle.

“I am not a bull,” Tony says, clearly offended.

“You are, though. Once you set your mind on something, you charge. You get tunnel vision. Like a bulldozer.”

He pouts. “You guys are no fun.”

We spend the next hour talking about everything and nothing at all. The biggest thing I’ve always been grateful for is my relationship with my brothers. I spent the first half of my life before I met Tony isolated from everything and everyone. I was incapable of building sincere relationships. I’ve always had Michael, but our bond didn’t really flourish until Tony came along to complete us. They helped me to see that it was possible to open your heart without feeling weak. And I’ve done that, or at least I try.

Still, there’s one secret I’ve kept from my brothers. One that weighs heavily on my mind. And there’s a part of me that’s worried that our bond won’t survive if that secret comes out.

Tony might never forgive me. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s holding a grudge.

The Legans all had varying reactions to Tony and Elena’s mother’s abandonment. Salvador’s was more grief; it was obvious he missed his wife. Elena was heartbroken at first. Then she began to feel anger, but ultimately, her emotions led to sadness. Like her father, she misses her mother as well. She wants her. Tony’s only known anger in relation to his mother’s abandonment. He refuses to forgive her and chooses to forget her. He mentions her once in a while, but it’s clear he hasn’t dealt with it and has no plans to.

The man is barely in check with his emotions, but anger’s a close friend to him. Which is how I know he won’t forgive me. I want so badly to keep it a secret. But what I did with Elena... things like that always find a way of coming out.

Especially now that she’s back.

MY MOTHER LIKES to hover until she gets what she wants. Since I've attained my position as the Don, she can't yell at me like she used to, but that hasn't stopped her from constantly nagging me and pushing for me to fulfill her wishes. I sigh as she follows me to the home gym. When I realize she's not going to stop until I acknowledge her presence, I turn to her with a huff.

"How can I help you, Mother?"

Her eyes narrow. "You know exactly how. I arranged a date between you and Bianca tonight. It's at Le Bernadine. I worked hard to secure that reservation."

"I saw her last week," I say dryly. "Is another date really necessary today?"

"Yes. Bianca is a woman you will be marrying and I expect you to take getting to know her seriously."

"I am taking it seriously."

The woman and I have had three fucking dates. The first one, she was perfectly docile, boring. I almost backed out. The next time we met, she showed some of her claws. I mean that both literally and figuratively because the woman has long-ass nails that I'm pretty sure could pierce skin. When I asked how she was comfortable carrying them around, she let out a high-pitched laugh and thanked me for being so considerate before explaining that she's used to them. Then she told me that she could stop doing them once we got married and had kids. I couldn't come up with a reply. It was our second date and she was already thinking about the marriage and kids.

Unfortunately, that's how things work in our world. By the time we met up again for our third date, it was after a meeting with her father whereby a marriage was finalized. My mother has since then been watching me intently, her expression impatient. I think she's waiting for me to ask her about an engagement ring, but it's too soon. I'm not ready to commit just yet. Even though I probably should.

"Roman, do I need to remind you how beneficial this arrangement is?"

“No. I’m very aware. Considering I signed the documents and brought up the idea.”

“Exactly. It’s not like I’m forcing you into a marriage. You had a choice and you chose Bianca.”

Because of all my options, her family was the richest and they’ve also been incredibly loyal to mine over the years. Loren Zanetti is a huge airline tycoon. Owning a company that manufactures planes, jets and several other impressive aircrafts. Our families have been close over the years and while Zanetti hasn’t been an active member, he is a major source of funding. He deferred to my father while he was alive and now, to make sure their partnership continues, I’ve chosen to enter a marriage contract with one of his daughters.

Bianca arrives at the restaurant five minutes late with a flush on her cheeks and an apologetic smile. “There was a bit of traffic. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I tell her, sitting forward in my chair.

She’s wearing a tight red strapless dress. Bianca’s a beautiful woman. Long dark hair flowing past her shoulders, light brown eyes, olive skin. She has an aristocratic air to her and considering her family’s standing in society, she’s perfectly poised with endless grace.

“You look beautiful,” I say politely.

She beams. One thing I can’t figure out about Bianca is if she’s genuinely interested in this match or if she’s doing this for her family. She certainly acts interested but I can’t tell what her motivations are.

“Thanks, I spent an hour getting ready. I was a little nervous.”

My eyebrows furrow. “Why would you be nervous?”

“Because on our previous dates, we were still testing the waters. Now, with the contracts signed, our futures are etched in stone. I can’t wait to see how that future will be,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes in my direction.

I reach for my collar to loosen a button on my shirt as heat washes over me. I'm not sure I like the implications of the words "etched in stone." Every day, I want to turn around and not go through with this. But my parents did, and I know this is what my father would have wanted. Everything I do is to honor his memory.

"I'm a little thirsty. Can I have some water?" she asks.

I nod, gesturing for a waiter to come forward. I inform him that the lady requires a cup of water before we order, and the waiter moves away, returning with a cup on a tray. He places it in front of Bianca but must have exerted too much force because some of it spills out of it and onto the table. Bianca lets out a shrill.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she yells, patting down at the front of her dress that barely got any water on it. "This is Dolce and Gabbana."

I watch the scene quietly as the man fumbles out an apology. Another waiter arrives and apologizes as well before leading the first one away. I wait until they're gone before speaking.

"Ugh, imbecile," she mutters.

"It was just a mistake, the guy's human. He should be afforded some respect."

Bianca blinks, her expression almost comical. "You're right. I'm sorry. I overreacted," she says.

I frown at her quick acquiescence. When the waiter returns, she even apologizes. The apology is anything but sincere; it's pretty clear she only did it to appeal to me.

"You should pick the wine," she says, gesturing at the menu in front of me.

I shake my head. "You can pick."

"No. I'd rather you picked."

I clear my throat to shake off my irritation, reaching for the menu to order us the wine and subsequently the food we have. The entire evening is dull. Our topic of conversation flows

from our families to her life growing up, which would be nice to talk about if she didn't make her life sound perfect. As the third child of five, she's always had everything she's ever wanted. Her father dotes on all his kids. She's also one of two daughters and she makes sure to stress on the fact that her father would do anything for her. Conversation also touches on some fashion shows she's attended and the celebrity friends she has.

Bianca is perfectly compliant, obedient. On some level, I understand that it's exactly the kind of behavior some men would like in their partner. But I grow even more uncomfortable over the evening.

It's like she's a robot. What's even more frustrating is that I know she has more bite than she's letting on. There's intelligence hidden behind those brown eyes. She's playing a role, and I'm not sure how to tell her to quit it. So I say nothing.

Once we're done with the food, I lead her to her car. There's a driver in front.

"Thank you for the meal, Roman. I enjoyed myself," she informs me.

Really? Because I nearly died of boredom.

I keep that to myself. The thought of the marriage I've agreed to rings in my ears.

"I did as well. It's always nice to spend time with you."

When she smiles, I consider the night done. I open the back door to help her into the car but she turns to me, expression hesitant.

"Aren't you going to give me a kiss to end the night?" she prompts.

The request catches me off guard but I don't show it. I offer her a small smile of my own, leaning downward and placing a small kiss on her lips. The kiss is perfunctory at best. I feel nothing at the press of her lips against mine. No heat, no emotion. I haven't felt anything with a woman in a year. Not since Elena.

When I pull back, Bianca's looking at me like I hung the moon.

"Good night, Roman," she breathes.

I nod, and once she's seated inside the car, I shut the door. It isn't until the car is out of sight that I let out a soft exhale. It's not just about Bianca or our eventual marriage. Lately, I've found myself craving more. I'm just not sure what exactly that is. My duties as Don are going well. Business is thriving and my family's finally in a good place. Everything is fine, and I'm fucking bored.

I've never been great at sitting still. And right now, it feels like my life has stagnated. I crave more action, more excitement. More something. I just don't know what.

When my phone dings with a text as I'm on my way to my car, I realize it's always good to be careful what you wish for. Because Elena Legan's name flashes across my screen, and her text is four simple words—straight to the point.

We need to talk.

I pause, thinking about what she could possibly have to say to me. It takes a few seconds but I text back a reply.

When.

Anytime you're free tomorrow.

Alright then. I guess I'm seeing her tomorrow. A part of me doesn't want to spend any time in her presence out of worry that emotions I thought buried will rise to the surface. Elena's always had a way of bringing out the worst in me, and occasionally the best.

One thing's for sure, though—I won't be fucking bored with her.

CHAPTER 17

Elena

I pace the length of our living room, only pausing to check my phone every few minutes. From her spot on the couch, Kiara sighs. She's holding Cassie, who is fast asleep, her soft breaths slightly soothing me.

"Elena, I guarantee that your pacing isn't going to make Roman arrive here faster."

"I'd rather he didn't arrive at all," I state.

She gives me a disapproving look. "You have to tell him. Better late than never. And this is already extremely late."

I groan, moving to sit beside her. Cassie stirs in her arms before going back to sleep. For a three-month-old, she sleeps fairly well and I'm so glad for it. We hired a nanny the first month after she was born because Kiara and I were running around trying to get everything ready for our move back to New York. The nanny couldn't stop talking about what a mild-mannered baby she is. Granted, she has yet to start sleeping through the night, but she barely cries and she eats without a lot of fuss.

When I try to take her from Kiara, she shakes her head, moving out of reach.

"Uh-uh, I'm going to go and grab a bottle and a blanket to wrap her in. We should also leave now so we won't be here when Roman arrives," she says. We both decided it would be better if she took Cassie on a walk while I spoke to Roman. She's not going too far so that she can bring the baby back

once I'm done getting Roman up to speed on the situation. "Or do you need us to be here with you?"

I don't immediately answer. On some level, it might be a good idea for me to talk to him alone, but on another...

"I mean, what if it's a good idea to have a buffer between us?"

She fixes me with a firm look. "If you want me to stay, I will."

"No." I shake my head. "I should talk to him alone. I know he'll be pissed and rightfully so, but it's not like he's going to kill me. Plus, if something goes wrong, I don't want my baby to be here."

"Roman can be scary, but he's not a monster," Kiara says with a nod.

I snort. "Actually, he kind of is. Maybe I should ask him to divest of all his weapons before walking in."

I'm only half-joking. Kiara must see the worry on my face before she leans closer and places a hand on my thigh.

"You can do this, Lena. You're the strongest person I know. Cassie's proof that you can do anything you set your heart to. You're almost at the end of your journey, love. Now all you've got to do is tell her father the truth. Together, the two of you will decide how to talk to the rest of the family."

My heart thuds at that, another conversation I'm completely unwilling to have. Very carefully, Kiara gets to her feet and moves toward the bedroom. Cassie looks so tiny in her arms, it sends an ache through me. She's so innocent, it hurts to look at her sometimes.

When Kiara returns a few minutes later, she's dressed with a coat over her clothes. I stand up, peeking in at the tiny baby swaddled in blankets. She's still sleeping so peacefully. I place a hand on her soft cheek, feeling my heart ache.

"Do you think I did the right thing, Kie? Hiding my pregnancy and Cassie's birth? What if it's unforgivable?" I ask, nervous.

“Nothing’s unforgivable,” Kiara states firmly. “It’ll take some time for everyone to come to terms with it, but eventually, they will. You’ll see.”

She leaves with Cassie and I spend the next twenty minutes in silence waiting for Roman to arrive. He arrives punctually at 6 p.m. When I open the door, there’s a curious expression on his face.

“Elena,” he greets amicably.

“Roman,” I say, my voice coming out a little breathlessly. “Come in.”

I shift away from the doorway, granting him access into our apartment. I watch as he takes note of his surroundings, and I try to view the house through his eyes. Lilac-painted walls and cream furniture. Considering we only just moved in two days ago, the house is mostly bare, devoid of anything truly personal. Kiara and I took care to clear out the living room of anything that could allude to the fact that there’s an infant living in the house.

Roman’s face is carefully blank. I wipe a sweaty palm against my dress and gesture for him to take a seat. His expression turns suspicious.

“You’re acting weird,” he says. “It’s unsettling.”

“Define weird?”

“Well, you haven’t provided any quips in the past minute, nor have you said anything mildly insulting or annoying.”

Ah. He would expect that of me.

“I’ve changed.”

He flicks an eyebrow up. “Really? And what led to this... change?”

“Would you sit down and let me talk?” I ask, growing mildly frustrated.

He smirks, taking a seat on the couch. I pause before doing the same.

“Would you like anything? Water? Juice?”

Roman's eyebrows climb high. "Now I know something's wrong. Are you okay? Did something happen in England? Are you in trouble?"

"No, I'm not. Everything's fine."

"Then why did you ask me to come here?"

"You know this conversation would go quicker if you'd just let me speak," I snap.

I inwardly sigh because I was determined not to let him get to me. Roman unsettles me in a way no one else can. And I'm pretty sure he knows that. There's a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Go on," he states, gesturing for me to speak.

I open my mouth to do so and immediately lose my nerve. Very slowly, my mouth shuts and I swallow thickly. I look away from him, staring at the wall.

"What's wrong?" Roman presses.

I shake my head. "Roman, I'm going to ask you some questions and I need you to answer me honestly. Could you do that?"

His expression pensive as he watches me. I catch the slight worry in his dark eyes. And maybe some suspicion. Then I realize the last time I asked him questions, we ended up fucking in his car. Which is what led to this cluster-fuck in the first place. For some reason, I smile.

"Don't worry, I promise not to climb you or do anything untoward."

"*Climb me?*" Roman says dryly with an eye roll. "Fine, ask your questions."

"Okay. First question, why do you hate me?"

He scoffs. "I don't hate you, Elena."

"You've hated me since I was a teenager. Roman, you couldn't stand me. You made me feel like shit for wanting to chase after my dreams. We had sex and it meant nothing to you. You treated me like garbage," I say through gritted teeth.

I didn't call him here to air out my grievances, but because of Cassie, we're going to have a relationship going forward whether we like it or not. And I'd rather that relationship not be strained.

Roman lets out a long-suffering sigh, looking up to the ceiling. He's probably wondering why he came here in the first place. When he looks back at me, he leans back against the couch.

"You remember your freshman year of high school? You snuck out to a party for seniors, alone. You knew nobody there and yet when a random guy offered you alcohol, you downed it without a second thought. Tony and I arrived before anything could happen, but Elena, you were so close to following the guy to a room."

I wince at the memory. Admittedly, I was extremely immature back then, dumb, and still reeling from my mother's exit from my life.

"Thank God you weren't drugged. Tony literally had to drag you out of the house. You were pissed and you kept yelling at your brother. You called him an asshole. You said he was suffocating you. You told him to leave you alone," Roman continues with his jaw clenched. "He didn't that night and he never has. But that was just one moment among many when you were so much to handle."

"So you hate me because I was an immature teenager lashing out due to the fact that she missed her mom?" I question, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. "Roman, you were a dick to me for years! I couldn't stand to be in the same room with you because you'd either insult me or put me down in some way. You made me feel like I was *nothing*."

This time, it's his turn to wince.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I was also an immature teenager. I was watching my best friend struggle and seeing you like that pissed me the fuck off. You didn't realize what was right in front of you. You had a family, Elena. A family that cared so much. I used to be a little envious of your

relationship with your father and even Tony. My family and I are close, sure, but not like yours. We've always been more traditional, our interactions stuffy. And you were right there—you didn't know what you had and you were throwing it all away. I couldn't do anything but watch.”

“I'm not that girl anymore,” I whisper.

He looks me in the eyes, “No, you're not. You've grown, Elena Legan. Matured. And as much as it pains me to admit it, you were right. You did need to be away from your family in order to find yourself. Moving away for college was the start of you becoming an actual adult. And I'm proud of you.”

I let out a soft breath, feeling an unsteady hum in my chest. “I'd really like it if we could put all the hate behind us.”

“Like I said, it wasn't hate. More like irritation directed at you, because the situation was out of my control and I wasn't sure how to help.”

“But you don't feel that way anymore?”

He shakes his head.

I smile. “Does this mean we're friends now?”

Roman tilts his head to the side. “Don't get me wrong, you still annoy the shit out of me.”

“Jerk,” I say, hitting him on the shoulder.

He chuckles. “But yeah, I guess we can be friendly. You're in my life, Elena. Always will be. That's never going to change.”

“That's really good. I'm so glad to hear it,” I say, nodding enthusiastically.

He arches an eyebrow. “Why is that good?”

I inhale softly before blurting out the words that I've been working up to since he arrived.

“Roman, we have a child together. I'm pregnant—o-or at least I-I was,” I stammer, my heart pounding in my chest.

I planned to tell him in a calm way, but I guess this will have to do.

Roman stiffens. His eyes search my face for a second before he laughs. “Very funny, *lupacchiotta*,” he says, running a hand through his hair.

“No, Roman, I’m serious. I had a baby.”

His dark brown eyes land on mine. “Hilarious,” he deadpans.

I inwardly groan, getting to my feet. I start to pace in front of him. He watches quietly, apprehension distinct on his features.

“We had sex last year.”

“I remember,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest again. “Your point being?”

“My *point* is that it led to a baby. I was pregnant. And then I gave birth.”

Roman blinks. Slowly. It would be funny if I wasn’t so terrified.

“That’s why I moved to London for a year,” I explain softly. “I was pregnant and I had to hide it from you, from everyone. And I’m so sorry I did that. I was trying to do the right thing. I thought it would help if I stayed away for a year. So I did. I moved away and I had my baby. It’s a girl. Her name is—”

“Shut up,” Roman says icily.

My mouth clamps shut. His expression is much darker than I’ve ever seen it. I watch as he slowly gets to his feet.

“Elena, you sound fucking unhinged right now. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You-you have a baby. A little girl,” I say, heart pounding.

He lets out a harsh laugh. “That’s ridiculous. There’s no way in hell you got pregnant, and instead of telling me, you chose to move across an ocean instead!”

“I can explain—”

“No! I’m done listening to this,” he says, visibly angry.

“Roman, I—”

“Just stop, okay?! Fucking stop.”

He takes in a ragged breath and after one last look at me, he walks away, leaving the apartment. As soon as he’s gone, I fall onto the couch. My head is in my hands and my eyes well up with tears.

“Well, that went really poorly,” I say to myself.

Having nothing else to do, I text Kiara, asking her to come home with my baby. She arrives at the apartment with a worried expression on her face, especially when she takes in the fact that he’s not here.

“Where’s Roman?”

“He left,” I reply flatly, taking Cassie from her arms.

She’s already awake with an adorably happy expression on her face. I carry her to the couch and take a seat, making soft, cooing noises. Her cheeks are tinted red and her short dark hair is slightly mussed. She’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever laid my eyes upon.

“What happened?” Kiara asks, still standing by the door.
“Did you not tell him?”

I let out a brittle laugh. “I told him.”

“And then what?”

“And nothing, Kie. He didn’t believe me. I tried to talk to him but he just left.”

“That’s...” Kiara trails off.

I simply sigh before turning my attention to the bundle of joy in my arms. Her brown eyes practically gleam as she stares at me.

“I love you so much,” I breathe, hugging her closer to my chest.

More than anything else in the world.

CHAPTER 18

Roman

My fist smashes into his face and the kid goes flying backward. He rights himself before he hits the floor, jaw clenched.

“Easy, Don,” Tony says from my left.

