



You'll be MINE

TEXTING  
*The Mafia Prince*

FLORA FERRARI



TEXTING THE MAFIA  
PRINCE

TEXTING THE MARINO MAFIA

BOOK TWO



**FLORA FERRARI**

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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Cover model: Chase Mattson

Cover Designer: Lori Jackson

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Texting the Mafia Prince can be read as a standalone but to get the best experience it's best to read [Texting Mr. Mafia](#) first.

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# TEXTING THE MAFIA PRINCE

*People say the mafia prince is a bad man, but he's the only one who can save me.*

I'm being blackmailed. When I see the tall, handsome Luca Marino at the gym, I take a chance. I sneak him my cell phone number, praying he'll call or text so I can beg for help. He agrees, but it comes at a steamy price.

I'm not used to this sort of intensity. He's possessive and jealous and, he affirms in his texts, *hungry* for me. I'm a virgin, ten times less experienced than him, and he expects so, so much.

Secrets lurk around every corner, making life more complicated—secrets that consume my family and his. When the secrets clash with my desire and our budding, text-fueled relationship, I'm forced to make an impossible choice.

*Can I ever go back to being the shy, withdrawn woman I was before he lit up my mind and body? Or will the darkness of his mafia life tear us apart?*

\* *Texting the Mafia Prince is an insta-everything, standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

# PROLOGUE



*Luca*

I sit outside the house, rage burning deep in my gut. My cell phone sits on the dashboard, Elio's voice just about piercing this haze in my head. I have this urge to do some serious damage.

"Luca, just wait. Just think."

I grind my teeth. The pressure of my pistol in the holster against my chest feels weirdly strong, like metal making an imprint on my skin.

"What if it was Scarlet?" I snarl.

I used to be the joking one, the lighthearted one, the drinker, the womanizer, the waster. I used to be the prick without any direction. But now, all I care about is making this right.

"I can't let him get away with it," I go on. "What if it was *your* woman?"

Elio takes a moment, always so measured. "I'm not saying you do nothing, but this will destroy the Family."

"Don't make me choose between her and the Family," I snap, taking the gun from the holster when a light flicks on in an upstairs window.

"I'm not asking you to choose long-term. Just... for now."

"Don't ask me to choose at all," I tell him. "In that game, the Family will lose. Don't even think about telling me it hasn't



been long enough for me to know a thing like that. Just look at you and Scarlet. Look at how quickly that happened. I'm going to tear this bastard to pieces."

"At least wait for backup."

The window opens. A man calls across the street. It's the middle of the night, quiet except for the arrogance in his voice. "You got a problem, buddy?"

I push the door open, gun in my hand. As I walk toward the house, I can hear Elio on speaker. "Luca? *Luca?*"

I keep walking. I need to do this... for my woman.

# CHAPTER 1



TWO WEEKS EARLIER

*R*uby

“You got it, sis,” Lexi says, staring at me in the mirror with a stubborn look in her mismatched eyes. I do my best to finish the squat, and she helps me put it on the rack. At the same time, I do my best *not* to look at myself in the mirror.

“Good job.” Lexi claps me on the shoulder. “That was great work.”

When I returned from college for the break, Lexi was shocked when I told her I wanted to hit the gym. Lexi has always been diligent about the gym. She owns her curves, whereas I sort of retreat into my clothes, into history. But something happened at college that made me want to feel stronger.

“My turn,” she says.

I help her rack some weights, then spot her as she does her set. She’s got the same long, wavy brown hair as me. We’re about the same height, too. She has complete heterochromia, meaning that her eyes are different colors. One is sky blue, and the other is green. This, combined with her sideways smile, gives her a confident, almost cocky look.

“You good?” she asks as we wait for a weight machine to be free.

“Yeah, why?”

She shrugs. “You’re just quiet.”

“I’m always quiet.”

She grins, nudging me. She's only two years older; I'm twenty, and she's twenty-two. Yet it's always felt like there's more of a gap, stemming from the fact she's always watched over me, like during Mom and Dad's arguments. Ugh, I don't even want to think about that.

"You're being *quieter*," she says. "Is it Mom and Dad?"

After years of arguing and fights and stress and bull crap, Mom and Dad have finally started divorce proceedings. "I always thought they might find a way," I mutter.

"You're too optimistic," Lexi replies. "I knew it was going to fail. I knew from their first argument, the first broken dish, but you're doing well, kid. You're going to make something of yourself."

When she calls me *kid*, despite the small age gap, it's like she's wrapping a warm blanket around me. It helps distract me from what happened and from what's *still* happening. I should tell somebody, but I don't keep up with any of my high school friends anymore. It's not like I had many, anyway. With the divorce, unloading on Dad, Mom, or Lexi feels cruel.

"Machine's free," Lexi says, nodding across the gym.

I follow her, doing my best to give my all during the exercises. She's halfway through a set when her eyes widen.

"What?" I say, turning.

She's staring at a man in his early to mid-thirties, his hair dark, a crazily intense look on his face as he walks across the gym. He's *huge*, with broad shoulders, staring stubbornly ahead. A strange tingle dances through me. "Uh, who's that?" I whisper.

"Luca Marino," Lexi says quietly.

"Who?"

"Luca *Marino*. Come on, you've heard of the Marinos."

I try not to watch him too obviously. He's several feet taller than the tallest person in here. Weirdly, I think about what it would be like if he wrapped his arms around me and held me close.

Lexi lowers her voice. “The Marino crime Family. The mob. He’s a powerful man, but apparently, the Marinos have a code of honor. They’re not bad people unless they’ve got a problem with you.”

“The mob,” I murmur, thinking of the class I’m taking on the history of organized crime. “I suppose they perform some Good-Samaritan-type deeds, then?”

“You even *speak* like you’re writing an essay.” Lexi laughs.

“But... do they?”

“Yeah, actually, they do. A friend of a friend started her salon business with their help.”

I nod, hoping I come across as casual. Lexi can always read me, but I don’t need her reading this. An idea spins over and over in my head. With this problem hanging over me—bullying, blackmail, threats—a Good Samaritan is just what I need. However, my belly tightens with nerves just *thinking* about approaching him.

We go on with our workout, but I make sure to know where Luca Marino is. He’s in the free-weights section, pressing dumbbells twice the size of my head. Other men grunt and make loud look-at-me noises, but Luca lifts quietly, intensely, teeth gritted, like he’s fighting his own personal demons.

## CHAPTER 2



Luca

A sober life makes a man angrier, but it has its benefits. It lets a man see clearer, too. It allows me to see that all that drinking and partying was just empty, hollow crap. It was a waste of time. It was a waste, full stop, but I've got to admit. Smiling was easier back then.

I listen to "Nessun Dorma" from Turandot by Giacomo Puccini on repeat. Elio was surprised when I asked him for some classical suggestions. I cocked a smirk at him, all jokes. "*I'm a new man, bro.*" But inside, a fire's raging. It has been for almost a year, ever since I found out about Mom's cheating. I've taken over the business's main operations, giving my big brother the break he deserves after so many years of hard work.

After my set, I drop the dumbbells. Across from me, a teenage boy is talking to two swollen steroid heads. There's something about the way they're standing, sneering down at the kid, that pisses me off. I reach up, click the side of my Bluetooth headphones, pausing the music.

"How many sets?" Steroid Head Number One snaps, a bald pitbull-looking bastard with a clumsily tattooed heart on his throat.

"Uh..." The kid looks like he's ready to cry. "I don't know. A fuh-few."

“A few,” Steroid Head Number Two repeats. He’s a douche wearing a tank top that might as well be a bra to show off his pumped-up muscles. He looks around at the benches, all occupied except for the kid’s. “A *few*.”

“But... it’s okay.” The kid moves as if to stand up.

“Do your sets, kid,” I tell him.

All three of them look over at me. “What’d you say?” the tattooed one snaps.

I stand up slowly. I look at him honestly, which means I look at him like I’m ready to fight. I *want* a fight. A tense atmosphere has fallen over the free-weights area. “I told him to do his sets.”

The men look at each other. “We were just asking...”

“No, you were gonna bully this kid into giving up the bench because you think a few gym muscles make you dangerous men. So, you can either puff yourself up and say some silly words to me, or you can have some goddamn decency and wait until he’s done.”

I see their urge to do just that—puff up and act tough, but they’re not complete idiots. They can see how serious I am. They’re not fighters. They’re not killers.

“Just relax,” Steroid Head Number Two says. “Jeez.”

The kid gives me a tight smile, and I return to my workout.

After another set, I sit up and look in the mirrors which cover the entire wall. Two women walk by, and my life changes. I feel it like a wrenching in my gut. I feel like somebody is throwing a party in my brain and *heart*. I bite down, trying to get a grip on myself.

One of the women is so damn captivating I don’t even understand it. Maybe this is how Elio felt when he first saw Scarlet. I never understood that until this moment.

She’s probably around twenty, her long brown silky hair in soft waves, her bangs pulled over her forehead and partially over her eyes like she’s shy and wants to hide how beautiful she is. Most women here wear booty shorts and revealing



clothes, but she has heavy sweats and a hoodie. Yet, somehow, she's the sexiest, most beautiful woman here.

Something about her hair makes me want to push it from her face. "*You don't have to be shy with me.*" I'm going nuts, clearly, but I don't give a damn. There's this pulsing heat in me. There's this sudden, certain purpose. They go to a machine. The shy woman sits down and starts her workout. Her sweats hug her thick hips, stirring my dick, my hunger. I want to sink my hands into her curviness. Tear off those sweats, bite her creamy fullness, taste her, and own her.

*Fuck.* What's wrong with me? What's happening? I feel drunk, but I haven't touched a drop in months.

I try to go on with my workout, but focusing isn't easy. I keep worrying my dick is going to get hard just thinking about her, and in between sets, I look around instinctively, needing to find her. What if she has a boyfriend? If I see a man touch her...

I need to cool off. Fast. I need to get some control.

Replacing the dumbbells on the stand, I take my water bottle to the water fountain to refill it. And who's in line ahead of me? It's my shy woman, standing with her back facing me. Her hoodie has ridden up her back a little, giving more shapeliness to her ass. The base of my cock aches. I want—need—to walk up behind her, drive my dick against her, let her feel how beautiful she is.

Her mouth falls open when she turns and sees me staring. I quickly avert my gaze. I'm probably freaking her out. She walks past me, then pauses and glances up. She's close enough I could grab and kiss her.

"Nine-one-seven, five-five-five, seven-four-eight-two." Her cheeks are bright red. She's trembling slightly as she speaks. Suddenly, I don't know how I know—I just do—that something is wrong. I know she needs my help.

"Repeat the number," I say again, reading her. She doesn't want to speak here. Maybe she knows who I am. Maybe she knows I can help her.

She repeats the number, then quickly walks away. As I commit the number to memory, I watch her go, savoring the way her ass shifts from side to side.

Then I take out my phone, quickly enter her number, and send a text. *Is something wrong?*

She looks up from across the gym. She's got one arm wrapped around herself, holding the phone in her other hand. *Yes*, she replies. *I don't know who else to turn to, Mr. Marino.*

I smirk, moving away from the fountain and leaning against the wall. There's a fair amount of distance between us—and she has a habit of looking down—but I'm pretty sure she's got a cute-as-hell smile on her face, too. *Call me Luca*, I tell her. *And, if I'm going to help you, I'll need to know your name.*

*Ruby*, she tells me. *But I'm not sure you can help.*

*You wouldn't have given me your cell number if you thought that.*

*Do you know who Maverick Kingston is?*

Everybody on the East Coast knows who Maverick Kingston is. He's a congressman who's been making waves in the news recently, clearly in a bid to set up a presidential run.

...

Three dots appear, telling me she's typing a message. I can't stop staring at her, especially the arm she smooths across her stomach. It makes me wish it was my arm instead, feeling her heat blaze through her clothes. It makes me want to hold her more intimately than I've ever held anyone—than I've ever even *thought* about holding anybody.

Finally, her text arrives. *His son is blackmailing me.*

## CHAPTER 3



### Ruby

As Lexi drives us home, I drum my fingers on my leg. I didn't plan on going all wannabe-spy-novel and giving Luca my cell phone number. But something clicked in me when I turned from the water fountain and saw him standing there. It was the way he was staring—so intense, almost *protective*. I just blurted it out.

I've got a text from Luca waiting, but I won't check it while Lexi's paying attention. She'll be able to see how much his words make me ache. She'll ask questions I can't afford to answer.

She parks up outside our rundown three-bedroom. When we get to the door, a *crash* noise greets us, and then Mom's raised voice. "*Don't say that like you ever even tried, Paul!*"

*"You're just nuts, Wren! Nuts!"*

Lexi turns to me with a frown. "So much for a relaxing shower and a movie. I'm going to head back to the gym and shower there, then see if they've got any shifts at the restaurant. I can't be bothered dealing with this crap."

I nod. "I'll just hide in my room. Headphones. History books. Easy."

Lexi touches my arm. "You sure? I don't want to abandon you."

"We're not kids anymore," I tell her.

“Fair enough.”

She returns to her car. I walk inside, ignoring the yelling, sneaking upstairs before they know I’m here. The second I close the door behind me, I drop onto the bed and take out my phone.

*Explain*, Luca’s text reads.

I swallow, nerves tightening in me. From downstairs, there’s another *crash*. It’s a miracle we’ve got any dinnerware left, considering how Mom goes through it during every argument.

*It was two weeks ago. One of my college friends invited me to a frat party. I’m not much of a partier, but my friend didn’t want to go alone, so I went. I only had one drink. I think it was spiked. I was all groggy. When I woke up, the congressman’s son, Nate Kingston, was sneering at me. I was in his bed. I wasn’t wearing any underwear. He laughed when I got panicked. He said, “Relax, fatty, I didn’t do anything. Just this...”*

I pause typing, a shudder moving through me, the memory like acid biting into me.

*He showed me his phone. He’d taken a photo of my private areas. Then he told me that, from now on, I would do all his history work for him. I’m struggling so much to keep up with my own work as it is. Plus, I’ve got a small cleaning job at college. I don’t know what to do. I really care about my degree.*

Three dots appear. A dreamy, silly part of me imagines Luca flooding with rage. Not just rage at the situation in general but rage for *me* specifically. I imagine him wanting to protect me, his woman. It’s absolutely insane. These relationships exist in the pages of my books, like Abelard and Heloise in the twelfth century, defying their very society to be together, but not now, not in *my* life.

*You don’t deserve this, Ruby. I’m going to make this right.*

*What are you going to do?*

*You don’t need to worry about it, he replies. Trust me. You won’t be completing that asshole’s college work, and that*

***photo is never going to see the light of day.***

Relief instantly washes through me, though I know I should be more careful. I don't know this man. All I know is that during my studies of organized criminal groups, they've often been known to exhibit police-like behavior. However, they can act on much less information than the police. Who knows if anything would happen if I went to the cops with the blackmailing stuff, but with Luca, weirdly, I feel confident.

***Do I need to do anything?*** I ask.

***No***, he replies.

***Why are you helping me?***

...

I bite my lip as the three dots appear on the screen. All sorts of silly ideas pop into my head, imagining his response. *Because I know we belong together, Ruby. I don't care if it sounds crazy. I know you're my woman.* Maybe—and this is bad, the fact I want it—he wants sexual favors in return for helping me. That is *so* wrong, but a tingle dances up between my legs at the thought.

*Bend over. Show me your ass.* Now he's taking down his gym shorts in my mind. *I'm going to take you any damn way I want.* Never mind that I have next to no experience.

...

*Again*, with the three dots, leaving me to stare with pathetic hunger, honestly. *Pathetic.* I've never been much of a dater, and what, I think I'm going to start with the mafioso king, prince, whatever-he-is, Luca Marino?

***I don't like bullies***, he replies.

I let out a sigh. It feels like a weirdly anticlimactic answer, not that I have any right to expect anything from him.

***Are you sure there's nothing I can do?*** I text.

Downstairs, Mom raises her voice. *"I thought this could work. I really did."*

I try not to let myself listen. They've been going around in circles for months, according to Lexi. Knowing her, she's kept the worst from me. I'm sure there have been far more fights and stress than she's let on.

When his reply comes, I imagine him smirking. *You seem pretty keen to offer something in return, Ruby. But seriously, don't worry. He violated you. He drugged you. He's a lowlife. If anything, you're doing ME a favor by letting me handle this.*

*Oh, okay,* I reply.

This is my version of putting myself out there, of painting my face with outlandish makeup and wearing the sexiest outfit I own, which, upon reflection, isn't even sexy. I don't own clothes like that.

There's a knock at my door. For some reason, I quickly hide my phone, though it's not like Mom or Dad are in the habit of wrestling it from me and checking it.

"Yeah?" I call.

"It's me," Mom says quietly.

"Come in."

She pushes the door open. Unlike Lexi and me, Mom is on the more slender side. Her hair is dyed brown, but her gray roots are showing. Her eyes are red and bloodshot from crying. She winces when the door slams from downstairs.

Mom and Dad have never hit each other, not once, but the arguments get way, way too violent in different ways. The broken plates. The holes in the walls. The general atmosphere is that something terrible is going to happen.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," Mom mutters.

"I wish you'd talk like grownups," I tell her.

"*Like grownups,*" Mom repeats, rolling her eyes in a way that makes me feel small and not at all respected. "It's a complicated situation. There's... a lot between us."



“Maybe that’s true, but I don’t see how breaking plates and yelling will help.”

Mom drags both hands through her hair. I was very alert to Mom’s moods and gestures when I was little. I’d hang on every single one, watching closely, as if I could fix her if I only knew the right words. Then, one day, Lexi told me, “*She notices you watching her, kid. She does it on purpose. It’s gonna hurt, but you’ve got to stop paying her attention.*”

Lexi was right, as usual. So, these days, I just let her go through the routine, the hair-pulling, the grumbling. I wait until she’s ready to speak.

“I’m going to stay with Junie for a few days.” That’s my aunt, mom’s sister. “I thought you should know that’s why I won’t be around. Living together while we get this divorce sorted is just not viable. Since your dad is *determined* to stay here while you’re on break, I just... I don’t see any other choice.”

I nod, not letting her see any emotion at all. It’s probably toxic as all heck, hiding the pain that tightens in me, but I know Mom. If I tell her, “*Dad’s staying because he wants to spend time with me. Don’t you?*” she’ll get all dramatic. We’ll have to have a long *talk*. It’ll turn into an ordeal.

“Is that okay?” she asks quietly.

“I understand,” I tell her. “It’s a difficult situation.”

Mom touches my arm. “I’m sorry, Ruby. I love you.”

Finally, I let myself collapse into her. Despite everything, she’s still my mom. “I love you too.”

Once she’s gone, I check my phone quickly, but Luca hasn’t replied.

## CHAPTER 4



*Luca*

*Oh, okay.* Sitting at my desk in the city, I glance at my phone, rereading her text. A savage note in me roars that she *wanted* me to ask for a favor. What am I going to do? Tell a woman who was violated to tear her shirt off, show me those big round tits, send me a video of her massaging her young, tight...

*Fuck.* I need to focus on work. Since taking over the day-to-day of the business, I've thrown myself into it. I won't let Elio or Dad down, but I can't think. My mind is full of the meeting I arranged later with Dad and Elio so I can talk about this congressman's son situation. Even more distracting, I keep seeing Ruby. Her cheeks flushed. Her plump ass tempting me in those sweatpants.

I grit my teeth, struggling to think, struggling to...

Then I *don't* think. Quickly rising to my feet, I almost run to the other side of the office. Elio was pretty spartan when he was running things. I had a sauna room installed, along with a small gym. That way, in between intense work sessions, I can get some recovery or exercise in.

I lock the door behind me. I'm panting like an animal. I can hear myself, my hungry breaths.

Sitting on one of the recliner chairs, I close my eyes and remember what she looked like as she read out her number, staring up at me with her hair across one side of her face. I

imagine smoothing her hair, leaning down, and kissing her passionately. Kissing her and then grabbing her thick hips.

I pull my pants down, letting my cock spring free. Precome is already leaking down my cock. As I stroke in real life, I let the fantasy take shape. Now, we're alone, and I'm peeling off her sweatpants inch by inch to reveal her curvy thickness.

She gasps when I press my hand against her core. The shyness is still in her eyes when I start fingering her. *Fuck*. I'm sure I can feel her slit and how tight she is, how eager for her so-called Good Samaritan to bring her to an orgasm. Then the fantasy shifts again, and I imagine her bent over, showing me that big, round ass.

I sink my hands into her hips, and the fantasy flits. Now I'm inside her, *hammering* her hard. I'm fucking her so hard, and she's creaming thick white blobs of pleasure down my dick. The cream slides up my cock and onto her ass. I spread it over her cheeks, making her glisten for me as I take her like a beast.

*"I'll do anything,"* she moans in my mind. *"Any. Thing. Luca."*

*"Don't say that..."*

*"Anything,"* I imagine her moaning.

Suddenly, I slip my finger into her ass. The image is so dirty. I can only stroke my hand up and down a couple more times, imagining the tightness of her, the gasping sound she'd make if I did this to her, and then, then...

"Fuck," I grunt as a hot stream of come explodes out of me and all over my stomach. "Oh, *fuck*."

Once it's all over, it feels wrong somehow. I'm no monk, but thinking about using Ruby like that doesn't feel right. She deserves better than for me to bend her over savagely and indulge all my darkest fantasies. Even sitting here with come on my stomach, I'm already getting hard again just thinking about her.

After cleaning up, I stubbornly focus on work, counting the seconds until it's time to see Dad and Elio.

---

“This... is... between... you... boys,” Dad says, talking slowly as he sits in the corner of his home office in his wheelchair. “Whatever you decide, you have my blessing.”

“Are you sure, Dad?” I ask. “I haven’t even told you what it’s about yet.”

“Family business is for strong men,” Dad says.

There’s no shame in his voice. Even through the gravelly layers of illness and the difficulty he has with speaking, I can tell that. He’s not ashamed. If anything, I think he’s relieved not to make these sorts of calls anymore. Pride touches me when he’s able to wheel himself from the room.

Elio walks to the door, my big brother looking lighthearted, relieved, and *happy*. For all the years I knew him, I never expected him to always have a smile on his face. It’s like he’s always thinking of my sister-in-law, Scarlet, and my niece, Molly, even when he isn’t with them.

“How’s the rascal doing?” I ask as he closes the door.

Elio turns to me, his smile widening. “Last night, I held her in my hand. One hand, and she just lay there, staring up at me with so much love in her eyes. I couldn’t believe it. I still can’t. She’s just perfect.”

“And Scarlet?”

Elio smiles. “We’re all fine, Luca, but you’re not.”

I laugh savagely. “What makes you say that, bro?”

“You wanted a meeting with me and Dad. That means it must be serious.”

“I need to do something which might have repercussions for the Family,” I say. “I might be running the day-to-day, but you’re in charge, Elio. You deserve a say.”

He nods, sitting behind Dad’s old desk, fiddling with a golden letter opener. “Tell me, then.”

I explain about the gym, Ruby, and what the congressman’s son did.

“Oh, Christ,” Elio says, and I can tell he’s thinking of Scarlet and Molly. He stabs the letter opener into the table. “*Christ*, Luca. This is bad.”

“I know.”

“No, it’s not what you think.” He runs a hand through his hair. “You know I’ve been handling... the executive stuff?”

I try for a smirk, like the old days, though I don’t like his tone. “Sure, bro. Everything above my paygrade.”

“It’s not that,” he replies, just like the old days, missing my humor. Or maybe I’m just not as lighthearted as I used to be. “I know how busy you are. I didn’t want to come to you until I had something concrete. But...” He runs a hand through his hair again.

“Stop massaging your goddamn head and just lay it on me,” I snap.

“We’ve been in talks with congressman Kingston for a few months. He’s pledged ten million to the orphanage program. We’re going to make this city a better place—less kids hooked on drugs, less kids trafficked, education, the chance to begin anew.”

“So his daddy donates some money,” I say bitterly, “and he gets to do anything he wants? He *drugged* her, Elio. He took a photo of her...” I can’t even say it. Just thinking about another man seeing my woman makes me ferocious. Just thinking of it makes me want to kill. “He doesn’t deserve to fucking get away with it because of *money*.”

“I’m not saying that,” Elio says, watching me closely.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I tell him.

“Like what?”

“Like you think you can read my mind.”

The problem is, he can. So I stand up and walk over to the window, looking down at the city. The sun is beginning to set. I wonder where Ruby is and what she’s doing. Is she with a friend, boyfriend, or somebody else? I know nothing about her except I want her.

“When did you meet this girl?”

“I met Ruby earlier today,” I say. “It doesn’t matter, though. I could’ve met her right before I walked in here, and this would still be the right thing to do. If this creep did this to her for *grades*, just think what else he’s done.”

“It’s a question of numbers,” Elio replies. “Hundreds, thousands of kids will be helped by this—”

I turn to Elio. There must be something in my eyes because he cuts himself off. I’d never think my big brother looked *scared* of me. It’s more like he’s scared of what I might do. “I’m going to force him to delete that photo,” I tell Elio. “That’s the end of it.”

“Luca, please...”

“Please, *what?*” I snap. “He’s a little scumbag who doesn’t deserve your protection. What’s wrong with you?”

“If you do anything to Nate, we’ll have the Feds on our asses. We’re talking about a *congressman’s son* here. We can’t disrupt our lives.”

“No, what you mean is *you* can’t disrupt *your* life. I get it. You’re happy. I’m happy for you. That doesn’t mean I’m going to stand aside and let this little prick get away with this.”

Elio sighs. “You’re not leaving me much choice here.”

“Don’t get all ominous with me.”

“I’m Don, Luca. I know you’ve been working hard, but that hasn’t changed. You said it yourself.”

“What else would you let happen, brother, to keep playing happy goddamn families?”

“I’m not *playing* anything.” He stabs the letter opener into the desk again so hard I hear the wood splinter. “I just want to handle this like professionals. There’s a way we can get him to delete the photo without ruining what we’re building.”

“He’s going to understand what he did was wrong, too.”

Elio narrows his eyes. “You mean you’re going to hurt him.”



I laugh darkly, the scene Ruby described so horrifically vivid in my mind: the photo, the sneer, him calling her *fatty*. All of it clashes and rages in my thoughts. “He’ll be lucky if I don’t kill him.”

“Luca—”

“You heard what I fucking said.”

Elio shakes his head. “If you do anything, you’ll be doing it alone. No Family resources.”

“Fine by me,” I growl.

“That means lawyers, too. That means backup. That means everything.” Emotion makes my big brother’s voice husky. “I know you want to do the right thing, but you don’t know this woman. Let me handle this. I’ll get the photo deleted. Nate will understand he can’t do anything like this again.”

“Listen to yourself. Family life is making you soft. He’ll *understand* it when I *break his goddamn legs*.” I don’t mean to shout, but I can’t stop myself. “What if this was Scarlet?”

“This is different,” Elio says. “I loved Scarlet the first moment I saw her. You don’t love this girl, do you?”

I turn away, opening the door with a stiff fist. Storming past one of the butlers, I make for the elevator, my heart beating too hard. My brother’s question ricochets through my mind. *Love her...* It’s impossible. I’ve never felt anything for any woman. The truth is, I’ve been a dog my whole life. I’ve been an animal. I never cared, never felt anything. I’ve been numb. Asleep. Yet now, I feel like I’m waking up.

I need to find Nate Kingston. With or without Family support, the little shit’s going to pay.