“If you see a fist coming at you, you’re supposed to fucking dodge! Was I not clear?” I shout.

There are about twenty people surrounding me, creating a wide circle with me standing in the middle. We’re in one of my buildings, a training facility of a sort for new blood. Most of the men and a few women are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-one—kids with nowhere left to turn but the underworld. My dad was always fond of recruiting them, training them, helping them to make a life for themselves. All he asked in exchange was loyalty to the family and the drive to fight for us, if and when needed. I’ve continued the tradition.

They all break into groups soon after, training in hand-to-hand combat. I move away, heading for the refrigerator to grab a bottle of water. Tony follows. He leans against the wall.

“You good, Rome? You’ve been acting weird since last night.”

“I’m fine,” I grit out.

“Really?” he draws. “From where I’m standing, looks like you’re in a pissy mood. Who’s got your panties in a twist?”

Your fucking sister! I want to yell. But I clench my jaw and look away. After leaving Elena’s and that insanely bizarre

conversation, I went to my house and promptly locked myself up in my room. I spent the rest of the night alternating between denial and imminent rage. This morning, I woke up leaning more heavily toward denial.

Because there's no way in hell she had a baby and didn't tell me. It's ridiculous.

Still, I've been irritated all day, snapping at the smallest things. Of course, Tony's noticed, and of course, he has questions.

"I'm fine, Tony. Just having a bad day is all. I'm frustrated the Gates deal isn't coming through."

He studies me for a second before nodding once, believing me. "It'll be fine, man. I'm sure they'll get their heads out of the clouds eventually. If they don't, we can just blow their heads off."

"Charming," I mutter dryly.

He chuckles before slapping my back and moving to one of the groups, showing a guy how to choke someone from behind. The rest of the training session passes in a blur. I'm heading home when I get a text.

We need to talk.

This time, it's not from Elena but her best friend. I drop my phone, ignoring the message altogether, but my phone dings again. And again.

"For the love of God," I groan, reaching for the phone. I pull over by the side of the road, stopping the car to read Kiara's texts.

I'm really fucking serious right now, Rome. I need to speak to you.

Get here now. I'm at a café on Ocean Avenue.

I grit my teeth, considering her request. There's no doubt in my mind she wants to speak to me about Elena's insane claim. And while it would give me immense peace not to

indulge in the conversation, I can't ignore it forever. Something's going on and I'm sure as hell going to find out what it is.

I'm on my way

I text back, starting the car and heading to Brooklyn.

Kiara's seated in a booth when I arrive at the café. Her black hair's much shorter than I remember. It's chin-length now, framing her face. She arches an eyebrow when I continue to stand, and after a second's hesitation, I slide into the booth in front of her.

"Hello, Roman," she starts.

"Don't 'hello, Roman' me. What can you tell me about the shit Elena was talking about yesterday?" I say, cutting straight to the point.

Kiara's eyes briefly close as she takes a steadying breath. "You know she would kill me if she knew I contacted you. She was pretty upset yesterday."

I scoff. "She told me about a kid whose existence I had no fucking clue about and she's the one upset?"

"So you agree that you have a kid."

"Fuck no."

Kiara sighs. "This is hard for you. And I promise, I get it. But it's hard for Elena, too. It was difficult for her to work up the nerve to tell you. She expected you to be angry, she expected judgment. What she didn't expect was you walking out on her, ignoring her."

I let out a hoarse chuckle. "What the hell was I supposed to do? Hug her?"

"You could have done anything! Anything but walk away. That's exactly what she was terrified you'd do. I don't know what's going through your head right now, Roman, but you've got a kid. A little baby girl. And she's the most beautiful thing in the world."

My heartrate quickens and my fists clench. “Stop saying that.”

Kiara fixes me with a firm look. “It’s the truth. I’m sorry, Roman but we can’t afford for you to be in denial. Wake up. This is happening. And I’m so fucking sorry we kept the truth from you. You have every right to react in any way you want to, but right now, she needs you.”

Her voice cracks on the last word. I don’t say anything for several seconds. When I speak, my voice is low and gruff.

“Thank you for talking to me about this,” I tell Kiara, getting to my feet.

Her eyes widen. “Wait, what? That’s it?”

“What do you want from me?” I ask, irritated.

“I want you to ask me to take you to your child. I want you to talk to Elena, to let her explain.”

“Like you said, I have every right to react however I want. If what you’re saying is true, then Elena’s been taking care of herself just fine for the past year. She doesn’t fucking need me and I’m not seeing her until I’m ready.”

Kiara’s expression is pinched. “What don’t you believe? That she was pregnant? That you have a baby?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” I state. “Right now, I’m exhausted and I want to head home. Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and want to make sense of this fucked-up situation.”

“Okay,” Kiara says after a few seconds have passed.

“Okay, what?” I ask wearily.

“You said you’d be ready by tomorrow.”

Now I’m alarmed. “I didn’t say that.”

“I’ll talk to Lena. I’ll tell her you that you promised to show up tomorrow. And I’m not hearing any arguments,” she says, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Kiara,” I try.

She gets to her feet, grabbing her purse. “I know this is hard, but we need you. She needs you.”

And with those words, she’s walking out of the café. I take a seat again, staring out the windows of the café as I allow myself to consider the possibility. It’s still crazy, but it’s Elena Legan—anything’s possible with her. The woman doesn’t do things by half and she certainly doesn’t look at situations like a normal person.

The drive home is silent and the rest of the night even more so. For the first time since I talked to Elena, I allow myself to think about her words. To ponder them seriously. Add that to Kiara’s speech and I’m forced to contend with the fact that they might be telling the truth.

By the time I wake up, the next morning, only one thought is ringing in my head.

Fuck. I might have a kid.

Which is what prompts me to call Elena. She picks up on the second ring.

“We need to talk,” I state.

I swear if I have to hear or speak those four words one more time. It’s been used more than in the past seventy-two hours than I care for.

“Where?”

“I’m not coming to the apartment. Meet me at the bar your brother took you to a few years ago.”

I’m sure she remembers the place I’m referring to. She doesn’t immediately answer, though.

“Alright. I’m guessing by the location you picked that you’re still not ready to meet her.”

There’s no need to ask which “her” she’s talking about.

“No. Just you.”

“Okay. See you at seven.”

She hangs up and I go about my day, dreading our meeting. I've been in gunfights and knife fights without issue, but a conversation with a woman about a baby is the one thing that actually scares me. I arrive at the bar ten minutes early and take a seat to wait for her. Thankfully, Elena arrives on time.

The door to the bar opens and she enters, wearing dark jeans, ankle boots, and a cream shirt. Her hair is in a ponytail. As she's walking toward me, I want to hit myself. Because I'd be damned if she still isn't the most gorgeous woman I'd ever seen. I grit my teeth, reaching for my glass and throwing back a shot of whiskey. Elena, now standing in front of the table, eyes it wearily.

“Are you sure you should be drinking tonight?”

“Have a seat,” I gesture, ignoring her words.

She does so, nerves clearly displayed on her face.

“Your friend talked to me yesterday. She implored that I hear you out.”

Annoyance ripples across her features but she quickly she smooths it out.

“Yeah, I spoke to Kiara about meddling. She shouldn't have done that,” Elena mutters.

“Hmm. Want something to drink?”

She shake her head. “Just water.”

“Really?”

Her gaze narrows. “Roman, I have a baby.”

“So you keep saying,” I drawl. “Alright, go on. Tell me all about this baby. What happened? I'll listen.”

She stares at me warily for a beat before launching into the story of how her life came to be what it is now. According to her, she found out she was pregnant a month after we had sex. But owing to the state of my family and the fact that we were in the middle of a gang war, she didn't think it was a good idea

to tell me about a baby she was carrying out of wedlock. She left for London to give birth away from home and prying eyes.

By the time she's done, I've downed four more shots of whiskey and one shot of vodka. Elena's jaw is clenched.

"So, you're telling me you did all this for me? You kept a baby that's supposedly mine away from me for a year because you thought you were doing the right thing?"

"Yes," she replies smoothly.

"How can you be sure the child is mine?"

She's visibly annoyed by the question. "Trust me, Roman. She's yours. It's pretty obvious. You'll see when you meet her."

I lean back, crossing my arms as I stare at her. Neither of us speak for a minute or two. The bar is mostly quiet, not a lot of patrons on a Wednesday night. Elena waits patiently for me to say something. When I finally do, my voice is cold, devoid of emotion. Like always, whenever I find myself close to a volatile emotive state, I shut down.

"I take it back," I say finally.

She rears back, expression hesitant. "What?"

"When I told you I didn't hate you. I lied."

She sucks in a sharp breath, her face paling. "Roman..."

"No, I listened to you, now it's your turn. You and your best friend don't seem to be grasping the gravity of this situation, so I'll lay it out for you. You got pregnant and instead of coming to me like a normal woman, you decided to take matters into your own hands. You left the country, you stayed hidden for a year, and you gave birth—and now you're expecting to wheedle your way back into my life and ruin it."

She flinches and I force myself to take a calming breath. Running my hands through my hair, I fix her with a pointed look.

"Regardless of the reasons you did it, I have every right to be angry. This is about a baby. A living, breathing baby whose

life I haven't been a part of until now. Whose existence I had no idea about. You had no right, Elena. I missed the entire pregnancy. I missed her birth. I missed the first three months of her life! What the hell do you expect me to do right now? How am I supposed to handle this?"

Her face falls when she realizes I actually want an answer, "I don't know," she says sadly. "How you handle it is up to you."

I get to my feet, feeling anger start to burn beneath my skin. "You kept her away from me without informing me of the truth. And now you have to deal with the consequences," I spit, and I don't even care how harsh I sound.

After throwing some bills on the table to cover my drinks, I walk out of the bar. Elena follows me into the night. I hear her footsteps behind me. An exasperated chuckle escapes me before I turn to face her.

"How could you do this to me?"

Pain flashes in her green eyes. "I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry."

"You're sorry? I have a child, Elena. A baby! You kept it from me, my family, hell, even your family." I groan. "This is so fucked up. What the hell are we going to do?"

Elena takes a step toward me "Roman, breathe."

I glare at her. "Don't fucking tell me what to do."

I start walking to my car but she blocks my path.

"You're not driving in this state," she says firmly.

"Are you fucking—"

"No. Turn around, Roman. Catch a cab."

A muscle ticks in my jaw. But considering I'm not interested in spending another second with her, I do as she says. My anger remains a restless burn beneath my skin, but it cools with each step I take away from her. I hail a cab and leave. The last thing I see is Elena on the side of the road,

hugging her arms around her body, her expression heartbroken as she watches me go.

I stay away for two days. Elena doesn't try to contact me, giving me space, and I'm slightly grateful for that. My family notices that something's wrong but they don't push. I go through my daily motions while fighting a mounting fear and an encroaching feeling of responsibility. By the time the third day comes around, I'm angrier at myself.

My father taught me better than to avoid my responsibilities because of fear of the unknown. Which is why I turn up to Elena's apartment later that day, unsure of exactly what I plan to say.

When she opens the door, though, the right words tumble out.

“What's her name?”

CHAPTER 19

Elena

I can sympathize with what Roman's going through. I understand him, even. He's being forced to contend with the fact that his life isn't the same anymore. And despite how much his words hurt, I did suddenly deliver life-altering news. No one should have to deal with what he's going through right now.

My intentions were pure when I decided to keep it from him but now I've blindsided him and I deserve his anger. He spent three days away and I couldn't even find it in myself to be angry as well. The man had to come to terms with the fact that he's a father, so I gave him some space.

Watching him right now, though, my heart aches. Because I never meant for things to be this way. I followed my heart, and I can only hope I didn't cause more pain than necessary in the process.

Roman continues to stare at me intently, so I shake myself out of my thoughts.

"Cassiopeia," I breathe. "But we call her Cassie."

One eyebrow flicks up. "You named her after a vain queen in Greek mythology that ends up killed?"

"Emphasis on the queen," I say defensively. "And I named her after a constellation in the sky."

Surprisingly, Roman smiles. It's a small one and it's more of an exhausted smile than anything, but the sight of it fills me with relief.

“Like your mother?” he asks. I’m not surprised he knows.

My middle name is Andromeda; Tony’s is Orion. My mother used to love watching the stars. It’s the reason my dad built that observatory in our home. She also liked Greek mythology, which is why she named us after both.

When I gave birth to Cassie, I felt healed in a way—like the deep hole left behind by my mother was suddenly filled. I’ll probably never know where she is right now, but I loved her. And looking at my own daughter, I made myself a promise to do better than she did. For my little girl. Cassie will never know what it feels like to be abandoned.

“Yeah,” I say softly.

“Can I come in?” he asks tentatively.

“Of course,” I reply, moving from the doorway so he can walk inside.

He takes a look around the apartment. I don’t miss the way his eyes zero in on the bottle on the table. When he came here last, I took care to erase any signs that I had a baby. But now there’s no longer any reason to hide.

“She’s asleep right now,” I inform him. “She sleeps a lot during the day and is up for most of the night.”

He nods once, his expression unsettled. It’s pretty clear I’m not the only one nervous.

“Should I—should I go and get her?”

“Just... just wait,” he replies, taking a seat on the couch.

I take a seat as well, leaving distance between us.

“It’s okay to be scared to meet her,” I say once the silence has stretched on long enough.

He flicks an eyebrow up, obviously not comfortable with the fact that I’m alluding to him being scared about anything.

“You’re not the big bad wolf you think you are, Roman.”

He rolls his eyes. “No, I’m just a psychopath,” he says sarcastically.

“I think you’ll be a great dad,” I say with a smile. “I was terrified before I got to meet her. Those hours I spent in labor were some of the worst of my life because I was scared I wouldn’t get to see her.”

He stiffens, rubbing at his collar. “Was it not an easy birth?”

“It was,” I reassure him. “There weren’t any complications and Kiara was right there with me the entire time.”

“I’m glad she was. You tend to live in this isolated world all on your own where you can’t depend on anyone else. You always seem to forget there are people who care.”

His jaw is clenched as he says the words. I look away, grasping his meaning entirely.

“I do know that people care. And I didn’t make the decisions for Cassie all on my own.”

“No, you just made them without her father,” he says stiffly.

“I didn’t do it because I thought you wouldn’t be a great father to her,” I feel the need to clarify.

He might act self-confident and sure of himself, but at the end of the day, he has doubts just like every other human being. My mind travels to the day of his father’s funeral. He was so close to breaking that night, scared he wouldn’t be enough.

“I didn’t keep her away because I didn’t believe in you. I kept her away because you were dealing with a lot, and as much as I wanted to tell you, I didn’t want to make your life harder in the process.”

The look in his eyes is a little intense as he stares at me. I wish I could tell what he was thinking. Then Roman blinks and his expression turns guarded.

“I’d like to see her now,” he tells me.

My heart swells. “Really?” He nods, and I quickly get to my feet. “She’s in her crib in my bedroom.”

I lead him to one of the oak doors and open it quietly. Walking inside, I peek into the mahogany crib with a crescent moon painted on it. She's still asleep. Very slowly, I reach inside to lift her up. But Cassie's a fussy baby and a light sleeper, too. Her eyes open and she lets out a soft cry.

"Shh," I say softly. "Don't cry, *mi amore*."

It takes a few seconds, but my voice soothes her enough for her to stop crying. I look up and realize that her father is still standing at the doorway of the room. I wish I could get a mirror and show him how scared he looks right now. It's almost funny. Almost.

"Don't worry, Rome. She's not going to bite," I tease.

He scowls before taking slow steps inside. When he reaches us, he peers down at the baby in my arms and almost immediately, his expression softens. I'm pretty sure I watch him melt.

"She has my eyes."

"Yeah," I say softly. "And your nose, too. It's kind of annoying that she looks so much like you, especially since I spent seven hours birthing her."

"She knew to take after the better-looking parent," Roman whispers without looking at me. His eyes are fixed on his daughter.

I roll my eyes at the comment. "You wish. We both know I'm the better-looking parent. Besides, Kie says she'll start to look more like me as she grows older."

"We'll see," Roman says with a smile.

"Do you want to hold her?" I ask gently.

He suddenly looks alarmed. "What if I drop her?"

"You won't," I assure him.

He lets out a breath, nodding once, and I carefully transfer Cassie from my hands to his. He struggles a little to get the right position, but soon he's holding her, with his hand behind her head to hold it up. Once she's perfectly situated, she blinks

up at her dad and my heart soars when she smiles. Roman's expression softens.

"Holy shit," he says.

I cough. "Rome, no swearing around the baby."

"Right," he mutters. "Sorry, *principessa*."

My eyes almost well with tears at the endearment but I blink them away. The both of us stay still for several moments. He just watches her and I watch him watch her. When Cassie starts to squirm, I place my hand on her head, shushing her gently. She doesn't stop squirming and when she opens her mouth to cry, Roman's expression quickly turns frazzled.

"It's okay," I tell him. "She probably just wants her pacifier."

I grab it and place it into her mouth. She settles after that, and I see Roman let out a soft breath.

"We should probably set her down again so she can sleep."

He nods, handing the baby over to me. I rock her for a few seconds and I'm glad when her eyes start to fall closed. Very quietly, I place her in her crib, and after making sure the baby monitor is on, I leave the room, noticing that Roman already left without me realizing.

I find him leaning against the wall in the living room.

"So..." I drawl, "still think she's not yours?"

He rolls his eyes. "I had every right to ask that question and you know it."

"Sure," I mutter.

He looks away and I find myself wishing he would tell me what he's thinking. He just met his daughter for the first time. I want to know how he feels, but he's giving me nothing. When Roman speaks, there's a bit of an edge to his voice.

"I just want to make some things clear," he starts, and I gesture for him to speak. "First off, I don't forgive you for keeping her from me."

Something cracks in my chest but I nod regardless. “I get that.”

He has every right to be mad. Rome wasn't built in a day. And Roman obviously has the same sentiment when it comes to forgiveness.

“However, we're in this situation together. There's no you or I anymore, there's just us, trying to take care of our—” He hesitates, swallowing roughly. “Our daughter.”

The two words fall from his lips in a whisper, but he gets them out. I don't say a word and he continues.

“I'm going to head back home now. And we're both going to do our best to ensure that our family doesn't find out about this.”

When I open my mouth to protest, he doesn't let me speak.

“They're going to know eventually, but I have to figure out the best plan of action. They'll be furious, and rightfully so. I need time. And a way to ease them into this information.”

I take a seat on the couch and sigh. “We're fucked regardless of what you do, Roman.”

He grimaces. Roman thrives on having a sense of control over every situation. This is one thing that's out of his power.

“I'll figure it out. Just make sure no one finds about Cassie.”

I nod once. “I will.”

He looks back toward my bedroom and I can tell he wants to see her again. But he shakes his head, reconsidering the thought.

“I'll have a man or two stand guard outside the building,” he informs me.

My eyes widen. Almost immediately, I remember I'm dealing with a paranoid, overprotective head of a mafia family.

“That's not necessary. Plus, what if they see Cassie when we take her out on a walk?”

“They’ll keep their mouths shut, if they want to keep their lives,” he says, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

I blink. “See, now this is the kind of behavior we’re going to have to talk about, in relation to Cassie. Tone down on the psychopathic Don behavior.”

“She’s mine to protect.”

“Ours,” I correct, an edge to my voice.

He rolls his eyes. “The guards will be here later today. I’ll make sure they understand discretion. Neither you nor the baby are allowed to live this building without security.”

I clench my fists. “That’s too much. Chill out.”

He glares at me. “Nothing’s too much when it comes to her. I’m going to leave now,” he announces.

“When will you be back? To see her?”

He hesitates. “It might be a good idea for me not to come around too often. Just in case our family gets suspicious. I’ll come see her this weekend. Maybe Sunday?”

“Alright.” I nod. “Bye.”

He leaves without another word. My head falls back onto the couch and I sigh softly. I’m not pleased about the security situation. But Roman and I are stuck together. And right now, he’s doing his best to work out a terrible situation. The least I can do is not fight him at every turn.

KIARA and I take Cassie to the hospital for her monthly check-up, and I’m glad when the doctor informs us that she’s perfectly healthy. Eating and sleeping well enough for her age.

We’re leaving the hospital when Kiara suggests she take Cassie home while I go visit my dad.

“Didn’t you have that meeting with those fancy execs today?” I ask her as we head for the car.

She shakes her head. “They canceled on me. Guess they’re not too keen on meeting a novice jeweler. My brand is still up and coming; I can’t expect a huge company like that to be taking me seriously.”

My eyes narrow. “Nonsense, your brand is amazing. And they’re dumb for not taking you seriously.”

She smiles. “What’s even more annoying is that dad is close friends with the CEO of the company. One phone call and they’d be in a meeting with me instantly.”

“But you’re not going to ask him.”

“Nope,” she states, shifting the baby in her arms. Cassie is extremely curious about all the people milling about in the hospital lobby, her blue eyes big and wide as she tries to look around.

“But you—”

“I’m not calling him, Lena. End of story,” Kiara says firmly.

She and her dad had a huge falling out a few months ago, which, according to her, has been a long time coming. I’m not sure exactly what the details are because Kiara can be infuriatingly private about her family life. Mr. Coleman can be extremely overbearing, but I haven’t spent nearly enough time with him to gauge his relationship with his daughter. He’s always struck me as a stern man, a little controlling.

I thought I had issues with the way my father and brother tried to control me, but then I met Kiara’s dad. He has always tried to micro-manage her life, down to the outfits she was allowed to wear in public.

Kiara has much more control than she used to have, but it’s clear he hasn’t truly let up. She hasn’t spoken to him or her mother since their last fight.

“Okay,” I tell her, dropping the issue. “I guess I should go see my dad.” He asked me to come over a few days ago, but I told him I was busy.

“We’ll take the car home. You can catch a cab, right?”

“Yeah.”

I watch as she heads over to our car, pretending not to notice the big, hulking man trailing after them. Once Kiara has Cassie situated in her car seat, she gets into the driver’s seat. And our bodyguard, who I secretly call Todd in my head because we have yet to be introduced, heads into the black Escalade he uses to follow us everywhere. I appreciate him giving us space, though. We usually don’t notice his presence.

When they’re gone, I hail a cab and head over to my family’s home, where I find my dad in the living room. A surprise awaits me in the form of Ivan De Luca, who seems to be watching a game of baseball with my father. They both look up when I arrive, rising to their feet. My father’s face splits into a grin.

“Hey, honey,” he says.

“Daddy,” I greet, kissing him on the cheek. “Ivan.” I offer the other man a nod.

I haven’t seen him since I got back from London. His dark hair’s a little longer and he’s much bulkier than he was the last time I saw him, but he’s still the same. With his charming, golden boy aura that makes a person want to trust him. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work on me.

“Hey, beautiful.”

He moves like he wants to give me a hug then seems to decide against it. I’m glad.

I turn to my father. “Since when are you two close enough to watch a game together?”

“Since Ivan’s going to become my son-in-law,” Dad announces casually.

I blink, slowly piecing together that statement. “I’m sorry, what?” I ask, confused. “Do you have another daughter I’m not aware of?”

To my utter annoyance, both men chuckle.

“Of course not, *mia cara*. I told you I’d find you a husband, didn’t I? And in the past year, Ivan has proven he’s

the right man for the job.”

With growing horror, I turn to Ivan, who has a pleased expression on his face. And just like that, my dire situation becomes even worse.

CHAPTER 20

Roman

I wince when the door of my Audi slams shut. I hadn't meant to close it with that much force. I look up at the church I've attended for as long as I can remember. I haven't been here in a while, but my mother insisted on my appearance today, claiming it wasn't a good look for the head of the family to be away from God's presence for too long. What she really wanted to say is that it's bad PR for us in the face of the media, especially since we're meant to be a good loving Italian family.

Michael's beside me as we step inside the grand cathedral. Tony's not with us since the fucker's practically an atheist. Walking through the grand entrance, we dip our hands into the blessed water before making the sign of the cross. Then we head to the front of the pews where my family usually sits. The majority of the congregation are Italians, members of the family. I stand beside my mother and she smiles, handing me a hymn book. I don't sing, but the chorus of voices rises as the service begins.

I don't say a word, sitting through the entire service until the priest says the magic words.

"Go in peace."

We all rise as he leaves. Finally. Everyone starts to trickle through the exit and I'm about to head out as well, but my mom convinces me to stay behind and mingle with some of the congregation.

Fucking hell.

“Mother,” I say through gritted teeth, when she asks me to accompany her to the back of the church to see the priest. “I couldn’t care less about what donations you plan to make to the church. And I especially don’t give a damn what you say to the priest.”

Her eyes narrow. “We are in church, Roman. Don’t swear. If you’re going to speak like that in God’s house, then leave.”

“With pleasure,” I say, relieved. “Bye, Mom. I’ll see you at home.”

I walk out of the church toward my car, where Michael’s leaning with a shit-eating grin on his face. He was allowed to leave with everyone else. Not like Mom would have dragged him along, anyway, considering his utter distaste for human company outside of the family.

“How did socializing go?” he asks.

“Fuck off,” I mutter.

We get in and I start the car, driving off. The first few minutes are spent in companionable silence before my mind inevitably trails to the subject it has been on the entire week. I’m set to see Elena and Cassie later today and I still have no fucking clue what I’m supposed to do. It doesn’t help that I haven’t been able to speak to anyone about it.

“Hey, so I’ve got to talk to you about something,” I start hesitantly.

“Go on.”

“This is a hypothetical question, Mikey. As in, it’s not a real situation.”

“I know what hypothetical means,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Alright, let’s say I knocked a girl up. Got her pregnant. And remember this is a purely hypothetical question, Mikey. I was just wondering. How would you propose I tell the girl’s parents?”

Michael peers at me like I’m fucking insane. “Rome,” he says slowly, “did you get someone pregnant? Holy fuck. Is

Brianna pregnant?”

“Bianca,” I correct with an eye roll. “And no, she’s not pregnant. We’ve never had sex.”

“Oh,” Michael says, his worry visibly diminishing. “Then why the hell are you asking that kind of fucked-up question?”

I groan. “I don’t know, man. Just curious.”

He stares at me again. I can practically feel the suspicion. He wants to know more, but he won’t ask. Michael doesn’t push.

“It would depend,” he finally answers.

“On...” I prod.

He shrugs. “A number of things. How close is your relationship to the woman? Is she Catholic? Italian? Is her family in the Cosa Nostra?”

I nod slowly before settling on the best way to help him understand.

“Okay, imagine it’s Rosa—and no, my sister is most definitely not pregnant, but what if she was impregnated by a man that she’s not married or even engaged to? Let’s say a one-night stand. What would you do?”

Michael doesn’t even hesitate. “I’d probably kill him. But I’m sure you’d beat me to it.”

I stiffen slightly. “But the baby...”

“Would have to grow up without a father,” Michael says firmly. “No one touches the women in our family.”

He’s right. Fuck, I know he’s right. Which means I’m so screwed.

“Yeah,” I say, swallowing.

“You good, Rome?”

“Yeah, all good.”

ELENA ANSWERS the door almost immediately after I ring the doorbell.

“Hey. You’re here early,” she says in greeting.

I’m momentarily thrown by the sight of her. Her hair is wet, droplets of water falling down onto her body. The shirt she’s wearing sticks to her skin and I’m unable to look away from her chest—specifically her tits, which are much bigger than I remember. My eyes dip down to her legs, which are clad in jean shorts. I swallow softly before looking up to her face.

She definitely caught me ogling her. But, oddly enough, she doesn’t mention it.

“Are you just going to stand there?” She moves from the doorway and lets me into the apartment.

“Where’s Kiara?” I ask, looking around.

“She went out to meet some friends,” Elena replies. “I know, it was surprising to me as well that she has friends other than me,” she adds sadly.

My lips twitch. “Not everyone’s like you, trouble.”

Her eyes gleam as she looks at me. “Fair enough,” she states. “Cassie’s in her crib. Should I bring her out here or you’ll go in and see her?”

“Is she asleep?”

“She wasn’t when I left the room five minutes ago, but she could be. I fed her before I went to take a shower and she sometimes gets sleepy after.”

“Let’s go to the room. Just in case she’s asleep,” I say, trying not to sound too eager.

The truth is, I’ve been waiting all week to see her again. It took everything in me not to get into my car two nights ago and drive over here. But I didn’t. I forced myself to be content with the reports from the men guarding them while I did everything to keep her family and mine from finding out the truth. But we can’t hide it forever.

When we enter the room, Elena gasps before rushing to the bed to clear off the clothes on top of it. I catch sight of some bras and a couple of panties as she sweeps them all into her arms.

“Shit,” she mutters.

“Take your time, *lupacchiotta*.” I chuckle, moving to the crib. I hear a muttered, “Pervert,” before she moves to the closet.

Meanwhile, I turn to my little girl.

“Hey, *principessa*,” I say softly.

She’s awake with a chew toy that’s shaped like a dog in her hands. When she notices me, her mouth opens and she makes soft babbling noises.

“Aw,” Elena says beside me. “I think she recognizes you.”

I smile. “I doubt it.”

“You can pick her up,” Elena says.

I don’t need any more prompting before reaching inside the crib and grabbing her. I spent about three hours researching the right way to hold a baby, to give it the right support and ensure it’s comfortable. As soon as my daughter is in my arms, my chest clenches.

This is only the second time I’ve met her and I’m pretty sure I’m already attached. She blinks at me, big blue eyes that practically sparkle. When I look at her, everything in me feels settled. I’m at peace. I never knew a child could do that to you. I spent the past week thinking about how insane it is that I’m a father. It’s something that I knew would inevitably happen. I was always going to have kids, I just didn’t think it would be so soon.

And while a part of me is terrified I’ll fuck up, another part of me is excited about how it’s going go. Fatherhood is just another challenge. And I never back down from a challenge.

When Elena gestures at the bed, I sit down on the edge while cradling Cassie’s head. I’m at a loss on what to do next.

“I should probably go,” Elena suddenly says, pointing at the door. “Give the two of you some space.”

“Hey, wait. I actually had some things to talk to you about. I’ve got a couple of questions.”

Elena arches an eyebrow. “Why am I not surprised? Let me guess, you spent all your free time researching everything and anything that had to do with babies and now you’re curious about ours?”

I narrow my eyes, not at all pleased that she was able to guess that so efficiently. I’m not that transparent. Elena laughs before moving to sit beside me on the bed.

“Come on, let’s hear it,” she prompts.

“First question,” I start. “When’s her birthday?”

“May 26,” she replies.

“Okay. And what’s her middle name?”

Elena pauses. Her eyes meet mine and there’s something vulnerable in their depths.

“I didn’t give her one. I was hoping you would. It didn’t feel right to decide on all her names without her father. So on her birth certificate, there’s only her first and last name. Cassiopeia De Luca.”

My throat tightens. Suddenly, I can’t look away from her.

“That was... thoughtful,” I finally settle on.

She nods. “It was the right thing to do. When you think of a middle name for her, we can get it changed. You’ll also probably need to sign her birth certificate, too. As her father.”

I’m not sure what to say. I look down at the baby in my arms. She can’t understand what we’re saying, but her eyes are fixed on my face like she can.

“I never meant for you not to be a part of her life, Rome. I just had to take a little detour first.”

“Okay,” I say softly.

Elena gets to her feet after, clearing her throat. “I know you have other questions, but I think you should spend some time with her first. I have something to do anyway.”

“What?”

“I was going to look for a job, see if I can find anything on my laptop.”

Very slowly, I consider what she’s saying. Then I grit my teeth. “You don’t need a job, Elena. Your daughter is three months old.”

Her head tilts to the side. I can practically see her gearing for a fight. Then she looks down at the baby in my arms and blows out a breath.

“I’m looking for remote work. Something I can do from home. I’m bored as hell, Roman, and while I love spending time with my baby, I also need something to occupy my mind before I go crazy. A job will help with that.”

“But still—”

“No. You don’t get a say, Roman. This is about me and what I need.”

“Fine,” I mutter.

“Eventually, when Cassie’s old enough, I’m going to get an actual job,” she states. I open my mouth to speak but she stops me. “And no, you don’t get a say then, either.”

I sigh. “We’ll table the discussion.”

“There’s no tabling. The discussion is over,” she says firmly. “Enjoy your daddy-daughter time.”

She walks out of the room, leaving us alone.

“Your mom is probably going to be the death of me, *principessa*.”

She blinks once and I take that as agreement. I thumb her cheek softly.

“That’s my girl,” I whisper.

I rock her for a few seconds. Soon enough, she's yawning, and a few minutes later, she's fast asleep. Very carefully, I place her in her crib before moving to find her mother. Elena's seated on the living room floor in front of her couch. There's a laptop in front of her and she's wearing glasses, which is a little surprising.

"Since when do you need those?"

She jumps in surprise, placing her hand against her chest. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

I cross my arms against my chest and smirk. When she pulls herself together, she shoots me a look.

"What are you even doing out here?"

"She's asleep," I inform her, taking a seat beside her on the floor.

What she's doing there while there's a perfectly respectable chair behind her, I don't know. But I learned a long time ago not to question Elena Legan.

"So," I prompt, "when did you get the glasses?"

"A few months ago. I was reading something on my phone and the letters suddenly became blurry. I've always had problems with my eyes but I was too stubborn to get glasses until now."

"Your trademark trait: stubbornness."

"I thought that was yours," she retorts.

"I highly doubt that."

"Like you'd ever admit you're anything less than perfect," she scoffs.

"You said it not me, *lupacchiotta*."

Elena lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Whatever." Something shifts in her expression and she grins. "So, I hear you're getting married to some airline heiress. Brenda?"

"Bianca," I correct for the second time today. I can't help an amused smile. "Her name's Bianca. And who told you?"

“My dad mentioned it,” she replies. “Right after he informed me about my imminent engagement to your cousin.”

“What?”

Green eyes turn to me curiously. “You didn’t know?”

I had my suspicions, but no one bothered to tell me the Legans were planning to marry her off to Ivan.

“Of all fucking people, Ivan?” I spit.

“You still don’t like him,” Elena says.

“I don’t want you getting married to him,” I retort.

Her eyebrow lifts. “And who, pray tell, would you rather I get married to?”

I may be the Don, but it’s not like I have any say in who marries who. Especially since she’s Salvador’s daughter. But imagining her walking down the aisle to marry my cousin makes my blood boil.

“Anyone but him,” I say, looking her in the eye.

Elena looks away first. “Well, it doesn’t matter because I’m not marrying him. Not only is Cassie’s existence a pretty big chink in my dad’s plans, I also have zero interest in him.”

That makes me relax. Slightly. “So, who do you have an interest in? Got a boyfriend?”

She laughs. “God, no. When would I even get one? When I was heavily pregnant in London? Or now while I’ve got a three-month-old baby? I doubt dating’s in the cards for me any time soon. All I’m focused on right now is Cassie.”

“Yeah, alright,” I say, nodding.

“Now, back to you. How’s your relationship going with the heiress?”

I tense slightly. I’ve tried hard not to think about Bianca in the past week. She’s been blowing up my phone with texts asking to meet up, but I’ve been ignoring them. She’s just another item on my long list of problems. Granted, she might be bigger than most.

“We don’t actually have a relationship,” I find myself saying.

“My dad told me you already signed a marriage contract and everything.”

“I signed an agreement stating I would marry her,” I say, already regretting that decision. “Apart from that, we’ve gone on a few dates. There’s not much going on.”

“Oh,” Elena says quietly. “But you still signed a contract. You gave your word, and Ricardo always used to say that—”

“A man is only as good as his word,” I interject through gritted teeth. “Trust me, I’m aware.”

“So you have to marry her.”

“I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to.”

Elena looks like she doesn’t quite believe me, but she drops it.

“Are you hungry? I could cook for us.”

Her words remind me that I haven’t eaten anything since before we left for church.

“Sure,” I reply tentatively. “But I’d rather not die.”

She rolls her eyes, getting to her feet. “I’ll have you know that I’ve been taking online cooking classes. I can cook now.”

I stare at her warily. She crosses her arms, seemingly offended.

“I’ve changed, Roman.”

My eyes trail over her face as I take those words in. “You really have, haven’t you?”

CHAPTER 21

Elena

Contrary to what I said, I don't actually possess the ability to whip up a complete meal on my own. Yet. But I can make us some sandwiches. I'm thinking grilled cheese.

I head to the kitchen, hyped to prepare something for someone other than myself. Kiara is still wary about my cooking so I've had to practice on my own. Roman's about to be my first test subject without being aware of the fact.

I grab all the ingredients. Some bread, cheese, and some vegetables. I'm chopping up the onions when Roman walks into the kitchen. He eyes me warily and I roll my eyes.

What's a girl got to do to get some trust?

"Do you need help?"

"No. I'm perfectly capable of making a sandwich," I inform him.

He hums but doesn't leave. I huff out a breath and look up at him.

"Roman, would you go? I told you I've got it," I say in frustration.

Unfortunately, I forget what I'm doing and the fact that I'm currently holding a knife. It slips out of my hand, slicing my finger before clattering onto the wooden surface of the slab.

"Ouch!" I yell, holding out the finger that's rapidly seeping out blood.

Roman leaps into action, rushing to my side. “Fucking hell, Elena.”

He grabs a cloth and presses it over the wound.

“Ow, ow, ow,” I cry.

He rolls his eyes. “Chill out, it’s just a tiny cut.”

“Are you kidding? Just a tiny cut? Look at all that blood. I think I need to get to the E.R. I need stitches, Rome,” I say dramatically.

Surprisingly, he smiles. It’s not a half-smile, either, but a full-blown, honest-to-God smile that knocks the breath out of me. For a second, I forget to move. I just stare at him until he’s looking into my eyes.

“Are you done with the dramatics?” he questions.

I nod slowly.

“Alright, come on,” he tells me.

Before I can blink, he’s lifting me by my waist onto the kitchen island. Heat sears into my skin at his touch.

“Where’s the first-aid kit?”

I gesture at one of the cabinets and he moves to grab it while I ignore the pounding in my chest. When he returns, Roman steps between my legs. He’s eye level with me, his attention focused on the wound that’s still bleeding. Not for long, though. He works quickly, quietly, cleaning the wound before applying some ointment. I hiss out a breath at the sting.

“Don’t be a baby, we’ve already got one,” he says gruffly.

“Jerk.” I pout.