## CHAPTER 5



### Ruby

I spend the evening sinking into *Pax Romana: Triumph and Tragedy in the Roman World*. Letting my mind glide back through eons of time is far easier than thinking about the present, thinking about *me*. The photo. The blackmail. The tingling that won't quit every time I think about Luca.

Mom left a while ago. When Lexi came home, and I told her, she just gave me that emotionless stare, making her mismatched eyes seem eerie. She's way more pessimistic about the world than me. "*I'd be happy to die alone,*" she said to me once, which was the most depressing thing ever, mostly because I believed her.

When my cell phone vibrates, somehow, all the bad drifts away for a moment. It's a weird, almost instant feeling. I wonder if this is what all the other girls in high school felt like when they started dating, these dancing butterflies in the belly.

***How are you doing, Ruby?***

A smile lights up my face. It's such a simple question. I need to chill ASAP. ***I'm reading about the Roman Empire. You?***

***I said HOW are you doing,*** he replies right away. I imagine his fingers moving quickly over the keys like he's eager to speak with me.

***Okay. You know. Just got to keep going.***

***Why do I get the feeling you just lied to me?***

It's so easy to imagine him staring at me with those intense eyes, huge and imposing, ready to do whatever it takes to defend me—prepared to keep me safe.

*You'll have to tell me,* I text.

*It's just difficult to believe you're doing okay. You've been violated. A mafioso has offered to help. That's a lot for a woman your age to deal with.*

*What does my age have to do with it?* I type quickly. *Being young doesn't mean I'm less emotionally capable.*

*Generally speaking, Ruby, it actually does.*

*Well, maybe I'm the exception. I've spent so long with my nose buried in history books that sometimes I feel hundreds of years old.*

*I guess that makes YOU the experienced one, then,* he replies.

*How old are you?* I ask.

*Thirty-three, you?*

*Twenty.*

Thirteen years between us... It doesn't matter because it's not like we're going to *do* anything. I find myself wondering if that's going to freak him out. It's definitely not going to do anything about this hunger burning inside me. If anything, the fact he's older is a plus. More mature. More experienced. He can lead the way in certain areas.

*Age aside,* he goes on, *tell me how you really feel.*

I wonder why he cares so much. What if he does this a lot? He finds random women, takes an interest, uses them, and moves on. Even if I thought about *sexual favors* earlier—and even if, honestly, I've been thinking about them all night—I don't want to be used and discarded by him. The idea of him with other women, ew, makes me way madder than it should.

*I'm terrified Nate's going to release that sick photo. My mom went to stay with her sister because she and my dad are*

*going through a divorce, so that sucks, too. Not a good time, but it could always be worse.*

*I don't know, Ruby, that seems pretty bad to me.*

*But think about history, Luca. I could have all these problems, and my teeth could be rotting out of my head. I could be working fourteen hours a day for basically no money and, if I'm lucky, live to be fifty only to die of some horrible disease or from the so-called treatment of the disease. It can ALWAYS be worse.*

*Wow, he replies. You really are the mature one. I've never thought about stuff like that before.*

*It's pretty much all I think about, I tell him. During arguments, lows, and uncertainty, I always think about the past, putting myself in different eras. It makes everything far more manageable.*

*It's good, admirable, he says. But it also seems like a way to downplay how bad things are. You're allowed to be upset.*

*I'm about to reply, but then I see—*

*...*

*Those ever-present tingles keep dancing around my body.*

*I'm going to sort the photo, Luca goes on. But Nate might get away with it.*

*What do you mean? I reply.*

*I won't be able to hurt him.*

*I didn't know that was part of the plan. I just want him to stop.*

*It was always part of the plan, he texts. Unfortunately, sometimes, other factors get in the way of what is right. I want you to know, Ruby, if I had my way, he'd never be able to look at you, speak to you, or even say your name again.*

*Thank you, I reply. You're a good person.*

*A pause. I imagine him chuckling. Maybe he thinks I'm naïve. You might not say that if you knew exactly what I was*

*speaking about. What are your plans for the rest of the night?*

I glance at the clock. It's 11:47 p.m. *You mean for the next thirteen minutes?*

*Such a smartass.* Now, I imagine him smirking. *Are you busy? Or am I taking you somewhere?*

I end up pressing my legs together. There's a crazy amount of tension *down there*. My clit feels weirdly sensitive, way more than it's ever been before, rubbing up against my underwear. My head is cloudy.

*Like a date?* I ask because I have to know. I can't be vague about this. If he wants me, that will be enough to deal with. But *wondering* if he wants me will make it even more difficult.

*Not like a date—a date. So, when am I picking you up?*

## CHAPTER 6



Luca

I sit at the end of her street like she asked. I'd prefer to go into the house and shake her dad's hand. This feels seedy and underhanded, which is hilarious. Luca Marino is giving a damn about being respectable.

Looking across the street, I grit my teeth at the sight of her house. It's rundown, not the sort of place Ruby belongs, but where does she *belong*, exactly? How can I know she belongs with me? How the *fuck* can I know that?

I check my phone. Nothing new, just her last text. ***Okay, let's do this!*** Then she gives me her address. The exclamation mark is the only one she's used. It gives this whole thing a sense of danger and adventure. This is a big deal for her, a date. She's so much younger than me but look at Elio and Scarlet. Their age gap hasn't stopped them.

My head aches when I think of Elio. Maybe it's the smart move, not rushing in and hurting a congressman's son for a stranger. Still, when it came to Russel, I helped him. I would've killed that bastard for my brother.

The front door opens. In the semidarkness, I can only see Ruby's silhouette. Even that is enough to get me stirring. Her shape. The ways her hips move highlight their thickness. She raises her hand and waves to me. Then she stops and turns. Somebody must've called her from the house.



A light switches on, and a man appears at the door, walking onto the steps. The light from the house lets me get a look at him. Am I going nuts? Maybe this day has been too long, but I could swear that's Paulie. His hair is gray now, not black, and slicked back with product. I'm almost sure it's him. It's not impossible. We live in the same city, after all. If it is him, though, dating his daughter just got a hell of a lot more complicated.

They talk for a moment. Then she walks down the street past my car and keeps walking. I understand. She's told him some lie and wants me to play along. I wait until she's at the end of the street and Paulie—if it is him—has gone inside. Then I drive over to Ruby, hating the sneaking around.

"Sorry," she murmurs when I reach over and open the door. She slides into the passenger seat. Her cheeks are blazing red. She looks so vivacious, so young, so beautiful. "I didn't know how to explain what I was doing to Dad. I don't even know how to explain it to myself, you know?"

"Worried the big bad mafioso is going to do something immoral?" I say with a smirk.

Unlike with Elio, I sound like my old self here. I *feel* like my old self. It's often difficult to remember what it was like being so lighthearted, jokes coming so easily, but now, my tone must come across as savage. Instead of being freaked out, Ruby laughs. "*Should* I be? This is pretty nuts."

"I know," I tell her. "The truth is, Ruby, I was watching you before you even gave me your number."

However, the fact Paulie is her dad is ticking in the back of my head. Is this a set-up, somehow?

"Really?" she murmurs, turning away from me.

I guide the car through the city, my fingers twitching, wanting to grab her and feel her curviness. The base of my dick aches and gets hard when I think about grabbing the perfect thickness of her leg.

"Yeah," I tell her. "Really. You were the hottest woman in the place."

She laughs most adorably like she can't possibly believe me. She's way too cute to have no idea how hot she is. "Yeah, sure, in my hoodie and my sweatpants. Did you *see* some of the girls in there?"

"You don't need to wear short shorts or show your bra," I tell her. "You're beautiful enough as it is."

Thinking of her like that gets me stirring. I don't want to treat her like I did in my fantasy, but the temptation is there, the urge to drive her someplace private and strip her naked, spank her big round ass, and make it jiggle for me. Drive my dick up between her thick legs, find her pussy, claim her, own her.

"Are you okay?" she murmurs.

I realize why she's asking. I'm shaking. I'm struggling to hold myself back.

"Where are we going?" she asks, with a hint of fear.

"I haven't even thought about it," I tell her honestly. "I'm just driving."

She smiles, making me wonder if I imagined the fear. The road is so quiet I've got plenty of chances to glance at her, drinking in her expressions. "This has been a crazy day," she murmurs. "Mom leaving, meeting you..."

"A day we'll both remember," I say, nodding.

"It's been memorable for you, too?" she replies with a teasing, almost flirtatious note in her voice.

I nod.

"Why?" she asks, the note turning needy. It makes me think of all the other ways I can make her voice needy, all the ways I can make her moans shiver for me, make her gasp in just the right way.

"Because I decided to be a Good Samaritan. I won't say it's a first for me, but it's not something I do often."

"Oh," she says. "I thought it might be."

"No," I say fiercely. "And this—what we're doing now—is not something I do often, either."

The old Luca had his ways and parties, but even then, I never felt this sort of insane connection. She must be experiencing it, too. Otherwise, why would she agree to get in the car with me?

“Aren’t you scared of me?” I ask.

“Should I be?” she counters.

“No, but most people would be. You know who I am, clearly.”

“Aren’t *you* scared of *me*?” she counters.

I end up on the waterfront. She giggles when I drive over the sidewalk and right up to the edge of the water. “Um, are we allowed to be here?”

“It’s quiet,” I tell her. “Anyway, I’ll be able to handle any trouble.” I turn away from the glittering water and face her. “You were saying I should be scared.”

From how she looks at me, I can tell it’s difficult for her to hold my gaze. I can tell it takes a lot of effort. It’s like I can watch the nerves dancing through her.

“Well, let me say upfront that I’m not a cop.”

I laugh. “If you are, you’re a ballsy one.”

“But you don’t know who I am, either. I’ve read plenty of stories about undercover police officers or officers using regular people to infiltrate criminal organizations. So, there, *you* should be scared of *me*.”

I lean forward, smirking. “Maybe we should be scared of each other...”

I keep leaning forward, but then she backs up, shaking her head, moving her hand up, and rearranging her bangs so they come across her eyes. “I... We just met.”

“I know,” I say, reaching over and pressing her window button. “I just thought it was getting a little warm in here, that’s all.”

“Oh...” She glances at me with that dangerous smile again. “Really?”

“No,” I say, grinning. “I’m saving face, Ruby.”

“Sorry. It’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain.”

“I’ve never dated much,” she goes on.

My mind goes to the fantasy, the giant chasm between what I imagined she’d be like and what she is like. But that’s a good thing. I don’t want a woman who’s going to bend over and take my finger up her ass after we’ve exchanged a few hundred words in person if that.

“Too busy living in the past?” I say casually, my chest feeling light.

Even if she rejected me for the kiss, her admission about not dating much makes me want her more. At least I don’t have to think of her with other men, except that photo is out there and the bastard who took it.

“Yes, actually,” she says, her smile washing away my concerns, for now at least. “That’s been my whole life. History, history, history.”

“Would it be a stupid question to ask what you want to be when you grow up?”

She pouts at me, her eyebrows raised playfully. “*When I grow up*... I thought we agreed I was the mature one?”

Reaching over, I gently brush her hair from her face. A shudder of lust moves through her. I can read it in her eyes, in the way she bites her lip, in the little, excited sigh she lets escape her kissable lips. “You don’t have to hide.”

She reaches up and touches my hand. She does it so shyly. It’s like she thinks that at any second, I’ll laugh at her or snatch my hand away. “Yeah,” she murmurs as electricity sparks between us. I’ve never felt heat like this. She’s burning me up just from us touching hands. “I want to be a historian. Maybe a history professor, or a writer, or a researcher. As long as my career is related to history, I’ll be happy.”

I press my hand against hers. “You’ll do it, Ruby.”

“How can you say that?” she says, dropping her hand. “We just met.”

“Call it gangster’s intuition,” I reply, feeling an insane sense of reward when she gifts me with a smile. “I’ve been working like a dog for the past year, and seeing you smile, Ruby, is worth more than all of it.”

“Why are you being so flirty, huh?” she asks.

“Because you’re beautiful. Because I want you.”

“I like how straightforward you are.”

“It’s the best way to—”

As soon as I hear the ringtone, I reach into my jacket pocket and grab the phone. It’s a classical song—Elio’s ringtone. “Yeah?” I say, voice tight. He’d only call me this late if it were serious. “What’s up, Elio? Is it Scarlet? Molly?”

His signal is crappy. His voice keeps cutting in and out. A sick image of him lying facedown comes to me. Ruby stares at me with wide, terrified eyes as if only now realizing how dangerous this mafia life can be. Finally, the signal corrects itself.

“Luca?”

“I’m here.”

“Shitty phone.” He sighs. “Listen, can you come by the club? I’ve got a couple of guys here to see you about a certain photo.”

I swallow, my mind flashing with violence. With Ruby right in front of me, the wrongness of what that sick bastard did slams into me with even more force.

“He’s there now?” I growl.

“He and his father,” Elio replies. “Remember what we talked about. I’m going to broker this meeting. You were right. He needs to pay, but we have to be smart about this. No more parlor talk.”

Parlor talk—funeral parlor—meaning, no more talk about doing what’s right, which is beating this sick fuck bloody and

tossing him in the ocean.

“I’ll be there in forty minutes,” I tell him. When Elio sighs, I snap, “I need to drop someone off first. The precious little pervert can wait.”

When I hang up, Ruby looks at me, her eyes wide open, one of them still shielded by her hair. She can’t stop herself from pulling her hair across and hiding herself. Something about it makes me so damn mad. Or maybe it’s the fact that, soon, I’ll be standing face to face with the man who violated her.

“It’s time,” I say. “I need to take you home.”

“Time for what?” she murmurs.

“Time for me to make this right.”

She says nothing for a few minutes as I turn the car around and drive back toward her house. Then she mutters, “You seem really intense all of a sudden, Luca.”

“Do I?” I say, trying to make it sound lighthearted as if there isn’t a fire in me that won’t quit burning.

“What are you going to do to him?”

“After what *he* did to *you*,” I growl, “he’ll be lucky if I don’t kill—”

“Don’t,” she cuts in.

“Don’t what? Do the right thing?”

She looks out the window. My palms hurt from gripping the steering wheel too hard and digging my palms into it, imagining it’s Nate’s throat instead. I can’t stop thinking about squeezing until his eyes pop. “I don’t want to think about you hurting people,” she mutters.

I laugh gruffly. Even to myself, I sound like a douche. I almost sound like I’m mocking her. “I’ve hurt people before. It’s not like he doesn’t deserve it.”

More silence. Then she sighs. “I think this was a mistake. I mean, what am I doing? I’m in a car with a stranger.”

It's my turn to be quiet now. Technically, she's right. It's not like I can argue with the fact that we're strangers to each other. But something about the word pisses me off. It doesn't feel right. I've heard Elio say the same thing about Scarlet many times.

"What? You don't think we're strangers?" she says like she's just read my mind.

"Am I that obvious?" I ask.

"I guess that's the benefit of being so intense," she replies. "Your expressions are pretty easy to read."

"You asked me for help," I tell her.

"I want him to delete the photo. I can't stand the thought of it being out there, but that doesn't mean I want you to..." She trails off, letting out a shaky breath. She's a civilian. She's not accustomed to this life. What else can I expect? "I just want the photo gone."

"He needs to understand what he did was wrong."

"People like him never will."

"You're too young to be this pessimistic."

When I stop at a red light, I feel her looking at me. She glares through her bangs. "Not everything is about my age. Maybe we should be quiet for the rest of the ride."

*Or maybe I should drop you off here. Maybe I should forget about helping you.*

I'm shocked when the words rise in my mind. They're cruel, mean, not at all like me. I can't keep using the excuse that life was easier when I was a drinking, partying playboy. That life doesn't appeal to me anymore, and definitely not now that I've met Ruby. Yet I can't deny everything was easier to deal with back then—when I knew that, no matter what, I could sink a case or devour a bottle and just forget.

We're both too stubborn. I drive her home without saying another word. When I'm parked at the end of her street, she bites her lip and runs her fingers along her bangs. I can't get

rid of this note of anger thrumming inside. I know I'll regret not turning to her and apologizing, but then it's too late.

She pushes the car door open and runs down the street.

*Fuck.*

I slam my hand against the steering wheel. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

She's the only woman who's ever made me feel anything, and this is how I treat her? My phone buzzes. It's Elio. ***Where are you?***

I turn the car around. If Ruby was trying to calm me down—make it less likely I'm going to tear Nate's throat out—she failed. As I drive, a small, depressing voice whispers in my head. *She's never going to be able to face the darkness in you.*

I can use it to make Nate understand he's never allowed to hurt my woman.



## CHAPTER 7



### Ruby

“Wait, Ruby?” Mom calls when I’m about to sneak up to my room.

The meeting with Luca was so confusing. As we were driving and talking, I could make myself believe he was just an ordinary man. I could ignore the darkness, but when he said the K-word, panic gripped me. It was hard to connect this smirking, playful man with death.

I turn to find Mom standing at the living room door. The lights shine from behind her. I can hear low voices—Dad and Lexi.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Mom has an almost manic look in her eyes, one I don’t like at all. It reminds me of my childhood when she’d get some wild idea like she was going to go back to school to become a doctor, or redecorate the entire house herself, or go traveling for half a year.

“Uh, yeah?”

“We need to talk.” She smiles, gesturing at me.

I follow her into the living room. From an armchair, Lexi gives me an eye roll that says a lot. Dad is sitting on the couch, his hands clasped together, a hopeful look in his eyes. He’s a wide man, strong. As a kid, I called him *my big tree* because I used to climb him so much.

“Sit down, Ruby,” Dad says.

Mom goes to sit next to Dad. I sit on the arm of the chair next to Lexi. It's an odd place to choose since there's another chair free, but it feels weirdly appropriate—Lexi and me versus them.

“We've got some exciting news,” Mom says.

“Exciting enough to call me in a panic and get me to come home?” Lexi mutters.

Mom shoots her a look. Luckily, nobody is asking where I've been.

I say, “Okay...”

When Mom takes Dad's hand, I almost cry, but I keep my face composed and force the emotion away. I won't let them twist me up. Whatever this is, I can't ignore that manic glint in Mom's eyes. “Your father and I are going to give it another go!”

She beams like I'm supposed to throw her a party. I feel miserable. *You're too young to be this pessimistic.* His voice was so husky and intense when he said that.

“Another go,” I repeat.

That'll make this the fourth or fifth time since their divorce talk started.

Mom pouts like she's angry with me. “I thought you'd be pleased.”

“Well, good luck,” I say, standing. “I'm tired.”

“Ruby...”

“Mom, let her go,” Lexi snaps. “She doesn't have to listen to this if she doesn't want to.”

I leave the room. Maybe Luca was right. Maybe I'm acting juvenile. Maybe all those long sessions with my head buried in history books weren't enough to make me mature.

As soon as I walk into my bedroom, there's a knock on my door. “Ruby, it's me,” Dad says softly. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

He opens the door and walks slowly across the room, sitting on the edge of my bed and touching my hand. “I know how this seems.”

“Then you understand why I can’t be excited,” I tell him.

“But it’s for real this time.”

“You were arguing earlier. Throwing things. It’s just the same cycle, Dad.”

“You know we love you, don’t you?” He squeezes my hand almost desperately, like he needs me to understand this.

“Of course, I know that,” I tell him. “I’m just not sure if you and Mom love each other. It hurts, Dad, waiting for her to decide.”

“This isn’t just about her,” Dad says. “It’s about me. I haven’t always been the husband I should have.”

“Then why are you trying again?”

“Because you’re wrong. We *do* love each other. We just don’t always like each other. One day, you’ll find a husband. You’ll realize what a relationship is—ups and downs, fighting to make it work.”

I think about Luca and the... the what? The mini argument we had?

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You’ll see, kiddo,” Dad says.

“Can you not call me *kiddo* anymore?” I ask, even though I like it when Lexi calls me *kid*.

He smiles tightly. “Old habits... Too old for that now, though, aren’t you?”

I try to return his smile because it hurts when he’s trying so hard, and I’m just sitting here. I know where this cycle will end—where it always does. “Just a little.”

After Dad leaves, Lexi knocks at my door, making me think she was waiting for him to go. She closes the door behind her wordlessly and sits on my computer chair, spinning from side

to side, her mismatched eyes filled with deep misery. But Lexi isn't the kind to let it all out. I understand she just needs me to sit with her.

Finally, she says, "I'm going to die alone, Ruby."

I gasp. "Don't say that."

"You don't need to act like it's a bad thing," she mutters. "It's a decision. After seeing them together, I can't imagine being with anyone. Not after I've seen where it ends."

I picture Luca, tingles dancing over me. For some reason, I feel the need to defend relationships, almost like I'm defending what this strange mafia prince and I might one day share. "It's not the same for everyone."

"Do you really think some people have perfect relationships? That they never argue? It's not worth the stress. You can have a good life being alone."

"I'm not saying you can't, but what if you meet someone? What if they're the perfect man for you, but all this stuff about Mom and Dad makes you sabotage it?"

She looks at me closely. I can tell what she's thinking—that I'm projecting. "Have *you* met someone?" she asks.

I turn away. I can't look at her as I lie. "No, but I want you to be happy."

"I will be," she says. "Happy and alone. Forever."

## CHAPTER 8



Luca

“I thought they were waiting for us,” I say to Elio, leaning against the wall of the club’s office. Music pumps from beneath us, dampened by the soundproofing but not completely silenced. There was a time when the music would call to me, but now, the idea of going down there, drinking, and meeting some random woman makes me feel hollow.

“They’ll be back in a few minutes,” Elio says tightly. “They wanted to grab a coffee, apparently.”

“Pfft. It’s a power play. A way to let us know *they* don’t wait for *us*. It’s the other way around.”

Elio frowns at me from his place at the desk. Even now, he’s got this *aura* around him. I never would’ve believed it before. Although we’re dealing with some depressing business, it’s like he’s fighting the urge to smile. Can I blame him? He’s got Scarlet. He’s got Molly. If life’s a game, my big brother won.

“What?” I snap when he keeps staring.

“You’ve checked your phone six times since you got here.”

I put my phone in my pocket. Honestly, I didn’t even realize I was doing it.

“Waiting for a text?”

“Ruby and I didn’t leave things on good terms,” I tell him. “She doesn’t want me to do the right thing.”

“Which is?”

“Put Nate Kingston in the dirt.”

Elio sucks in a breath. “I happen to agree with her there, Luca.”

“Do you know what it takes for a man to do what he did?” I snap. “To drug a woman? To take a photo of her...” I curl my hands into fists. “He’s the lowest of the low.”

“I don’t disagree,” Elio says. “But with our connection to his father, we can force him to be on his best behavior. We can make a positive change.”

“People like him don’t change.” I wave a hand when I realize I’m about to check my phone again, all on autopilot.

Elio laughs.

“What’s funny?” I snap.

“You are,” he says. “You’re saying people don’t change, but look at you. You’ve changed. Ruby’s changed you already, just like Scarlet changed me. Do you think it’s fate? Ruby, Scarlet... They both mean red.”

“Damn, brother,” I say, laughing darkly. “Fate? I think I preferred you when you were miserable.”

“Text her,” Elio says, ignoring me. “You’ll feel better, trust me.”

I take out my phone again. Suddenly, I feel like a kid, looking up to Elio for all the answers, knowing my strong, slightly intimidating big brother could make anything right. “What should I say?”

“How bad was the fight?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve got a frame of reference.” When Elio tilts his head at me, I snap, “It’s not like partying gave me good relationship skills.”

*“Relationship?”*

“You know what I mean.”

“Speak from the heart,” Elio says.

I mime being sick. It feels good to banter with Elio, to let go of some of the darkness. “Seriously, brother, who are you?”

“I mean it,” he goes on seriously. “I could’ve avoided a lot of hassle if I was straightforward with Scarlet from the start, but...” Again, he gets that borderline dreamy look. “I knew she was my woman the moment I saw her. I knew we were going to have kids. I knew we’d be together forever. Do you know all that?”

Turning away, I focus on my phone. I don’t know how to answer his question. “I’ve been running the day-to-day,” I tell him, “and I’m only now learning about this deal with the congressman.”

“That’s one hell of a way to change the subject,” Elio says.

“I’m just saying—” I cut myself off. What am I saying? Or am I just trying to pick a fight?

Going to mine and Ruby’s text thread, I think about my brother’s words. What’s the honest truth?

***I don’t want you to be afraid of me.***

I send it without letting myself dwell too much on the consequences. Then, one of our men, Matteo, knocks on the door. “The congressman is back.”

---

Congressman Maverick Kingston is a large man with a pocket watch chain dangling from his breast pocket. His dark hair looks dyed, shiny, and slicked to the side. His son is a tall, broad, jock-looking type with a preppy haircut and puppy dog eyes that seemed forced to me. They’re giving me the vibes of an indulgent dad with his rich, spoiled son. Our dad was never like that. Despite our wealth, he gave us discipline.

From my pocket, my phone buzzes. I itch to check it but can’t until this is done.

“Is this true?” Maverick says when I finish explaining. “Don’t lie to me, boy.”

Nate glances up at me. The little coward bites his lip. He’s putting on a show for his father. “I didn’t want to do it,” he

says.

“Did somebody force you?” I growl.

Elio glances at me with a silent message. *Chill, brother.*

“What do you mean,” I go on, “you didn’t want to? How do you do a thing like that by accident?”

“Now, hold on,” Maverick says. “Let him explain.”

I push off the wall, meaning to let this bastard know just what I think of him telling me to *hold on*. Then Elio quickly says, “This is a serious thing, Maverick. You might have some ideas about our life, our world, and our Family, but we don’t tolerate violence or degradation against women.”

“Very progressive,” Maverick mutters with disdain.

I almost roar at him. Elio just sits there and lets this prick disrespect him.

“Explain,” I say, leaning over the desk.

Nate picks at the desk with his fingernail, looking like a kid being reprimanded by a teacher for some minor, meaningless issue. “It was part of our frat. We’ve got these challenges, and...”

“So your frat challenged you to blackmail Ruby to do your college work for you?” I snarl. “That seems pretty damn specific to me.”

“Elio,” Maverick snaps.

“Stop talking to him like that.” I stare at the weak congressman right in the eye. The only way he’s getting away with this is because of his position. Without it, he’d have no way to challenge my brother about anything.

Maverick smirks, and worse, he looks down at me like I’m a dog who’s yapping too loudly. Maybe he’s heard some stories about me, the waster mafia prince letting my big brother take care of the business. Perhaps he’s not aware that things have changed.

Elio looks at me again. His presence is the only thing stopping me from flying into a murderous rage, the only thing stopping



me from tearing them both to pieces.

“I didn’t want to do it,” Nate says after a pause, “but I had to, and you’re right. I asked her to help with my work, but that had nothing to do with the photo. That was just... I just find history so hard.”

*Does this puppy-dog routine work on everyone? I want to bellow. Is the rest of the world that goddamn gullible?*

“Where is the photo now?” Elio says.

“I deleted it,” he replies.

“Did you show anyone else?” I snap.

Nate looks at me. He’s got the same judgmental glint in his eyes as his dad. “No. Why would I?”

It’s subtle, but there’s a mocking note in his voice when he asks the question. It’s like he’s saying, *What possible reason could I have for showing anybody a photo of HER?*

“How can we be sure you’ve deleted it?” Elio says.

“I’ve got no reason to keep it,” he replies. “Ruby isn’t really my type.”

That’s almost enough to make me completely lose it. He’s not even trying to hide that arrogant, belittling twist in his voice now.