He laughs, grabbing a small bandage and placing it over the cut. “There you go,” he says once he’s done. “Good as new.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, swallowing softly.

Roman’s eyes lift and he must realize the position we’re in because he suddenly stills. He’s close enough that I can see the scar on his upper lip. It’s new, wasn’t there a year ago. Just a

tiny scar that isn't noticeable until you're standing right in front of him. I want to ask how he got it.

Dark blue eyes trail across my face, leaving simmering heat behind. Roman's hand falls on my bare thigh. He strokes me there once, twice causing heat to shoot straight through my core. I haven't felt desire in over a year. Not since I was with him.

It feels like I'm a recovering addict about to fall back into old habits. But Roman's not a habit—he's a drug. And one I'm not sure I ever want to recover from.

My next words come out slow, sensual.

"The airport heiress, is she your girlfriend?" I ask, trying to ignore the bolt of jealousy cutting through me.

Roman watches me through half-lidded eyes. "No," he replies gruffly.

"No?" I slide my hand up his neck, pulling him closer while grabbing a fistful of hair.

My stomach swoops and dives as Roman's lips hover close to mine. Close enough to kiss. My breasts brush against his chest and my heart speeds up. Racing.

"If you're going to kiss me, Elena, fucking do it," Roman says against my lips.

For some reason, I hesitate. But when my lips part, he doesn't waste another second before his mouth meets mine. Pure lust erupts inside me so violently I grow dizzy. I run my fingers over his chest, aching for the touch of his bare skin. He smells so good, addictive, and I can't help but feel like I could get lost in him.

He pushes his tongue into my mouth and it's hot and wet and fucking amazing. Butterflies flutter across my skin when Roman's hand travels up to my neck, teasing the skin there softly. I gasp when he bites my bottom lip before sucking the sting away. It's erotic and maddening at the same time.

A shiver rolls through me when his hand plays with the hem of my shirt, feeling for bare skin. With hardly any effort,

Roman lifts me off the counter. I wrap my legs around his waist, too far gone to think about anything but the feel of him. He places me against the kitchen wall as he continues to ravage me. I can feel his erection beneath my ass, hard and thick.

“Oh god,” I moan as Roman continues to kiss me like I’m the air he breathes.

I reach for the buttons of his shirt and I’m about to pop one open when we hear a soft cry. Roman’s head snaps up and my eyes blink open. We both turn to the baby monitor on the counter. Water is effectively doused over our desire. Roman steps back and I slowly slide down to the ground. I’m a little unsteady on my feet but I manage to gain my balance as I look anywhere but at him.

“I’ll go check on her,” he mutters, quickly exiting the kitchen.

I groan softly, covering my face as I throw my head back against the wall.

What the fuck did I just do? Dammit, Elena.

I take a couple of seconds to gather myself before Roman returns with Cassie. I reach for her and he places her in my arms.

“I think she needs a diaper change,” he informs me.

“Yeah, I can smell that.”

He smiles. “I’ll do it.”

My eyes widen and I clutch Cassie to my chest as I look up at him. “You’ll what?”

“Change her diaper,” he says in a dry tone.

“You, you... Have you ever changed a diaper before?”

He shakes his head. “No. But you can show me. I might as well learn. You’ve changed your fair share over the past couple of months. It’s my turn.”

I feel my heart soar. Since when was Roman De Luca such an amazing man? I mean, I’ve always known he’s alright, but

he really grew up to be pretty close to perfect.

“Yeah, sure. I can teach you,” I say softly

We head into the room and I grab a diaper, quickly showing him how it’s done. He watches attentively and I’m beyond shocked as I look at him. If anyone would have told me that the Don in the Cosa Nostra would be willingly changing diapers, I’d have called bullshit. But he’s here and it’s pretty amazing.

When we’re done changing her, he holds her, trying to rock her back to sleep. The man has known about this child’s existence for a little over a week and he’s already this good with her. It’s the sweetest thing ever.

“I’ll put her back to sleep,” he tells me.

I nod. “I’ll finish preparing those sandwiches.”

His eyes narrow. “Elena...”

“I’ll be fine. The cut was a freak accident.”

“Fine,” he mutters, cradling his daughter’s head as he gently rocks her back to sleep.

After one last look at them, I walk out of the room. It only takes me a couple of minutes to get the grilled cheese sandwiches ready. By the time Roman walks out of my bedroom, I’ve laid out the sandwiches on the table and I head back into the kitchen to grab two bottles of coke.

Roman accepts the sandwich I hand him with a quiet word of thanks, taking a seat on the couch. We eat in silence for several minutes. The air between us is a little awkward, which is to be expected considering what just happened in the kitchen. Roman clears his throat once he’s done eating.

“I can admit that wasn’t half bad,” he states.

It takes me a second to realize what he’s talking about and my face splits into a grin.

“I told you! I can cook now,” I say triumphantly.

He arches an eyebrow. “Elena, you made a grilled cheese sandwich. Pretty sure toddlers can do that.”

“Yeah, right,” I scoff. “Just say thank you, Rome. No need to be an asshole.”

He chuckles. “Thank you for the sandwich, trouble. Maybe next time you can cook me something else. Something challenging.”

“Of course I will.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “About what happened back there. In the kitchen.”

My pulse quickens. “It was a mistake,” I blurt out.

Roman pauses, staring at me.

“There’s no need to talk about it. It was just something that happened in the heat of the moment. No big deal,” I hurriedly say.

His eyes narrow. “A mistake? Elena, the last time you and I made a mistake like that, you ended up pregnant.”

I suck in a breath. “Cassie’s not a mistake.”

“Of course not,” he says, his expression softening. “I just think we should talk about this.”

“No. There’s nothing to talk about,” I say stubbornly.

Whatever this thing is between us, I have no intention of exploring or questioning it. We’re not at liberty to entertain such thoughts. I know he knows that, too.

Roman’s jaw is clenched. He’s about to say something else, probably argue, when the door unlocks from the outside and Kiara walks in, pocketing her key. She falls to a stop at the sight in front of her.

“Roman,” she drawls. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I was just leaving,” he mutters, getting to his feet. “I’ll text you, Elena.”

He walks out without another word and I exhale softly. Kiara places her purse on the table as she sits beside me.

“What the hell happened?”

“We kissed,” I confess immediately, needing to get it off my chest.

“You did what?” Kiara yells.

I wince. “Easy, Kie. The baby,” I remind her.

“You kissed? When? Why? What?” she asks, confused.

“I cut myself and he was cleaning my wound, and one thing led to another and I was kissing him... or was he kissing me? Anyway, we kissed.”

Kiara eyes me. “And how did it make you feel?”

“I-I don’t know.”

She leans her head against the couch, watching me. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Lena, this situation is already complicated enough without you two adding your unresolved emotions to the mix.”

“I know,” I say softly.

“This isn’t just about you guys, it’s about Cassie, too. You have to do the right thing for her.”

“I know that.”

“Alright. I’m just making sure. I’ll never understand you two, though. If you like each other, just go for it. This stupid game of hate-slash-love has gone on for years, and frankly, I’m sick of it.”

I cross my arms over my chest, deciding to ignore that.

“Did you at least talk about telling your family the truth?” Kiara asks on a sigh.

My eyes widen as I realize that we did not, in fact, have that conversation. I shake my head and Kiara groans.

“So what did you do today? Besides locking lips?”

“We were talking about Cassie,” I mutter defensively.

She pinches the bridge of her nose in frustration. “You two need to get your shit together. I was with Michael earlier and he kept talking about how weird Rome is being. It’s only a

matter of time before he finds out. Trust me, Lena, you do not want any of them finding out before you tell them the truth.”

I grimace. “Yeah, I’m aware. We’ll figure it out.”

“Alright, I’m going to go see Cassie before going to bed,” she informs me, getting to her feet. “Night, babe.”

“Good night,” I murmur.

CHAPTER 22

Roman

“Let me know if anything goes wrong,” I say to Tony.

He nods, his eyes fixed on the computer screens. We’re at one of the gambling dens my family owns, supervising a game of pretty high stakes. When I was told the clientele that would be participating, I decided to come oversee the game, ensuring nothing goes wrong. I don’t need a brawl on my property, especially not one that could very well lead to someone’s death.

These men are high-profile politicians. The P.R. that would come with a scandal should anything occur is not what I fucking need. But I’ve been here for over an hour and the game appears to be going well.

My eyes narrow when I notice a sleight of hand by one of the players—Coleman secretly hides a card beneath his sleeve. Tony and I lean forward, waiting to see if any of the other players notice. A few minutes pass but none of them raises any alarm.

“I’m going to go now. Rosa’s plane arrives in thirty minutes,” I inform my best friend. “Keep an eye on Coleman.”

“You got it, boss.”

I head for the poker room to speak to the men before heading out. I just want to share some quick pleasantries, especially considering one of them is Loren Zanetti. The old man’s gaze flicks to mine as soon as I step through the door and he smiles as I approach.

“Ah, Roman. Come join us,” he says.

I shake my head. “No thanks. I was just coming to check in,” I say, my eyes roaming around the table.

There are about five men, each of them in their later forties to early fifties, each of them politicians or affluent businessmen. And every single one of them used to work with my father when he was alive. The capos that helped to keep his empire stable in one way or the other.

“Everything’s fine here,” Coleman says, his eyes very alike his daughter’s. “Am I right?”

The other men murmur their agreement. I nod, getting ready to leave when Zanetti stops me.

“My daughter informed me you haven’t been paying her any attention of late.”

I grit my teeth as I look up at the man. “I’ve been busy.”

“Right. Hopefully not too busy for your future wife. Put a ring on her soon, would you, Rome? You’re not doing yourself any favors staying so long without a woman at your side.”

“Of course.” I swallow. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen.”

By the time I arrive at my car, I’m agitated and in the mood to punch something. But I stave off my anger in favor of driving to the airport to pick up Rosa. She’s been gone a month and is only just returning to the country after some artist’s retreat.

When she spots me waiting for her, she smiles, walking over and giving me a hug. “Hey, big brother.”

I peer at her, running my hand through the tips of her hair which have been dyed red.

“What is this? A cry for help?”

She rolls her eyes. “No. I just felt like doing it. I got a month away from Mom, Rome—of course I was going to do something crazy. Plus, I’m an artist.” She sniffs. “It’s a form of expression.”

I grin. “Mom’s definitely going to lose her shit.”

She shrugs and I grab her suitcase, leading her out of the airport to my car so we can begin the ride home. She tells me all about her retreat on the way and I try my best to listen, but after my chat with Zanetti, my mind is miles away. With my daughter and her mother who keeps fucking with my head.

Of course, my sister notices.

“*Che succeed, fratello?*” she asks—“what’s up” in Italian. “You’re distracted.”

I blow out a breath and glance at her. Her expression is open and curious. Rosa and I have always had a pretty good relationship, in the sense that we never really hide the important shit from each other. For example, she used to tell me all about the guys she had a crush on and I used to have a lot of fun making sure they stayed the hell away from her. I never told her that, of course. Anyway, Rosa trusts me, and I trust my little sister. Which is why I feel the need to tell her the truth.

Rosa tilts her head in confusion when I suddenly pull over, stopping the car by the side of the road.

“Okay, I’m going to say something and I’m going to need you to not freak out,” I start.

She nods once. “Alright, I’m listening.”

I take in a deep breath. “I have a daughter.”

Rosa’s eyes widen to the size of golf balls. I don’t allow the shock to pass before I lay it all on her. I tell her that Elena’s the mother of my child and that she left for London to hide her pregnancy. I tell her all about Cassie and the fucked-up situation I’ve found myself in.

By the time I’m done explaining, I feel lighter than I have in weeks. It felt good to get it all off my chest. Of course, it seems I’ve traumatized my sister in the process. Rosa doesn’t speak for several minutes and I stay quiet, letting her take it all in.

“You and Elena have a child together?” she asks, horrified.

“Yep.”

“Holy shit!”

I fight back a smile. Rosa’s always so prim and proper all the time thanks to Mom’s grooming. She never really swears, so hearing that from her mouth is amusing.

I lean my head back on the seat and sigh. “Yep.”

“Oh, god. You’re dead. You’re both so dead,” she mutters.

“Not exactly comforting words, *sorella*.”

“You know I’m right. Not only did you sleep with her, but you knocked her up and then you hid the pregnancy for an entire year!”

“That was not my decision,” I point out with a frown. “I had little control over that.”

“So what? You have a child, Rome. With a woman you’re not married to. Oh my god! Mom’s going to pass out. Salvador’s going to freak. Tony’s going to kill you.”

My jaw clenches. “Trust me, Rosa. I’m aware of how they’re going to react to the news.”

She looks over at my face and at the sight of my expression, her gaze softens. “I’m an aunt, though. That’s amazing. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Yeah. She’s a perfect baby girl.”

“And you love her?”

I arch an eyebrow at that question. I’ve known about Cassie’s existence for almost three weeks. I’ve met her three times. But honestly, there’s no doubt in my mind how I feel for that little girl.

“Of course I love her,” I reply gruffly. “She’s my daughter.”

Rosa smiles. “I’m glad. And I’m happy for you. You’ll be the best father.”

“Sure. As long as my best friend doesn’t kill me,” I say grimly.

“He probably won’t kill you,” she offers optimistically. “But he might never forgive you, either.”

I blow out a breath. “Yeah. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

WHEN I ARRIVE at the apartment the next day, Kiara’s the one to open the door. I arch an eyebrow at her appearance.

“What’s with the shit on your face?” I ask, gesturing at the black substance covering every inch except her eyes, nose, and mouth.

Her eyes narrow. “It’s a face mask, thank you very much. Lena, your baby daddy’s here,” she announces, moving from the doorway to grant me entrance.

Rolling my eyes, I follow her in. Elena walks out of her bedroom, holding a crying baby in her hands.

“Hey,” she says, smile unsettled. “You can have her. She won’t stop crying.”

I reach for Cassie immediately, pulling her into my arms. Settling her against my chest, I rub her back in soothing circles, a tip I learned upon research. While I do my best to remember the words to the song, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”. “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, up above the world you are. In a diamond in the sky, lalalalalala fly. Twinkle, Twinkle Little star. In the sky, there you are.”

A few seconds pass and the wailing cries stop, dissolving into small gasps and noises. She finally falls silent and I grin.

Elena begins to chuckle making it clear I have forgotten the words. Or perhaps I’ve never known them.

“You are so good with her,” she says, eyes wide.

She moves to join her friend, who’s watching me intently. She whispers something in Elena’s ear, which causes her to gasp before slapping her shoulder.

“Shut up, Kie,” Elena mutters.

I watch the two women curiously while rocking the baby in my arms.

“So, Rome, care to tell me how you went from a guy that shoots people in the head to this,” she says, gesturing at me.

“Magic,” I deadpan.

She smiles. “This is so precious. I would take a picture to send to Michael and Tony but I can’t since you two haven’t come clean.”

I can hear the judgment loud and clear in Kiara’s voice. Elena lets out a huff of frustration.

“I told Rosa,” I say, looking into Kiara’s brown eyes.

“Congratulations. You told the one person who was never going to give you any shit about it in the first place. Please, Roman,” she scoffs.

“And why are you so concerned?” I ask her.

“Because I’m worried. This whole thing can so easily blow up in your faces. And I hate that you might not be able to handle the fallout.”

“I’ll handle it,” I grit out.

“Hmm. Just tell them soon, please.”

She stands up and heads into her room, leaving Elena alone with me. There’s a thoughtful expression on her face.

“She’s right, you know. We need to tell them soon.”

“Yeah, I know. I was planning to break the news at the family dinner on Tuesday,” I inform her. “You don’t have to be there.”

“Are you kidding? This is as much my mess as it is yours. Maybe even more so. I’m the one who hid her away for a year. I’ll be there.”

“Okay.”

We both talk about Cassie’s sudden aversion to her baby formula for a few minutes before Elena informs me that she needs to go to the grocery store.

“I’ll come with you,” I state.

“No, it’s fine. It’s a ten-minute drive.”

“I’m coming along. We can take Cassie with us, too.”

She shrugs, deciding not to argue, and heads toward the other bedroom. I hear her informing Kiara that we’re leaving and then she’s standing in front of me with Cassie’s baby bag.

“Let’s go.”

We head out of the house and down the elevator, deciding to take Elena’s car since Cassie’s car seat is already in it. After making sure she’s tucked in, we get inside. The ten-minute drive is spent planning the best way to inform our family of its newest addition. Once we arrive at the grocery store, I park and Elena waits for me to grab Cassie from her car seat. I’m carrying her out when a very familiar car pulls up beside her.

My eyebrows climb as I take in the dark green Mercedes. Then Tony’s walking out of the driver’s seat. He pauses a few feet away from me and the baby in my arms.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he asks.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 23

Elena

The entire world grinds to a stop as I watch my brother step out of his car. He approaches Roman and I'm not sure what he says because panic seizes every muscle in my body. It's like I'm about to get hit by a train and all I can do is fall still. I'm unable to move.

When Tony's expression turns menacing, I snap out of it. I rush to the other side of my car, standing between my brother and Roman.

"Tony, what are you doing here?" I ask, heart pounding. I'm hoping to defuse the situation.

"I followed you," he replies, not taking his eyes off Roman or the baby in his arms. "Saw you getting out of the apartment. Whose baby is that?"

His eyes finally meet mine and I can see how confused he is. He's waiting for me to tell him the truth. I open my mouth to speak but I can't seem to find the words. I have no idea how to explain. For all the planning we did, my brain turns to mush in the moment I need it the most.

Thankfully, Roman seems to be more in control than I am.

"It's okay, Lena. Take Cassie," he whispers from behind me.

I turn around and accept the baby, holding her so she's not facing her uncle, who is rapidly growing enraged.

"Would someone please explain what the fuck is going on? I'll ask again, whose baby is that?" Tony snaps.

Roman takes a deep breath. Visible tension is lining every single muscle on his shoulders.

“That’s my daughter,” he finally says. Tony’s eyes widen in shock. “Not just mine. Ours,” Roman adds.

I run my free hand over my face and groan softly. *Smooth, Rome. Real smooth.*

“The fuck are you talking about?” Tony snarls.

“I’m gonna need you to calm down, Tony. Calm down and let me explain.”

Oddly enough, he does. He leans against his car and crosses his arms. “I’m listening,” He prompts.

Roman takes a deep breath. I’m keenly aware that we’re in public and if Tony throws a punch, we’ll be garnering attention we certainly don’t need. I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, chewing nervously.

“A year ago, when Elena left for London, she was pregnant—”

I should have known Tony doesn’t have the ability to actually listen. He cuts Roman off with a chuckle.

“You’re telling me my sister had a baby and I didn’t know?”

“Yes,” Roman says bluntly.

He’s really not handling this well.

“That’s Cassie,” he says. “She was born about three months ago.”

“Okay, pause. Let’s say this insane story is actually true. Say she did get pregnant. What do you have to do with it?” Tony demands.

The expression on his face can be aptly referred to as the calm before the storm.

“The baby’s mine,” Roman states.

Tony looks from Roman to me behind him, then back to Roman again. I watch his eyes darken and he shoves Roman

backward.

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re trying to tell me you fucked my sister?” he yells.

I wince, noticing the number of people who look over here. Yeah, this situation needs de-escalation. And fast. Seeing Tony’s fist clenching like he’s about to throw a punch, I immediately step in between them. I look at my brother.

“We’re not doing this here,” I snap.

“Fuck off, Elena. Get out of my way!” he snarls.

“No. You’re going to get in your car, right now. And I’m going to come with you so I can explain the situation. Roman’s going to meet us at the house after dropping Cassie at my place with Kiara.”

Roman leans in behind me. “Not sure that’s a good idea, *lupacchiotta*.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Tony rages. “And stay the hell away from her.”

Right now, Roman’s not his Don or his best friend of more than a decade. When Tony advances like he’s going to hit him again, I step forward. Cassie’s still in my arms and, thankfully, she’s not crying. She’s blissfully unaware, her eyes taking in her surroundings.

“Tony, please,” I beg my brother. “I need you not to do this right now.”

My brother’s chest heaves as he stares at me. Then his eyes cut to the baby in my arms and I see hurt flash across his expression. He looks back at Roman once more before heading for the driver’s seat of his car.

I turn to Roman, feeling some relief. He’s not looking at me. His gaze is fixed on Tony, who’s currently clutching the steering wheel in his car.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to go with him? Tony’s a ticking time bomb. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I shake my head. “We both know my brother would never hurt me. Come and meet us at your house. I guess we’re telling the truth today.”

“Fuck,” Roman breathes.

He takes Cassie from my arms, holding her carefully. I feel a stab of guilt as I look at them both.

“Roman,” I say softly, “I’m sorry. This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t hidden the truth for so long.”

He shakes his head. “You did what you thought was right, trouble. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I offer him a small smile before getting into the passenger seat of my brother’s car. He doesn’t even look at me before revving the engine and driving off.

“Are you going to listen to me?” I ask a few minutes into the drive.

“No,” he replies, muscles straining. His eyes are fixed on the road. “I’m taking you to your father. You can tell him whatever the hell it is you want to say then.”

I take in a deep breath. “Tony I’m so fucking sorry. You have no idea—”

“No! Shut the hell up. I can’t believe you actually did this. You fucked my best friend!” he yells.

I pause, staring at him. “You’re oddly fixated on the wrong thing. Yes, I slept with Roman. But I also hid my pregnancy and gave birth without telling you.”

He glances at me, eyes twin pools of anger. “Is that something to be fucking proud of? You’re just begging me to fucking hate you, aren’t you, *sorella*?”

With those words, my lips clamp shut and I turn away, staring out the window. My eyes well up with tears but I blink them back. I can’t talk to him like this. He won’t listen to me.

We arrive at the De Luca home and Tony slams the door shut as he steps out of the car. I follow him at an even distance

as he heads into the house. I'm suddenly regretting coming here without Roman.

Unfortunately, Maria's with my dad, and so is Rosa. The only person missing is Michael, but of course he decides to trail downstairs upon our arrival, eyebrows raised in question.

"What's going on?" my dad asks, getting to his feet.

Michael nods at Tony. "Why does he look so pissed?"

A muscle ticks in my brother's jaw as he turns to me. "Well? Are you going to tell them or should I?"

A drowning sensation washes over me as my throat closes up. This isn't how I wanted this to happen at all.

"Tony—"

He looks at my dad sharply. "Your daughter slept with the Don."

"Oh, god," I mumble.

Dad's eyebrows rise as his eyes swivel from me to Tony. Everyone is silent, staring at us.

"And that's not all," Tony continues. "She apparently got knocked up and has a kid."

If the earth was going to open up and swallow me, now would be the perfect time. My hands grow sweaty and I look anywhere but at my dad's face.

"What the hell are you talking about, Anthony?" Dad questions.

"Yes, I'd like to know, too," Maria speaks up. "What is this about Roman and Elena?"

"Just calm down, Mama," Rosa says softly beside her mother, taking her hand.

I'm glad that at least she's aware of the situation. Michael's leaning against the doorway, expression blank. I look back at my father.

"Dad, I can explain everything," I say quietly.

He arches an eyebrow for me to continue, so I do. I tell them about finding out I was pregnant and leaving the country because I didn't want to destabilize Roman's rise to power. Then I tell them about Cassie. By the time I'm done, my dad is pale and Maria's this close to passing out.

"*Dios mio,*" she breathes.

Rosa's rubbing her mother's back now in a soothing motion. My dad doesn't say anything. He's frighteningly quiet. Everyone seems at a loss for words. Which is when Roman decides to walk into the room.

Tony doesn't even hesitate. He crosses over to him and punches him in the jaw. I gasp, watching Roman's head snap to the side.

"Both of you," Tony says, pointing back at me. "You're dead to me."

After that pronouncement, he walks out of the living room. Michael follows him quietly. Roman rubs at his jaw, eyes icy, and my hands tremble as I turn back to my father.

"Dad," my voice comes out in a whisper. This time when tears fill my eyes, I can't blink them away. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

His expression is stormy, filled with disbelief. Without a word, my dad takes slow steps out of the room. I move to follow him but Roman grabs my wrist.

"Give him time," he says softly.

I stare at him for a moment, feeling my heart ache with each beat.

Maria's voice is light as she speaks. "Both of you, come here."

Her expression leaves no room for argument. Roman holds my arm as we move to stand in front of his mother. Rosa offers me a small, encouraging smile.

"Am I to understand that I have a grandchild?" Maria asks.

Beside me, Roman nods. "Yes. Her name is Cassie."

“And the two of you connived to hide her away from the family for over a year?”

“No.” I let out a harsh breath. “Maria, Roman had nothing to do with me hiding the pregnancy. He wasn’t aware that I had even gotten pregnant until a few weeks ago,” I confess.

“Wrong thing to say, *lupacchiotta*,” Roman mutters beside me.

If looks could kill, I’d be six feet under right now. Maria glares at me as she slowly gets to her feet.

“So you not only hid your pregnancy away from your family, you hid it from the father of your child as well?”

I swallow softly. “I didn’t—”

“Your behavior doesn’t surprise me. You have always been a troubled child, Elena. Ever since your mother left, you’ve been a loose cannon, waiting to blow up and take down everyone around you. I tried my best to help you. I took you and your brother in as my own and this is how you repay me?” she asks angrily.

Her words cut deeper than they should.

“That’s enough, Mother,” Roman’s voice booms.

“And you!” she says, turning to her son. “How could you be so irresponsible? Is this how you honor your father’s memory? You got a woman pregnant, Roman, and now you have a child. What are you going to do about the Zanettis? How are you going to take care of this?”

“I’ll take care of it just like I do everything else, Mother,” Roman says icily.

Maria’s eyes flutter shut before they open and cut to me. “Bring my grandchild here as soon as possible,” she orders. “You’ve kept her from her family long enough.”

With those words, she walks out as well. Rosa reaches for my hand and I fall onto the couch beside her, resting my head on her shoulder.

“That went... about as well as it could have gone,” Rosa says softly.

I can only groan in reply.

THE NEXT DAY, Roman drives me to my family’s home, where I’m sure my father is. He parks the car outside of the house before turning to me.

“You sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

I shake my head. “No, I have to talk to him alone.”

“They’ll come around,” he says firmly.

“Roman, my brother practically disowned me. My dad refuses to talk to me. And I have no idea what I’m supposed to do.”

“Tony will get over it,” Roman says, but his words don’t really carry any weight.

After we left his house yesterday, he dropped me off at home before heading back to his place. Right now, he looks exhausted. He said he was going over the contract with the Zanettis, trying to find a loophole or anything that would assist him in breaking it.

It’s all an enormous mess and I’m drowning in guilt because I can’t help but feel like this is all my fault.

“Stop looking like that. Everything will be fine.”

I give him a look, “Really? Because right now, I’m pretty sure everyone hates me.”

“I don’t,” he says, looking forward.

“I distinctly remember you saying the words,” I mutter dryly.

He sighs. “Unfortunately, I don’t possess the ability to actively hate you, Elena.”

That makes me smile. “So, what? We’re friends now?”

His gaze cuts to mine, piercingly. “You kiss all your friends?”

My eyes widen and my mouth drops open. I flounder for a way to reply to that question.

“It’s alright, trouble.” Roman chuckles. “We’ll have to have that conversation. But not now.”

My heart speeds up. “I’m going to go now,” I announce, opening the car door.

“I’ll come pick you up. Just let me know when you’re done.”

I nod and step out of the car. He’s gone in a matter of seconds. I shake my head, trying to focus on the task at hand. First things first, I need to talk to my father.

Unsurprisingly, I find him in the observatory. It’s daytime and there aren’t any stars in the sky, and yet this is the place my father comes to for comfort.

After taking a deep breath, I walk over to him. My heart clenches when I catch sight of the bottle of bourbon on the table. My dad only drinks on the rare occasion that he’s incredibly upset.

“Elena,” he says without looking at me. His eyes are fixed on the large telescope in the middle of the room. “Do you know why we named you Andromeda?”

“Because Mom liked Greek mythology and constellations.”

“Yes.” He nods. “But also because in the Greek myths, Andromeda’s one of the few women who had a happy ending. After she was rescued by Perseus, she fell in love and got married. And when she died, she was immortalized as a constellation in the sky. Your mother and I wished the same for you. We wanted you to have a long, happy life. We wanted you to get married, start a family. She wanted more than anything for you have to have a happy ending.”

My hands clench into fists. “My life’s not over yet, Daddy.”

“No,” he states, “but it’s a pretty big mess right now, isn’t it?”

Ranking the list of things a person has said that hurt me, my dad telling me that my life is a mess would be at the top.

My throat tightens. “I can fix it. I will fix it.”

“After your mother left us, I wanted better for you. I wanted you to raise you to be an amazing woman but you fought me at every turn. So I let you be. I didn’t know how to reach you, so I decided to take a step back instead. That was a mistake.”

“I went to Harvard. I got a business degree. I graduated with honors! I’ve tried my best to make you proud!”

“Those are achievements, yes, but when did I ever tell you I needed you to do all those things? I asked you to go to a college in New York so you’d be close to our family but you refused. I wanted you to study law but you didn’t show any interest. You’ve only ever done what you wanted, Elena. I thought I was protecting you, but now I can see that all I did was raise you to be a disappointment.”

I feel my heart crack. “I hid a pregnancy and gave birth to a child without your knowledge. It’s not like I committed murder.”

“In our world, Elena, we both know that what you did was so much worse.”

Here’s the thing about us Legans—when we’re angry, we say things that are sure to hurt the other person. We can be quite stubborn, as well. But there comes a certain point where we cross that threshold. Where we just give up. I’m at that point now.

My dad hasn’t looked me in the eye once, but I make sure to look at his face as I say the next words.

“If I’m such a disappointment, then you might as well never see me again. Goodbye, Daddy.”

When the tears fall, I don’t stop them. I grab my phone to call Roman. Ironically, the person I thought hated me for so

long is the only one I can turn to for help right now.

Roman and I made a mistake, but I'm done apologizing for what happened. I'm done apologizing for bringing my baby into this world and loving her. And I'm done apologizing for having feelings for him, as well.

CHAPTER 24

Roman

Not surprisingly, my mother adores Cassie. I watch as she plays with her grandchild, holding her cheeks with a smile on her face. She still refuses to look at Elena, but the past few days, Elena has been dropping Cassie off here more and more. It's pretty clear Mom adores her.

I was surprised when I finished my meeting in my office and came down to find my daughter here. Apparently, Elena had dropped her off and left. I'm a little worried about her. After staring at my mother for a few more seconds, I head outside and find Michael leaning against the wall. I haven't seen him in a few days. He disappeared with Tony to God knows where after the whole fiasco.

"Hey," I say, grabbing his attention.

He glances at me once before looking away. "Rome."

"What? You mad at me, too?"

"No," he breathes. "Honestly, I'm more pissed at Elena. She should have come to us."

"She thought she was doing the right thing. And honestly, Mikey think about it. A year ago, we were just wrapping up a gang war with the Gallos. I was trying to keep everything under control while dealing with opposition left and right. If the capos found out I impregnated a girl out of wedlock, they'd have been on my shit. It would have been a hell of a lot harder to get them to fall in line."

Michael looks at me, his expression assessing. "That's a real passionate defense, Rome. A plus," he mutters. "When did

you start falling for your best friend's little sister?"

I stiffen, surprised by the directness of the statement.

"What? Don't be so shocked. It's always been pretty clear you had feelings for her. None of us was really fooled by the whole hating game you two were putting on. Elena would walk into a room and your entire focus would be on her. She riled you up in ways no one else could. You cared about her, more than you should have. Hell, even Tony knew. His entire speech to us when we were sixteen about staying away from his little sister was directed more at you than me."

I remember that speech. It's one of the reasons I tried so fucking hard to stay away from Elena. Because Tony looked me dead in the eye and told me she was off-limits. I always knew I risked losing my best friend by going after his sister, which is why I kept away.

"How is he?" I ask gruffly.

"How do you think, *fratello*? He's spent the past few days getting drunk and fucking around with some girls from the club. I was keeping an eye on him, making sure he didn't party too hard and do something he'd regret. You know how he is."

I nod. "You think he'll get over it?"

Michael huffs out a breath. "Honestly, I can't say. It's Tony. He blows hot and cold so fast. Right now, he's fucking angry. But in a few days, he might calm down enough to come over here and punch you in the face."

"I'd let him," I say.

I definitely deserve a few punches.

"You're his family, Rome. Elena's his little sister. I know what he said, but there's no way in hell he's going to cut you off."

"Alright. Thanks, Mikey."

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I grab it, seeing Bianca Zanetti's name flash across my screen. I grit my teeth before placing the phone back. Michael eyes me curiously.

“What are you going to do about Zanetti?”

I shrug. “I’m about to break a contract we signed. The best I can do is offer him something to soothe his wounded ego.”

“The man’s a billionaire. What can you give him that he doesn’t already have?”

“I have no fucking clue, Mikey.” I sigh.

“What did Maria say about it?”

“She asked if I was still planning on marrying Bianca. Which is funny because there’s no way in hell that woman’s going to marry me knowing I’ve got a kid. Right now, I’m looking into ways to break the contract. Which would go over well if my fucking consigliere would answer the phone.”

Salvador’s another person who refuses to speak to me. Which is unfortunate because I really need him right now.

“Well, you’d better figure it out fast. Time’s running out, Rome.”

“I know.”

Michael shrugs. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a niece I’ve got to meet,” he says with a small smile before walking into the house.

With nothing else to do for the rest of the evening, I decide to head over to Elena’s. Kiara opens the door, dressed up in a gold cocktail dress and white heels.

“Oh, thank God,” she says, ushering me in.

“Going somewhere?” I ask.

“Yeah. I have an event that I can’t miss. You came at the right time because I really wasn’t comfortable leaving Elena alone,” she says.

I flick an eyebrow up. “Where is she?”

“In her room. I prepared us some food but she said she wasn’t hungry. I’m really worried about her.”

Elena’s been shutting down. Ever since her conversation with her dad, it’s like she’s completely devoid of energy. It’s

been eating at me, especially since she's usually so full of life.

"I'll take care of it," I tell Kiara. "You can go."

"And Cassie?"

"She'll spend the night with my mother."

"Alright. Just let her know I've gone and that I'll be back late," Kiara says, grabbing her purse. She pauses at the door, turning to look at me. "Roman? Thank you for being there for her."

"I always will."

Kiara offers me another smile before leaving. Once she's gone, I head into the kitchen to grab Elena's meal before heading to her room. I knock once and when there's no reply, I enter regardless. She's on her bed, under the covers, when I walk into the dark room. I roll my eyes, reaching for the light switch and turning on the lights.

She groans, immediately raising her blanket over her eyes.

"Hey, trouble," I say softly.

She sniffs once and I realize she must have been crying. I place the tray of food on the bedside table before getting on her bed. I gently ease the blanket away until I can see her face. Her eyes are red-rimmed and teary.

Jesus. Sometimes, it hurts to look at her. A protective urge wells in my chest. I want to catch all her demons and destroy them. But her demons are mine as well, and until I can fix this situation we've found ourselves in, all I can do is be here for her.

Elena sits up and narrows her eyes at me.

"When did you hear the words 'come in'?" she asks, annoyed. "I obviously want to be alone."

"I left you alone for days. Enough moping around," I state.

"You walked into my room without permission, Roman. What if I was naked?"

I pointedly trail my eyes from her face down to the thin shirt she's wearing. Her nipples are poking out through the material and my throat tightens as I force myself to look back up at her.

"Unless you actually are naked under that blanket," I say hoarsely since I can't see her lower half, "I think we're good."

Her eyes meet mine and heat simmers in their depths. I'm glad I'm not the only one that can feel this maddening attraction between us. It frankly makes things easier. Elena clears her throat before throwing the blanket off and getting to her feet. She stares at me, placing her hands on her hips.

"What are you even doing here?"

I lean against the headboard, shutting my eyes.

"Isn't it obvious? I came to see you, *lupacchiotta*."

"And Cassie? Where is she?"

"With my mother. I figured she should spend the night there, give you some time to yourself. Don't worry, Mom will take care of her."

She considers my words for a moment before nodding. "I guess I can't complain. I did keep her away from her precious granddaughter. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to use the bathroom."

She wanders off, and I decide to answer some important emails while I wait. When Elena reappears a few minutes later, she's fresh-faced and her expression is much clearer.

"It's really weird seeing you on my bed," she says, moving to the bedside table where I placed her food.

Instead of reaching for the plate, she grabs the glass of water, downing it all in one gulp. I level her with a stare when she starts to walk away.

"The food on the plate is meant to be eaten," I state.

"I'm not hungry."

My eyes narrow. "Elena..."

She stares me down for a moment and when she realizes she's not going to win, she grabs the plate with a huff. "Fine. I'll eat. Anyone ever tell you you're bossy?"

"I might have heard it once or twice," I say, smiling.

She starts to eat and I continue going through my emails. It's strangely domesticated. Neither of us says a word and yet I'm more at ease than I've been in days. Being with Elena makes me feel the same way as when I've got Cassie in my arms—settled.

When she's done eating, she takes the plate out. And when she returns, she sits down, cross-legged, in front of me. I arch an eyebrow at her intent stare.

"What?"

"I'm looking for a button," she mutters.

"What button?"

"You're being strangely nice to me. I figured you must be a robot or something."

"Right," I say blankly. "Because that makes sense."

She laughs, flopping down onto the bed and staring up at the ceiling. "Any word from my brother?" she asks.

"Michael said he's fine."

"And my dad?"

"He hasn't left your house in a few days, but I imagine he's alright as well. I talked to one of the maids and according to her, he's been taking his meals. Although he's not talking much."

She lets out a sigh. "Great. I broke my family."

"You didn't break your family," I correct. "They're hurting. It's normal."

She turns to look at me, eyes warm. "I did, though. My dad called me a disappointment, and my brother told me I was dead to him."

I understand that she's allowed a breakdown. Those aren't things anyone wants to hear from their loved ones. Her dad and her brother mean the world to her, even if she doesn't always show it.

"Roman, your nickname for me is literally trouble. You call me that because that's exactly what I do. I ruin things." She laughs bitterly. "You know I thought I changed? I spent the last year trying to make myself a better person. Because I was about to be a mom and I promised myself I'd be better in every way than the one I had. I know my faults. I know who I was before Cassie and I wanted to be better than that, but what if I'm just doomed to be this selfish, vapid bitch who pushes away the people she loves?"