“What do you mean by that?” I lean over the desk, staring down at him. If we were out in the wild, if these walls and all this civilization wasn’t here, if this were primal, nothing would stop me from tearing his limbs from his body.

He laughs. *Laughs.*

I slam my fist against the table so hard several items leap into the air. “What’s so fucking funny?” I roar.

“Now, wait a second.” Maverick’s tone is just as infuriating as his son’s. “We didn’t come here to be shouted at by *you*, Luca.”

“Then maybe your brave little boy can find his balls and tell me what he meant.”

That triggers something in Nate, the real him, the douchebag. He can't fight his insinuating little smirk now. "I don't go for women like her. That's all. Think of her, then imagine the opposite. That's my kind of girl. I'm an athletic guy. I expect the same from—"

Suddenly, the world turns red. My vision bleeds. I hear Elio and Maverick yelling. It's like I black out. When I "wake up," I've got Nate pinned against the floor, one hand wrapped around his throat, and an object—the telephone, I realize—in my hand, ready to crush his face. Ready to shatter his nose and paint him in a picture of gore.

"Say one more word about her," I growl. "One more goddamn word, you little worm. Go on. Do it. *Do it.*"

He's opening and closing his mouth stupidly. Elio's got his hand on my shoulder, his voice sounding impossibly small, as though his words are coming from far away. "*Luca, you have to stop. You have to calm down.*"

"Well?" I snap.

"Please," Nate whispers. "I deleted the photo. I swuh-swear. I did. Dad made me."

I look up at Maverick. A sick thrill of satisfaction grips me when I see his expression has turned from arrogant to terrified. "Is that true?"

"My son knows that the press will look for any reason to slander a politician's family, even if it means stealing and hacking phones. That photo is gone."

I turn back to Nate, searching his eyes for any sign of deceit. I'm pretty sure he's telling the truth, but is *pretty sure* good enough when my woman's honor is at stake? "She won't be helping you with your college work," I tell him. "In fact, you're never going to speak to her again. Or look at her."

"Fine by me."

I tighten my hold on his shirt, giving him a shake and letting him feel how weak he really is. When I stand, Maverick huffs, glaring at Elio. "Are we done here?"

Elio nods. “I’d say so.”

I put the phone on the desk, waiting as Nate climbs to his feet. He looks at me like he might want to make something of it, but he backs down when he sees I’m not scared but ready.

Elio shuts the door behind them and spins on me when they’re gone. His eyes are bulging with rage. “Jesus Christ, Luca. Jesus *Christ*.”

“We’ve got enough money to fund orphanages ourselves,” I tell him. “We don’t need them.”

“It wasn’t about that,” he snaps. “I was trying to protect you!”

“Protect me? What are you talking about?”

Elio runs a hand through his hair. Suddenly, he reminds me of the man he was before he met Scarlet—dark and pissed. “You’ve found somebody you care about—somebody worth fighting for. What if fighting for her means ruining it?”

“Stop with the goddamn riddles.”

He pushes the door open. “You should’ve listened to me. You should’ve let me handle it *my* way. Goddamn it.”

He leaves, storming down the hallway. I want to go after him, find out what he meant, but my phone buzzes again. Despite everything, the urge to check it is overwhelming.

*I don’t want to be scared of you either*, her first message reads.

I imagine her waiting near her phone for a reply, biting her lip, her bangs a shield across her eyes. ***But this is moving so fast. I know it’s my fault. I asked YOU for help, but it’s scaring me.***

I want to tell her she doesn’t have to be scared of me or her feelings. How can I when I’m scared, too? She’s already changed me more than I ever imagined any woman could.

## CHAPTER 9



### Ruby

I wake the following day with a head filled with Luca. I realize I'm hugging a pillow, almost as if imagining it's his body pressed against mine, except *his* body would be firm and muscular. His body would fill me with a reassuring heat, convincing me that everything will always be okay.

When the sleepiness disappears, I snatch my hand from the covers and grab my cell phone. After my message to Luca about being scared, I expected something more than this. I'm not sure what exactly, but when I read his message, a sense of anticlimax touches me.

*It's done. You don't need to worry anymore.*

This is good news, I tell myself—exactly what I wanted when I reached out to him. It's not like I have the right to expect anything more. It's not like the car ride last night was a date or anything. What do I want? What do I think I deserve?

*Oh, that's good,* I reply. Immediately, the status message goes from *sent* to *read*.

When those three dots appear, my heart hammers harder than last night or when I was getting myself ready to be once again thrown into the mayhem of a Mom and Dad cycle: make up, argue, break up, repeat.

Yet no message comes. It just stays on *read*. I guess that means we're over—*over*. God, that's so dramatic, considering

we never even started.

Sitting up, I decide to put this behind me, ignoring the tightness in my gut at the thought, almost like there's something in me that refuses to let him go. Something in me says I need to fight for this, that all my future happiness depends on it—on *us*.

“Right.”

Leaping to my feet, I forcibly smooth my hair out of my face. It's a miracle I don't give myself a concussion.

“Enough of this.”

I grab some clothes and a towel and walk quickly through the house toward the bathroom. I'll take a steaming hot shower and do my best to forget about Luca.

Yet, as the water drips down my body, it's impossible to forget about him, especially the heat I felt the first time I saw him or sat next to him in the car. I can feel his hand against my forehead, brushing my hair out of place. He doesn't want me to hide. He thinks I'm too beautiful for that.

I lean against the shower wall, biting down as the lust grips me. Suddenly, he's in the shower with me. However, my eyes are closed. I'm not going *completely* crazy, but it feels like he's right here, his shirtless body pressed against mine, trailing his hand up my inner thigh.

*“You belong to the mafia prince,”* he groans in my sparkling imagination. *“You always will. Nobody else.”*

I imagine him grinding his hand against my clit, rubbing hard as his panting, hungry breaths overpower even the blasting noise of the shower. It's difficult to know what to think and where to let my fantasy go. It's not like I've got a blueprint. I want his heat, his attention, the burning he instills in me that tells me I'm beautiful. I've never believed that before.

I grab the showerhead, turn up the pressure, guide it to my sex, and let it blast against my clit. In the waking dream, Luca is on his knees, his mouth buried between my legs, groaning as he lavishes me with attention. It's all I want, all I need. I grind my

hips, letting the water pulse against the searing point of pleasure. I make believe I'm grinding against his face instead.

I don't let myself think about the fact it's over. I don't allow myself to project into the future because there's nothing: a few texts, a car ride. I'm trying to grasp onto smoke, but it's drifting through my fingertips meaninglessly.

No, think about *him*. Luca. His mouth against my sex. His hands sink greedily into my legs like he can't get enough of me. I move the showerhead, guiding it this way and that, enhancing the pleasure until my toes curl, and I have to lean heavily against the wall so I don't slip. I bite down at the end. If I let this release become a scream, I'd bring the whole house down.

When it's over, I open my eyes. The water blurs my vision. For a crazy second, I can see Luca, a shimmering shape made of water, smirking at me like he's starving for more steaminess.

---

"I think she wants us to throw her a party or something," Lexi says grimly the next day when we're browsing the bookstore. She's talking about how forcibly upbeat and cheery Mom was this morning. "It's like she wants us to forget how many times we've done this crap."

She picks up a romance book and puts it down almost aggressively when she sees me looking. She aims her sideways grimace at me like a challenge.

I shrug. "Maybe this time it'll be different."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No."

"Then why say it?"

"I don't know. Maybe I want to believe it."

I grab a couple of books, then head for the checkout. I stop, a jolt moving through me when I look out the bookstore window and across the street. A woman sits at the window, holding a

baby in her arms as she talks to somebody in the chair opposite.

“What’s up?” Lexi asks.

“That’s Scarlet Smith. From high school.”

“An old friend?” Lexi asks. “I don’t remember her.”

“Uh, sort of.” A memory hammers me, making me feel cruel and pathetic. “Not really. I didn’t have many friends in high school.”

“Do you want to say hello?”

“No,” I say quickly.

I’m glad she seems to be doing well for herself. She looks like a glowing, happy new mother. As I pay, the guilt expands in my gut, acid and hateful. It reminds me of how cowardly I once was. It reminds me that I could’ve done the right thing, but I chose not to out of fear, a pathetic need to be accepted, or some other low, miserable thing I don’t want to think about.

“Smile, sis,” Lexi says after we leave the store. “*I’m* supposed to be the depressing one, remember?”

## CHAPTER 10



Luca

“Pick up the pace some?” I ask Colt in between rounds. It’s been a few days since I last texted Ruby. I’m doing my best to forget her and pretend she hasn’t changed me, which means I’ve been at the martial arts gym every day. My buddy Colt and I have been beating the hell out of each other.

Colt looks at me impassively from the other side of the ring. He’s tall, even taller than Elio, with silver hair cut short, maybe a holdover from his military days. He’s forty-five, but his age doesn’t seem to matter in the ring. He’s not breathing heavily as he hops from foot to foot. “Sure.”

From the edge of the ring, his Belgian Malinois, Shadow, sits and watches as calmly as his owner. Shadow is jet-black with eyes that seem to gleam with human understanding.

The buzzer sounds, and we go in on each other, grunting and growling as we exchange punches. It’s a good round. He hits me clean a few times, and I do the same, though you’d never know it from his ice-cold demeanor. It’s only toward the end when he throws a savage right hook that would take my head off if I didn’t slip it. It’s then that I see a glimpse of something truly dark in him, like a rage buried deep, threatening to erupt.

When we’re done, we climb out of the ring, toweling off as we sit and drink water. Shadow stalks around the edge of the room, sniffing, then walks over to us and sits upright, alert, ready.



One thing I like about Colt is that he never feels the need to talk. He's happy to sit here silently. Maybe not *happy* but content as long as I ignore the pain and fire that seems to hide behind his impassive eyes.

"I might have a job for you," I tell him.

"Yeah?"

"Simple enough. Need you to follow somebody and let me know if he does anything he's not supposed to."

Colt has never been specific about his military background. The most he's ever told me is, "*I hurt people who hurt people.*" I get the sense he was in the Special Forces, but I'm unsure.

"It'll be good money."

"I don't need money," Colt says. "I need a reason."

Another thing Colt has never explained is how he can live in an upscale penthouse on a military pension. I've never pressed him on it. That's not the sort of friendship we have. We exchange fists, kicks, and submissions, not feelings.

"He's a scumbag," I say.

"Plenty of scumbags in the world. What did this one do to you?"

"Disrespected somebody I..." I pause, then say it. Screw it. It's not like Colt will repeat it or hold it against me. "I care about."

"Your brother?"

"No, a woman."

Colt narrows his eyes at me. I think I almost see him smile for a second, but if he does, it vanishes as quickly as it appears. "I seem to remember a certain Italian telling me his days of partying were behind him."

"This isn't the same," I growl, with much more passion than I intended. "I never cared about a woman before Ruby."

Colt holds his hands up. “Fair enough, Luca. So what did this scumbag do to her?”

I explain about the photo.

“I’m surprised you let him live,” Colt snarls.

“We can’t always go down that path,” I say, but a prick of shame touches me.

“I’m nobody to judge,” Colt goes on. “I’ve never had a lady I care about. I’ve never had a lady, full stop.”

“What? You’re telling me you’re a virgin?”

“No, but I can’t imagine feeling how you clearly feel.”

Here I was, thinking we didn’t talk about feelings.

“How do I *clearly feel*?”

“Are you kidding me?” Colt laughs deeply. “You sound like you’d rip the world apart for this Ruby. You sound like you’d propose to her now if she were here. How many years have I known you? Three? Four? You’re a good sparring partner. You’re tough as hell and give as good as you get, but I never thought I’d see you settling down.”

“I’m not,” I tell him. “Ruby and I... We’re over.”

“Why?”

“Because I scare her,” I snap. “Don’t turn this into a therapy session. Will you take the job or not?”

Colt looks closely at me, then shrugs. “Sure, but only if you promise me something.”

“Like I said, we can discuss pay—”

“I don’t need money,” he cuts in. “I want you to promise you’ll take another chance with Ruby.”

“What? Why?”

Colt stares at me darkly. “Because up until five minutes ago, I thought you were as miserable as me, but you have a chance. It’d be a damn shame to let something like that go.”

“Here I was, thinking you were a cold bastard, but it turns out you are sensitive.”

“All cold men are, on some level,” he grunts.

I think of Elio, of the ice that covered him for so many years and then melted fast when he met his lady.

“I could just tell you I’ll give it another try,” I say.

“But you’re not that man anymore,” Colt replies. “Sure, when you were a drinking, partying waster, maybe you could’ve lied, but you’ve changed since you got sober. You take things more seriously. Lie to me, and you won’t be able to forgive yourself.”

“What’s gotten into you, Colt?”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem different today. More intense than usual. That’s saying a lot, buddy.”

Colt sighs. “Nightmares, Luca. Nightmares. But don’t ask me about them. I’d rather put a bullet in your head than talk about that. I don’t mean that to sound aggressive.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You’re the only man I know who’d dare to say something like that to a Marino. It’s why I like you so much. You’re not scared of anyone.”

“Do we have a deal, then?” he asks.

I stick out my hand. “Sure, I’ll reach out to her, but that doesn’t mean anything will come from it.”

He shakes my hand. “At least you’ve got a shot. So, who am I following?”

---

Scarlet sings softly as she rocks Molly in her arms. We’re in the living room after sharing a meal: Mom, Dad, Elio, Scarlet, Molly, and me. Mom has a look of pure happiness on her face as she looks over at her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. Dad’s smile is wide, too, something inside me twitching when I think about how he *couldn’t* smile until recently.

Scarlet lowers her voice, then leans down and kisses her daughter on the head. Elio, at her side, leans down and kisses her, too. A nasty sensation grips me as I watch them. Is it *jealousy*? Do I want that?

I stand, go to the liquor cabinet, grab a glass, grab the bottle, put them both down, and return to my seat. Elio watches me closely, but he doesn't say anything.

"I wonder if she'll be a singer like my *Angela*," Mom says teasingly. It's a callback to when Elio told Mom that Scarlet's name was Angela, back during the drama that brought them together.

Scarlet beams over at her. "Whatever she decides to be, we'll support her."

Elio kisses his wife on the cheek. "I second that."

"You're *obsessed* with that thing tonight, son," Dad says.

Elio and Scarlet share a smirk. Cell phones will always have a special significance for them.

"I didn't even realize I was checking it," I mutter, putting it back in my jacket pocket.

"Is there something you need to tell us?" Scarlet teases. "A special lady, maybe? Hmm?"

"A *lady*?" Mom says, getting all excited. She's seen one of her sons settle down and experience happiness brighter than she ever thought possible. It's only natural she'd want the same for me. "Have you met someone?"

"Maybe," I reply.

"Another fling, is it?" Dad says with some disapproval.

"Those days are behind him, Dad," Elio says.

"Don't speak for me, brother."

Elio frowns. Maybe I spoke too sharply. I still can't get that meeting out of my head: his ominous words about ruining things with Ruby, the way he let that congressman talk down to him. That's not the Elio I know.

“So it is just a fling, then?” Dad says.

“It’s nothing,” I tell them. “Ruby and I... We’ve only spoken a few times. We haven’t even gone on a date.”

“But your voice, dear,” Mom says softly. “You don’t *sound* as if it’s nothing.”

As shameful as it is, I still find it difficult to look at Mom the same way as I used to. It’s hard not to think about the affair, and it’s hard not to project that into my future. I was sure Mom and Dad were as in love as two people can be, and she still cheated. I’m not a kid anymore. I don’t have the right to sulk about it.

“What happened?” Scarlet asks.

“It’s just... when I saw her, I immediately wanted to be with her, get to know her, just be around her, I guess.” It’s hard talking about this when they’re all staring at me with stunned curiosity in their eyes. “Is that so hard to believe? Playboy Luca actually has feelings?”

“Relax,” Elio says.

I shoot him a look, but I can only get so grim when my cute niece is sitting right beside him in my sister-in-law’s arms.

“So what’s the issue?” Dad asks.

“She’s scared of me,” I growl. “Scared of the mafia prince, scared of this life and the darkness in me. So I need to push down whatever this is, ignore it, and move on.”

Except I promised Colt that I’d give it another try. I don’t want to lie to him.

“But?” Scarlet says.

“Who said there was a but?”

She smiles. “You didn’t *have* to say, Luca.”

“But I want to text her, at least. See how she’s doing.”

“Then text her,” Scarlet says passionately. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that when you feel the itch to text, you *have* to listen to it.”

She and Elio share another dreamy-eyed look.

I take out my cell phone again. Last night, when I took out my phone, three dots appeared on the screen. She was typing me a message. I stared for minutes as the dots appeared and disappeared, but then she gave up.

“Harder than shouting some nonsense over music, eh?” Dad says.

Dad’s been going in on me lately about the playboy stuff, my old depressing life. I think it has something to do with the fact Mom cheated. He hates promiscuity of any kind. Not that I was *promiscuous*, exactly. I haven’t been with as many women as they seem to think.

“Just speak from the heart,” Scarlet says. “That’s what Elio did.”

“He didn’t have a heart before he met you,” I reply jokingly, or not.

“Just be genuine,” she goes on, unfazed. “What are her interests?”

“History,” I tell her. “She seems pretty obsessed with it.”

Scarlet narrows her eyes, then says, “Wait, Ruby... and she’s a history nerd?”

“I’m not sure she’d like the word *nerd*,” I say, getting protective even with my sister-in-law. I can’t help myself. “But yeah.”

“What’s her surname?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her, which makes me feel like a complete moron. I can’t stop thinking about her, and I don’t even know her *name*.

“Describe her,” Scarlet says.

“She’s short, with soft wavy hair with bangs. She wears her hair over half of her face like she’s trying to hide how beautiful she is, but there’s no need. I swear, she *glows*.” I cut myself off when I realize everybody is staring at me as though I’ve grown a second head.

“That sounds like Ruby Fitzgerald. I went to school with her.”

“Small world,” I mutter, thinking of Paulie... *Fitzgerald*. It seems the world is even smaller than the school connection. If I was right about the figure I saw standing at her door, her dad has a link to us. I wonder if she knows.

“She was always reading,” Scarlet says, “and she wore her hair the same way. I wonder if she’s the same one.”

“Were you friends?” I ask.

Scarlet swallows and then looks down at Molly with an expression that’s difficult to read. “I didn’t have any friends in school.”

I wonder if there’s more to the story there, but if that’s the case, then maybe Elio had a point when he said this is fate. He made a flippant comment about Ruby and Scarlet, both meaning red, but what if there’s more there? What if the world or destiny or whatever-the-fuck is throwing us together?

“Where are you going?” Mom asks when I stand up.

“To send a text,” I say. “I can’t do it with you all staring at me.”

Mom beams like I’ve just announced I’m going to propose. Before I even think about any commitment, I need to work out how to stop her from being afraid of me.

## CHAPTER 11



### Ruby

I sit at my laptop, trying to focus on a journal article about foot health in the late Roman Empire—seriously, some of these articles get *very* specific—but I can't concentrate. Maybe it's the subject matter. Or perhaps it's because since Luca and I sent our last texts to each other, I've opened the thread at least a dozen times to type a new message only to delete it.

*When I said I was scared, I wrote last night, I didn't mean that we had to stop. Isn't that what relationships are about? Overcoming difficulties?*

This wouldn't have been a rhetorical question. I would've actually needed him to explain it to me since I've never had a relationship. I don't know anything about it. Then I erased the words, wondering if it would make me sound needy. The only person I could speak to about this—Lexi—doesn't even know about it or the photo. So what am I going to do?

When my phone buzzes, I grab it up so fast. My heart is pounding. My world is spinning way too freaking enthusiastically.

It's him! I almost jump to my feet and do a silly dance around the room. I can feel my feet tapping as though along with a tune. I feel like the biggest dork who's ever dorked, but I can't help it.

*Hey, stranger.*



*Hey, I reply. I thought you'd forgotten about me.*

*I didn't want to scare you...*

I frown, wondering if he means this in a teasing or a nasty way. That's the downside to texting, I guess. Yet there's also a massive upside. I don't have to be face-to-face with him while working out what to say. Even so, I brush my bangs down as if to hide myself.

*Can you blame me for being scared?*

*No, he texts quickly. You live in the regular world. You've seen some bad stuff with what that goddamn animal did, but you don't know how downright evil it can get. I want you to know something, Ruby. I might not always be good, but I've never been evil. I've never done anything that wasn't warranted. There are bad men in this world, and sometimes, it takes bad things to put them right.*

A moment later, he adds, *I'm not sure if that came out right.*

*No, I understand what you mean, I reply. I guess it's just hard for me. I've never really had a relationship before.*

*You've never had a boyfriend?* he messages, making me wonder if he's judging me.

*No, I write. I always found it easier to read about Lancelot and Guinevere. You know, impossible romances, stuff that would probably never happen in real life. The sort of loyalty that seems to be in short supply these days.*

After sending it, I see his three dots, and my fingers move quickly. *And DON'T tell me I'm too young to be this pessimistic.*

*You got me, he replies, but I've seen real romance—my brother, Elio, and his wife, Scarlet. They have something special. I never would've believed it before I saw them. By the way, Scarlet mentioned she might've known you in school. Is your surname Fitzgerald?*

Panic coils deep inside me. I walk over to the window, staring into the night as if I can see the past.

*We didn't really speak*, I reply after a minute or two. *But yeah, that's my surname—small world.*

*I'm starting to think it's a tiny world*, Luca replies. *She said you were just the same in high school. A beautiful, shy, sexy-as-hell history nerd with her head in the clouds and her nose buried in a book, just waiting for your Lancelot to come riding into your life.*

Despite the tinge of drama touching me, I type, *She said all that?*

*Okay, Miss Pessimistic. Maybe I added a few things. I want to see you.*

I'm about to type a reply when a car pulls up outside the house. It's almost midnight, and the vehicle drives slowly like the driver is trying to keep the engine as quiet as possible. Even in the darkness, the windows seem too black, as though they're tinted. As I stare, Dad leaves the house—I quietly hear the door close downstairs—and walks over to the car. The whole thing takes maybe a minute. They wind the window down, and Dad gives the driver something. Then the car leaves.

I duck out of the way when Dad looks up at my window. It's dark in here, too, but there's light coming from my laptop. Closing the laptop, I climb into bed. A soft knock comes at my door. I ignore it. Then the door creaks open, closing a moment later.

*Ruby?* Luca messages. *Have I scared you again?*

*No*, I reply, wondering if I should tell Luca what happened, but what would I say? What did I just see? This Mom and Dad drama is giving me a headache. Maybe a break away from it all, with my so-called Lancelot, is just what I need. *What did you have in mind?*

*Some lunch, some conversation, and see where it leads.*

I sit up in bed, tingles dancing through me, swirling lust teasing me deeply.

*I want that, Luca*, I tell him. *But first, I need to be upfront so you understand if I'm not like the women you're used to.*

*Don't compare yourself to other women*, he replies quickly. I imagine him staring intensely at his phone. *You're one of a kind. Don't even mention other women. Or men.*

*Some women would be freaked by that crazy possessiveness, you know.*

*Those women haven't spent their lives reading about Lancelot and Guinevere, though, Ruby.*

I smile, but a moment later, it falters. I have to send this message. *It's not a big deal. I'm not sure their story could work out in real life, anyway. What do boyfriends and girlfriends do?*

*You're asking the wrong guy. I've never really had a girlfriend.*

*Yeah RIGHT! Have you seen yourself, Luca? There's no way. I bet women are throwing themselves at you all the time.*

*I don't care about other women*, he writes. *I seriously don't give a single damn. What do you need to tell me?*

I wonder why he's getting so defensive about it. Does he have a past? He's over ten years older than me, so it'd be silly to expect him *not* to. Still, the idea of him with other women makes my belly tighten, and not in a good way.

*Answer my question first.*

*Boyfriends and girlfriends go on dates. They have sex. Am I in the ballpark here?*

*Exactly! They have sex, and I've never had a boyfriend. Come on, Luca. Don't make me say it.*

A moment later, his message arrives. *Are you telling me you're a virgin?*

I force myself to type out a quick, *Yes*. Maybe this is the part where he completely loses interest.

Instead, he replies, *Now I have to see you even more. Tomorrow, Ruby. I won't take no for an answer, and I don't give a damn if that scares you.*

My legs close on instinct, the pressure in my core blazing, heat rising to my cheeks, chest, and everything. *You want to see me even MORE now? Why?*

*Because when I touch your hot, curvy, perfect body, I'll be the only one. Remember what I said about not wanting to talk about other people? Now, I don't even have to think about it. Your voluptuous body belongs to me.*

I gasp, the familiar tingles getting even more intense. My sex is burning even hotter than when I brought the showerhead to it. My heart is pounding with the force of destiny. It's so cheesy, but I don't care. That's how it feels. There's a "this is right" drum pounding deep within.

*Does that scare you, too?* he follows up.

*Not as much as it should,* I reply.

*That's why I wanted to end that motherfucker. He did something no man has the right to do. He violated you, but you don't belong to him. You belong to me.*

*What does it mean to belong to you?*

*It means I'm the only one who touches your body, ever. It means I'm the only one who'll ever kiss your shy, perfect lips. It means I can't think about waiting until tomorrow. I want to see you soon. Now.*

*Now?* I message.

*What? Have you got other plans?*

*Well, just sleep, but I don't think I'll be able to sleep now.*

*Why not?*

*Because of all the stuff you're saying.*

*But WHAT about it?* he persists. *Be specific.*

I take a bolstering breath. This is all so new to me. Every aspect of it is like a new chapter in a period of history I've never encountered before. It's that multiplied by a hundred, a thousand. *My core feels like it's getting really hot.*

*I said be specific, Guinevere.*

*Okay, Lancelot... My pussy is getting really warm. My clit is aching, sort of like I want to be touched, but I'm also scared. I've never done this before. I don't know what I'm doing. What if I'm not good enough for you?*

*Oh, fuck. You're more than good enough. Get dressed. Be ready. I'm coming over.*

*You can't come here! Mom and Dad and Lexi would freak if they knew about us.*

*Why?* he texts.

*Because you're a mafia prince, Luca.*

*Just get ready,* he responds a moment later. *Tell them you're staying over at a friend's or something.*

*I don't have to tell them anything. I'm not a little kid anymore. I can go where I want, with who I want.*

It's just telling them that will make things tricky.

*Then get your perfect, curvy body dressed. I need to see you. I'm rock-hard thinking about you.*

*Seriously?* I murmur and text, my thighs aching even more.

*I'm aching, bursting with lust for you. I'm hungry. I'm starving for you.*

*Okay, let me know when you're outside.*

I get dressed quietly, not wanting anybody else to hear. I don't have to feel guilty, anyway. If Dad can sneak around, why can't I?

## CHAPTER 12



Luca

I sit at the end of the street, almost shaking with how badly I want to see her. The days apart have just made me even hungrier. Rereading her texts makes me even more of a wild man. When she shyly talks about getting horny, my dick stiffens. Precome leaks hotly from my tip. I want to treat her better than this—another meeting in the dark—but I can't.

Her figure appears, her shapeliness obvious even in the darkness. Her hips drive me nuts. It's how wide they are like she's begging me to grab and hold them, to own her, but I already *do* own her.

Reaching over, I push the door open. The moment she slides into the seat, I lean across and press my lips against hers. It's not even like I make a conscious decision. I can't fight the urge after being apart from her for so long or what feels like so long.

She moans and shyly grabs onto my arms. It's like I can feel the lust buried in the movement as if I can somehow sense she wants to grip me more firmly. I open my mouth, sliding my tongue against hers, tasting her. She grips me harder, gasping as I grab onto her neck. Our teeth collide as she reels back.

"Not... here," she whimpers.

"You turn me into a savage," I growl. "I need to be more chivalrous... like one of your knights in shining armor."

“It depends on what era you’re talking about,” she murmurs, her eyes darting all over the place as if she finds it difficult to look at me. Maybe it’s the darkness in me, or perhaps it’s how overwhelmed my young virgin feels by this moment. “After gunpowder was introduced, it tended to be less shiny. In the Renaissance, you had the gildings and patterns, which removed some of the armor’s gleam. Well...I’m rambling.”

I gently brush her hair across her forehead. “I like it when you ramble,” I tell her.

She smiles, then her mouth tightens as she looks down the street. “Shall we go?”

“As long as you’re sure... you’re not too scared of me.”

I almost cheer when she playfully slaps my arm. It’s the sort of thing I’ve seen Scarlet do to Elio dozens of times. It never seemed like such a big deal. I always wondered why he grinned like such a doofus. However, coming from Ruby, I get it.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I thought you had a plan.”

I smirk. “Considering your age, I thought you’d want to be a modern woman and go fifty-fifty on all the decision-making.”

“I live in history, remember?” She’s beaming, glowing, her cheeks infused red as though she’s as ecstatic finally to be with me again as I am with her.

After a pause, an idea occurs to me. It lights me up.

“What are you smiling about?” she asks, even as her own smile spreads from cheek to cheek.

“The Family has shares in hundreds of legitimate businesses,” I tell her. “It’s given me an idea.”

“You’re going to take me to a Family business?” she mutters, her smile faltering.

I cradle her cheek, feeling her warmth burning into my palm. “Trust me.”

“Crazily, I do,” she mutters. “I feel like I can believe everything you tell me. I feel like you’d never lie to me. That’s dangerous, isn’t it, to believe that about a stranger?”

Leaning forward, I kiss her again, softer this time. “Yet you don’t feel like a stranger to me,” I tell her, “and I know I don’t to you, either.”

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I pull up outside The Museum of Time and Terra, the large globe out front surrounded by yellow lights, illuminating the sign and the entrance. It’s closed this time of night. I look at my woman, savoring her expression of joy and curiosity, and then say, “Wait here. I’ll have a quick talk with the security guard.”

After heading inside, I return, gesturing at my woman to follow me. In the light of the globe, I can savor just how beautiful and sexy she looks. She’s wearing a hoodie and jeans, not exactly a look-at-me outfit, but it doesn’t matter. Her natural shape makes me want to strip her naked.

Taming the more animal parts of myself, for now, I offer her my arm.

“This is amazing,” she whispers as we walk into the museum together. The main lights are off, but the exhibit lights are on, giving the place a romantic feel. Hell, *romantic*. This is the first time in my life I’ve ever thought about romance.

I move my hand to hers, the one on my arm, and gently apply pressure. She beams up at me with enthusiasm radiating from every part of her.

“Your hair’s not in your eye,” I tell her. “I think it’s all the turning to look at the exhibits. It’s shaken it loose.”

When she raises her hand, I quickly grab it. “Don’t you dare!”

She giggles. “Or what, huh?”

“Or I’ll be forced to punish you, Ruby.”

Her cheeks glow. Her eyes widen. “Punish... how?”



I slide my hands down her body, grabbing her hips, pulling her against me. She makes the most intoxicating gasping noise. It makes me feel drunker than any booze ever could and gives me a thrill that not even violence can. “Bend you over and spank that big, beautiful ass of yours, that’s how.”

“Do you want to do that?” she whispers.

I hesitate, not wanting to freak her out, but then she takes my face in her hands. I can tell it takes a lot of effort for her to do this. She tosses her head as if angrily shooing away her hair. “Just be honest with me.”

I squeeze my hands into her hips with even more greediness. I sink my touch into her, claiming her, owning her. I can’t help it. “I’d love to spank your big ass. I’d love to turn it as red as your name, but I know that makes me a dark, scary mafia prince.”

She moves her hands to my shoulders, letting out a soft whimpering moan. It has a slightly confused tone to it somehow. I could spend the rest of my life listening to all the different ways she moans. “I guess it’d be one hell of a way to revise history, huh?” she teases.

“One spank for every wrong answer?” I groan.

She bites her lip, nodding.

I lean down and kiss her. Hard. With more passion than the first time. She whimpers through the kiss as I push her back up against some dinosaur exhibit. I drive forward with my hips, letting her feel how hard I am for her, letting her feel the outline of my dick pulsing in my pants. Grinding against her, I’m sure I can feel her wetness even through her jeans. Lifting her up, I lean her against the exhibit, letting me drive with more force against her sex.

“Question number one,” I say between kisses. “Tell me why the whole Lancelot and Guinevere thing doesn’t work for us.”

She beams. She *glows*. It’s like she’s pregnant already. Whoa, where did that come from? I don’t have time to linger on that thought as she answers, “Because that started with infidelity. They went behind Arthur’s back.”

I smirk. “I knew looking that up online would come in handy. You’re right.”

“Any other questions?” she challenges.

“I’ll think of one, but first, I need to taste you again.”

I love the way she gasps each time I kiss her. It’s like every single kiss is a shock to her system, opening up new parts of life for her. Everything she does with me is her first time. It makes me feel younger and fills me with a sense of adventure.

When I begin to glide my hand up her thigh, she grabs my wrist and shakes her head while giving me the most ball-tingling pout. “I...”

“It’s okay,” I growl, stepping back. If I don’t—if I stay pressed up against her—I won’t be able to stop. “Let’s keep exploring... and I’ll think of more questions.”

I keep my hand on the small of her back as we walk past the dinosaurs and into the Viking section.

“Where are the horns on the helmets?” I ask.

“Vikings didn’t have horned helmets. That was added later, in plays and stuff, to make them seem scarier...” She trails off when she looks up and sees me smirking. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

I nudge her, grinning. It feels so easy to be with her, far easier than it has any right to. “I’m just looking for an excuse to spank you.”

She glows with lust. My balls are aching. A deep, primal instinct tells me to grab her, bend her over, tear down her jeans, and reveal her big creamy ass. Then I’ll spank her over and over, making her skin blossom red for me.

Pausing at an exhibition, I say, “Close your eyes.”

When she does it without asking why, my shaft gets even harder. My underwear feels sticky with all the precome burning out of my tip. My mind flashes with the image of my woman on her back, thick legs open, showing me her soaked, wet pussy.

“Where was the first Viking raid in England?” I ask.

“Lindisfarne, off the northeast coast,” she says. “It was considered a holy island.”

I laugh. “You’re too clever for me. Okay, and what was the date?”

“Uh, seven hundred and eight-one AD?”

“Nope, ninety-three.”

When she opens her eyes, giving me a dreamy look, I realize. “Did you just answer wrong on purpose?”

She shakes her head, but her horny-as-hell eyes tell me *yes*. “It’s almost like you want me to spank you,” I moan, smoothing my hand down to her ass. I take a moment to massage her thickness, savor it, and then bring my hand down. She gasps when I make contact, the sound loud in the quietness of the museum.

“Oh, heck,” she whispers, falling against me, gripping onto my shoulders.

“You liked that,” I groan. It’s not a question.

“I don’t know why. Does it make me weird?”

“It’s because it proves I own you. I own your thick, gorgeous ass. I can spank you any damn time I want, with or without our quiz game.”

I spank her again, then grab her hips and turn her around. She sticks her ass out and looks at me over her shoulder. Her hair has fallen across her face again, as though she’s instinctively hiding herself, but she’s not telling me *no*. Her mouth is open. Her eyes gleam. She wants this.

I spank her again and again and again. Each time, her moans get even more urgent.

“I bet you’re fucking soaked for me.”

She bites her lip, nodding.

“*Fuck.*”

She laughs as I grab her, lift her onto my shoulder, and carry her through the museum. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere more private,” I snap.

I carry her to the back office, kicking the door open. There’s a small waiting area in here with a couch. When I put her down, she turns to me, staring with those wide, excited eyes.

“We can’t... you know... here.”

“When I fuck your tight virgin body, it’ll be in a place you deserve. On silk sheets.” Holding her ass with one hand, I glide my other up her inner thigh, then toy with the button on her jeans. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t feel your wetness. That doesn’t mean I can’t make you cream for me.”

I tear the button loose, then slide my hand down her underwear. My dick aches as she trembles against me. I push her folds apart, finding her clit, pressing down. Her underwear is soaked and so damn hot. She’s burning my fingertips with her eagerness.

She falls against me as I begin to rub. Her breath burns hotly against my chest. When I move my hand even quicker, she stumbles back. I cradle her and lower her onto the couch, sitting beside her and shifting my hand even lower, finding her heat.

“You’re soaked for me, Ruby,” I groan. “You’re fucking drenched for me. My sweet virgin... I could slide my dick into you right now, and you’d take it.”

She looks up, her lips trembling. “Luca...”

“I said *could*,” I groan. “Don’t worry. For now, I just want to see, to *feel* you creaming for me. Make your underwear even wetter. Drench my hand with your release.”

I grind my palm against her clit, circling her entrance with my finger at the same time. Her moans are the hottest noise I’ve ever heard. Nothing else even compares. Her pussy starts to make wet, horny noises. She opens her mouth like she might apologize, so I kiss her passionately.

She gasps, finding it difficult to kiss me back with the pleasure bursting through her. Our teeth collide, and then she leans back, her eyelids fluttering, an orgasm gripping her. I slip my finger into her, making her gasp in the horniest way. She shifts her hips back and forth at the final moments, and then she collapses against me, biting into my chest.

“Oh... Luca,” she whispers. “That was... oh...”

“It was, *oh?*” I tease, kissing her forehead, feeling more intimate with her, closer to her than I ever thought I’d be with any woman.

“I’m sorry I can’t—”

“Don’t even go there,” I say, slipping my hand from her jeans. “When it’s time, you’ll give me everything I want. You’re going to bounce on my dick, your perfect tits shaking. You’re going to come all over my dick. I’m going to explode deep inside your tight, wet, warm pussy.”

She stares up at me, almost like she doesn’t believe it, then nods. “Shall we, uh, continue the tour?”

I smirk. “Sure.”

## CHAPTER 13



### Ruby

As we walk around the museum together, studying the lit-up displays, part of me wishes I could go back in time to the steaminess. When his hand was between my legs, I experienced pleasure like I had never dreamed of before. It was heaven. It was unbelievable. It was like he was pushing a button deep inside me, linked to some primal part of me, over and over and over.

I could tell he wanted something in return. He couldn't hide the savage note in his intense eyes. He couldn't hide the way his breath trembled, as if he was holding himself back. He couldn't hide any of it, but I couldn't get over that hump of shyness inside. Sitting there, letting him touch me, that's one thing. Even getting spanked... Fine, I can handle that.

But doing something to *him*? I don't know where to start, and it wasn't like we were going to have sex there, right? Or maybe that's what he wanted—expected—and I disappointed him.

“What are your parents like?” he asks after we walk through a section on different kinds of tribes from around the world. “You said they'd freak if they knew you were talking to a mafia prince.”

I shrug. “Normal... ish. Dad works in construction. Mom works at an insurance company. They've been going through a divorce for what feels like forever. They argue, then they make

up, then they argue again. Honestly, I wish they'd just choose a path."

"You want them to break up?" he asks.

"No," I say fiercely, "but I don't want them to continue torturing each other either. If they could make it work, that'd be good, but I'm not sure they can. Why do you ask?"

He shrugs, looking over at a display. "I feel like you belong to me, Ruby, but I don't even know your parents' names. It's making me feel crazy."

I lean over and nudge him. It feels so natural, way more than it should. "If you're crazy, then so am I."

He smirks and sweeps his arms around me, pulling me against him. I can feel how solid he is. I can feel the lust and the hunger pumping through him, sense it in the thundering of his heartbeat. "You're definitely crazy," he whispers before kissing me.

We sink passionately into the intimacy. Then he takes my hand, and we keep walking. For some reason, an instinct hits me that he's lying somehow, but I'm not sure why I think that. It's like a vague alarm is blaring in my mind.

"Are you sure there wasn't another reason you asked about Mom and Dad?"

He pauses, looking down at me, chewing the inside of his cheek. When I first saw him in the gym—not even a week ago, which feels wild—I could've never imagined Luca Marino seeming nervous. He sighs, taking my hands. The way he holds them, it's like we're standing across from each other at an altar.

I push that thought down, feeling so freaking ridiculous.

"You're better at reading me than most people," he says quietly.

"There *is* something, isn't there?" I reply, squeezing his hands tighter.

He sighs. "It's like I said. Something's throwing us together—fate, destiny. Something, Ruby, or maybe this city's just

smaller than it seems.”

“Explain,” I say, my voice trembling slightly. I can’t help it. Suddenly, it feels like this entire thing has been leading to this, whatever it is. It doesn’t seem good. He’s gone from joking about history and being intense about spanking to seeming downright miserable.

“I thought I recognized your dad the first time I picked you up,” Luca says. “Then I learned your surname. Paulie Fitzgerald.”

“Paulie?” I murmur. “Nobody calls him that.”

“My dad did. My brother did. I was only a kid, but I recognize him.”

“Wait, what are you saying?”

“He worked as a courier for the Family... and I think he worked security for a while, too.”

“He works in construction,” I snap, but Luca just stares at me calmly.

“Maybe he does now,” Luca replies. “Listen, this doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean he’s a bad man. It doesn’t mean—”

“It means he’s a *liar*,” I cut in. “What about now? Does he still work for you?”

“No,” Luca replies. “I would know. I’ve been running the Family... mostly.”

“So why is he handing strange men packages in the middle of the night?”

Luca tilts his head at me. “What?”

I search his intense eyes, looking for any sign of deceit. I wonder if I’d be able to read it if it was there, or maybe I’m kidding myself. Perhaps he could dance circles around my curiosity, treating me like some in-the-way kid, easily placated with a lie or two.

Quickly, I explain what I saw before Luca picked me up.



“That has nothing to do with us,” Luca says quietly. “As far as I know, at least, but I can look into it.”

“This was supposed to be a fun date,” I mutter. “Now we’re *looking into* my dad.”

He smooths his hand up my arm. “When you pout like that, I want to kiss you more.”

I pull my hand away. “My entire worldview about my dad is crumbling. I’m not really in the mood.”

He wraps his arm around me. When I move to pull away, he pulls me against him, holding my shoulder supportively. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he says fiercely, “but I’m going to be here for you. I’m going to help you. I’m going to protect you. It’s my job.”

I can’t fight him for long. The sense of comfort his embrace provides is just too intimate, too reassuring. I lean against him and close my eyes. “Your heart is beating so fast.”

“It’s you,” he whispers, kissing my head.

I slide my hands around his body, squeezing onto his back. “I’m not sure I want you to look into Dad.”

“Why not?” He strokes his hand through my hair. When I don’t reply, he says, “Are you scared of what I might find?”

“Yeah,” I say, relieved when he can read me and I don’t have to say it. “What if Dad isn’t the man I thought he was? He’s always been so loving, so caring. Even when he and Mom fight, Mom always takes it to the next level. Not him.”

“You don’t know who that man in the car was,” Luca says. “You said it was dark. You don’t even know if it was a man. Maybe your dad bought something online. As for his time in the Family, he was never *really* in. He never hurt people. He just carried messages. Stood guard at some meetings.”

“As far as you know,” I murmur, looking up at him. “But you were just a kid, you said. You could be wrong. He could’ve done worse.”

Luca swallows, his fingers trailing through my hair. “Whatever he’s done, Ruby, it’s nothing compared to me. I’ve

taken lives. I've hurt people."

"You said they deserved it."

"They did, but not everybody would agree with my assessment. Maybe you were right to be scared of me."

"It's too late for that," I murmur. "I'm not scared anymore."

This time, I'm the one who leans in for the kiss. I wrap my arms tightly around him and lose myself in the feeling of his lips and the closeness of our bodies. With his heat wrapping around me, with his body pressed against mine, I can forget about everything: Nate and the photo, the divorce, Dad's possible involvement, even the stuff with Scarlet—the past rearing its accusatory head.

I can simply be with him.

"We should try meeting in the day sometime," Luca says, kissing my head again, sending warm tingles all over my scalp. "Maybe you should come for a family lunch."

"*Family*, or capital-F *Family*?"

"Elio, Scarlet, Mom, Dad, and me."

"You want me to meet them all already?" I ask.

He smirks, raising his eyebrows as though this is a silly question. "Of course..."

My thoughts stray to Scarlet, wondering if she remembers the part I played, wondering if she hates me for it. Or was I as invisible to her in high school as I was to everybody else? After everything I've experienced, it just makes me feel even worse. I want to be a better person, though. I don't want to be afraid all the time.

He smooths his hand down my face. "What is it? The stuff about your dad freaking you out?"

I sigh deeply and then shake my head. All the while, my soul is *shaking*, too. "I don't know what to make of that if it's true," I tell him. "I'm still hoping you're wrong, but deep down, I know you're not. It's just..."

When I trail off, he says, “The fact we’ve only met a few times, and I already want to introduce you to my parents?” His smile is so complicated. It’s like he’s experiencing the same tension coursing through me, but he’s handling it better, somehow. I wonder what he’d say if I told him the truth.

“It feels weirdly natural,” I admit.

“Almost like we were meant to be?” he teases.

I put my hand on his chest, meaning to push myself away. Yet when I feel his solid build burning through his shirt, I end up pulling myself against him. He kisses me with so much passion, with so much *ownership*. As I sink deeper into the heat, part of me wishes we were texting instead.

As our tongues clash and my body sends urgent signals pulsing through me, I wonder how much easier it would be to type it all out in a message. To explain what I did. To explain why his sister-in-law might hate me.

“Have you spoken to your family about me?” I ask when the kiss is over.

“Yeah, and they want to meet you. You should’ve seen my mom’s face when I was describing you.”

“Describing me how?” I whisper, more tingles shimmering through me.

He wraps his arms around me, holding me close to him. Every time he kisses the top of my head, it’s like warm, soothing water trickling through my scalp and over my cheeks. “I said you glowed,” he whispers.

I laugh. “*Glowed?* Maybe I need to go see a doctor.”

He squeezes me. “I mean it,” he says. “There’s something special about you, Ruby. You shine. It’s your kindness. Your beauty.”

“My kindness,” I repeat. “You don’t know if I’m kind or not. I could be a complete douchebag, Luca. I could be a bully.”

He takes my shoulders and lengthens his arms so that there’s enough space between us for him to look down at me. With a soft shake of his head, he says, “You could never be a bully.

Say yes. Say you'll come to dinner. It'll be good for my folks to see I can have a real relationship."

"A real relationship? As opposed to what?"

He takes my hand and turns away. "Shall we get going? If we stay here any longer, I won't be able to hold myself back. I'll maul you."

It's obvious he just changed the subject, but I laugh anyway. "*Maul* me? Is that supposed to be a good thing?"

He laughs savagely. "I think so. It sounded good in my head."

"My big mafia bear," I tease, tickling his side. "You're going to *maul* me."

Even as we laugh, I can't stop thinking about what he said—a *real relationship*. So what does that say about his life before we met? He obviously has a past. I can't fight that. I can't expect anything different, but it doesn't mean I have to feel good about it.

## CHAPTER 14



Luca

The following day, I drive to Elio's office in the city. He doesn't work anywhere near as often as he used to. He spends a lot of time with his wife and newborn but still puts in decent hours. He's typing something when I push the door open. He gestures to a seat, his eyes focused on the screen, his fingers moving quickly.

I sit down and wait for him to finish. With anybody else in our lives, this would be a power play. Luckily, brothers don't have to worry about petty crap like that.

"So," he says, with a sarcastic smile, "how can I help you today, sir?"

I'm about to reply when my phone buzzes. "Hold on." I take it out and check the text. It's my woman. *Let's do dinner, Luca. I know it's complicated. I know it's crazy, but let's do it!*

*Complicated, crazy... two words that describe us perfectly. I'll make the arrangements.*

"I know that look," Elio says as I put away my cell phone.

I smirk. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"How long has it been? Less than a week?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"So I've been there. I know how quickly it can happen. I'm happy for you."

“Thanks, brother,” I say, “but it’s not like life is simple. I haven’t even taken her on a real date yet. She doesn’t even want to tell her family about me. She’s still scared of me, even if it’s just a little bit. Like a reflex, like how a man flinches when you pull a gun on him.”

“You can overcome all of that,” Elio says confidently.

“Then there’s the fact that her dad is Paulie Fitzgerald.”

My phone buzzes again, distracting me at the critical moment. I was going to watch Elio carefully as I dropped this information, but the vibration of my cell draws my gaze.

***Okay, Luca. I’m looking forward to it.***

There’s clearly more she wants to say.

...

After around thirty seconds, no message appears. I turn back to Elio.

“Her dad is Paulie,” I tell him.

“The courier?” Elio says.

“Apparently, he’s been meeting with men in the middle of the night, handing over packages. It looks like he’s still involved in Family business.”

Elio shakes his head. “No, he’s not. Not with *our* Family, anyway. Maybe he’s working with somebody else.”

I lean forward, looking closely at Elio. “Are you telling me the truth, brother?”

He narrows his eyes as if the idea he’d do anything but tell the truth is absurd.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I snap. “I only learned about the whole congressman thing because I agreed to help Ruby.”

“A lot of connections,” Elio mutters.

“Don’t start talking about fate and love and any of that crap.”

I sit back, folding my arms. It feels sick to call any of this *crap*, but I don’t want Elio to change the subject.

“Luca, listen, I don’t know anything about this. I swear, and I would’ve told you about the deal with the congressman, but...”

It’s a rare sight to see Elio Marino look unsure. He frowns and turns back toward the computer screen.

“What’s going on?” I say. “There’s something you’re not telling me. When we met with those douches, you said I could ruin what I have with Ruby somehow. It was a riddle. I let it go.” More accurately, Elio stormed off, but still. “We don’t lie to each other, Elio. That’s not something we do.”

Elio bites down, glances at me, and then back at the computer screen. Just before he’s about to answer, his office door opens. Scarlet walks in with Molly strapped to her chest, her precious little eyes closed. Scarlet stops short. “Sorry... am I interrupting something?”

I give Elio a look, meaning *Later*, and then I stand up. “No, it’s fine.” Leaning down, I kiss my niece on the head, then leave the office. As I walk out to my car, I call Colt. “Any news on the douche?” I ask.

“He has a boring life,” Colt says. “He drinks. He picks up women. He sleeps. Then he repeats the process. I haven’t seen anything criminal. How long do you want me to watch this bastard for?”

“As long as you can,” I tell him, refusing to let this go for some reason. “But I don’t want to take up all your time, Colt. Not for free—”

“I don’t need your money,” Colt replies coldly.

“Why? Because you already have enough money? Or you don’t want to take cash from a mafioso?”

“You’re a good man, Luca—a good training partner. I want to help you with this, but don’t make me answer that question.”

I sigh, struggling to work out his complicated moral code. He doesn’t want to take my cash but is willing to help me. “Fair enough, Colt. Keep me posted.”

---

Later, in my own office, I text my woman. Focusing on work was easy before Ruby came along. I slipped into the state Elio must've experienced when he was a workaholic. Since I had nothing else—partying seemed so hollow and still does—the facts, figures, and dealmaking were easy to prioritize. Now, with my woman *right there* and the cell phone calling me, it's much more challenging.

***Elio doesn't know anything about your dad, apparently,*** I type and then study the message. The “apparently” implies I don't trust my brother. Is that the case? We've always had each other's backs, even when we disagreed about certain things. I remove it, then send the message.

***What do you think I should do?*** she replies.

***Let me send a car to pick you up and bring you to me.***

***What, so you can't ruin my outfit before the dinner later, huh?***

Despite everything, I smile at the sassiness in her message. I can imagine her tossing her head, pushing her hair from her face, and looking at me bravely.

***I can speak to your father if you want,*** I tell her. ***He's familiar with the Marinos. I'm sure he'll talk to me, man to man.***

***What if you let it slip we're together?***

I lean back in my office chair with my teeth gritted as I let out a shaky breath. This message provokes a torrent of conflict in me. We're together. That's a good thing, the *right* thing. Hell, it feels like the *only* thing, but the part about letting it slip is downright fucked. It implies—not subtly—that she's ashamed of our... our what? Our relationship?

***Would that be such a bad thing?*** I counter.

***We can't tell my family until we know we're serious.***

***What does that mean, Marie?***

I wonder if she'll get the reference. When she does, I smirk. ***It means, Pierre, that we need to give this some time. But***



*you're sure as heck winning some points with these esoteric historical references.*

I chuckle. *Last night, I searched "famous historical couples." I'm glad it paid off.*

*Marie and Pierre Curie. They won the Nobel Prize together. They were a team.*

*That's what I want us to be,* I tell her. *A team.*

*This is all so new to me,* she counters. *I've never had a boyfriend. They're all used to seeing me as the shy, withdrawn girl with my head in the historical clouds. If I suddenly announce I've been seeing a mafia man and that I really like him after only a week...*

*A lot can happen in a week. A person can completely change in a week.*

*Please, Luca,* she sends. *Let's take this one step at a time, and I know. I'm too young to be this pessimistic.*

*I can talk to your dad without letting anything slip,* I text her, gritting my teeth. *I can say I've gotten word on the grapevine he's been couriering packages in the middle of the night.*

*What if this has nothing to do with the Family stuff?* she replies. *We don't know who those men were.*

*Then, I'll be more subtle about it. I'll pretend to run into him by mistake. Or you could speak with him and tell him you saw him and ask what's going on.*

There's a long pause. I look up at the computer screen, at the spreadsheet. Suddenly, it all seems so meaningless. I don't know how Elio did this for years without wanting to tear his hair out. Or maybe it's like I was thinking a few minutes ago. It was easy before meeting his lady.

*Okay, I'll speak to him about it,* she replies. *I don't want to cause World War III if it turns out there's an innocent explanation.*

I clench my teeth. *World War III...* She's talking as if it's a given her parents will disapprove of us. I don't see how we'll get over that hurdle if that's the case. Family is the most

important thing, always. If Mom and Dad somehow disapproved of Ruby—I don't see how anybody could—I'd force them to accept her.

She's a beautiful, kind young student, and I'm a man who's taken lives and lives on the dark side of life.

*Good idea, Juliet...*

*Hey, that's not a good one,* she replies. *That ended in tragedy.*

*Yeah, that was my point.*

I stare at the message before I send it. I'm being bitter. I'm being soft. Weak. I delete the message, and instead, I send, *I can't wait to see you later.*

Then I shove my cell phone in a drawer and focus on my work. My thoughts try to fill with scenes from the future—altars, sparkling engagement rings, honeymoons, and happiness—but I don't let it. I can't, not until I know we've got a real shot.

What if we don't? What if she pushes me away? What will I do then? I curl my hand into a fist. I'm being pathetic. I survived well enough before Ruby, and I'll be fine after, but that's a lie.

She's changed me. Forever.

## CHAPTER 15



### Ruby

“I hear you’re going out this evening,” Lexi says, wandering into the living room. I’m sitting in the armchair, waiting for Dad to get home, attempting—and failing—to read a book.

“Who told you that?” I say.