"Hey, look at me," I say, causing her to lift her head until she's staring right into my eyes. "I don't call you trouble because I think you ruin things. It's just a stupid nickname, and in case you haven't noticed, I also call you *lupacchiotta*."

She smiles, "I've noticed. And you call me that because you saw a picture of me dressed up as a wolf for Halloween."

"No," I refute. She gives me a disbelieving look. "Okay, maybe partly, yes. But... you like Greek mythology, right?"

She nods.

"Well, in Greek myths, wolves are a symbol of ferocity and strength. I call you little wolf because in case you didn't realize it, you've always been a force to reckon with. And you always will be. You're strong, stronger than anyone actually gives you credit for. You never back down from any challenge—and trust me, I'd know, considering I'm the person that challenges you the most. Honestly, you amaze me sometimes. If you ask me, I don't think you've ever needed to change. You've always been perfect just the way you are."

By the time I'm done, Elena's staring at me, her expression filled with awe.

"Damn, Roman. You actually do like me," she says softly.

"Maybe a little too much," I mutter. "Come here."

She does so without hesitation, sitting up and scooting closer to me on the bed. I grab her wrist, my finger trailing down to her palm. She shivers when I brush against it and I smile.

I once thought that I'd always be doomed to a life spent wondering how it feels to truly be alive. I didn't think I'd find any happiness. But I've come to realize that Cassie and Elena could be my happiness. They could be everything to me, if only I would let myself feel.

I stroke her cheek with my thumb. She's staring at me, green eyes radiant against her skin. She's so fucking beautiful. It really does hurt to look at her sometimes.

"Elena." Her name falls from my lips like a prayer, a plea. Right before I wrap my arms around her neck and place my lips on hers.

As we kiss, I allow myself to freely think the thought that's been brimming in my head since I was fifteen. Even when I didn't realize it. Even when I was in denial.

Mine.

CHAPTER 25

Elena

Roman's lips crush against mine as he pulls me closer. The kiss is heated, passionate, and makes me grow wild with desire. My heart beats erratically in my chest as his hands tighten around me. Roman pulls me fully into his lap so I'm straddling him. He kisses me so deep I lose myself in it.

I've never felt this much with anyone in my life. It drove me crazy last year. After our moment in the car. I just kept wondering, why him? How could he possess the ability to elicit feelings so intense? I nip his bottom lip lightly and feel him smile against mine. He pulls away, his hand still resting against my cheek.

"We should probably talk about this," he murmurs.

"Probably," I agree against the racing of my heart.

"This might be a bad idea."

"Haven't you heard, Rome?" I ask, lacing my arms around his neck and pulling us even closer. "I excel at bad ideas."

He lets out a soft curse as I play with the strands of his black hair. The intensity in his eyes knocks my breath away.

"Remember how well I fucked you last time?" he asks softly.

His expression is so open right now. More open than I've ever seen it.

"Maybe," I tease. "I vaguely remember what it feels like to have you sliding inside of me."

Warm and impossibly hard. My legs tighten at the memory. It doesn't help that I can feel the hard evidence of what I'm sure is at the forefront of our minds under me right now.

His gaze warms every inch of my body. "I remember those breathy sounds you made right before I made you come. I imagined those pretty moans so many times."

I lean forward, my lips brushing against the shell of his ear. "Want to hear them again?"

Roman shivers, I feel him grow even harder. "Fuck yes," he breathes.

"You will," I promise. "But first, I want to do something. For you. Come on."

I climb out of his lap and off the bed, pulling him to his feet as well. I look him in the eyes once more before slowly lowering to my knees. Roman's eyes widen.

"Elena," he says gruffly.

"Shh," I whisper, reaching for the buckle of his jeans.

I quickly work him out. A shiver rolls through me as I pull his pants down, my hands encircling his hard length. I wrap my hand around his shaft and lick him from base to tip. He doesn't make a sound as he watches me with eyes that have grown dark and hazy.

Heat blossoms in my stomach, moving lower in a wave that causes me to squeeze my legs together. I can feel the tension in Roman building to a crescendo and I smile softly to myself, desperate to see him fall. I run my tongue across the tip of his cock before sliding him deep into my mouth. I can only take in half of him but with the sounds he's making, it's clear he approves.

He holds my face and slowly slides in deeper.

"Fucking hell, Elena," he groans loudly.

My eyes water and I can barely breathe, but I'm filled with warmth at the thought of driving him crazy.

“Baby, I’m gonna...”

He doesn’t need to finish his statement, I look up at him, communicating without words that it’s okay. His eyes soften as he looks down at me. Then they’re sliding shut as he comes with a hoarse groan. I swallow every single drop he has to give, sucking him off until there’s nothing left. Roman lifts me to my feet and kisses me deeply.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

I grin. “You can make it up to me.”

“I plan to,” he promises. “Take off your clothes.”

Like a puppet in the arms of its master, I do his bidding. My smile is stretched wide as I pull down my shorts. My shirt comes off next until I’m standing in front of him in only panties and a bra. There’s so much raw, undisguised hunger in his expression, it takes my breath away.

He peruses me slowly, his eyes traveling the length of my body before he looks back at me with a wolfish grin.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Elena,” he whispers. “Now get on the bed.”

Despite his commanding words, his tone is gentle. I comply immediately, lying sideways on the bed and propping my head with my palm to stare at him.

“What’s next, your highness?”

Roman leans back against the dresser, his expression assessing, while looking all too pleased with himself. He has ditched his jeans and boxers so he’s standing there, looking much too sexy.

“Spread your legs, *lupacchiotta*. Touch yourself.”

My breathing seizes. I can’t believe he’s asking me to do this. And I can’t believe I’m going to do it. Very slowly, my hands settle between my thighs as I spread my legs like he asked.

“Go on,” he prompts. “Run a finger up and down your clit.”

Sheesh. His dirty words are so much hotter than they should be. Roman's jaw tightens as I reach for my clit. I'm so incredibly wet I whimper as I run my fingers through my folds. The evidence of my arousal sticks to my fingers. I look down at my hands, eyes wide as I continue to rub the slick folds.

"Look at me, Elena," Roman says sharply.

I moan as I meet his dark blue eyes.

"That's my girl," he says with a grin. Very briefly, my eyes travel down to his cock, which is already hard. "Now dip a finger inside."

There's no way to fight off the blush on my cheeks as I follow his instructions. I drag my finger across my folds before gently pressing inside. Roman's groan spurs me on as I slip my finger inside completely. He says something else but I barely hear him as I start thrusting inside faster, imagining it's his finger. My orgasm looms and I chase after it. Seeking relief. I move to add another finger but Roman's there in an instant. I gasp as his hand closes around my wrist.

"I didn't say you could do that, *lupacchiotta*. Don't be a bad girl."

I snarl, irritated at the dampening of my impending orgasm.

"Then come do it yourself," I snap.

That's all he needs to hear. He licks my finger clean before pulling me to the edge of the bed and kneeling between my legs. My skin flushes and my pulse skyrockets at the first lick of his tongue on my clit. All I can do is whimper as he thrusts it inside me. Then Roman adds his fingers, curling them against my inner walls. I gasp, my thighs locking around his head. He uses his thumb to stroke my clit and the friction, plus the pressure and the feel of his mouth on me, is enough to push me to the land of complete and utter bliss.

My mouth falls open as I muffle my scream. My back falls against the bed and for a couple of seconds, all I see is stars. When my eyes open, they connect with his and I'm suddenly

filled with urgency. All I know is raw hunger and need as I reach for the hem of Roman's shirt. Thankfully, he seems to feel the same way because he's unhooking my bra in the same breath. We quickly discard all our clothes. I only get a glimpse at his gloriously tattooed chest before he's kissing me. Our tongues meet in a dance that I'm quickly becoming familiar with.

"Fuck, Roman, I need you," I cry.

"Slight issue," Roman says in between kissing me. "I don't have a condom with me."

"Birth control," I say softly.

I got on the pill a few weeks after I gave birth to Cassie, not wanting to take any chances again.

Roman's stare is intense as he looks at me. "You sure?"

"If I wasn't sure I wouldn't be asking, now would I?"

He bites my bottom lip for the comment. Then he rewards me when the head of his cock teases at my entrance. He looks at me, something vulnerable in the depths of his eyes.

"It's not a mistake this time," he says in a tone that brooks no argument.

"It's not a mistake," I promise.

All his self-control disappears as he pushes in. I gasp as he stretches me.

"How are we doing so far?" Roman murmurs.

"More," I pant.

I feel his smile against my neck as he pushes in with one hard thrust.

"Oh god."

He's deep. So fucking deep I can feel him everywhere.

"And how does that feel?" he asks.

"Perfect," I whisper.

“No, you’re perfect,” he counters, kissing me once before slamming inside of me.

Again and again. Roman sets a brutal, steady pace, his mouth sliding down my neck as his hand rises to cup my breast. The room is filled with the sound of slapping bodies, my loud moans, and Roman’s quiet gasps. Each stroke causes my breaths to stutter.

“Oh my,” I say in a breathless rush.

“Say my name, Elena.” He enunciates his words with a sharp thrust that hits a spot.

“Roman,” I moan.

I grasp his shoulder as I rock back with more force, meeting the drive of his hips as I take him in deeper, harder. I start to writhe against him, my hands and tighten as I start to come.

I cry out his name as my orgasm takes a life of its own. Earth-shattering is the right word for it. I’m glad no one’s in the house with us because the scream I let out is powerful. The sight of Roman above me, his dark gaze locked on mine in intense concentration, is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

He claims my mouth as he comes, shuddering within me. Roman practically collapses onto the bed beside me, both of us breathing heavily. He rolls onto his side, eyes meeting mine.

“You’re pretty fucking amazing, trouble.”

I feel myself smile even as my eyelids grow heavy. Roman’s face swims in and out of my line of vision. I haven’t been sleeping well these past few days, and I fall asleep in a couple of seconds due to exhaustion. The last thing I remember is Roman pulling me into his arms and pressing a kiss to my forehead.

WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, his arms are still curled around me. I grin like a fool as I look up at his sleeping face.

He is deliciously good-looking while asleep. I've never felt safer than I do in his arms and I never want to leave, but my heavy bladder calls to me, demanding release.

I try to slide out but his grip tightens around me instead.

"Roman," I whisper, trying to wake him up.

His eyelids twitch but he doesn't open his eyes. I tap his cheek.

"Would you get your ginormous arms off me? I need to pee."

When his lips twitch, I narrow my eyes.

"Roman!"

He groans, shifting slightly and finally opening his eyes. His lips stretch into an easy grin as he looks at me.

"Hey."

"Good morning. Let me out," I say insistently.

He rolls his eyes before finally opening his arms and I slide out from beside him, getting to my feet and padding across the room toward the bathroom. When I look back at him, there's a pleased smile on his face as he looks at my naked body. I shoot him a glare before heading into the bathroom.

Roman's sitting up in the bed when I return, back against the headboard. I jump back into bed with a smile, landing in his lap. He lets out a soft groan and pulls me closer.

"Sleep well?" he asks, running his hands through my hair.

"Better than I have in a while."

"Oh, yeah? Me too," he whispers before crashing his lips to mine.

I'm not sure how long we kiss for, but when we break apart, both of us are gasping for air. I run my hand across the planes of his chest, landing on a particular tattoo that catches my eye. I trace the words written there.

"It's in Latin, right?"

He nods.

“*Oderimt dum metuant,*” I read, likely botching the pronunciation. “What does it mean?”

“Let them hate as long as they fear,” he translates, leaning closer to bite the shell of my ear.

I giggle, pushing him back. “Those are some pretty nice words to live by, Don,” I say sarcastically. “But I don’t hate you. Nor do I fear you.”

“I’ve never wanted you to do either of those things, baby. And you never will.”

I nod in agreement and he’s kissing me again.

“I should probably go and make us breakfast,” I say, reluctantly pulling away. “I need someone to practice on.”

He arches an eyebrow. “What do you mean by practice? I thought you could cook.”

“I can. Or at least I will be able to soon.”

He suddenly looks very worried, making me laugh.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” I assure him.

He sighs as I get to my feet. I pull on a dress and some panties before leaving the room. Kiara’s standing in the kitchen when I get there, sipping a coffee with the largest smile on her face.

“What?” I ask.

She shakes her head, “Nothing.” She’s still smiling.

“Kie...”

“You have no idea how badly I want to say I told you so right now,” she groans. “But I’m holding it back. Because I’m an amazing friend.”

“Thank you,” I say on an eye roll as I move toward the fridge.

Kiara’s standing behind me when I turn around. “Please tell me this isn’t just you two fucking around.”

I take in her worried expression and ponder her words. Then I remember the way Roman looked, the things we said to each other, and I shake my head.

“No, it’s so much more than that,” I say sincerely.

ROSA’S BIRTHDAY might be the only thing the De Lucas go all out in celebrating. When Ricardo was alive, he used to do anything his little girl wanted. Standing in the middle of a lavish party in the ballroom of a hotel, it’s pretty clear Roman feels the same.

The birthday girl makes rounds around the room, speaking to her guests with a bright smile on her face. I arrived a few minutes ago after dropping off Cassie at the house with the babysitter. She had to go through several processes before she was hired, background checks inclusive. Roman wasn’t taking any chances. I’m still a little nervous leaving her alone with someone that isn’t family, but she’s at the heavily guarded De Luca mansion. I’m sure she’ll be okay.

I spot Kiara almost immediately. She’s engaged in what appears to be a heated conversation with Michael. When she looks up and spots me, she gestures me for to come over.

“Hey,” I greet. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine,” she assures me, sipping her glass of champagne.

I turn to Michael, who looks dashing in a black tux. “Are you still mad at me?”

He sighs. “No, I’m no longer mad at you, Elena. Quick warning, though, your brother’s around here somewhere. And he’s fucking drunk, so steer clear.”

I stiffen at that.

“Why did you let him come here in the first place?” Kiara questions.

“I’m sure it’ll come as a surprise to you, Kie, but I can’t control every single thing he does.”

With those words, he walks away. I turn to my friend, eyes wide. Michael never gets mad. Ever.

“He’ll be fine,” Kiara says with a wave of her hand, right before she throws back her entire drink.

I feel a presence behind me and turn around to find Roman. Something flutters in my chest as I look up at him. He places a kiss on my lips, uncaring that we’re in public. When he pulls away, I catch an uneasy expression on his face.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I just had a rough day,” he replies, thumbing my cheek softly. “You look stunning.”

“Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

He offers me a half-smile. “Do you want to leave? I saw Tony and I’m not in the mood for a confrontation. Especially not here.”

“Sure,” I tell him.

I find Rosa and after wishing her a happy birthday, Roman and I walk out the party doors. He’s suggesting taking me out on a date when we come across two people standing just outside the party doors. Ivan De Luca’s face is filled with rage. And he’s not alone; there’s a woman beside him. One I don’t recognize despite the fact that she’s currently glaring daggers at me.

“So this is the slut you left me for, Roman,” she says. Her gaze travels the length of my body, assessing. Her expression is one of distaste as she looks back at me.

I blink. “And you are?”

The woman lets out a shrill laugh. “You ended my engagement and you don’t even know who I am.”

Oh. So this is Bianca Zanetti.

The last time we spoke about her, Roman was telling me that he had scheduled a meeting with her father to discuss the

terms of ending their deal. I guess he already did so. My eyes move to Ivan. The two of them together is odd company. I'm sure my father must have told him already that a marriage between us would never work.

“What are you doing with her, Ivan?” Roman demands, his jaw tense.

“We realized we had a mutual problem,” Ivan says with a sharp smile. “Apparently, my cousin stole my girl.”

Roman tenses beside me.

“I was never your girl,” I say with a scoff before looking at Bianca. “And you and Roman were never engaged. They struck a deal with you as the subject. It didn't work out. Get over it.”

Seriously, where's all the delusion coming from?

Bianca's green eyes narrow. “I hear you got knocked up and that's the only reason he's with you. Trapping a man with a pregnancy is so medieval. And desperate.”

Oh no, she fucking didn't.

CHAPTER 26

Roman

I was having a shitty day to begin with. Loren Zanetti was furious after our conversation yesterday. This morning, Michael woke me up with news that Zanetti's pulling out of some investments we were planning to make. I got his message loud and clear. His loss from the family is a pretty huge blow, considering he's one of our major sources of funding.

I also had to deal with the fallout of my decision reaching the ears of other capos. They're not happy with me breaking the marriage contract. A part of me couldn't help but be thankful that Elena decided to hide her pregnancy. Because their reactions right now show that if it had been a year ago, they wouldn't have hesitated to voice their discontent by overthrowing me. Right now, there's some whispers and murmurs reaching my ears, but they're all too fucking scared to do anything about it.

Rosa's party was meant to be a distraction, but my shitty mood didn't dissipate—which is why I chose to leave with Elena. I was thinking of taking her to one of my favorite restaurants but of course something else had to ruin that, too.

Before Elena can do something reckless like hit the daughter of a man who's holding a grudge against me, I grab her arm and pull her closer.

"Calm down, *lupacchiotta*," I say to her, then I turn to Bianca. "Say something like that again and you'll regret it. Now leave," I say, my tone harsh.

Her expression crumples. “This isn’t fair, Roman. You promised me a life together.”

My jaw clenches. On some level, I can understand where she’s coming from.

“I didn’t make any promises, Bianca. You had expectations, and although I am sorry I couldn’t meet them, I don’t owe you anything.”

Her eyes well with tears. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me? This marriage was supposed to be my chance to prove my worth to my family. I was ready to be anything you wanted me to be. I was ready to be perfect and you’re throwing me away.”

I inwardly sigh. This is getting fucking exhausting.

“That’s really sad,” Elena speaks up from beside me.

I look down at her, unsure if she’s being sarcastic or not. Judging by the way Bianca cocks her head, she’s not too sure either. When Elena steps forward and I see the look on her face, I can tell she’s being sincere.

“You don’t have to get married to prove your worth, Bianca. I might not know you, but you deserve better than that.”

Bianca seems a little surprised by her words. Then her shock clears and she rolls her eyes. “Just shut the fuck up,” she snaps.

Elena sighs. “The one time I try to be nice.”

Bianca’s eyes cut to me. “You’ll regret this, Roman.”

I don’t say a word in reply.

“Good riddance,” Elena mutters as we watch her walk away.

I pull her back to my side, rubbing my hand up and down her arm.

“You know, she’s really pretty,” Elena says, looking up at me, a teasing smile on her face. “You sure you’re not going to regret ending things with her?”

I roll my eyes. “Shut up.”

She laughs, getting on her tiptoes to kiss me. I get lost in her until a loud throat clearing interrupts us. I let out a growl as I look up.

“What the fuck are you still doing here, Ivan?”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “What the fuck am I doing here?” he asks angrily. “What the fuck are you doing, Rome? You destroyed a beneficial arrangement and chased away one of our biggest investors, all because of her? Are you insane?”

I grab Elena’s hand and pull her to my side as I stare him down, trying to control the rage unfurling inside of me. “Be very careful with your next words, cousin.”

“Exactly. I’m your fucking cousin,” he snaps. “I’m your family and you betrayed me for a girl who couldn’t keep her legs closed. You’re a fucking idiot. And she’s a slut.”

One second he’s speaking, and the next there’s the sound of a crack as his head snaps to the side. I didn’t throw the punch. Elena gasps and my eyes widen when I see Tony there, clutching a bottle of vodka in one hand. He stares at Ivan with a murderous expression.

Where the hell did he even come from?

“Say that again about my sister,” Tony says, slurring his words. “I fucking dare you.”

Ivan, who must have a fucking death wish, actually advances on him. I don’t waste a second before stepping between them. My gun is out in seconds. I point it at Ivan’s chest and he falls to a stop.

“The only reason I’m not going to kill you right now is because, unfortunately, my blood runs through your veins. But if you ever fucking say something like that again, I will end you. I promise.”

He swallows, looking nervous. “You’re going to choose them over me? I’m your cousin!”

“Just because you’re my cousin doesn’t mean I like you. I couldn’t give two fucks about you. You may have been useful

this past year, but make no mistake, I will always choose them. Tony's my fucking brother and you're nothing to me. Now fuck off."

He leaves without hesitation. I return my gun to its place within my jacket before turning around. Tony's eyes are half-closed as he leans against his sister. He's obviously plastered. I move to take his weight off her and Elena grabs the bottle from him, her expression soft and a little wary as she looks at her brother. Tony's eyes open briefly and they land on me.

"Hey, Rome. I missed you man," he says, still slurring his words.

My throat closes up. "Missed you too, brother."

He smiles, turning to look at his sister. "Hey, *sorella*."

"Hi, big brother," she breathes. "Come on, let's get you home."

We lead him to my car and after he's situated in the back seat, we start driving toward my home. Elena glances at the back to her brother, who's fast asleep.

"You think he's forgiven us?" she asks hopefully.

"I'd say we've got a fifty-fifty chance," I reply with a smile.

After tucking Tony into his bed, we head upstairs to find our daughter. She's in her grandmother's room. I stare at my mom in surprise.

"I thought you were at Rosa's party," I say, walking into the room.

Elena follows behind me, her steps hesitant. My mother frowns when she notices her.

"I had a headache so I left early," Mom says in reply.

I reach for Cassie, who's fast asleep in her arms. My daughter doesn't stir as I lift her. Mom purses her lips as she stares at me.

"Are you going to take them home?" she questions.

“Actually, they’re both spending the night here. In my room,” I add, just in case she doesn’t get the message.

I stare at her, daring her to say something. My mother and Elena have never had the best relationship, but she’s a part of the family. Cassie’s existence makes sure of that, and my feelings for her solidify it. Although I haven’t said in so many words that we’re in a relationship, I’m sure she’s aware of the fact.

“Good night,” my mother says airily, obviously not in the mood for an argument.

“Would you like me to get you some aspirin for your headache, Maria?” Elena asks gently from behind me. Her way of extending a white flag.

“That won’t be necessary,” Mom replies.

I look back at Elena with a soft smile. At least she tried. It might take a while with my mother, but we’ll get there. We leave her bedroom, heading toward mine. I lay Cassie in the middle of our bed.

“She must be really tired,” Elena notes. “I can’t believe she’s not waking up. She’ll probably be up all night, though. We’re definitely not going to get much sleep.”

“I don’t mind,” I tell her, moving to take off my jacket and stripping out of my clothes.

She watches me, heat simmering in her expression as I take off my shirt.

“Is it too late to drop her off in Maria’s room?” she questions, eyes trailing my chest.

“Yes.” I chuckle, handing her a clean shirt. “Change into that and then we can all get some sleep.”

She pouts but does as I ask. My shirt hits her mid-thigh, and possessiveness flares within at the sight of her in my clothes. Elena lies down on the other side of Cassie. Without any hesitation, I reach for her hand, intertwining our fingers.

“I finally figured out Cassie’s middle name,” I say softly.

“Oh, yeah? What is it?”

“Caterina,” I tell her. “It feels right.”

“Cassiopeia Caterina De Luca,” Elena repeats. She offers me a soft smile. “That’s a pretty big mouthful. It’s perfect though. I love it.”

And I love you.

I don’t say the words, though. I’m pretty sure if I did, it would scare her off. I’ll give her as much time as she needs while staying right beside her. There’s no doubt in my mind that we were always meant to be. Now all I’ve got to do is wait for Elena to realize that.

CHAPTER 27

Elena

My hips are in Roman's hands as I slowly ride him, trailing my fingers up and down his neck. His gaze darkened with lust, he grips me tight, holding me against

him as I slide down his shaft. Every single time he's inside me feels like the first. It feels impossible that no matter how many times we have sex, he manages to elicit the same incredible emotions as before.

I reach up to wipe some sweat from his brow. Roman arches his hips, hitting me at an angle that has us both groaning.

"Fuck," he whispers.

He lifts me up slightly before pulling me down into his next thrust. I fall forward, muffling my moans into his neck. Roman seems to be done letting me lead. He powers upward unrelentingly, fucking me hard enough to make me scream. But I don't. Because we've got a baby in the living room and an aunt who most definitely knows what we're doing and was kind enough to take our daughter and give us the much-needed space.

Roman kisses me on the lips, whispering softly, "Come for me, *lupacchiotta*."

His voice spurs me on, the perfect trigger as I detonate. I feel boneless and utterly sated as I fall against him, taking soft gasping breaths. He's not too far behind me.

"Elena," he groans, coming as well.

Once I start to take in full breaths, I kiss Roman's cheek and climb off him.

"I need to take a shower," I inform him.

"I'll take one with you," he offers.

My eyes narrow. "No, if you get in there with me, we'll be in there for the next hour. And I simply don't have time for that."

"Fine," he says, letting out an aggravated huff.

I grin as I skip over to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, I'm freshly showered, dressed, and ready to go. Roman pulls on his boxers and his shirt before following me out the door. Kiara's watching a TV show with the volume incredibly loud. She turns it down when she notices our presence.

"I see you're done," she says with a mischievous smile.

"That really wasn't necessary, Kie," I state, gesturing at the TV.

"I decide what's necessary. Who knows what I'd hear coming from that room," she says, shuddering dramatically.

Not wanting to get into it, I reach for Cassie. She giggles as I lift her up, throwing her in the air, only once because her daddy's a control freak who scares easily. My darling child is more than four months old and is growing rapidly. And while I'm a little sad, I'm also fucking grateful that she's so healthy.

"Hey, baby," I say softly.

She reaches for my face with her tiny hands. Her hands are so soft. After holding her for a few more seconds, I hand her to her father, who had been watching us with an inscrutable expression. His face softens once she's in his arms, though. I reach on my tiptoes to look at Cassie's face.

"Mommy has to go somewhere. And Daddy's going to drop you off with your Nonna," I tell her. She smiles like she understands. I look up at her father next. "I'll see you later?"

"Yeah, I'll come pick you up when you're done."

He places a quick kiss against my lips and after I turn to the last person in the room. Kiara's watching us with a disgusted expression.

"The three of you are so freaking perfect, it's a little nauseating," she says on a sigh.

I laugh. Roman rolls his eyes.

"I'll see you later, Kie," I tell my best friend.

She waves at me, a clear dismissal as she leans back against the couch to continue her show. After one last look at them, I head out the door.

Surprisingly, Tony's already waiting for me in the car downstairs.

I arch an eyebrow once I'm seated inside. "Since when are you so punctual?"

"I'm always punctual," he retorts.

It's right on the tip of my tongue to name at least three occurrences that prove that's not the case, but I shove it all down. We're on a path of reconciliation; it would do me best not to pick a fight.

"Of course. Silly me. You're great at arriving to places on time, Tony. The best."

His brown eyes narrow. "The sarcasm is greatly not appreciated," he says, although I notice the small smile on his lips.

We don't say much else as he starts the car, driving us toward our family home. My dad called us both and asked to have lunch with us. I'm equal parts nervous and hopeful. I haven't seen him in weeks. Roman told me to give him time and that's exactly what I've been doing.

When we arrive at our house, Tony turns off the ignition but neither of us get out. I look at him, wishing the uneasy tension between us would dissipate.

"Before we go in there, I figured we should have a talk first," he says gruffly.

I nod, my mouth set in a thin line. While his actions have alluded to his forgiveness, he hasn't actually said the words. I guess now's the time.

"I'm going to start with this, Elena," he says, eyes fixed on mine. "I've considered you my personal responsibility since the day you were born. No one asked me to and while as your older brother it's technically expected of me, all I've ever done is to protect you."

My chest seizes. "I know," I say on a harsh breath. There's no doubt in my mind that Tony would do anything for me.

"Really? Because when you needed me the most, you didn't come to me. You didn't even consider that I would have been there for you."

There's no amount of apologies in the world that will ever make what I did okay, so I keep quiet. I don't say a word, letting him continue to speak his truth.

"I'm not angry anymore. I just feel fucking gutted. I hate that I put you in a position where you felt you couldn't trust me."

"No, Tony," I shake my head, "I do trust you. More than anything. But you were in the same complicated position as Roman. He needed you."

He blows out a breath and I see understanding etched into his features. "I'm sorry for saying you're dead to me. You will never be dead to me."

"I know, *fratello*," I say warmly. "But I'm not yours to protect anymore. You should live your own life, Tony. Without expectations, without worry. I can take care of myself now." I hesitate before adding, "I also have Roman to take care of me."

His jaw tightens. "I'm still not a hundred percent okay with your relationship. But I guess my opinion doesn't really matter. And honestly, all I want is what's best for my little treasure."

He's talking about Cassie, who he fell in love with within minutes of meeting her.

“That’s what everyone wants, Tony,” I state.

“Alright, then,” he announces, rubbing his hands together. He grins and suddenly the car doesn’t feel small anymore. Like he’s flipped a switch, I get my big brother back. I know without a doubt we’re okay. “Let’s go see what Daddy Dearest wants.”

Tony steps out of the car and I follow. He throws his arm around my shoulders as we walk into our house.

We find our father in the foyer at the foot of the stairs. Tony doesn’t hesitate to walk up to him. Dad bumps his fist against Tony’s and offers him an affectionate smile. Meanwhile, I stand apart, shuffling my feet nervously.

My dad watches me warily. Exhaustion lines his eyes.

“I called you both here because I wanted to us to have lunch together. Just the three of us. We haven’t done that in forever.”

I nod and follow dutifully as he leads us into the dining room. The cook has already prepared a large spread that’s way too much for three people, but I don’t comment on it as I take my seat at my dad’s side. He’s seated at the head of the table and Tony’s sits on his other side. We wait for him to say grace before digging into our meal.

It’s quiet, a little stifling. Tony tries to keep up a steady flow of conversation but responses are muted from both Dad and me. The air in the room is strained and I hate it. I hate it so much. But I’m not going to be the first to speak.

“This ham is fucking amazing,” Tony says through a mouthful of food.

I wrinkle my nose at him.

“Swallow before speaking, Anthony,” my dad says calmly. “Did I not teach you any table manners?”

Tony swallows dramatically. “Of course you did. But I choose which manners I intend to live by,” he states cheerfully.

“Something your sister seems to agree with as well.”

Oh, I'm being addressed? Fucking finally.

"And that's supposed to mean?"

Green eyes flick toward me. "It means I raised you both to be strong, resilient in your beliefs. I raised you to be your own people. Independent. Which is why it's a little hypocritical of me to be so angry when you do exactly what I taught you to do."

My breath seizes as I stare at him.

"You made a decision for yourself and you did your best to stand by it, *mia cara*. And despite it all, I'm proud of you."

Something warm trickles down my face and I wipe away the tear. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm really, really sorry."

He's the only person I haven't apologized to. Because he shut me out for three weeks. I'm still slightly pissed about that, but at least he's talking to me again.

"No, I'm sorry. I never should have called you a disappointment. You're anything but. You are my greatest achievement."

"Hey!" Tony calls out in indignation.

"Both of you," my dad corrects with a smile.

My face splits into a grin. I get to my feet and throw my arms around his neck. My dad hugs me back and finally, for the first time in weeks, I can breathe easier. I feel whole.

"Well, this calls for a celebration," Tony announces. "I'm gonna go get some champagne."

Neither Dad nor I look as he trails out of the room. I pull away and look at my dad's face.

"You're going to love Cassie," I assure him.

The expression on his face sours. "I never should have kept away from my granddaughter for so long."

"That's okay. You have all the time in the world with her from now on. Although you might have to share custody with Maria."

We both laugh at that.

“I see so much of your mother in you, *mi amor*. It makes it hard sometimes. Because you remind me of what I’ve lost.”

“Well, you don’t have to ever worry about losing me. I’ll always be here because I know just how amazing you are.”

My dad’s expression lightens. “I know, sweetheart,” he tells me, heaving out a breath.”

I look behind me to ensure Tony’s nowhere in sight before turning back to him.

“Have you ever tried to look for her? I know we shouldn’t, but these days I find myself wondering where she is. If she’s even alive.”

My dad is the picture of heartbreak. He seems to fumble for words before saying, “The last I heard of your mother was five years ago. When she boarded a plane to Germany.”

My breaths falter. “Oh. I guess she really wanted to get away from us, huh?”

There’s concern etched into every inch of my father’s face.

“It’s okay,” I quickly reassure him, managing to plaster on a smile. “We have you. And you’re more than enough. And like I said, you’ll always have us.”

A part of me will always be curious about my mother. But I’m not who I used to be. I’ve grown up, matured. I managed to sort out my feelings in relation to her and I’ve let most of the resentment go. My mother might not be the person I desperately wished she was. But I know without a doubt that I’ll do better than her. No matter what.

Tony returns with the champagne and I spend the rest of the afternoon in their company. We talk and we laugh and all my worries melt away. My dad is telling us about his decision to retire as consigliere when my phone rings. I reach for it, prepared to ignore the caller, when Roman’s name flashes across the screen. I shoot my dad an apologetic glance as I answer.

“Hey.”

Roman pauses. His soft breath is the only thing I hear for about two seconds before his voice fills my ear.

“Baby, I need you to listen to me and not freak out,” he says softly.

“Okay,” I say, my pulse quickening.

“Someone took Cassie.”

I feel the floor sweep out from under me as I fall down into a bottomless pit of fear. Terror grips my whole entire being. Because those words are a nightmare come true.

CHAPTER 28

Roman

Two hours ago, I was having the best fucking day of my life. All was right in the world and I was happy. But that was two hours ago. Now, everything's fucked and I'm trying my best not to lose it. I'm hanging on by a thread, every breath I take bringing me closer to the edge. But my daughter needs me.

I thought I knew fear, but the way I used to feel is nothing compared to how I feel right now. My daughter's gone. She's gone because I couldn't protect her.

The doors of the club are practically wrenched open as all three Legans enter.

Elena beelines for me as soon as our gazes connect. She's practically hysterical. As soon as she's within reach, I pull her into my arms.

"My baby," she says, taking short gasping breaths. "Roman, where's my baby?"

I rub her back softly, trying to ignore the pain in my chest. I hate seeing her like this. I feel fucking helpless.

Tony steps into my line of sight and I let Elena go. She's still crying, but she's starting to pull herself together.

"What the fuck happened?"

My chest tightens. "She was at the mall with my mother. They went shopping for baby clothes. Cassie was in her baby carrier. According to Mom, she placed the carrier on the floor and turned around for a few seconds to grab her purse. When

she looked back, Cassie was gone. And so was the guard I assigned to them. The man I hired to guard them. He took her.”

I trusted him to protect my daughter, and he betrayed that trust. I’m fuming. I’m consumed with so much rage right now, it’s hard to fucking breathe. But I have to stay in control. I can’t afford to lose it.

Mom called me, voice shaky as she explained what happened. I rushed to the scene and barely managed to calm her down. As soon as she told me what happened, I asked Michael to take her home. She blames herself for what happened, but it’s not her fault. None of this is.

“Who’s the man?” Tony asks, arms flexing like he’s itching to hit someone.

“Dane,” I reply, voice grave.

I ordered him to keep watch on my daughter the minute I found out about her existence. He’s shadowed her with Elena and Kiara for a while.

“He wasn’t acting alone,” Tony says in a matter-of-fact tone.

I nod. “Dane’s a foot soldier. He received orders from someone.”

“Who?” Elena asks quietly from beside me.

I wish I knew, mi amore.

“Zanetti?” Salvador questions.

I shake my head. “I barged into his office as soon as I found out Cassie was kidnapped. He swore he had nothing to do with it and I believe him. He wouldn’t kidnap a baby. This is someone else,” I say through gritted teeth.

“But who?” Elena asks again, desperately.

I look at her then, grabbing her wrist and pulling her closer.

“I will find our daughter, *lupacchiotta*. I swear it to you. She’ll be okay. I’ll die before I ever let anything happen to her.

I just need you to trust me. You trust me, right?"

She stares at me for a second before nodding. "I do," she breathes.

"Okay. Then, baby, I need you to go," I tell her.

Her green eyes flare. "What? No fucking way."

"You will go. Because you can't do anything right now. All you're doing by being here is distracting me. I've already promised to find our daughter. Let me do that," I plead.

Tears swim in her green eyes. She shuts them briefly before looking up me, expression soft and a little heartbroken.

"Bring her back to me, Rome."

I pull her closer, leaning my head against her forehead. "I will, I promise."

Looking away, I turn to Salvador. "Please take her home," I say to him. "My mother needs you, too."

His jaw tenses and he nods in understanding. As he leads his daughter out, I send two guards after them, to make sure they arrive home safely. Once they're gone, I turn to Michael.

"Why the fuck is it taking so long to find them?"

He clenches his jaw. "I'm doing the best I can."

I run my hand through my hair in agitation. My phone rings and I pull it out, ready to throw it against the wall until I see who's calling.

"This is really bad timing, Christian," I say through gritted teeth.

"I know. Your daughter's been abducted."

"How the fuck do you know?"

"It doesn't matter. But I also know who took her."

My pulse quickens as hope flares in my chest. "Tell me."

Christian does so without hesitation. "The Russos are behind it."

"Motherfucker!" I roar.

I hang up after a quick thanks to Christian. The Russos have been quiet for more than a year. After pulling back from my father's coup, they've done nothing to us. Our sources informed us that it was due to a change in leadership. I haven't paid them any fucking mind.

Until now.

My blood heats as I stare at the men surrounding me.

One year and I've been able to hone the ruthless efficiency that ensures I get whatever the hell I want. Three hours after receiving Christian's information, we're barging into the home of the Russos. Twenty men, armed to the teeth with orders to shoot to kill any man that resists. Ten gunshots ring out as we make our way into the main house.

I practically kick the door down I step inside. It's not only men that are in here, though, women are inside, too. And some children. I feel a stab of guilt as my eyes land on two kids, not more than seven, with fear written across their faces. I look at the woman hovering in front of them, trying to shield them with her body.

"Get them out of here," I order.

She doesn't hesitate, running away and leading the kids to safety. My vision homes in on the man seated on the couch, trembling like a leaf as his terrified blue eyes meet mine. He hasn't seen fear yet. I move toward him, ignoring the woman at his side, clutching his hand like a vise.

My gun presses against his temple.

"Is my daughter in this house? You have five seconds to answer. Yes or no, Russo."

He's the Don. Leo Russo. He just recently came into power a year ago, after the last Don died. It explained why the Russos suddenly went radio silent. But I guess this Don got a taste for death. That's the only fucking reason why he would think to cross me.