“Mom mentioned it when I met her for lunch.” Lexi sits opposite me, raising her eyebrows, her mismatched eyes looking *into* me. “Why? Was it a secret?”

I stare down at my book, trying to laugh, but it comes out shaky. “No. Why would it be?”

“Come on, kid. Cut the crap. Something’s going on.”

“Is it?” I say in the most innocent voice I can muster.

“You’ve been acting weird for a week. You’ve been avoiding me, and when we do talk, you won’t look at me.” When I meet her eyes, she smirks. “See. This eye contact feels weird, doesn’t it? *Rare*. Where are you going later?”

Lying straight to her face feels impossible, so I’ve been avoiding her. “A date,” I say quietly.

Her face lights up. “*That’s* what you’re hiding? What’s the problem with that? This is great news!”

“It’s... complicated.”

“Life’s complicated,” Lexi says.

“I thought you were against dating? Against happiness? Against relationships?”

She doesn't take the bait. “That's for me, Ruby. I'm going to die alone, and I'm fine with that—”

“I really wish you'd stop saying that.”

“But that doesn't mean *you* have to, does it?” she continues, ignoring me. “So, tell me about him. Or her.”

I put my book aside, wringing my hands together. “It's really hard to explain. I'd have to explain something about college, and I don't... I can't...”

Oh, heck. This is bad. I could keep the sadness at bay by locking it away from Lexi. However, my heart starts to hammer when she looks at me with that understanding glint in her mismatched eyes. Tears sting my cheeks.

“Ruby, what is it? What's wrong?” She sits on the arm of the chair, grabs my shoulder, and leans down, pulling me into a hug. “Talk to me.”

I wanted to keep this from her, but I can't anymore, not when she is willing me to tell her and being so sympathetic. I tell her everything in fits and starts: Nate taking the photo, reaching out to Luca for help, even seeing Dad meeting a mysterious man at night and his connection to the mafia.

When I finish, almost twenty minutes later, Lexi stares at me with wide, shocked eyes. “He... he... he photographed you?” she whispers. “He *blackmailed* you?”

I nod. “Yeah. I didn't know what to do, but Luca saved me.”

“Saved you?” she snaps. “He made sure the photo was deleted. He should've caved his head in!”

“He offered to hurt him,” I say quietly, shocked at my sister's rage. I really shouldn't be. She's always been protective.

“So why isn't he *hurt*?” Lexi snaps.

Of all the possible responses, this unbridled rage isn't one I expected. Maybe that was naïve of me. Lexi has always been the best big sister a person could wish for. Yet it's still freaky

seeing her like this, leaning forward with her blue eye blazing like a lightning bolt, her green eye staring with cold aggression.

“I asked him not to,” I mutter. “I didn’t want to cross that line. I just wanted the photo gone.”

“What’s this monster’s second name? You said his first name is Nate, right?”

“Lexi...” Leaning over the small coffee table, I place my hand against hers, but she snatches her hand away, shaking her head, glaring.

“Don’t *Lexi* me,” she snaps. “He deserves so much worse than what he got. He deserves whatever Luca was going to do to him.”

I swallow, looking at my sister like she’s a different person. I trust her opinion and judgment so much that I’m even starting to rethink my own instinctive fear, the shimmer of terror I felt at the idea of him letting out his dark mafia side. If *Lexi* is on his side... I can’t let my thoughts go there. I can’t let myself think like that.

“This is the best course of action,” I mutter. “I don’t want Luca to be a ki—” I can’t finish the thought.

Lexi glares at me. “Wake up, kid. He’s already a killer. He’s a mafia *prince*. He’s second-in-line to the Marino empire. If you’re going to do this, I won’t try to stop you as long as you know what you’re getting yourself involved with and you’re not walking into this blind.”

“I know who he is,” I say quietly. “We’ve talked about it. He says he’s never hurt anybody who didn’t deserve it.”

“I’ve heard the same about the Marinos. Remember I told you they’ve got a code? But you’re a better person than me, kid—more moral. How does it make you feel knowing the man you clearly care about has taken lives?”

Now, it’s my turn to glare at her. “Who says I *clearly care* about him, Lexi?”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t play games with me. I’ve never seen you like this before. Even when you were explaining all that sick stuff, your voice got all dreamy when you spoke about Luca. You’ve been waiting for a knight in shining armor your whole life, and here he is.”

“This isn’t fair,” I tell her. “When you talk about relationships, it’s only ever in the worst possible terms. It’s always pessimistic...” I trail off, a familiar sensation teasing me when I say *pessimistic*, reminding me of Luca. “Now you’re basically telling me to throw myself into his arms.”

“Newsflash. We’re not the same person. If I was in your position, all I’d be able to think about is the arguments Mom and Dad have had. All I’d think about is how it could never work. I’d poison the damn thing with overthinking. I bet you haven’t even thought about Mom and Dad, have you?”

“Not like that,” I murmur. “I’m just worried what they’d say if they knew.”

“Screw that,” Lexi snaps. “The only question that matters is... are *you* happy? Don’t waste time worrying about them. They’ve put us through too much.”

I walk around the coffee table and sit next to my sister. She stiffens when I put my arm around her, but then she lets me pull her into a hug. “It’s okay,” I whisper. “You don’t have to be so tough all the time.”

She turns and presses her face against my chest. For a moment, I think she’s going to burst into tears, but then she sits up and shakes her head. “What are you going to say to Dad? About his nighttime mafia deal?”

“I don’t even know if that’s what it was,” I murmur, wishing she’d let some of the pain go and let me carry it for her.

“I knew about the mafia thing,” Lexi mutters after a pause.

I gasp, leaning back. She looks at me miserably.

“You *knew*?”

“I found Dad with a couple of his friends when I was a kid. I demanded to know what was going on. He tried to tell me all

these lies.” *The sort you probably would’ve fallen for* is her unspoken follow-up. “But I made him tell me the truth. I wanted to tell you, kid. I just—”

“Stop calling me *kid*,” I snap. “All the times Mom and Dad argued, all the times we hid upstairs, listening to them yelling, I thought you had my back. I thought you’d never lie to me.”

“I didn’t lie. It just never came up.”

“Don’t give me that, Lexi. We both know it’s bullshit.”

“Hey, hey,” Dad says, walking into the living room, his hands raised. He’s wearing his construction gear. I didn’t hear him come in. “What’s up with you two?”

“Nothing,” I snap. “We’re just talking about your second life as a mafia hitman!”

Dad gapes at me as I storm out of the room.

---

I’m acting like a kid but screw it. The idea of Lexi lying to me—even to protect me, which is probably her reason—is just nuts. It refuses to fit into my head. Plus, there’s the embarrassment of how I handled that situation. Snapping at Dad, storming to my room, and now I’m locking myself up in here and refusing to talk to them.

It’s all so humiliating. I should handle this like a grownup, like the *mature one*, as Luca called me. I told him life could always be worse, but now, as I try to compare my situation to historical scenarios, I can *see* how life is worse, but I can’t feel it. I can’t make myself live in that other reality.

Dad knocks on my door several times, but I ignore him. I compose a bunch of messages to Luca, telling him I won’t make it tonight. Yet when I think about letting him down, I can’t do it. I really *want* to see him. I don’t want to let my family drama ruin the meeting with *his* family, even if the meeting causes nerves to swirl through me. Apart from anything else, it’s better than sitting around here feeling sorry for myself.

***Am I still good to send the car for seven, Ruby?***

I type out, *No*. Then I stare at the message, biting my lip. I quickly delete it, then type, *Yes, what should I wear?*

*Whatever you want. You'll look beautiful no matter what.*

My chest heats up, and my cheeks warm at the same time. A silly smile spreads across my face.

*Okay, but I mean, is it formal? Casual? I don't want to show up in jeans and a hoodie if everybody will be wearing tuxes and dresses!*

*Smart casual, I'd say. I'll be wearing a shirt and trousers. The ladies will probably be wearing dresses.*

Nerves shiver through me again. *The ladies* undoubtedly include Scarlet. Part of me knows I should tell Luca the situation before I walk in, but a small, cowardly voice whispers that maybe she won't remember. Perhaps, after everything that's happened to her since then, high school seems like a thousand years ago. Maybe she isn't holding a grudge.

*Okay, I'll find something. I need to get moving. I haven't done my hair and makeup yet, either.*

*You're talking like it's your wedding day. Just relax, Ruby. Just breathe...*

Three dots appear, and then he sends a follow-up message. *But if this were our wedding day, you'd have the best stylists anyway, so maybe that comparison doesn't make sense. See you soon. I'll let you know when the car is on the way.*

My heart starts to pound super hard. I'm unsure if he realizes it, but he just said *our* wedding day. Maybe it was a typo, but as I stare at the message, I can't help but imagine walking down the aisle, Luca standing at the altar in a dashing suit, his hair glistening and slicked back as he turns to me with a smile of pure love.



## CHAPTER 16



Luca

“Why don’t you sing something for us, Scarlet?” Mom says after taking a sip of her wine. For all her jitters and nerves, anybody would think it’s *her* girlfriend who’s about to meet *her* parents. Since I asked if they’d be willing to have dinner with Ruby, Mom hasn’t been able to contain her excitement.

Scarlet smiles, taking Elio’s hand when he offers it to help her to her feet. Molly is having a rare evening with a sitter, though I can tell it bothers my brother and sister-in-law to be away from their child. We’re sitting in the study, waiting for my woman’s car to arrive.

Scarlet sings, her voice flowing angelically. Elio watches her with a look of pure love on his face. I wonder if that’s how I looked last night in the museum with my woman, staring into her captivating eyes.

“*Never alone,*” Scarlet sings. “*Always together. We found our home...*”

She lengthens the note, meeting eyes with Elio. Even Dad has a sentimental look on his face. Scarlet’s mom, Jessica, wraps her hands around a glass of orange juice. We share a look, as we have many times. Though my issues never got as bad as hers—I was never dependent on pills—we can both relate to the struggle of becoming sober. Though mine was more like, *I’m done with this hollow life*. Hers was an uphill war against

an addiction that, for a while, looked like it might not release its hold.

“Wonderful,” Mom says, clapping her hands, then turning to Dad with an arch to her eyebrow. “Now it’s *your* turn, my love.”

Dad laughs gruffly. Apart from a few tics, which are holdovers from the stroke, he’s just like the man I’ve known my entire life. “You’d have to force me.”

Mom grins. “Don’t tempt me.”

As far as I can tell, they’re pretty much the same as they were before the cheating scandal came out, before the stroke. It makes sense, I guess, since Dad already knew about the cheating. I often still find myself watching, wondering if a relationship can overcome it.

I can’t even think about my woman being with another man, and it’s only been a week. What will it be like after years? I’d kill any bastard who touched her.

*Liar*, a vicious thought taunts. *You let Nate live.*

My phone vibrates. It’s the driver. ***Sir, she’s here.***

***I’ll be right down.***

“Why don’t you just have him bring her up?” Mom says, with a note of demand.

“Because I want to get her ready for the hyenas,” I joke, rising to my feet. “You’re acting like you’re going to tear her to pieces the moment she walks through the door.”

“Oh, *please*,” Mom says, laughing. “Can’t I be excited? Until recently, I thought both of you boys would be loners for life. Well... you, Elio. Nobody would describe you as a *loner*, Luca, would they?”

She means it as a joke, but I look at her coldly. “Don’t say that sort of thing in front of Ruby. I don’t want her thinking about me with anybody else.”

“Doesn’t she know about your past?”

“I don’t have a *past*,” I snap.

“Luca...” Mom’s using that *don’t lie to your mother* tone.

“Just because I partied and hung around with women from time to time, it doesn’t mean I slept with them all, does it?”

I leave the room, not wanting to start an argument tonight. This dinner is supposed to be about letting go of the outside world. Outside this penthouse, there are concerns we’ll have to deal with, like wolves waiting in the dark. Now, for a little while, we can forget. We can be normal, whatever the hell that means.

“Master Marino,” Sebastian says as I pass him in the hallway. He’s been the butler since I was a little kid, a tall, thin man with white hair and unique-looking, nearly purple eyes.

“How goes it, Seb?” I say, smiling.

“Busy as usual. If you don’t mind me remarking, you have a different energy this evening.”

“Don’t tell my mother, but I’ve found the woman of my dreams, Seb. That’s why.”

“I’m happy for you.”

I ride the elevator down, walk across the private parking garage, and open the rear door to let my woman out. My breath catches when I offer my hand, helping her to stand. She’s wearing an elegant, form-hugging dress that glistens from her neck to just below her knees. There’s a subtle slit up one side, classy, showing a hint of her tempting thigh. She’s combed and pinned her hair back, holding it in place with an encrusted jewel as though she’s forcing herself not to hide behind her hair. Subtle makeup touches her features, bringing out her natural beauty.

“So?” she says, nerves making her voice tight. “Luca?” She waves a hand in front of my face. “Earth to Luca?”

I reach out, sink my hands into her hips, and pull her in for a kiss. She makes that just-Ruby noise of pleasure.

“I’ve missed you today,” she whispers, her breath shimmering over my cheeks, her perfume wafting around me. “Does that make me needy?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “And I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Is it busy up there?” she asks, swallowing.

“Not really. Me, Mom, Dad, Scarlet, Elio, and Jessica, Scarlet’s mom.”

“Scarlet’s mom is here?” she says, her voice getting tighter.

“Hey, it’s okay.” I smooth my hand across her face. “It’s just a meal. I have to say... I’m so happy you chose not to cover your beautiful face.”

She reaches up and touches my hand. “I had to pin it in place.”

“I noticed, and it’s gorgeous. Come on. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

Once inside the elevator, she murmurs, “Luca, before we go up there, I have to tell you something.”

“Okay...”

She bites her lip, making her look so captivating. I have to focus on not letting tension flood my length, making me rock-solid. I have to concentrate with everything I have, not to let my balls fill and my desire unleash. It would be so easy to grab onto her thick, gorgeous leg, squeeze to feel her curviness, and spank her big, round ass again.

“Dad knows I know about the whole mafia thing,” she says, averting her gaze.

Something tells me she was initially going to say something else and then chickened out. I don’t want to push her; even if I did, there isn’t time. The elevator door opens with a *beep*.

“That’s okay,” I tell her. “After tonight, we’ll work out what to do. You need to know, Ruby, you’re not in this alone.”

---

“So, you’re going to be a historian?” Mom says almost the moment Ruby sits down.

Elio chuckles. “Give her a chance, Mom.”

“You’re pouncing on the poor girl,” Dad puts in.

I sit beside Ruby, my hand on hers to offer her some support against what feels like a gathered army. Even Elio is beaming. The only one who doesn't look hungry for every little morsel is Scarlet. In fact, she looks slightly concerned, but that's probably because her mind is on Molly.

"That's the plan," Ruby says. "I've always loved history. It's like disappearing into a different world. Well, it's our world, but..."

"They know what you mean," I tell her.

She smiles at me and reaches up to move her hair into place. Then she drops her hand as she remembers pinning it back to stop herself from doing precisely that.

"What part of history do you find the most interesting?" Dad asks.

"That's an issue, actually," she replies. "I need to pick a specialization, but I love it *all*. Whenever I think I've found my favorite era, I stumble on something else, and so on, and so on." She bites her lip, glancing at Scarlet, then down at the floor.

Scarlet looks at the floor, too. What the hell is going on between those two? Elio gives me a look. He's noticed it as well.

"Sir," Sebastian says, knocking on the door. "The starters are ready when you are."

Dad claps his hands, standing slowly. He winces a little as he leans against his cane. "Excellent. Shall we?"

I help Ruby to her feet, noticing how she stares across the room at Scarlet. As Scarlet walks past, Ruby suddenly steps forward. "Scarlet... I... Can we talk?"

Elio and I exchange another look. He's silently asking me if I've got any clue what's happening, and I'm doing the same, but neither of us has a clue. Finally, Scarlet nods, and the two women leave the room, walking quickly like they need to settle whatever business this is before they lose their nerve and back out of it.

“What’s that about?” Elio asks me.

“Honestly, I’ve got no idea.”

“Scarlet was nervous about tonight. She said...”

“What?” I demand when he trails off. “Don’t get all mysterious on me now.”

“She said she was worried that Ruby would be awkward around her. She was worried Ruby would assume a bunch of stuff that’s not true. That’s a quote.”

“What stuff?” I ask.

“She told me she’d prefer not to say.” Elio sighs. “Whatever it is, it’s not good.” He narrows his eyes. “I told you, little brother. This is fate. There’s too much connection here, too many coincidences. Somebody upstairs is having a grand old time at our expense.”

I want to make a joke and tell him he’s losing his mind, but the more events unfold, the more convinced I am he’s hitting the mark. “I just hope, whatever it is, it’s not too bad,” I whisper. “What if Scarlet and Ruby don’t get along? What would we do? We couldn’t choose, could we?”

Elio stares at me bleakly. “Jesus. Hell no.” He clears his throat, looking lost for words, a rarity for him. “I don’t know what we’d do,” he says after a long pause.

## CHAPTER 17



Ruby

“We can talk in here,” Scarlet says, leading me into a library filled with books.

I look around in awe, like some medieval peasant walking into a lord’s house.

“Does Luca know?” Scarlet asks, wincing as she sits near the window, moving as though she’s still pregnant. Yet she looks strong like, soon, she’ll be completely over the aches and pains.

“No,” I whisper. “I wanted to tell him, but... Scarlet, I’m so sorry.”

Scarlet’s expression softens. “Ruby, there’s nothing to be sorry about. It was high school. It was a million years ago.”

“But I *am* sorry,” I say firmly, sitting opposite her. “I’ve got no excuse.”

Scarlet folds her hands, looking at me unflinchingly. We’re the same age, but she seems far older somehow. Maybe it’s the fact she’s a mother or married. She looks like a mafia queen, and I’m just the would-be princess. “Why don’t you explain what happened from your point of view?”

I nod. I owe her this much, at least. “I was invisible in high school. I guess you probably felt the same. So when that asshole jock pulled the stunt...” We both pause, thinking of when the most popular kid in school brought in pig ears. He

glued them to Scarlet's hair before she had a chance to react, then started oinking, and everybody laughed and clapped... and so did I.

"I was going through a phase of trying to be popular," I go on. "I was sitting at the cool girls' table, thinking I was so special."

Tears threaten, but I push them away. It's not my right to cry, not after what I did.

"When it happened, all the girls started clapping, and I just went along. Like an idiot. Like a *sheep*. I can't believe I did it."

Scarlet nods. "I didn't see you at the popular girls' table after that."

"I felt sick with them," I snap. "Absolutely disgusted. In fact..."

"Wait." To my shock, Scarlet smiles. "I think I've guessed this next bit, Ruby. May I?"

"Uh, sure."

"That semester, all the popular girls—who had somehow been doing extremely well in history—all got straight Fs in their biggest assignments, completely tanking their grades. My theory is you were helping them with their work, but then you decided to sabotage it."

I can't help but grin when she's aiming such a beaming smile at me, but I quickly wipe it away. "That doesn't make it okay."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because they're bitches," I snap. "The way they laughed and after, the way they fawned over that jock douche. It made me sick. I would rather have no friends than suck up to them."

Scarlet beams. "That was my theory. I wanted to ask you about it, but high school..."

"It was hell, wasn't it?"

"Yep. I don't miss it one tiny bit. Is college better?"



I nod. “Much. There aren’t the same games. Nerds are actually respected. There’s a lot more independent work. Scarlet, I’m really sorry. I hate myself for it. It’s one of my worst memories.”

“Oh, Ruby.” Scarlet reaches over and takes my hand. “If *this* is one of your worst memories, you must be a pretty special person. Don’t beat yourself up about it. I was worried you might be. It’s all in the past.”

“Really?”

She squeezes my hand. “Something’s changed in Luca since you came along. Elio has noticed it. I’ve noticed it. We all have. There was a time when I’d thought it impossible for two people to fall for each other this quickly. After Elio and me...” Her smile widens. “I know *anything’s* possible. Don’t let some silly thing in the past spoil it. It’s all ancient history.”

“That’s the problem, though. All I think about is history.”

She laughs. “Not anymore.”

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Luca’s mom, Alessia, laughs as she places her wine glass down. “And you sabotaged their grades?”

I risk a smile, though I still feel terrible about the whole thing. “It felt like the right thing to do. They were so cruel, but so was I.”

“She’s a keeper, Luca,” Elio says, grinning. “Ruby, if *this* is the worst thing you’ve ever done, you’re a saint, especially compared to my wife.”

Scarlet playfully digs her elbow into him, and he leans in and kisses her on the cheek.

“Really,” Luca says softly beside me. “Don’t beat yourself up. We all make mistakes.”

“I’m just glad it’s out in the open,” I tell them. “It’s seriously been eating at me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, Luca.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he tells me.

For the rest of the dinner, we talk about my history work, the funny things Molly does, and the time Alessia got stranded at the mall and ended up running up a ten-thousand-dollar charge on her credit card. After saying goodbye, when Luca walks me down to the car to give me a ride home, he says, “You’re smiling. I take it that wasn’t as terrible as you imagined?”

I spin on him, throwing myself into a kiss. He catches, spins, and gently pushes me against the hallway wall. He groans in that husky, possessive way as I wrap my arms around him.

“Seems like it went *very* well,” he growls.

“It was so refreshing,” I tell him. “Talking about fun things. I didn’t have to worry people would start arguing any second. There was no tension or awkwardness in there. Well, after I cleared up the stuff with Scarlet, anyway.”

“You’re cute as hell for thinking any of us would hold that against you,” Luca says. “You’re a good person, Ruby. After spending five minutes with you, nobody could doubt that.”

“I still feel horrible,” I whisper.

“*Because* you’re a good person.” He kisses the edge of my mouth. “Let’s go someplace tonight. Let’s not have the night end here.” He kisses my cheek toward my ear. Blossoms of heat tingle and tease down my neck, coiling around my throat like a necklace. He kisses my neck, breathing hotly. “I know you’re ready. I can feel it. Feel your hot, horny body aching for me.”

I squeeze my hands down on his arms, his muscles throbbing against me. He’s not wrong. I *feel* ready. However, there’s still this doubt twisting through me, a feeling like I’ll somehow make a fool of myself and ruin it all at the last second.

Pushing that feeling down, I look into his eyes. Without my hair to block my vision, I see so much clearer. “Let’s do it,” I whisper. “I want it—you, Luca. I want *you*.”

The desire comes from deep inside me, pulsing through my entire body. The only issue is my *mind* is playing mean games with me, making me think about what it’s going to be like

when he guides his huge manhood to my sex. Those moments are tantalizing in my thoughts but also terrifying.

“I told you it would be on silk sheets,” he says with a husky hunger in his voice, smoothing his hand to the small of my back and guiding me down the hallway.

I walk with him, repeating in my head over and over, *I want tonight to be special. I want tonight to be special. I want tonight to be special.*

In college, for some of the other girls, sex isn't even the big thing it feels like it is to me. They don't build it up to some imposing Goliath. They don't stress about it. They just *do it*. I wonder if I can be the same and cross that line. Maybe that's part of the problem. I'm thinking of it as *crossing a line*, building it up like it's a task I *must* complete rather than something I want to do.

I need to listen to the tingling inside me instead. I need to listen to the shimmering need deep in my belly, the tingles that never stop dancing over my skin.

## CHAPTER 18



*L*uca

My dick is solid as we ride the elevator up to our hotel room. As soon as the older gentleman riding with us leaves, the elevator stopping at his floor, I press my woman against the wall and kiss her passionately. I push my hips forward, letting her feel how hard she makes me. Her body blazes through her form-hugging dress, her skin feeling hot and needy.

She presses against my chest when the elevator door opens, staring up at me with her mouth slightly ajar. Her cheeks are redder than her makeup could possibly make them, blazing with her lust.

“You make me so damn hot,” I groan, sliding my hand up the curvy landscape of her thigh and grabbing her hip like the indulgent bastard I am.

She moans and leans up for a kiss. Then I see somebody out of the periphery of my vision, and I take her hand instead, leading her down the hallway to the presidential suite. Inside, she turns in a circle, gazing at the extravagant room.

“Isn’t this a little much?” she says.

I sink my hands greedily, savagely, into her hips, pulling her right up against me. “Nothing is too much for you,” I tell her. “You deserve all of this and more. Oh, fuck, you’re driving me crazy.”

She gasps in that innocent, youthful, horny-as-hell way when I crush her lips in a kiss and push her up against the couch. She falls back, and I hold myself up with one hand, using the other to slide the fabric of her dress up her leg, savoring the feel of her hot skin, her pussy beckoning to me with heat and wetness.

“Uh, uh,” she stutters when I press my hand down on the outside of her underwear. “Oh, *heck*.”

“I love how fucking soaked you get for me,” I growl. “You can pretend you’re nervous, my perfect historian, but your body tells me otherwise. Your body tells me you want this badly. Your body is aching for me.”

She moans, rocking her hips as I begin to rub. I can feel her swollen folds through her panties. I grab the fabric in a greedy fist and then pull them down.

“I need to taste you,” I tell her. “I need to taste your pussy. I need to taste all of you. I... own... you.”

My voice trails off into a savage, shaky sigh when the soft lamplight rests on her core. With her dress hiked up around her hips, I’ve got a perfect view of her pussy. Her folds are swollen with desire. Her clit looks engorged and ready for everything I’m going to give it. Best of all is her pink, excited pussy, gleaming at me like she wants my dick right now.

I reach down, stroking my hand over the outside of my pants, gazing at her. She’s turning me into an animal.

“Has anybody ever licked your pussy before?” I snarl.

“No,” she whispers. “And I don’t want anybody else to—just you, only you.”

I sink to my knees at the edge of the couch, gripping her thighs too hard, if her whimper is anything to go by. I find it difficult to make my hold softer. Instead, I gaze into her eyes, sinking my fingers into her curvy flesh, obsessed with how thick she is, with how much of her there is.

“Tell me, Ruby,” I growl.

She blinks, thinking about what I’m asking, then murmurs, “Please, Luca. Please lick my, my...”

“*Say it!*”

“... pussy.”

“Oh, *fuck.*” I almost roar as I lean down, letting the scent of her whirl around me, infusing me with her desire.

I intend to go slowly, but when I kiss her thigh and taste her sweat, it’s like her body is talking to me. I can’t hold myself back. I press my face against her. She tastes so. Fucking. Perfect. I open my mouth wide, darting my tongue out and sliding it up her folds, focusing on her clit, then sliding it back down. She gasps and shifts against me more eagerly than when I was using my hand.

I groan, making serious beast-like noises, and push my tongue down firmly against her clit. She bucks her hips, grinding against me, urging me to lick her quicker, harder. It’s like her excited body is telling me to make her come.

I slide my tongue down to her entrance, sliding around it before I push in, feeling her tightness wrap around my tip, just like it’s my dick, fucking her with my erect tongue. She pushes against me as I slide in, as her taste completely envelops me, surrounds me. I’m claiming her with every single movement. I’m owning her.

At the same time, I rub her clit with my hand. Her moans fill my ears, fill my world. Nothing else exists. Nothing else matters.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she sings so perfectly. My perfect, flawless woman. “Luca.”

“Come for me,” I groan, then immediately start tongue-fucking her again.

“What, on command?” she says sassily.

I smirk and look up at her curvy body. Her hairpin has come loose, causing her hair to fall across her eye again. As we lock gazes, she brushes her hair *out* of her face instead of trying to hide behind it. She smiles, a glint of *danger* in her eyes like this is a huge moment for her. Weirdly, I find myself wishing I was a virgin, too, but experiencing her excitement with her is the next best thing.