He swallows before answering me shakily. "No."

My eyes narrow. I tease the trigger of the gun backwards, my hands itching to fire.

“You’d better be telling the fucking truth, Russo. If you’re not, I’ll kill your wife, your children, every fucking person you love.”

“She’s not here,” he says, voice rising.

“Alright, then.”

I pull back the gun and nod at Tony and another capo behind me.

“Take him.”

They step forward immediately. Leo Russo has to pry his wife’s hand from his arm.

“It’s okay, Denise. I’m so sorry I did this to us.”

He gets to his feet and walks away with Tony. I turn to the woman seated on the couch, hands trembling.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I tell her. “And I’m sorry for barging into your home like this. But my daughter’s life is in danger.”

She glares at me but doesn’t reply.

“Your husband’s not coming back home. I’m sure you’re aware of that.”

Without another word, I turn around and walk out of the house.

LEO RUSSO’S limbs thrash in every direction as I hold his head underwater. Sometimes, a little convincing seems like the quickest and most efficient method in order to get what I want. Once I’m satisfied he understands that I’m not fucking playing, I release him. Tony drags him over to the chair in the torture room, closing the chains over his wrist.

I stand in front of him. The man is middle aged, with thinning brown hair and pale, sunken skin.

“Now that we’re properly acquainted, Leo,” I snarl, “tell me where my daughter is. And keep in mind that every minute you don’t reply, things will get a hell of a lot worse for you.”

I gesture at Tony, who’s holding pliers. My father’s favorite mode of torture. Leo pales even further, eyes wide.

“I-I don’t,” he stammers.

My eyes narrow into slits. “You don’t what? Where the fuck is my daughter?” I yell.

“I don’t have her.”

For a moment, everything stops and a ringing fills my ears.

Tony’s the one to ask the question. “What the fuck do you mean, you don’t have her?”

Leo starts talking immediately. He tells me everything about his plan to use my daughter as a bargaining chip so he could get control of our drug supply. When he mentions making a deal with Ivan, my eyes narrow and white-hot rage blinds me.

Ivan was the one who betrayed us. I can’t say I’m surprised.

Leo continues his story, telling us how he had my daughter kidnapped. His men were waiting outside the mall for Dane, who handed the baby to them. Then they left together in the van.

“Where’s Dane now?” I question.

“Dead,” Leo replies flatly.

I let out a soft breath, feeling an ache at the loss of getting to exact my revenge and making him suffer. “Who killed him?”

“The same person who has your daughter,” he informs me. “He hijacked the van. Killed all the men and took her.”

My heart quickens in my chest. “Enough with the vague details,” I growl, leaning forward and grabbing his chest. “Who has my daughter?”

“Enzo,” he breathes. “Enzo has her.”

I’m about to ask him who the fuck Enzo is when a phone starts to ring. Tony hands it to me. I stare at the restricted ID number flashing across the screen. One quick look at Michael and he has pulled his laptop out. He takes a seat and I’m sure he’s getting ready to track the number as I answer.

“Hello?”

“Roman De Luca,” an unfamiliar voice states. “This is Enzo Russo.”

Two minutes earlier, I had never heard the name before in my life. Now, the mere mention of it fills me with rage.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are, but if there’s even a strand of hair out of place on my daughter’s head, I will—”

“Enough with the threats,” he interrupts, tone bored.

My hand tightens around the phone.

“I’m not going to harm your daughter. In fact, I saved her,” he says lightly.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Listen,” Enzo Russo says, “you and I want the same things.”

“I highly doubt that. Because right now, all I want is my daughter back and your head on a spike.”

He pauses. “Oh. Alright, well, I want one of those things. Take a guess which.”

I let out an irritated huff. Who the hell is this guy? Tony stares at me and gestures for me to put the phone on speaker. I do so immediately.

“Not gonna guess?” he asks on a sigh. “Alright, I’ll tell you. I want your daughter safely returned to you as well. In fact you should be thanking me. I saved her from my dumb

uncle and whatever ludicrous plans he had for her in the first place. He's never been particularly bright, but I can't believe he actually kidnapped a baby. And not just any baby. The daughter of a Don. Stupid."

My jaw clenches. "From where I'm standing, you seem to be making the same mistake."

"Oh no, I'm not. Like I said we want the same things. Your daughter returned to you and—"

For some insane reason, he pauses. I look at Michael. His grim expression is all I need to know that he hasn't been able to pinpoint Enzo Russo's location.

"And?" I prompt.

"I want my uncle dead."

My eyes fly to Tony, who stares at me with just as much confusion. Seriously, what the fuck is going on?

"You're probably really confused right now," Enzo drawls. "Wondering what's going on. Don't worry, I won't bore you with tedious Russo politics. All you need to know is that my uncle kidnapped your daughter, I saved her, and she is currently with me. I want you to exact your revenge and kill him. Make it swift. He might be a bit daft, but he doesn't deserve to suffer too much."

I decide to focus on the only part of his statement that I actually give a fuck about.

"You'll return my daughter? That's all you demand?"

"Yes. And a ceasefire. I'm not interested in a gang war with your family. I think we're better off as allies, in fact. I'd like to discuss terms of a partnership with you. Whenever you're ready."

"Who the hell are you to decide that?"

"The Don of the Russos," he replies confidently. "As soon as you kill my uncle, that is. Tick tock, Roman."

I run my hands through my hair. I don't really have much of a choice. Although it pains me slightly to be following the

directions of a madman.

“Fine,” I grit out. “But why the hell do you want me to kill your uncle?” “Come on, we both know he’s already a dead man so why drag it out. Don’t let the old man keep suffering just end it and be done with it.” “And you’ll deliver my daughter?” I ask.

“Safe and sound,” he replies. “Honestly, she’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen. Call me when you’re done. I’ll send you details of my location so you can come get her.”

Fucking weirdo.

He hangs up and tension strains my neck as I crack it to the side. Tony looks at me, anger swirling in his features.

“Are we really going to do what that wacko suggested?”

“Yes,” I reply simply. “If we want Cassie back, we’re going to do exactly what he asked.”

I don’t say another word as I move toward Leo Russo, who seems to have accepted his fate. He only has one thing to say as I aim my gun at his chest.

“Tell Enzo he’s a fucking bastard.”

Those are his last words as I shoot him in the next breath and his chest falls still. A chill permeates the air. I take a picture of his body, my hands shaking slightly. I just want my baby girl back in my arms. I call Enzo and he doesn’t answer but sends an address a few seconds later. The three of us rush out as soon as he does. Tony breaks several speed limits and runs through at least three red lights as he drives.

We arrive at the location in minutes. Our guns are out as we move toward what looks to be a regular house in a pretty normal neighborhood. Just as I’m about to kick the door down, it opens, and standing in the doorway is a man. Reddish brown hair, light blue eyes. He looks to be about six feet tall and about my age. None of that matters to me, though, because in his hands is a little baby.

The man who I’m guessing is Enzo Russo rolls his eyes.

“The guns are overkill. What if my neighbors see?” he says on a soft sigh. “Here you go, though. Safe and sound.”

I practically wrench my daughter from his arms, pulling her against my chest. My eyes travel over her face and I let out a soft breath of relief as her blue eyes stare back at me. She’s okay. She’s okay. I say the words over and over in my head.

Thank God.

Tony and Michael close rank in front of me, their guns still pointed at Enzo.

He lets out a soft whistle. “Call them off, Roman.”

My head snaps up as I stare at Enzo Russo. “Why the fuck should I do that?”

“Because I want us to be friends,” he replies, his dull tone at complete odds with what he’s saying.

“You kidnapped my daughter.”

He lets out another long-suffering sigh. “How many times do I have to say it? My uncle kidnapped your daughter. I saved her. She is quite literally safe in your arms right now. I mean you absolutely no harm.”

I stare at him, assessing. “Who the hell are you?”

When he smiles, it’s a little unsettling. “You’ll come to know soon enough. I wasn’t kidding about the partnership. I’ll come find you. And when I do we can discuss the terms. Until then, I’ve got a title to claim.”

I don’t move for several beats as I stare at him, not calling off Tony and Michael like he asked. In the end, my curiosity wins out. Because I really want to know who the hell Enzo Russo is. And what he plans to do.

“Stand down,” I mutter.

The both of them immediately lowers their guns. Enzo nods at me once.

“I’ll see you soon, Roman.”

He heads back inside his house, shutting the door. When he's gone, Michael lets out a quick breath.

"Most bizarre interaction ever," he states.

"Dude's a total nut job," Tony agrees.

I'm still holding my daughter to my chest as we walk back to the car. Once we're seated, I can't help but throw one last glance at the house. And the man within.

Who is Enzo Russo?

"Don't worry, Rome," Michael says from the passenger seat. "I'm already working on digging up everything there is to know about him."

I lean back in my seat, staring at Cassie. "Honestly, right now, I really couldn't care less."

Cassie reaches for my face, her little hands tapping it gently, and I chuckle.

"Come on, *principessa*. It's time to go meet Mommy."

The relief I see on Elena's face as I place our baby back in her arms sends a rush through me. She plants so many kisses against Cassie's face that she starts to cry. Which is fucking ironic, because my daughter was kidnapped and in the hands of unknown strangers for hours and I'm pretty sure she didn't cry once. But kisses from her mother, which I admit might be a little smothering, are what does it.

A chuckle escapes me and Elena's head snaps up as her eyes meet mine.

"Why are you laughing?" she asks, cradling Cassie against her chest.

"I'm just happy, baby. I'm beyond happy."

She smiles. "You did it. I had every faith you could," she tells me.

"Thank you," I breathe.

We stand there for several minutes until my mom steps downstairs with Salvador right behind her. Her face is pale,

but there's no mistaking the relief in her features as she takes in her granddaughter. Cassie stops crying as soon as she's in my mother's arms. But then Mom starts crying and that triggers Cassie as well. Elena moves to my side as we watch her grandparents try to soothe her.

"You're moving in with me," I state.

My tone is firm, but she doesn't look inclined to argue.

"Okay," she says softly, without looking at me.

The next few days pass by in a blur. All our efforts to find Ivan are fruitless. He has disappeared off the face of the earth. If he's smart, he'll never show his face in front of me again. The Russos have also gone radio silent. It irks me, especially since Michael's efforts to find information on Enzo yields nothing.

He's not registered in any databases Michael can access. As far as we know, Enzo Russo's a ghost. But he's not. He's a real man. And when he's ready, I'm sure he'll show his face again.

The only difference is, this time, I'll be ready too.

Elena's eyes fly open in the middle of the night. She sighs softly before sitting up next to me in our bed.

"You need to sleep, Roman. She's safe now. We're all safe."

My jaw clenches. "We almost lost our daughter. I couldn't protect her."

"But you did," Elena says insistently. "You brought her back, Rome. Now, would you quit blaming yourself?"

She leans her head against my chest and I hold her to me for several breaths. When she pulls back, her eyes are shining with so much emotion, it makes it a little hard to breathe. I trail my fingers across her face and say the words I've kept inside me for too long.

"I love you."

CHAPTER 29

Elena

When I was younger, I used to dream of a love like my parents'. A love that transcends anything and everything. A love that was pure, good, unselfish. But that dream shattered when my mother left, forever distorting my opinion of love.

I love my daughter. I love my family. I love my friends. But when it comes to Roman, though, I'm not sure where he stands. I've never been in love. How am I supposed to recognize it if I don't know what it feels like? And that's exactly what I said to him after Roman dropped that bomb on me a few days ago. He just kissed my forehead and, with a patient smile, told me that I would know. And that when I did, he wanted to be the first person to find out.

Sometimes, he honestly feels like a dream. And I guess that's what's holding me back. The fear that I'm going to wake up one day and he'll be gone.

Cassie giggles when I shake the rattle over her head, and her eyes follow it as I move it from one side to another. She's in her crib and I'm standing over it. I haven't been away from her for longer than a few minutes since the abduction. My heart can't handle it. Any time I look away from her, my throat closes up with irrational fear.

She's safe. I know that. But I'm also anxious. Worried that the next time something bad happens, I might not get her back.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and look up at Roman.

"Hey, how was your day?" I ask softly.

“Boring. I spent most of it doing paperwork.”

We stare at Cassie for a few seconds. “I wonder what her first word will be,” Roman says.

I glare at him. “It had better be mommy,” I state.

He chuckles. “We’ll see.”

The conversation ends when there’s a knock at the door. Roman and I both turn to the opened doorway where Maria and Rosa are standing. Rosa smiles as she walks in, heading straight for the crib.

“Don’t mind me, I just wanted to hang out with my niece,” she says.

Before I can utter a word of protest, she’s grabbing Cassie from the crib.

“Say bye, Mommy and Daddy,” Rosa says, mimicking a baby’s voice.

She waves Cassie’s hand at us and then they’re gone. Roman and I exchange a look as Maria takes a seat on our bed. Her eyes immediately meet mine.

“Elena, come here. Come sit,” she says softly, patting beside her on the bed.

Maria has been much nicer to me since the incident occurred. I guess the guilt from losing my child has made her want to start treating me better. Which is ridiculous because she shouldn’t be feeling any guilt at all. None of what happened is her fault and I’ve told her as much.

But De Lucas are notoriously stubborn.

I sit beside her and she takes one of my hands, placing it between hers. She looks at my face with a smile before looking back at her son, who’s watching us with a curious expression.

“When do you two plan to get married?” Maria asks.

My mouth drops open. Of all the things I expected her to say...

Roman clears his throat and fixes her with a stern look. “We’ll get married when we’re ready, Mother.”

I can’t even tell the man I love him and she’s already expecting us to walk down the aisle. This is just perfect. Roman’s gaze cuts to mine and I can tell he’s a little amused as he looks back to his mother.

“There’s no rush,” he adds.

“No rush?” Maria presses. “Cassie will be one soon. Don’t you think it’s time you both tried for another baby? And I’d really like for you to do so once you’re married.”

My jaw slackens even further. This time, Roman disguises his laugh with a cough. He’s enjoying the dread running through my veins.

“Mother, take things slow. Like you said, Cassie’s going to be *one* soon. We have plenty of time.”

“I just want more grandbabies,” Maria says sadly.

“You could marry Tony off,” Roman suggests. “Or Michael.”

“As if I could get those heathens to marry,” she mutters. “The two of you are my only hope.”

“Alright, Mother. We got it.”

Maria turns to me, hands gripping mine a little tighter. “You’re so much more than I could ever see, Elena. And I’d be honored to have you as my daughter-in-law,” she whispers.

Her hands squeeze mine once more and then she gets to her feet.

“Rome,” I whisper once she’s gone, “is it just me or did I just get your mother’s approval?”

“A red badge and glowing endorsements,” he agrees with a nod.

Then he does something that surprises me. He gets down on one knee, staring up at me with concern.

“What my mother said... you know there’s no rush, right? We’ll do everything at your own pace. I don’t really give a fuck.”

I smile, placing my hands on his jaw. “I know. And thank you for being so amazing.”

“Thank you for being mine,” he returns.

Oh, who am I kidding? Of course I love him. I’ve loved him for much longer than I’ll ever know. And I’ll love him for much longer than that. They say home is where the heart is, and my heart has always had no other place but with him.

THANKSGIVING at the De Luca home, which I guess is now my home in every sense of the word, is chaotic at best. And it’s all thanks to my idiot brother.

“Tony!” Kiara snaps. “I swear if you don’t hand me that baby now, I’ll jam my elbow into your ribs.”

My brother rolls his eyes but doesn’t loosen his grip on Cassie, who seems to be enjoying being the reason for their fight.

“Not happening, Kie,” Tony says, uncaring when Kiara’s eyes flash.

“You’ve been holding her all night.”

“Because I’m her uncle,” he states.

“Well, I’m her godmother,” Kiara retorts.

I sigh softly. Roman’s arm is around my waist as we watch them argue. We finished dinner an hour ago and since then, Maria and my dad have retired to the living room to talk. Michael has disappeared and, like us, Rosa’s watching the scene unfolding in front of us with amusement.

“If you want a baby, Kie, just get pregnant. It’s literally not that hard,” Tony says dryly.

Kiara's hand twitches like she wants to hit him. I understand the sentiment completely. When I move to end the argument, Roman's hand tightens on my hip.

"Nope, we're steering clear of that one," he mutters.

He proceeds to literally steer me away, leading me up the stairs to a balcony that overlooks the clear night sky. I let out a soft breath as I inhale softly.

"Calming, right?" Roman says, throwing his suit jacket over my shoulders before stepping behind me.

"Yeah, it is."

We stand there for several minutes, letting the cool air wash over us. I've never felt more at peace than I do in this moment.

"I want a yellow wedding," I suddenly say. Behind me, Roman chokes on air.

"Excuse me?"

"Lots and lots of flowers. Daisies, peonies, carnations. My dress will be a flowing ball gown with floral designs."

Roman's silent for several seconds. He blinks slowly like he's trying to understand what I said.

"You want a yellow wedding," he repeats. "Because you can't have a white wedding like a normal person?"

"Exactly."

"Of course," he murmurs. "And who's the groom at this wedding?"

"It should be you. As soon as you get on your knees and pop the question with whatever fancy-ass ring I'm sure you've already bought."

I turn around and catch his grin as it brightens his entire face.

"You'll love your ring," he promises, confirming my words.

Happiness blossoms within me, spreading through my entire body and making me feel lighter.

“I doubt it,” I tease. “You have famously bad taste.”

“If you’re not going to trust my judgment, trust Kiara’s. She’s the one who made it.”

“Oh my god,” I breathe, chest aching at the thought of my best friend making my ring. “Now I want to see it.”

“You will. When the time is right,” he assures me.

I beam, turning around in his arms and leaning against his chest. We don’t speak for a while as we stare up at the clear night sky.

“Your father’s proud of you, Roman,” I say, breaking the silence. I feel him stiffen behind me. “He might not have gotten to say the words, but you are more than enough. You’re twice the man he wanted you to be. I know it. I’ve watched you protect your family fiercely. I watched you defend his legacy. There’s no way he’s not proud of you. There’s no way you’re not enough.”

Roman is silent for half a beat. Then his voice fills my ear as he leans closer.

“You’re more than enough too, *lupacchiotta*.”

“I know I am. Because I’ve got you. And I have Cassie. And our family. And despite how incredibly insane I think it is, you love me. And unfortunately, I love you, too.”

The air around us seems to stop as the words leave my lips. Roman’s arms tighten around me.

“*Unfortunately?*” he repeats dryly.

“What? It’s true. I’m pretty sure we’ll annoy the hell out of each other every single day for the rest of our lives.”

“But we’ll spend that time together,” Roman says. His words are a promise, a vow.

“Always and forever,” I say, making a vow as well.

As I turn to meet his lips, the certainty washes over me: our hearts beat in perfect harmony.

He's mine, and I'm undeniably his. It's the way destiny intended it to be.

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It turns out he has an agenda of his own, and we needed to play by three simple rules:

- Get to know each other so we're never caught off guard,
- Make a few public appearances together, and...
- Share two kisses.

In the end, he gets a building he's been trying to buy from my father, and I get to walk away from an arranged marriage.

The plan seemed perfect. We're total opposites, so romance was never an option.

I save lives, and he... takes them. So, there was no way anything could go wrong.

That is until he started calling me... *his*.

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