“Not on command,” I say, grinning. “I could do this all night long. Your pussy tastes so damn good. It’s addictive. *You’re* addictive.”

She shivers, nodding. I realize she probably thought I would try to pressure her.

Focusing on her slit again—I can’t leave it alone for long—I lick her folds and her clit with even more eager enthusiasm. She pumps her hips with even more insistence against my face. Her moans come faster, then catch, hollow, like she can’t produce any noise. It’s like she’s struggling to accept just how much pleasure she’s experiencing.

That makes me lick her even harder. With her tight, inexperienced body all hot from my tongue, I guide my finger to her, sliding in and swirling it in circles. She starts panting as I shift my finger up and down, causing her body to move in the same way, her lust bubbling up.

I want to lean back so I can watch the orgasm tear through her, but that would mean moving my mouth away from her, sacrificing her perfect taste. She starts bucking against me like she can’t contain the pleasure. Something in her frantic movements reaffirms this is her first time. It’s in her moans, too—shock, stunned pleasure, like she can’t believe this is happening.

I slide another finger into her, stretching her walls as she gushes her juices all over my hand. “Oh, *heck*,” she moans, and her body stops shuddering.

Standing up, I stare down at her wet core, immediately reaching for my belt. Her eyes snap open wide, one staring from behind her hair as I tear my belt loose. I’m panting like an animal, hardly able to control my breathing, feeling like a beast and not giving a damn.

Then I remember what I promised her—silk sheets. She laughs excitedly when I lean down and lift her, holding her against my chest as I carry her through the suite. Taking her into the bedroom, I lay her down on the four-poster bed, then tear my belt off.

She sits up, staring up at me.

“Get your big, perfect tits out.” I hardly even recognize my own voice. I sound unhinged, on the edge of completely losing control. “I need to see your nipples.”

She starts messing with her dress, but her hands are trembling. I lean down and grab her dress. “Lift your arms.”

She does as I tell her, and then I tear the dress over her head, revealing her bra. I grab her bra and unclip it quickly, tossing it to the floor, my whole world shaking as I lean down and press her gorgeous tits together. I suck on one thick nipple, massaging her other breast, swirling my tongue around it, spreading the juices she pulsed into my mouth.

“Oh, Luca,” she whispers.

“I need your tight virgin body,” I snarl. “I need your horny, inexperienced slit.”

Forcing myself to stand up again—I could play with her tits all night long—I pull my pants and underwear down at the same time, freeing my dick. She gasps, staring at me, grabbing thick handfuls of the silk sheets as if she needs something to hold on to.

“You’re so big,” she murmurs. “Luca, I don’t know...”

Then, a daring glint comes into her expression. She reaches forward and wraps her hand around my shaft, stroking up and down, spreading precome along the length of my dick. My balls flood, and seed rushes up my shaft like I’m going to erupt all over her face, her tits, her perfect body.

“Lie back,” I snarl. “I need to feel you.”

She trembles slightly again, a warning alarm blaring in my mind. If I had less primal hunger, maybe I’d stop and ask if she’s okay. But I can *smell* how badly she wants this, as insane as that seems. It’s like her body is sending me urgent signals.

She lies on the silk sheets, her legs open, her pussy fluttering as though beckoning to me. When I climb atop her and guide my tip to her entrance, she bites her lip, her eyes widening



even more. I push in just a little, but then her walls close slightly. I can feel her nerves in the movement of her body.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Luca—”

“It’s okay,” I say, but it comes out as more of a growl.

“Just keep going.”

I push in more, but then she winces, breaking the spell. “I’m not going to hurt you,” I tell her.

“I want this,” she says, trailing her fingernails down my back. “Try again. Please. Just try again.”

I grind against her, but she gasps. Moving away, I stand up, turning from her so the animal in me can’t take over. There’s a dark, mafioso voice roaring at me to bend her over, reveal her thick juicy ass, spank her roughly, and take her even rougher. I’ll glide hard and fast into her tight virgin body, fuck her until the walls of her slit stretch for me. I’ll...

But she deserves better than that. My head is pulsing.

“Luca,” she says, her voice tangled. “Look at me.”

I turn slowly, warning myself to calm down.

“Is there something else I can do? Tell me. I want to...”

“Bend over,” I growl. “Show me that perfect ass. Beg me to spank you.”

When she eagerly follows my commands, my balls swell even more. My dick is leaking so much precome it drips onto the expensive rug. I can feel her wetness teasing the tip of my cock, too, from where I almost glided inside of her.

The lamplight bounces off the round, perfect globes of her big ass. She looks at me over her shoulder. “Spank me,” she moans. “Spank me, Luca. Please. Punish me for not being able to take your big dick.”

“Oh, *fuck*,” I groan. “For somebody who’s never dirty talked before, you’re so damn good at it.”

“I just like seeing you all excited.”

I bring my hand down on her ass, causing her thick flesh to jiggle for me. She moans when I spank her again, and then I can't take it anymore. I step forward, bringing my dick to her ass.

“Luca.” She bites down. “I don't think—”

“I'm going to slip my dick between your perfect ass cheeks,” I tell her. “So thick. So damn juicy. So red from the spanking...”

I press her curvy globes together, sliding my shaft in between them and moving my hips back and forth, claiming her in the only way I can. My precome makes the movement slick. She moves with me like she will when I take her for real. She pushes back against me. It's so hot. My whole length tingles, burns, and it's so, so, so—

I roar as a river of come explodes out of my dick, splattering all over her ass and her lower back. I keep going, pumping faster, owning her, claiming her. Finally, I stop, taking a few stumbling steps back.

“I...” She bites down and crawls onto the bed, almost like she wants to escape me. “I should get cleaned up.”

## CHAPTER 19



**R**uby

Maybe it's immature—I guess Luca was wrong when he said I'm the mature one—but after washing up in the bathroom, I sit on the edge of the jacuzzi with my phone in my hand.

*I'm sorry I couldn't go all the way.*

From the next room, he chuckles. “Are we really doing this, Ruby?”

*Humor me, I text. Sometimes, this is easier than talking.*

His voice gets closer. He's standing right outside the door. “You don't have to be sorry. I was going crazy. You're so beautiful, so sexy. It's like you turn me into an animal, but we've got all the time in the world.”

*What if I can't ever do it?*

“This is new to you, that's all.” His voice is husky and intense. “Maybe I'm pushing you too hard.”

*It's not that. I wanted it. It's just that my annoying body refused to cooperate.*

“Seemed like it cooperated fine to me,” he says passionately. “When your ass turned red for me. When your pussy got all creamy and excited. Fuck, I'm getting hard again just thinking about it.”

*I want to go all the way, but how can I? I wanted it so badly just then. I can't imagine wanting it more than that.* I pause,

the sensations returning to me, the deep burning in my belly, the tickling, teasing of my sex. *Somehow, for some reason, I couldn't. What if you're too big?*

"I'm not, Ruby. You just need time."

Suddenly, a petty feeling grips me. Maybe it's guilt mixed with hopelessness. *I guess you'd know about that from all your experience?*

Luca pushes the door open, which I didn't lock, and strides across the bathroom in his underwear. He looks at me, still naked, then turns and grabs one of the fluffy robes from a hook on the door.

"Put this on," he says huskily. "Or I won't be able to stop myself."

I put the robe on, a shimmer dancing over me despite the argument I feel brewing. It's the stress of everything stacking up, the reveal about Dad, the tension with Scarlet, and now this—not being able to give my man what he wants.

"It's true, though," I mutter, tying the robe belt. "You've been with so many more people than me. It's like trying to answer an essay question. Let's say the question is, *What's it going to be like when we have sex?* I've got zero sources. You've got..."

Luca winces. His muscles throb, bulging, his stomach tightening and highlighting the ripped sheet of his abs. "We don't need to talk about that."

"You got defensive when we texted about it, too," I point out. "It's making me suspicious."

"I've got a feeling you're trying to pick a fight."

"That you won't talk about it makes me even more suspicious."

He lets out a growl of a sigh. He wasn't lying when he said I turn him into an animal. "For too many years, I partied and drank. I didn't take life seriously. That changed after my brother met the woman of his dreams. I had to step up for the Family, but I was numb. I felt nothing... until I saw you."

Walking over to him, I put my hand against his naked chest, feeling his heart drumming powerfully. “Imagine me with another man. Imagine me naked with him. Imagine me—”

“I can’t,” he cuts in. “It’ll make me crazy.”

“Then you understand why it’d make *me* crazy imagining you with other women.”

“So how will learning the number help?” he snaps.

“Because... because...”

“Because you’re trying to pick a fight, but you don’t need to feel bad about what just happened.” He brushes my hair out of my eye, leaning down. “I meant what I said. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

“But why won’t you tell me?”

“It’s not as many as people think,” he says.

“What do people think?”

He shrugs, his intense eyes darting all over the place like he’s searching for an escape. “I spent a lot of time at clubs with my men. There were women there. People seem to assume I went to bed with every one of them, but that’s not true. Most of the time, I just got shitfaced and passed out.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“We belong to each other, Ruby,” he says passionately. “You and me... here, now. I don’t care about the past.”

“But I do,” I snap, knowing he’s right, knowing I’m picking a fight. I feel possessed, like I can’t stop. “The more you refuse, the more I want to know.”

I’m not sure that’s entirely true. It’s more like I *have* to know as if I’m digging deep into some historical issue, gathering all the data possible, so... so what? What’s my endgame here?

“Fifteen,” he says. “But none of them meant anything to me, and I didn’t mean anything to them. It was all just... just waiting, Ruby. Waiting to feel. Waiting for you.”

He leans down, pressing his lips against mine. My body *now* chooses to respond, letting me sink into the heat of the embrace without thinking, but then ugly images stab into my mind—fifteen shades of jealousy.

“I think I want to go home,” I whisper. “I’m sorry, Luca. You’re right. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I can’t control what I did before I met you,” he says with his face close to mine, his breath painting me warmly. “I can tell you for a fact, if I’d met you years ago, you’re the *only* woman I ever would’ve been with. If I’d known I would feel this way one day—if I knew it was possible to feel like this—I would’ve waited for you.”

His words light me up, heat pulsing through me, but it’s still difficult to get those ugly images out of my head.

“Thanks for saying that,” I say. “I just need time to think.”

“About what?” he replies, his voice tight. For a second, I almost think he sounds scared. “We belong together, Ruby. I own you, and *you* own every part of *me*. I wish I could go back in time and crack the old Luca across the jaw.”

“I want you,” I tell him. “My head just feels like a mess. I’m not used to any of this—socializing, let alone dating. I guess it’s an introvert’s curse. Stuff only starts to make sense when I’ve got time to be alone and figure it out.”

For a moment, I think he’s going to argue. Then his expression softens as much as my man’s expression *can* soften, anyway. “Okay, but remember what I said. You and me, Ruby, it’s just you and me. Nobody else matters. Ever.”

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He drives me to the end of the street, killing his engine. When he places his hand on my leg, those familiar tingles dance through me. He leans over and kisses me on the cheek, whispering intensely, “Tell me you belong to me.”

Despite everything, I can’t tell him anything different. It feels true, a burning certainty in my core and soul, if such a thing exists. “I belong to you.”

“And I belong to you,” he says, squeezing my leg as if holding me in place. “Remember that, Ruby. No matter what happens, I’ll never be with anybody else. I’d rather spend the rest of my life waiting for you.”

“Really?” I look up into his eyes.

“Really,” he says, and I know he’s telling the truth. I know we can make this work—

Then my door flies open. I spin, shock coursing through me. Luca bursts from the car and starts yelling, “Put your hands up, or I’ll drop you, motherfucker. Hands up, now!”

Dad stands on the sidewalk, his hands above his head, his face red as he stares down at me, his eyes glittering like he might cry.

## CHAPTER 20



Luca

It takes me a moment to process what's happening. Paulie stands on the other side of the car, his hands above his head, looking more pissed than I've ever seen him. Not that that's saying much. It's not like I saw him often as a kid, just enough to recognize him.

Slipping my gun back into my jacket, I shake my head. "That wasn't very smart."

"What is this?" Paulie whispers, slowly lowering his hands, looking at his daughter, not me. "Ruby, why are you with *him*?"

"I... we...It's complicated..." Ruby hesitates.

"I saw you *kissing* him, Ruby," Paulie snaps. "Do you have any idea who that is? What am I saying? Of course, you do. He's the one who told you about my past, isn't he?"

"Dad—"

Paulie suddenly breaks into a jog, moving around the car toward me. I raise my hands when he spins into a telegraphed right hook. It's not like I'm going to hit him first or even back, but I won't let him take my head off, either.

His punch connects with my arm, and I step back, slipping the next one.

"Dad," Ruby yells, breaking into a heart-wrenching sob as she throws her arms around him and pulls him away.



Paulie glares at me, his chest heaving. “I left the life... and you *followed* me?”

“I didn’t know she was your daughter, Paulie,” I tell him, trying to keep myself calm. In our life, when a man swings at you, swinging back is a necessity.

“But you told her, didn’t you?” he demands.

I sigh, nodding. “Yes, I did, but when I first met her, I had no idea—”

He holds his hand up. “Enough, Luca. This is just... You were a *kid* the last time I saw you. Remember how I used to give you those baseball cards?”

I think back. A smile almost touches my lips, but the fury in his face stops me. “I didn’t until just now, but yeah, I do.”

“This ends here. My daughter isn’t part of this life. Whatever the hell this is, it’s over. You understand me?”

I swallow. “Paulie, I don’t want to disrespect my girl’s father—”

“*Your* girl?”

“But I can’t promise that. I just can’t. She means too much to me already.”

“I left that life behind,” Paulie snaps. “I didn’t do that so you could drag her back into it.”

“Dad, you haven’t left it behind,” Ruby says, her voice tight, filled with heartache as she glares at her father. I can see his confusion painting every inch of him. “I saw you meet that man in the middle of the night. I saw you hand him a package. That was some pretty mafia-looking stuff to me!”

“What man?” Paulie narrows his eyes, then sighs. “Jeez, Ruby. That was a friend from the construction site. He’s going away for the next few weeks, so he had to meet me at the last minute. I bought a necklace from him for your mother. I know you refuse to believe it, but we’re really going to make it work this time.”

“Really?” Ruby asks doubtfully.

“I swear. I left that life behind a long time ago. I was only involved in it because I had no choice, no other way to make money at the time. When I found out your mom was pregnant, I knew I couldn’t stay in. I knew I had to find a better path.”

“You know as well as me,” I growl, “the Marinos are a big part of why this city’s safe to walk at night. We’re the reason the streets aren’t filled with drugs. *We’re* the reason—”

“I know, Luca,” Paulie says, seeming calmer now, “but you’re still a mafioso. You still walk on the unlawful side of the road. I wanted a legitimate life, and that’s still what I want. For myself. For my family.” He holds his hand out to Ruby. “Come on. We’ll talk about this later.”

Ruby flashes a look at me, her eyes wide, but nothing like they were in the hotel room. Terror touches every part of her. “Dad, please don’t make me choose.”

“How long has this been going on?” Paulie demands.

“I don’t know—a week, maybe more.”

“A week.” Paulie laughs gruffly. “You’ll get over it. Or you *can* choose right now, right here. Your family or *the* Family, with a capital F.”

“It’s okay,” I tell Ruby. “I’d never drag you away from your family. We can talk about this later.”

“No, you won’t,” Paulie snaps.

“With all due respect, Paulie—”

“*Paul*,” he snaps. “Just Paul.”

I sigh, grinding my teeth. Conflicted feelings burn through me. One part wants to turn full savage and defend my closeness with his daughter. This is the same part that wants to push him hard, get him away from Ruby, get her in the car, and drive somewhere we can forget about this drama. There’s another part—the one I’ve got to listen to—that knows I can’t disrespect my woman’s father.

“Paul,” I go on. “I want to make this work, but everybody needs to cool off. Ruby, go with him.”

“I don’t want to abandon you,” she whispers, almost breaking down into a sob.

“Listen to yourself,” Paulie says. “He’s twisted your head up, hasn’t he? Come on.” He grabs her arm, turning toward the house. “I won’t let him make you feel guilty for doing the right thing.”

I grind my teeth some more, hating how he frames it, but I have to try to see it from his point of view. He thought he was done with the mafia life, and then he saw me kissing his daughter. I didn’t want him to find out like that.

Ruby turns, but not before giving me a meaningful look. She bites her lip and then walks toward the house.

I climb into the car. It’s only when they’ve disappeared that I let my rage out. Over and over, I slam my hand against the steering wheel, letting out a guttural roar. Is this it, the end? Now, I’ll have to go back to being the man I was before I found my dream girl. Cold. Dead inside. I don’t know if I can let go of this fire.

---

Colt grunts as I land a front kick to his midriff, but then he pivots and springs into a single-leg takedown, grabbing my leg and forcing me to hop around on the other foot. With a well-placed trip—moving with the speed and precision few people would expect from a man his size and age—he puts me on my ass. I scramble back to my feet, landing an elbow to the side of his head.

He grunts, and I realize I’ve thrown it harder than I usually would in sparring.

“Keep going,” he growls, reading my hesitation. “Fifty seconds left.”

He lands an elbow on me, causing my brain to rattle in my skull. I raise my guard, shift back, slip a punch, and then throw a leg kick that almost buckles him. Shadow whines from the side of the ring.

After another elbow, he ducks and fluidly glides around for a back take, then wrenches me to the mat. This time, he manages to wrestle me, holding me down as he tries to establish a top position. I scramble up to a half-seated position, lifting my arm. I'm about to throw a wild elbow onto the top of his head when the timer goes off.

Colt falls away, breathing hard, and I stumble to my feet.

"It's okay, boy," Colt says, walking over to the side of the ring and stroking Shadow on top of the head.

I grab my towel and wipe down my face. Spots of blood come away from the elbow.

"That's why I like you, Colt," I say. "Can't think of anybody else who'd go to war with me in the middle of the night."

Colt laughs gruffly. "This isn't war, Luca, but I know what you mean."

"Still, it takes a real man to spar like that and not hold a grudge."

"You're not the only one who needs to let out some darkness." Colt looks off into the middle distance, seeing phantoms only visible to him, ones he'll never speak about. "What happened?"

"My girl's dad saw us kissing. Decided he didn't want her dating a mafioso."

"Can't blame him for that," Colt says gruffly.

"What's your problem with the Family?" I snap.

Colt sits ringside with one hand on Shadow, looking like a giant with his shoulders hunched, his silver hair glistening with sweat. "I've seen what crime families do, Luca."

"But we're not like that," I tell him. "We've bled, lost men, fought wars to keep *those* sorts of Families out of our city. Whatever you've seen, don't put that shit on us."

He stares impassively, and I sigh. One reason I like Colt so much is also a reason he's so frustrating. He simply doesn't care. At least, he doesn't show it much.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“Text my woman. See where we stand. I can’t let her go. I know that much. I need to win her dad over and show him I’ll do right by his daughter.”

“You really care about her,” Colt mutters.

“You sound jealous.”

He smirks, which is a rare sight. “No woman would have me, Luca. Too many demons. Too much baggage. The truth is, I’ve never met a woman I’d want, either, but you... Something’s changed. I can see it. Anybody could. Ruby’s changed you. If anything’s worth fighting for, that is.”

“For somebody who seems determined to die alone, you sound like a hopeless romantic.”

Shadow makes a whining noise that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. Colt tilts his head at him. “Yeah, real funny, boy.” He turns back to me. “Is your head ringing, too?”

“Yeah, but it’s good. This means I don’t have to think about letting my lady go. I swear, Colt, I can’t do it. I don’t know how I’ll live without her. If I hadn’t seen it for myself with my brother and his wife, I’d think I was going nuts.”

“Maybe you are. Maybe you *both* went nuts.”

“But it worked,” I snap. “Scarlet and Elio are happy. I’m starting to wonder if I can taste a bit of that happiness, too. At least, I was, until tonight.”

“If you’re looking for relationship advice, you’ve come to the wrong man,” Colt says. “But I know one thing. When you find something worth fighting for, you don’t stop. Even if the enemy breaks every bone in your body, even if they do things that would shatter the wills of twenty other men, you keep going. As long as you’re breathing, you fight. That’s it. No excuses.”

“Wouldn’t she be better off without a mafioso, though?” I say, smirking.

“Maybe so. Maybe not. That’s not the point. The point is...” His eyes gleam, making him look younger than his forty-five

years. “You’re a good sparring partner. I can’t have you moping around and missing training.”

He climbs to his feet and walks over to the round timer, putting another three minutes on. I stand, rolling my shoulders and popping my head from side to side. My cell phone is resting on a stall beside the ring. I’ve got it on loud just in case my woman texts me.

## CHAPTER 21



Ruby

“How can you be so certain after a week, Ruby?” Mom says, frowning.

Suddenly, she and Dad are a team, sitting side by side across the kitchen table. I’ve got Lexi on *my* side. Somehow, my relationship with Luca has turned into a family meeting. Mom is wearing a new, glittering, beautiful necklace, so apparently, Dad was telling the truth about his nighttime meeting.

“Especially because you’ve never had a boyfriend before,” Mom says.

I run my hand through my hair, toward my bangs, and then forcibly stop myself from shielding my face. I’m not going to hide from this moment. I’m not going to avoid the difficulties of life anymore. I find myself thinking of Valentina Tereshkova, which is absurd. She was the first woman in space, and I’m just fighting for my first relationship. Still, it gives me some context. Things could be *way* harder.

Sitting up straight, I look Mom in the eye. “I knew the first moment I saw him. I know what you’re going to say. I’m too young. I’m naïve. Or maybe he tricked me. Yes, that’s it. He used some clever pickup lines and twisted my head.”

It’s how Dad described it earlier after Luca pulled a gun on him. This is so *wild*.

Mom makes a tutting noise, telling me that's exactly what she was going to say. "Could you blame me for thinking any of that, Ruby? You've never had a *casual* boyfriend before, and now you're talking like you're ready to settle down and get married!"

I push down my instinctual response, which is, *Yeah, because that's exactly what I want*. Instead, I take a long sip of my cocoa, giving me a chance to think about what I will say.

"We've got something special," I tell her. "It's only been a short time, but we're both certain already. We *both* feel it, Mom. And Dad, honestly, I had no idea there was any connection with you and in other ways."

I trail off, not wanting to get all lovey-dovey and annoy them.

"What?" Dad urges.

"It's nothing."

"You can't start saying something and then tell us it's nothing," Mom snaps.

I almost snap at her, saying she can't throw plates and mugs and scream at Dad, and then expect Lexi and me to believe it will all work out. I could toss plenty in her face, but I'm determined for this conversation to remain civil.

"We're connected," I say, ignoring the look Mom and Dad exchange. "His brother is married to somebody I went to high school with. You knew him when he was a kid. Dad, doesn't that seem odd?"

"This isn't a megacity, Ruby," Dad says dismissively.

"Two million people," Lexi mutters from beside me.

"Yes, but we all live in the same borough," Dad replies. "Let's not get superstitious about this."

"Forget that part, then," I say. "The fact is, I want him, and he wants me."

"Wants you for what?" Mom says. "Have you talked about that? Have you talked about the future? In this one magical week of so-called love, have you made any plans at all?"



“We would have if Dad hadn’t come storming out there!”

Lexi places her hand on my arm, telling me to chill out.

“What do you think about this, Lexi?” Mom says.

“I’m happy for her. She deserves some happiness after...” I quickly grab her hand. I don’t want Mom and Dad to know about the photo-blackmail thing.

“... after being alone all her life.”

“You’ve been alone,” Mom says, with a tinge of sadness. “In fact, you make it a point of pride, always going on about how you’re going to be alone forever.”

“That’s because we’re not the same person. Somehow, Ruby has kept her sense of hope. She’s kept her sense of optimism.”

A tingle dances over me when I think of Luca saying, *You’re too young to be this pessimistic.*

“What’s right for her isn’t necessarily right for me,” she says, “but I support her.”

“Thanks, sis,” I say.

Dad throws his hands up. “I don’t know what to do. It’s not like I can lock you in the house, right? It’s not like I can *command* you to stay away from him. But... but...” He grits his teeth, then lets out a long breath. “You can do better than him, Ruby. You’re a smart, ambitious young woman. You’ll be back at college soon, back with your studies. You don’t need to be with a man like Luca Marino.”

“He’s not a bad man, Dad,” I say. I probably shouldn’t mention that his darkness initially scared me.

Dad leans forward. “Give me this much, at least. You’ve been *together* for a week.” He places mocking emphasis on the word. “So give *us* a week. A week of staying away from him, a week to clear your head. If you still feel the same after...”

“What?” Mom says. “You’ll give your blessing?”

“I’m not saying that.” Dad places his hand on hers, and Mom smiles tightly, and for a rare, glittering moment, I actually

believe they can make this work. “But at least we’ll know this is how she really feels.”

“This *is* how I—”

Lexi nudges me. “Come on, kid. This is sort of crazy. You can give them this much, right?”

I sigh, nodding. Lexi has always been the voice of reason. If I’m going to listen to anybody, it’s her.

“Okay, Dad. I’ll give you a week.”

---

Despite the lateness, I sit up in bed, unable to sleep and filled with burning emotion. As I read Luca’s message, I imagine him lying beside me, the heat of his body making all of this seem much more manageable.

*I won’t lie, Ruby. A week without you will be painful, but I must respect your father’s wishes. I don’t want to come between you and your family. Family is the most important thing, and if there’s a way they can give us their blessing, we have to accept their conditions.*

*I thought I was supposed to be the mature one, huh?* I reply.

I imagine him smirking as his text arrives. *Maybe I’m learning from you. How are you feeling? Tonight’s been one hell of a rollercoaster.*

*I’m okay,* I reply. *I wish you were here. I don’t think I could give you what you want, though.*

*Don’t get hung up on that,* he tells me. *If I have to keep reminding you that we’ve got all the time in the world, I will. Anyway, even if your horny slit wants to get all shy, I’ve still got the pleasure of spanking your perfectly plump, round ass, making it all red. Hell, you should probably tell me to stop.*

*Why? Are you getting too excited?* A thrill runs through me.

*Way too excited,* he replies.

I bite my lip, wondering if I should type the next bit. Before I have a chance to flip-flop, I force myself to type the message

quickly. *A big point Mom had was about the future. She wants to know if we have a future together. I didn't know what to tell her. On the one hand, it's sort of strange. The girls in college would never talk about the future after a week, but I'm not like them.*

*You're one of a kind, Ruby. The answer is simple. We've got the rest of our lives together. What else did you think I meant when I said you belong to me?*

A wide smile spreads across my face. My cheeks feel like they're heating up. *What does that mean, though?*

*It means we're going to get married. It means we're going to have children. It means we'll be happier than I thought a man like me could be. It means every single second of every single day for the rest of our lives, you'll be MINE. It means I'm always going to protect you. It means I'm always going to be there for you. It means no other woman will ever get a single moment of my attention, and no man will get yours. It means we're going to fuse, Ruby—you and me like one big glittering diamond.*

My breath comes quickly as I read, unsure how to reply, and then those three dots appear.

*You know it's serious when a dark, broody mafia man says things like "one big glittering diamond."*

*Do you really want all that?* I ask.

*More than anything. I don't just want it. I NEED it. Tell me you need the same.*

*I do,* I reply, tears stinging my eyes, threatening to start sliding down my cheeks. *I want you. I want the future, but there's an issue, Luca.*

*What issue?*

I wonder if I should lie to him. He's got the whole future planned out, and I want it, too. I want it so freaking badly, but I haven't lied to him so far. Our connection has been magical and unlikely and, some would say, insane, but it's been *honest*.

*During the rare times that I've let myself think about finding a man, I've always been sure about one thing. I don't want kids right away. I want to focus on my studies first. I want to wait, Luca.*

## CHAPTER 22



Luca

I sit on the balcony in my penthouse, letting the cool night air wash over me. Something like panic is pumping through me as I read her message. Before I met her, I didn't let myself think about a family or kids. I've always wanted them instinctually, but since I was sure I'd never find the right woman, I let those wants fade.

But now, with my Ruby...

*Luca?* she texts when I don't respond. *I know this might not be what you want to hear, but I have to be honest.*

*How long do you want to wait?* I ask.

*I don't know. A few years, maybe until I'm twenty-five or thirty-something.*

I bite down, my head throbbing. Images of a happy family home—the sort of life Scarlet and Elio have—pulse and taunt in my mind. *You want to wait possibly ten years until we even start trying for kids?*

*I've wanted to be a historian my whole life. That means getting my PhD. That means making a name for myself with research and papers. That means a lot of work.*

*You can be a mom and do all of that, Ruby.*

I stare at the message before I send it. There's a bitter taste in my mouth, a pessimistic twist to my soul. For some reason, deep down, I just assumed she'd feel the same, just like Scarlet

did with Elio. Maybe that's the problem. I keep looking at Elio and Scarlet as the blueprint, but every relationship is unique. Even ones where the feelings come rushing in like an unstoppable hail of bullets, there are nuances.

Deleting the message, I type instead, *I understand, but I'll always be there, and you'll have all the help you need. I'll hire you an army of nannies if that's what it takes. You'll be a perfect mother no matter what. I just know it.*

*I'm not saying we're never going to have kids. Isn't it better if we talk about this upfront?*

*Of course it is,* I reply.

*That way, you've got the chance to end things if you can't accept it.*

I stand up, moving to the balcony railing, looking down over the city's glittering lights. *I'm not going to end things with you, ever. That's not an option. If you want to wait, we'll wait.*

*But you'd prefer not to?*

*You've been honest with me. I owe you the same. No, Ruby, I'd prefer not to. I'd like to get you pregnant as soon as we have your parents' blessing, but before I met you, life was hopeless and grim. It was mundane. It was flat. Now, it's so, so much better. So, if you want to wait, I'll stand by you. It's like I keep saying...*

*We've got all the time in the world,* she finishes for me.

*Exactly.*

*Who knew a mafia prince would be so understanding, huh?* I imagine her smiling with that teasing, sassy glint in her eyes.

*You bring it out in me, Ruby—only you.*

---

“I guess Paulie thinks she's going to stop wanting me if we spend a week apart,” I tell Elio, tossing a tennis ball against the wall of his office and catching it.

Elio laughs, shaking his head. “If you’re anything like Scarlet and me, you could be apart for a week, a month, a year, a decade, and it wouldn’t make any difference. Once you know, you know.”

I nod. “Exactly, but what am I going to do, go against her dad’s wishes? I don’t want to start our life out like that. It’s a man’s job to do the right thing by his woman’s family.”

Elio smiles. “Women, eh? They’re like magic. They’ve got the power to change us. Before Ruby came along, you never would’ve said something like that. You wouldn’t have had that boyish look of excitement in your eyes, either.”

“Can it, brother.” I toss the tennis ball at him, and he catches it easily. “Now I’ve just got to get through this week without going completely nuts. That’s why I’m here. I want all the work you can give me. Go spend time with Scarlet and Molly. I’ll be working sixteen-hour days until I can see my woman again.”

“I won’t turn down extra time with the family,” Elio says. “As long as you’re sure?”

“If I give myself too much free time, I’ll just go nuts thinking about her. Or about him.”

Elio frowns when I say *him*. He knows I’m talking about the congressman’s son, the douchebag Nate Kingston. “I thought that was over.”

“It is... for the most part.”

“Luca...” Elio leans forward. “You haven’t put any Family men on him, have you? That could jeopardize everything.”

The fear on my big brother’s face makes me sick. It’s so bad I can’t even look at him. Elio has been like a lion all my life, my strong, invincible-seeming older brother. Nobody can make him cringe away from doing the right thing. Yet now, it seems, he’s turned soft. Is it family life? Will the same thing happen to me?

“Ah, everything,” I say darkly. “Like letting this little shit do any damn thing he wants because his daddy is giving us some cash.”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

I turn to him. “Then tell me, Elio. What’s the situation, exactly? Because you’re acting weird. You’re not acting like yourself at all. All these little looks, all this *fear*, it’s not you. Has Maverick got something on you?”

“No,” Elio growls. “I’m trying to do the right thing, that’s all.”

“Before, you said I could ruin my relationship with Ruby by going after them. I haven’t forgotten that.”

“Luca, goddamn it,” Elio snaps. “Will you just leave it alone? Have you put any men on him?”

“No Family men,” I reply.

“What does that mean?”

“You know Colt.”

“The ex-soldier? With the Belgian Malinois lurking at his side like a canine bodyguard?”

“He’s checking in on the douche from time to time. No connection to us.”

“Call him off,” Elio says.

Now, it’s my turn to laugh darkly. “There’s no damn way I’m doing that. Anyway, I couldn’t call him off even if I wanted to. Colt is his own man. He has his own reasons.” Not that I know what they are, but I won’t tell Elio that. “So, unless you want to tell me why you look so damn scared every time we talk about this little prick, I’m handling this my way.”

For a second, Elio glares at me. Then he turns to his computer and begins clicking and dragging. “I’ll make a work folder for you.”

“So we’re not going to talk about this. You’re clearly hiding something.”

Elio grunts. “I’ve told you how I feel. Leaving this alone is the best choice. If you don’t listen, I can’t make you.”

I curl my hands into fists, tension pumping through me. “If this prick has somehow managed to get some dirt on you—”



“Dirt,” Elio cuts in. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. I honestly can’t think what it’d be. But if there’s something, we’ll face it like we have everything, brother. Together.”

Elio keeps staring at the screen. For a second, I think he’s going to break. Then he shakes his head. “This is about the orphanage.”

“Ah, right, yeah. The orphanage we could easily fund ourselves without that congressman’s help.”

“I love you, Luca,” he says unexpectedly.

“It must be serious if you’re saying that.”

Elio sighs. “Please, for me, just drop this.”

“I can’t promise that. Anyway, Colt’s not a dog on a leash.”

“The few times I’ve met him, he seems... dark, odd.”

“Odd?”

“Like he could put a bullet in a man’s head and think nothing of it.”

I laugh savagely. “That’s rich coming from us.”

“I’ve never done that easily. Maybe you can pretend it doesn’t mean anything to you, but I know you, Luca, and it does. But Colt, he seems different.” He taps a few keys. “I’ve sent you an email. If you want long days, you’ve got them. In the meantime, I’m going to see my wife and my kid.”

He stands up, leaving the office without another word. A moment later, my cell phone vibrates.

***It’s day one, and I’m already missing you like crazy.***

Despite what we discussed—the whole kid thing—I feel the same. I’m hungry for her. I burn for her. Every inch of me roars out to be with her every single second.

***We’ll be together soon, I reply. Unless your dad’s plan works. Unless this week apart makes you stop wanting me.***

***Yeah, right, she texts. Being away from you is just making me want you more.***

*Me too, Ruby. So damn bad.*

## CHAPTER 23



Colt

“What are we doing, eh, boy?” I say, glancing into the rearview.

Shadow stares at me, his head tilted like he understands. He looks ready for a fight, though, as usual. I look across the street at the frat-style house Nate Kingston shares with some other boys who call themselves men. When I heard the story about what this asshole had done, I figured I could spare some time, maybe in the dark hope that he’d show himself to be an even worse kind of predator.

Sometimes, the darkness in me threatens to eat me whole. It threatens to turn me into a complete madman. If Nate did something really evil, I’d have an excuse to let out some of that darkness. So far, he’s just been drinking, partying, driving expensive cars, and generally being a waster.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I tell Shadow. “I should probably just let this go.”

I’m about to start the engine when I pause. My heart starts nearly pounding out of my chest. I bite down and force all the emotion deep into my gut, where it dies. I push down any idea that I could be *soft* or feel a goddamn thing.

A woman is walking across the lawn toward the house. She’s holding something sharp in her hand—maybe a screwdriver. Wavy brown hair spills from a baseball cap. She’s wearing denim jeans and a hoodie. There’s no way I can know, from

this angle, that there's something special about her. There's no way I can know she's the woman who will change my life and heal some of this darkness in me.

Yet, somehow, I do.

No, no, I don't. That's crap. I need to get a grip.

I know one thing, though. I can't let her go in there and get herself hurt.

Climbing from the car, I jog across the lawn. "Stop," I snap, getting closer to her.

She turns, staring at me, a shiver moving through her curvy body. *Don't notice her body. Don't notice how beautiful her eyes are.* I tell myself this strictly because I'll completely lose my mind otherwise.

She's got two different colored eyes: one a pure, bright blue, the other a deep and somehow attractive green. My heart is still hammering, much more than it has in years. From the car, Shadow whines, though he won't leave the vehicle without my command.

"What are you doing?" I growl.

"None of your business," the woman says, putting up a tough exterior, but behind the layer of gruffness, it's like I can see the scared young woman beneath.

"What do you think you're going to do with that?" I say, nodding to the screwdriver in her hand.

"The right thing," she snaps, turning as if she's going to walk away.

I grab her shoulder. Hell, what's happening? It's like electricity sparks between us. She turns back to me with a gasp, then quickly steps away, glaring at me. I could stare into those mismatched eyes all day long.

"Don't touch me."

"I'm a friend of Luca's," I tell her.

Those alluring eyes widen, flooding my mind with a whole bunch of confusing thoughts. I keep my focus on the task at

hand. I can't let myself think about leaning down, kissing her, owning her. What is this woman doing to me?

"I'm Lexi," she mutters. "Ruby's sister."

"Ah," I nod. "So you're here to fuck up the bastard who violated your sister?"

"Yeah, because he deserves it." She glares at me, almost like she's angry. I wonder if she felt it too when we touched—the spark. I wonder if it angers her because she's determined to be miserable like me.

"As far as I know, the photo's deleted."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't deserve it."

"No," I say, nodding. "But if you spend your life dishing out punishment to every prick who deserves it, the best you'll get is life in a cage. The worst is no life at all."

Reaching down, I grab the end of the screwdriver, gently but firmly taking it from her. She bites down, making me think about kissing her again.

"Anyway, you're wrong," she says.

"I've seen people throw their lives—"

"No," she snaps. "About the photo. You're *wrong*."

A light switches on in the front of the house. I take Lexi's hand, more electricity sparking between us. Using the instincts I've honed over countless hours of stubbornly living in the moment and focusing on the task at hand, I ignore the hunger and guide her to the car.

By the way she follows me, I know she isn't sure this is the right path. I open the passenger-side door.

"Can I trust you?" she asks. "I don't make it a habit of getting into cars with strangers."

Reaching into my jacket, I take out my pistol and hand it to her, grip-first. She takes it, the blue and green of her eyes filled with something like appreciation, as if she's glad I respect her enough to trust her with a firearm. "If I do anything you don't like, just point and shoot."

She laughs, then kills the noise. It's like she feels guilty for letting herself feel even a few moments of happiness.

Starting the engine, I drive her toward the end of the street before Nate or any of his asshole friends can come out here and antagonize us. Somehow, I know I wouldn't be able to tolerate any disrespect to Lexi. She's a complete stranger, but...

But *nothing*. She's a stranger—end of story.

Shadow whines like a puppy, clambering between the seats and, unbelievably, trying to climb into Lexi's lap.

"Aww, good doggie," Lexi says, stroking the top of his head.

I swallow, not letting myself think about the fact that Shadow has never, not once, in all the years I've had him, acted like this with a stranger.

"Tell me what happened, Lexi," I say, feeling much too comfortable using her name, like we know each other already on some level.

As Shadow awkwardly clambers into her lap, she turns to me and starts speaking.

## CHAPTER 24



*R*uby

*Almost a week...* Bursts of starlight move through me as I send the text, my world spinning over and over when I think I'll soon be with my man again. *And it's been the hardest of my life.*

*Mine too,* Luca replies. *I would've gone nuts if I didn't have work to focus on. Hell, more nuts than I already am, anyway. What do your parents think about us seeing each other again?*

I spin around and around in my computer chair. I'm supposed to be reading a journal article, but it isn't easy when my phone keeps buzzing. Not that I'd change that. Texting is the only way I've been able to stay sane during the long nights spent thinking about Luca, the days dreaming of him, and the longing in my belly getting hotter and more insistent every single moment.

*Last night, Dad asked me how I was feeling. He was basically asking if I'd gotten over you yet. When I told him all I could think about was seeing you again, he got a bit... softer? I'm not sure that's the right word, but I get the sense he sort of regrets how he handled things. "I just want you to be happy, Ruby," he told me. I think that's a good sign.*

*I hope so,* Luca replies. *A week is just about doable. It's torture, but we're almost through it now, but spending an*

*entire life apart? There's no way I could do that. I need you. I'm hungry for you, Ruby.*

*I feel the same, I tell him. I'm glad you've been so understanding about the baby thing.*

*We've both been honest about how we feel. We're both determined to make this work. That's more than most people will ever have. We're a team, Ruby.*

My heart feels like it's glowing in my chest. Dad was wrong to think forcing us apart would somehow *fix* this, not that there's anything to fix. He can't come between us. He can't stop us from wanting each other. Nothing can come between us.

*What shall we do?* I ask. *For our big reunion?*

He doesn't reply straightaway, which seems odd since we were just going back and forth with no pauses. I push the neediness down, attempting to focus on the text of the journal article. I even read it aloud when my attention refuses to stay sharp and fixated.

“While qualitative narratives offer rich tapestries of the past, woven with individual stories and subjective experiences, quantitative methods provide crucial sextants...” But it all seems like gobbledygook, even more so than it usually does.

*Luca?* I text after around thirty minutes.

A moment later, Lexi pushes my door open. Her cheeks are red, and she's breathing hard. She looks like she's just gone for a long run. “Ruby, I need to talk.”

My phone buzzes. *I'm sorry. I can't speak now. I'll explain later.*

“What's going on?” I ask Lexi.

“It's Nate,” she says, and invisible maggots crawl over my skin.

“I don't want to talk about him,” I reply, wondering what the hell Luca is up to.

Lexi closes the door and spins on me. “I'm sorry, but you have to listen. Please.”



I sigh, the glowing feeling replaced by something dark and depressing. *Please don't let everything fall apart when we're only one day out.*

“What about him?” I ask.

“Yesterday, I followed him to a bar.”

“What?” I gasp. “How?”

“I searched ‘congressman’ and his name online. I found his social media. It’s public. He posted about going to the bar, so I went there and confronted his ass. He was wasted, and he started bragging about that photo. Ruby, he didn’t delete it. He *showed* it to me.”

I swallow, sickness gripping me.

“It’s not as bad as...” she trails off, shaking her head, looking ready to explode. “What I’m saying is it doesn’t show *all* of you. You’re wearing your underwear, but it’s still gross. It’s still wrong.”

“It doesn’t?” I ask, thinking back. “When he showed it to me, he just flashed the screen quickly. He didn’t let me get a decent look, and honestly, I didn’t want one.”

Lexi pulls up a chair close to me, laying her hand on mine. “Of course, you didn’t. Tonight, I decided to hurt that fucker. I was going to stab him right in his arrogant face with a screwdriver.”

My mouth falls open as I stare at my big sister. She’s completely serious.

“But before I could, this man, a friend of Luca’s...” Lexi’s mismatched eyes shimmer. For an outlandish moment, it’s like her armor cracks. It’s like she’s getting... dreamy? Smitten? Then the look vanishes, and she’s back to her usual tough self. “He stopped me before I could do it. I explained everything to him. I think he told Luca. I’m not sure what Luca’s going to do.”

“We were just texting,” I say, “but then he suddenly stopped!”

I grab my phone quickly, calling him, but there’s no answer. It just rings and rings.

“What about his friend?” I say.

“He gave me his number,” Lexi mutters. “He said whatever happens now is Luca’s decision. He said he’s not going to stop Luca from doing anything. He said a man has to make his own mistakes to win his own victories. He was very intense.”

Again, that dreamy look comes into her eyes, and she pushes it away again.

“Then what the heck am I supposed to do?” I yell. “I don’t want him to get himself hurt... or go to prison.”

I call Luca again, but it just rings and rings and rings.

## CHAPTER 25



Luca

Two men leap off the couch when I kick the front door in. I feel my gun pressing against my side, but I keep it holstered. I want to tear this prick apart with my bare hands. My vision is blurring with rage. The first man, shirtless and covered in tribal tattoos, yells, “What the fuck?”

I step forward, almost praying for him to do something stupid. I haven’t wanted a fight this badly since the stuff went down with Russel and the *Shanks*. “Go get Nate,” I growl.

“Now, hold on a second...” the other man trails off, looking stupid when I turn to him.

“Go. Get. Nate.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Should we call the cops?” the man with the tribals asks, almost to himself.

“Please do that,” I snarl. “Please, call them. Do it now.”

The other man runs from the room. Throughout the house, I can hear movement and voices raised. When Nate finally comes downstairs, it’s with three other men. He’s wearing sweatpants and nothing else but a lazy grin on his face, looking me up and down like I’m dirt.

“Oh, hey, buddy,” he says casually, as though his door isn’t kicked in.

“You know why I’m here.”

He laughs, and I think that’s another broken bone. That’s another missing tooth. “I guess you’ve got feelings for little Miss Piggy.”

I grind my teeth. “Let’s talk outside.”

“Nah, I’m fine here,” he says, and then his buddies start puffing up like they think this is their big moment to be tough. “Anyway, I don’t take orders from a baby killer.”

“Last chance to handle this like a man,” I snap, ignoring his last comment, which makes no sense.

“Aren’t you curious about what I just said, buddy?” he says.

When I step forward, his four friends make a loose ring around him, telling me everything I need to know about this sad collection of people. Nate’s the one with power, who gets anything he wants from them, probably because of his congressman daddy. I bet he’s paying the rent for this depressing party house.

“My dad told me,” Nate goes on. “He did some digging into your past. All judgmental now, but I hear you used to be quite the playboy. Turns out you got one of your sluts pregnant, and she was so depressed, she killed the kid.”

My thoughts swirl, my chest tightening. After all the baby talk with Ruby, this is painful. But I won’t let him distract me, especially since he could be lying, though my instincts make me believe he’s telling the truth. He seems too certain.

When I take another step forward, the man with the tribals raises his hand. “Hold up, big man. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“You’re the ones doing something stupid,” I snarl. “Protecting this rat bastard. I’m going to give you all one chance.” I look them in the eye, one by one. The man with the tribals smirks back at me. The others, at least, have the sense to look a little afraid. They’re probably wondering why I’m so confident, considering it’s five on one. “Leave Nate and me to handle this alone, or I won’t be responsible for what happens next.”

“Pfft, some tough guy, are you?” the man with the tribals snaps.

Suddenly, he throws himself at me. At least, *he* thinks it’s sudden and unexpected, but I saw him getting into the stance in advance. I slip to the side and hammer a vicious elbow into his nose, then another, then another. He gasps and falls like a sack of shit to the floor, and then two men launch at me, yelling like cowards.

The fury of war blazes in my head. The heat of battle. It feels right, defending my woman. It feels like the thing I should’ve done as soon as I learned what he did.

One of them catches me in the gut, but with all the adrenaline, I barely feel it. I headbutt him so hard he flies off his feet. Then I grab the other one by the ear and wrench his head sideways, slamming him into the wall.

Nate is gasping, eyes wide, turning for the door. I take out my pistol and shoot into the air, plasterboard flaking and falling around me.

“On your fucking knees,” I growl.

It’s obvious none of them have ever been near firearms before. They whine and cringe away from me. Nate stares, all his douchebag confidence draining away.

“Did I fucking stutter?” I aim my gun at him.

Slowly, he falls to his knees, his eyes filling with tears. “Please,” he whispers. “Please.”

I walk across the room and pistol whip him in the mouth so hard teeth fly from his mouth and land with a shockingly loud clattering noise against the floor. He gazes up at me, wide-eyed, blood dripping from his mouth. His friends start running from the house.

“Some pals you’ve got there, Nate.”

I hit him again, sending him sprawling to the floor. When he starts to crawl away, I step on his lower back and press down with all my weight. He kicks his arms and legs like he thinks he can swim away.

“What were you saying about *little piggy*?” Kneeling on his back, I push the gun against the side of his head, twisting the metal so the barrel grinds against his hair and digs into his flesh. “What were you saying about *my woman*?”

“Puh-puh-please,” he moans, his words difficult to make out, probably from the missing teeth.

“Where’s your phone?”

He reaches toward his pocket. I take my foot off him, letting him sit up, a steady stream of blood dripping from his mouth like red drool. His friends might be calling the cops, but I can’t care about that now.

“Show me the photo,” I growl.

When he shakes his head, I hit him again. He collapses sideways and makes a noise that makes me wonder if I’ve gone too far and killed the little prick. Then he blinks and sits up, looking dazed. Finally, he holds his phone up.

“Face recognition won’t work,” I tell him. “Your mouth’s already swelling.”

He groans and types in the code. When he starts swiping through photos, I snatch his phone from him, and then my soul turns cold. Turns to ice. The photos sear into my mind. They burn into my memory. Already, I wish I could erase them. I force myself to go on, past the ones that mean there’s no other choice—I’m going to have to kill this man—until I find the one of Ruby. She lies on a bed, the whites of her eyes just about showing through her drugged, narrow eyelids. The angle shows her legs and her underwear.

“Any copies?” I growl. “Lie to me, you sick bastard. Fucking *lie to me*.”

“One. In the Cloud.”

I delete her photo, then go to his Cloud app and find it there.

“I’m not deleting the rest,” I tell him. “Long after you’re gone, people will know what you are. You sick *fuck*.”

That’s when I really lose it. I drop the gun and lay into him with my fist, pounding his nose and feeling it shatter, then

driving my knuckles into his cheek over and over. I'm getting ready to beat him to death when somebody grabs my shoulder and pulls me back.

I spin, reaching for my gun, looking up to find Elio staring down at me. I've never seen him look so disgusted with me—so scared. He lowers his hand, looking around the room at how trashed the place is.

“What’s wrong with you?” he snaps. “Jesus *Christ*, Luca. This is bad.”

I pick up his phone. My hand is slippery with blood. “Look, Elio,” I tell him.

“I don’t need to see it. I know what it is.”

“No, you don’t. I really hope you don’t.”

“It’s the photo of Ruby, isn’t it?”

“It’s worse,” I tell him. “So much worse...”

Elio narrows his hands, then takes the phone. As he swipes through the photos, he gets a cold look. I can tell he’s thinking of Molly, my niece, his daughter, and that it could be her. That’s what’s on his phone. I can hardly even acknowledge it, even in my own mind.

“We’ll leave the phone here,” Elio says, dropping it. “That way, the cops will find it. The world will know what he did.”

“Please,” Nate whispers from the floor.

Elio leaps at him and kicks him so hard he must break a rib. “Shut the fuck up,” Elio roars. “You’re coming with us.”

---

Hours later, Elio and I stand beside a freshly dug grave far outside the city. Matteo waits for us in the car behind, the headlights shining.

“I had no idea,” Elio says, shaking his head. “I swear.”

“I know that,” I tell him.

“Do you think his dad knew?”

“It doesn’t matter. He raised the twisted freak. Either way, his political career is over. People have been ruined for far, far less.”

“I feel sick,” Elio whispers. “Sick to my stomach. How he was posing with them, the fear in their eyes...”

“We did the right thing,” I growl. “The world’s a better place without him. Elio, he told me something.”

“About the baby?” Elio says.

I nod. “Apparently, one of my exes—well, one of the women I slept with—had a baby. He said she killed it.”

“She was mentally ill, Luca. So much darkness, so many innocents, but it isn’t your fault.”

“Is this why you agreed to work with them? To protect me?”

Elio looks at me miserably. “They hired a whole fleet of investigators to dig up dirt on us. This was all they could get. Maverick figured, since we run the city, he’d need our help to launder his scumbag image, to win votes, to help establish any businesses.”

“I had a child,” I whisper, massaging my head. “It feels wrong. My first kid should’ve been with Ruby.”

Elio puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’m really sorry. I’m so goddamn sorry, Luca.”

“Where is she now? Did he give you the woman’s name?”

“Yeah, he did, but do you really want to know?”

I swallow. “I feel like I have to. It’s so wrong. The mother of my child...”

After Elio gives me the woman’s name, I make a call on my burner. Colt picks up after a couple of rings.

“Lots of commotion at the frat house,” he remarks.

“Turns out Nate was even worse than we thought.”

“Go on,” Colt says.

“Think of the worst thing a man can do,” I tell him.



After a pause, Colt says it. He hits the nail right on the head.

“That’s right. He’s where he belongs now.”

“If I’d known that,” Colt snaps, “I would have—”

“You played your part,” I tell him. “But please, Colt, I need one more favor.”

## CHAPTER 26



Ruby

*I'm outside.*

I leap to my feet when his text arrives, even as sleep tries to tug me back down. Running from my room, I find Dad waiting for me downstairs. He turns from his place at the window. Clearly, he was waiting for Luca to arrive.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks.

“You said I had to see if some time apart would make me want him less,” I tell him. “It hasn’t, Dad, not even a little, and he needs me. Something terrible happened last night.”

Dad frowns. “You’re supposed to be worried about terrible things that happened hundreds of years ago. You’re not supposed to be *experiencing* them.”

“Dad...” I walk over to him, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I can’t be your little girl forever. I know this is a shock. I know it’s not *normal*, but I have to do this.”

Last night, after hours of waiting and wondering, Luca texted me. *I can’t explain over the phone. Let’s meet in the morning. I’ll tell you everything then, but I should warn you. It might make you scared of me again.*

Dad sighs, then nods. “I wish you seemed more immature about this. I wish you seemed less certain, but the truth is, I’ve never seen you more certain about anything. You remind me of me when I first met your mother.”

*Before the arguments?* I almost say, but I push that comment down.

“It’s okay,” Dad mutters. “I know what you’re thinking, but we weren’t always at each other’s throats. Lately, things are getting better.”

“I have noticed that,” I say. “It’s like when I was little.”

“We’re both trying harder,” he replies. “We’re giving each other more leeway. We’re making more of an effort to understand.”

“Do the same with me,” I tell him. “Understand that I have to do this. Luca needs me, and I need to be with him.”

Dad nods. “I understand, but that doesn’t make this any less crazy.”

Despite everything, I find myself smiling. “I never said it wasn’t *crazy*.”

Dad wraps his arms around me, pulling me in for a hug. “I love you, kiddo.”

“I love you too.”

“Sorry, you didn’t want me to call you that anymore, did you?”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I tell him. “But I really should get going...”

Leaving the house, I almost run across the lawn. When I see Luca leaning against his car, the darkness cloaking every part of him, I realize this won’t be the reunion I dreamed of. Luca looks drained, bags under his eyes.

The closer I get, the more life sparks into him. Finally, he moves away from the car and pulls me into a passionate hug. He clutches me tightly, letting me feel his heart beating against me, through me. I want to kiss him, but I know he’s holding back because my dad might be watching.

“I missed you so much,” he says, opening the car door for me.

“I missed you too,” I whisper, meaning it with every part of my soul.

---

“Oh my God,” I say after Luca explains what happened last night. “I thought he was just a scumbag, but he was evil.”

Luca leans against the balcony railing of his penthouse, the wind disturbing his hair, the late morning sun gleaming through the small silver threads in the black. I stand at his side, my hand on his arm, offering comfort.

“I did it myself, Ruby. I beat him half to death and then finished the job with a bullet.” He turns, looking down at me, his eyes filled with fear, afraid I will fear him. “Are you scared of me again?”

“No,” I say fiercely. “After what he did and what he would’ve continued to do, how could I be? You did the right thing, Luca. It’s time for me to grow up. It’s time for me to accept that, sometimes, things that would normally be bad aren’t. That so-called bad people can make the world a better place.”

He sighs with relief, leaning down and pressing his lips against mine. My instincts make me respond fiercely. Emotion blazes through me as I think about that not even twelve hours ago, Luca took a life. He took the life of the man who violated me and did so much more.

When I dig my nails into his shoulders, feeling his firm muscles through the fabric of his shirt, he gently takes my hips and pushes me away.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper.

“There’s something else,” he replies. “It’s the reason Elio agreed to work with the Kingstons in the first place. He was protecting me.”

“You can tell me,” I say. “Whatever it is...”

“We should sit down.”

He leads me into the apartment, and we sit on the couch together. I lean against him, wanting to close my eyes and simply appreciate the moment, wanting to forget about all the mayhem and the heartache. When I look up at him into his

intense eyes, I see that same glint of fear again, as if he thinks any second, I'm going to run away.

"Whatever it is, it's okay," I tell him. "We've got each other."

He clenches his jaw. For a somehow terrifying second, I think he might cry. There's so much intensity draping over every single part of him. "My brother agreed to help the Kingstons because they have some dirt on me. Apparently, one of my, uh, previous partners..."

When I wince, he reaches up and touches my cheek, cradling my face in his hand. I can tell it hurts him to talk about this, maybe as much as it hurts me to hear about it.

"She got pregnant," he goes on. "She didn't tell me about it, but she lost her mind after. She did something evil, Ruby."

When he tells me, I gasp, feeling my heart clenching tight inside of me, heartache rending right through me.

"Oh my God," I whisper. "I'm so sorry, Luca." Tears sting my eyes, then start streaming down my cheeks—a mixture of jealousy and hate and just plain old pain. He holds me tightly, seeming relieved when I sink into his chest, pressing my face against his shirt and crying into the heat of his body.

"That's why we need each other," he says. "We're going to push away the darkness. Our future's going to be filled with light."

I swear I feel my womb get tight again when he says this. I remember what he said about wanting to have children with me and my desire to wait. Now, he's lost a child. It's probably bringing home his desire with even more force. I wipe my cheeks, looking up at him, his attentive expression blurry with the tears.

"Are you sure it's true?" I ask.

"I spoke to Elio about it," Luca replies. "This woman recorded a video describing what she did in detail. As for actual proof, there's her prison record and the death certificate. The fact I know the woman and the timeline match up."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

“So am I,” he growls. “But—”

He suddenly stands up and walks away from me, standing at the window with the city skyline as his backdrop. His back rises and falls with his intense breathing. His fists clench at his sides. His shirt stretches from shoulder to shoulder as if highlighting his muscular back.

I stand, approach him, and place my hand on his arm. The heat of his body is shocking, a blaze through the fabric of his shirt. “What is it?” I ask.

When he turns to me, there *are* tears in his eyes. He coughs them away, rubbing angrily at his cheeks.

I grab his hand and squeeze it with all the support stowed up in me and all the affection burning from this past week we’ve been apart. “You don’t have to be ashamed,” I tell him.

“I do,” he says miserably, “because what happened is evil. What she did... It’s evil, but the truth is, I wanted my first baby to be with you. I want to build a life with *you*.”

“Oh, Luca.”

He pulls me into a hug. I wrap my arms around him as tightly as possible, squeezing on.

“I’ll never judge you for how you feel,” I tell him. “And what if she lied? What if, somehow, the congressman made all that up? Imagine somebody who’d do a thing like that. It’s not like lying is above them.”

“Do you think so?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that jumping to conclusions before considering all the sources and the evidence is never a good idea.”

He laughs, though I can hear anguish all tangled up in there. “My beautiful historian, looking at the sources as usual... I’ve asked a friend to look into it. Colt.”

“Colt,” I murmur. “That’s the one who stopped Lexi from...” I swallow. This really has been the most insane couple of days of my life. “... from making a big mistake, right?”

“Yeah, that’s him. He’s a good man.”

“Lexi seems to think so, too,” I murmur.

Luca laughs darkly. “If she’s got a crush on him, I think she’ll be disappointed. I get the sense that Colt’s never going to settle down.”

“You thought the same about yourself once, right?”

He smooths his hand through my hair, then moves his hands down to my hips and does that thing where he gently moves me away, as if he wants to get a better look at me. His eyes are dry now, though his gaze still contains so much pain but passion as well. “True, but you’re special, Ruby.”

“So is Lexi,” I say. “Who knows...”

When Luca’s cell phone rings, he sighs. “Sorry about this. It might be Family business.”

“I guess I should expect that from a *prince*, right?” I tease.

He rolls his eyes as if, somehow, we can push away all the darkness and all the pain. He takes out his cell phone. “Mom? A party? Really?” Alessia speaks so loudly down the phone that I can hear the excitement in her voice, though not the words. “Okay, I’ll talk to her about it. Jeez, relax, will you? Okay, love you.”

He hangs up, slipping the phone into his pocket.

“Mom thinks things have been too grim lately. She wants to throw a party. She wants to invite your family, Ruby, your parents, your sister, a bunch of our friends, Scarlet and Elio, obviously. She wants to focus on the good things in our lives instead of the bad.”

He looks at me doubtfully. In truth, I’m doubtful about it, too. Is a party the best idea after everything? Honestly, there’s that nasty feeling of jealousy twisting through me when I think about the possibility I’m never going to be the one to give Luca his first child. It’s a vicious thought, considering what happened, but I can’t help it.

For his sake, as much as my own, I say, “I think a party’s a great idea.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Alessia’s right. Everything has been so gloomy lately.”

He nods, not needing me to explain why I hesitated. “It’s hard to find the right word, right?”

“Evil,” I correct. “Cruel. Unfair. Twisted. But we can make our own light.”

“All our families together under one roof...” Luca laughs, nudging me playfully in the side. “Do you think we’ll be able to survive that?”

“Look how far we’ve come already,” I tell him. “I almost had a meltdown when I spoke to you in the gym. Now, we’ve been through so much. We can do this, and it gives us a chance.”

“A chance for what?”

“To prove to everybody we work as a couple.”

He smiles, leaning in for another kiss. When the passion begins to overtake us, I place my hand on his chest and lean away slightly. He nods. He doesn’t say anything. He knows what I’m wordlessly saying. There’s been too much evilness for me to go *there*, at least for now, and the glint in his eyes tells me he feels the same.

“Let me just hold you,” he says, leading me to the couch. “Let me hold you and forget about the rest of the world.”

He pulls me against him, his breath tickling over my neck. His breath changes after a few minutes, and I can tell he’s fallen asleep. I cuddle even closer to him, closing my eyes and doing what he said—forgetting, just for a little while.



## CHAPTER 27



Luca

Colt calls me later that day when my woman is at home, getting ready for the party. I answer so damn fast, my heart pounding.

“None of it was true, Luca,” he tells me.

“Wait, *what?*”

“None of it,” he repeats. “There was no baby. Turns out the Kingstons bribed the warden to provide false prison records. Seems they threatened your ex—”

“She’s not my ex.”

“Well, this lady you once slept with, then,” he says. “Threatened her to record the video, confessing to this sick shit. They knew the only way to get your brother to do what they wanted was to threaten you. They knew you were his weak point.”

“Sick bastards,” I mutter.

“It doesn’t matter. Maverick will never see public office again when his son’s stuff goes public, and Nate...”

“You need to let me give you something for all this work,” I tell him.

Colt chuckles. “You already took the one thing you could’ve given me.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he's referring to. When it hits me, a cold chill moves down my spine. He's talking about Nate—about killing him. The one thing I could've given Colt Walker is the chance to put Nate in the dirt.

"I guess this is all over now," Colt goes on.

"Yeah, I hope so," I reply.

"I'll see you at the gym, then."

"Wait," I say before he hangs up. "My mother is throwing a party tonight. Seems she wants to make up for all this mayhem. She wants us to focus on the good parts of life. Why don't you come?"

"Parties aren't really my thing."

"I figured you'd say as much, but the offer's there."

He hesitates. "Who's going?"

"My mother can throw one hell of a shindig when she sets her mind to it, even on short notice. There'll be some Family people there." I mention that upfront so he doesn't think I'm tricking him. "Elio, his wife, Scarlet, Ruby, and her family—"

"Ruby's family?" he says tightly.

I find myself smirking despite the darkness that tries to cling to me. I feel like we're entering a new era, able to leave behind the pain and the bull crap. Elio was right that taking a life is never easy, but I chuckle when I hear the twitch of emotion in Colt's ordinarily calm voice. "You say that like you're excited, Colt."

"Why would I be excited?" he says coldly.

"To see Lexi again..."

"She was going to do something stupid," he snaps. "I stopped her. That's all there is to it."

"Relax. I'm only messing with you."

"Not everybody is going to fall in love in a week, Luca."

"Colt, I said relax," I snap. "Don't talk down about my relationship with Ruby. We banter a lot, and I like it, but that's

a no-go area.”

After a pause, he says, “Fair enough.”

“So, are you coming to the party?” In the background, Shadow whines. “It sounds like Shadow has strong opinions about it.”

“It was the craziest thing,” Colt says. “He climbed into her lap. He whined like a pup. He never acts like that with anybody. Shadow is the most well-trained dog you’ll likely meet, and no, Luca. I’m not coming to the goddamn party.”

Anger flares into his voice, and he hangs up the phone. It’s clear he has some feelings, but it’s impossible to know if they’re ones of desire or doubt or something in between. However, that’s not my problem. If he wants to stay lonely, like I was, it’s his choice.

I shrug, then quickly write a text to my woman. ***Just got word from my friend. The whole thing was a scam, Ruby. She was never pregnant. There wasn’t a baby.***

***Oh, thank God!*** I can see her beaming, her cheeks flaming as ruby-ish as her name. ***That’s great news. One less piece of darkness. One less innocent who’s suffered.***

Trust my loving, gorgeous woman to see it that way.

***How’s the party preparation going?*** I ask.

***Good, except Lexi is refusing to come.***

***Why?***

***She thinks Colt might be there. For some very suspicious reason, she doesn’t want to see him again. I’ve never seen her like this before. It’s almost like she’s smitten. It’s crazy.***

***I just got off the phone with Colt,*** I tell her. ***He won’t be there. In fact, I think it’s for the same reason. He was worried about seeing Lexi.***

***Luca, do you think...***

She hasn’t finished her thought in the message, but I know what she’s asking. Do I think the same thing is happening with them? Do I think they’ll get a chance at a burning, impossible-seeming connection, too?

*Maybe there's a spark there, I text. But if there is, it will never come to anything.*

*Lexi deserves to be happy,* Ruby replies.

*I know. So does Colt, but in all the years I've known him, I've never gotten the sense he'd let his defenses down. Even if he does feel something, he'll bury it. I think he'd leave the city, the state, and the country before letting himself go down that road.*

*He's that heavy?* she messages.

*Heavier. If you think I was broody and angry when we first met, he's worse. But let's not think about him. Let's think about us. Let's think about the future.*

I suppress a sigh, my mind flitting to my niece, her bright smile, and the unique mixture of Elio and Scarlet in her eyes. I won't leave my woman, so if that means waiting, I will wait. Yet I can't deny there's a spark in me that won't stop thrumming, a roar deep inside, telling me to put a baby in her young, curvy body as soon as possible.

But it's like I keep telling her. We've got all the time in the world.

---

"I let that prick *dupe* me," Elio says in disgust as we ride the limo to the party.

Scarlet places her hand on his arm. "Don't beat yourself up. You were worried about Luca."

"I saw that video, and I..."

"And you wanted to protect your brother," Dad says gruffly. "You thought you were doing the right thing. Scarlet's right, Elio. You can't blame yourself. Look, it all worked out in the end."

Elio glances at me, a note of his old darkness returning until Scarlet giggles and reaches over, pinching his lips and pushing them up into a smile. "There, all better."

He chuckles, playfully moving her hand away before shuffling closer to her.

“I hope everybody enjoys the party,” Mom says, wringing her hands. “Or do you think it’s too much? I just don’t want you boys fixating on all this nastiness.”

“Nastiness?” Dad grunts. “Because of Luca, this city’s a better place. One less corrupt politician. One less... Well, the less said about what his son did, the better.”

“I agree,” Scarlet says, shivering. “What a monster.”

I rest my head against the window, watching the city drift by, a tight, excited shimmering in my stomach when I think about seeing my woman. It sparks through me like I haven’t seen her in years, not hours.

“I don’t think there’s much chance of Luca clinging to all this pain,” Mom teases, smiling over at me. “You look like a puppy dog waiting for a treat... and *Ruby’s* your treat, right?”

“Mom, there are so many issues with how you phrased that.”

She’s not wrong, though. Ruby makes this all worth it. Ruby makes everything worth it. With her, I don’t have to disappear into drink, into reflection on everything that’s happened. I don’t have to dwell.

My phone vibrates. *We’re here, Luca. This place is great. Are you going to arrive soon? I miss you...*

My smile widens as I compose a reply.

## CHAPTER 28



### Ruby

I stand at the edge of the party with Lexi, trying to cheer her up. When we arrived at the large function hall, complete with a band, an open bar, and a full buffet—Alessia really knows how to throw a short-notice shindig—Lexi took one look around and then scowled, going straight for the bar.

She's wearing a dress, which is unusual for her, her hair styled. She's not saying it, but I think she's annoyed that Colt isn't here, even though I warned her he wouldn't be.

"Look," I say, gesturing across the party to where my and Luca's parents are talking, both of them laughing as they share some joke. "It's almost surreal, isn't it? Seeing those two get along?"

Lexi forces a smile, but I can tell it's difficult for her. "I'm happy for you," she says.

I place my hand on her arm. "You'll find—"

She cuts me off with a somehow aggressive burst of laughter. "I don't want to *find* anything or anyone," she says. "I'm going to get another drink."

Before I can tell her she probably doesn't need one, she walks across the party dance floor. Even the mafia men step out of her way like she's a force of nature.

"Is she okay?" Scarlet appears at my side, glowing with a beaming smile, though there's a hint of panic in her eyes.

“Are *you*?” I counter, not wanting to share Lexi’s personal business.

Scarlet’s smile gets tight. “I think I’m going to head home soon. I miss Molly. It’s a unique feeling like I’ve been separated from a piece of myself.”

Something deep inside pulses as if trying to persuade me to find Luca and throw myself at him right now, to forget about my whole waiting thing.

“Love like this... It makes a girl want to sing.” She laughs, seeming intoxicated, but I don’t think it’s from drinks or anything else. I think it’s from love. “I’m happy for you, Ruby, and I’m happy for Luca. You two have found a rare thing.”

“It seems the Marino family is blessed,” I say. “Both the brothers experienced something few people ever will.”

Scarlet nods. She knows exactly what I’m talking about.

When my phone vibrates, I snatch it out of my purse. ***You look so beautiful. The way you laugh, the way you smile, the way that dress hugs your body and highlights all the best bits—all your curves and your thickness.***

A fluttering dances through me as I look around the party, unable to find Luca. ***Are you watching me?*** I text, then turn to Scarlet. “Sorry, I’m being rude.”

Scarlet laughs. “Trust me, I know what it’s like to be addicted to texting your man. No apology needed.”

***Look up,*** he replies.

I look up to find Luca standing on one of the balconies above the function room. He leans against the railing, dashing in his suit, his hair slicked back from his face. Even from here, I can read the intensity in his eyes, just like when we were at the museum and he guided me into that private room, his hand between my legs. Or at the hotel with his mouth, his tongue pressed against me, burning, teasing.

***Are you trying to make me act inappropriately at a party?*** I text.

Scarlet touches my arm. “I’m going to find Elio.”

Luca looks at his phone and then looks at me, smirking. *I don't know anything about that, but you're making my mouth water, Ruby.*

A blush spreads across my cheeks, down over my neck. I can feel the heat traveling all over my body like it's tempting me to do something reckless and out of character.

*I want to make you feel good,* I tell him.

*Hmm? How would you do that?*

My heart pounds so freaking hard. People walk past me at the party. Lexi is with Mom and Dad and Luca's parents. Maybe she can see me and Luca making eyes at each other and has decided not to disturb us.

*By taking you, Luca, all of you.*

*Don't tempt me,* he replies, and I swear, I can hear his savage breath all the way down here. That's impossible, but much of what we share is, so what's one more thing?

I lick my lips, the warmth expanding in my belly. Luca has been through so much and has *done* so much to make this city a better place—no, to defend me. He *did* make the city a better place, but that was a byproduct. The reason he stormed in there, outnumbered, risking his life, was because he couldn't stand the thought of another man looking at my body. It's because Luca *owns* me, and I own him.

*Tempt you to do what?* I text.

*We're in a hotel, Ruby... I'm sure you can put it together.*

I stare across the party at him, my heart hammering. The nerves still cling to me. They try to wrench me down into the dark, into the world of self-doubt. For some reason, I think of the love in Scarlet's eyes and voice when she talks about Molly.

*Maybe I need you to explain.*

*I thought you were the mature one?* he texts, and when I stare up at him, he starts typing again. There's something hungry in how he moves, his whole body tight like his muscles will erupt



from his sleek suit jacket. The longer he types, the faster my heart hammers.

*I need to take you somewhere private. I need to tear off that beautiful dress and reveal your even more gorgeous body underneath. I need to kiss you, spank you, own you. I need to slide my hand between your legs and rub your clit until your virgin pussy gets all wet for me, and then I need to claim you passionately, deeply, over and over and over.*

After reading the message, I look up to find that he's disappeared from the balcony. What the heck? Is he really going to send all these burning flames through me just to pull a disappearing act?

I begin typing out a message. *Where did you go?*

Then he appears at my side, staring down at me with his jaw clenched tight, his temples pulsing like he's barely holding himself back. He leans down, wrapping his arm around me.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is not to take you right here?" he groans.

I smile. "I don't think anybody at the party would appreciate that."

He presses down on the small of my back, his hot palm burning through the fabric of my dress. It feels like he's tattooing my body with the heat of his touch.

When I hesitate, he says, "Don't overthink it, Ruby. You're so clever, my perfect historian, but sometimes, you have to live in the now. Sometimes, you must forget about sources, evidence, and quantitative and qualitative analyses." He smirks. "Don't look so shocked. I've been doing some research about your passion. It's interesting."

I place my hand on his chest, feeling his hammering heartbeat. "No pressure?" I say.

"No pressure," he says huskily. "Just you. Just me. Just this heat."

"Just this light," I whisper.

He takes my hand, leading me from the party. I don't stop to think if we're being rude to everybody else, if I should tell Mom and Dad or Lexi where we're going. I just let the moment and my man sweep me up, ignoring the slight twist of nerves deep inside telling me I won't be able to do this.

## CHAPTER 29



*L*uca

As I guide her into the hotel room, letting go of everything that's happened is easy. Nate, the phone, the darkness... It all fades to meaningless when I close the door and turn to my woman.

She's wearing a ruby-colored dress cut just above the knee, showing a tempting, mouthwatering preview of her thick, creamy thighs. The dress comes up to her neck, dignified and beautiful, highlighting the subtle makeup on her face that draws out her natural perfection.

Her chest rises and falls the more I stare at her, getting quicker, causing her curvy tits to sway beneath the fabric.

"You're so damn perfect," I growl, trembling all over as I step forward and sweep her into my arms.

She makes that half-surprised moaning noise as I lean down and crush my lips against hers. I'll never tire of hearing that—the excitement, the shock at something new. Every time we kiss, it'll feel like the first time.

She giggles through the kiss when I prop my hands under her thick, curvy ass and lift her up. Carrying her into the room, I lay her on the bed, leaning down and staring into her eyes. She gazes up at me with an attractive glimmer in her eyes and her pursed lips, like she's waiting for me to kiss her again.

I remember what she said—no pressure—which means she’s still nervous about the whole virgin thing.

“I’m going to be nice,” I tell her, leaning down and gently kissing her on the neck. “... which is going to be difficult for me.”

She laughs gently, smoothing her hand through my hair and down my back as I keep kissing her, tasting her, owning her. “I don’t know. You feel pretty nice to me...”

As I kiss her, I smooth my hand up her leg, savoring every inch of her curvy, hot body. Her hand tightens on my back when I slip under her dress and get closer and closer to her underwear. I can feel her heat, her wetness. It’s like her body is begging me to fuck her.

It’s like her body is telling me to forget this whole “*be nice*” thing and tear her dress off, tear her underwear away with my teeth, bring my hard dick to her entrance, and drive in, deep, hard. Drive in until she doesn’t have to wonder if she can take me.

Instead, I bring my hand to her underwear and push down, slowly moving my fingers over her clit. She moans right into my ear. I turn my face to better catch the noise. It surges through my body and right to my dick, making me even harder, my tip burning with the continuous release of precome.

I rub up and down her underwear, feeling her wetness against my palm, smearing it all over her folds and her clit before I grab the fabric and tug it down to her knees. It pushes her knees together like I’m trapping her here, another sign of my complete ownership over her. She whimpers when I bring my finger to her entrance, moving it in circles around it, teasing her.

“You don’t have to be *that* nice,” she whisper-moans.

I lean back, keeping my hand on her virgin pussy, letting me look down into her face. She gazes back up at me with her mouth open, her excited eyes wide and horny-as-fuck.

“Don’t tempt me,” I growl. “All this talk about forgetting the darkness... but you make me want to be pretty damn dark,

Ruby.”

She shifts against me like she’s chasing the pleasure of my hand. “It just feels so, so good,” she says, averting her eyes.

“Don’t...” I slip my finger into her a little bit. “You dare...” A little bit more, feeling her entrance widen for me, her heat enveloping my touch as I push in inch by inch. “Get shy on me.”

She gasps as I slide my finger all the way in.

“I bet you were getting wet when we were texting,” I growl when I feel how soaked her inexperienced body is. “You’re drenched for me, Ruby. Fucking *soppy* for me.”

“Yes, yes,” she gasps. “It’s so hot.”

“You don’t want me to be nice?” I groan, then slip another finger into her.

She grabs a pillow and bites down on it. There’s something so wild and frantic in the movement as if she has to do it quickly or she’ll lose control. I drive my fingers deep, feeling her walls stretch around me as I bury them inside of her, keeping my eyes fixed on her the entire time.

Then I feel her entrance quiver as if making room for me. It sends blazing heat up my dick in anticipation of how perfect she’s going to feel. I begin to stroke inside of her, her body responding right away, her walls fluttering as more wetness seeps over my hand.

The hottest part is the flush shining through her makeup, turning her neck red. She’s dropped the pillow, grasping at the sheets instead, staring up at me like she can’t believe how good this feels.

“My cock’s on fire for you,” I growl, slipping my fingers out and driving them in with so much passion her body makes sloppy, wet sounds for me. “I’m going to own your body. My dick’s the only one you’ll *ever* feel. Just me, Ruby. Only me.”

She rocks her hips, grinding on my finger as I move even faster. I’m finger-fucking her now, driving deep, her wetness

pumping down over my hand, seeping all over me, drenching the sheets.

“You’re so fucking wet,” I say in awe. “Oh, hell. I can feel how close you are.”

“Hmm... *hmm!*” she moans, still biting down, as if, otherwise, she’ll let out a scream. After what I did last night, she knows how badly I need to keep every aspect of her lust to myself. Nobody else can ever see her like this, hear her, or even *think* of her like this.

I fuck her faster and faster until her whole body starts shaking. I swear, her perfect eyes almost start rolling backward. The hottest part is how genuine she is. She’s not putting on a show. She’s just existing in the moment—with me, only me. She moans as her sweet pussy gives me more of her juices, her walls fluttering around my fingers, the wet sounds getting even louder as I dominate her.

When the orgasm is over, she pants, leaning back on her elbows. “That was crazy,” she whispers. “Oh, Luca... Let me touch you. Let me tuh-taste you.”

Come surges up my dick. For an insane moment, I think I might explode in my pants. Stumbling to my feet, I reach for my pants, nodding at her. “Naked. Now, Ruby.”

She cocks a smile at me, that sassiness flitting into her eyes. “Getting bossy now, huh?”

“You bring the mafia prince out of me,” I snarl.

I pull down my pants, but I keep my eyes on her, never taking them away. She stands up, pulls her dress over her head, and removes her bra. I tear off my clothes and then leap at her, causing an intoxicating gasp to escape from her kissable lips.

Greedily grabbing big handfuls of her tits, I bury my face in her soft curviness, sucking her nipples, kissing her, indulging like the animal she makes me. I suck her nipples until she moans insistently and pushes against me.

Leaning back, I smirk. “Something to say?”

“Let me get *you* ready,” she whispers.

I take her by the wrist, guide her hand to my cock. She whimpers when she feels how hard I am. I've never been this solid in my life. Every inch of my dick is swollen with come, my head aching with how much precome is bursting out of me. "I am ready," I moan as she strokes her hand up and down, spreading the precome along my length. "Can't you feel that?"

She bites her lip, nodding, moaning, tempting.

"Don't be nervous," I tell her, toying with her folds, stroking my thumb along the needy nub of her clit. "Your body belongs to me."

Taking her by the shoulders, I gently push her toward the bed. When she lies on her back, I take a moment to look down at her, the soft light dancing over the perfect shape of her body. Her tits are big and full, her nipples tight and perky. Her hips are wide, her thighs thick, her walls fluttering and pink. Her belly looks like it's getting ready to hold my child.

The thought thunders into me.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"I... Dammit, I don't have a condom."

It shocks me when this somehow causes her to stroke her hand across her pussy, playing with her folds. "It's okay," she whispers, rubbing her clit.

I groan, stroking my hand up and down my length. "I thought—"

"I don't want to think about that right now," she whispers. "I don't want to *think*, full stop."

I climb onto the bed, holding myself up with one hand and grabbing my dick with the other. Guiding my swollen head to her opening, I keep my eyes on her, studying her face for any sign of discomfort. When I feel her opening kiss my tip, her walls opening for me, I have to try so damn hard not to slide all the way in and completely own her virgin body.

Her walls grasp onto me so tightly. I slide in inch by inch, watching in awe as her mouth twists from uncertainty to bliss,

relief, and pleasure all mixed together. She laughs and takes my face in her hands, leaning up and kissing me, then whispering, “Holy *fuck*. That feels good. That feels right.”

“Oh, hell,” I groan, sliding all the way in, almost exploding when her walls grasp onto my base. She squeezes me like she’s trying to coax the come out of me and wants to go back on the whole waiting thing.

She kisses me again, but when I slide out, she can’t keep kissing. Her teeth click against mine, and she gasps, leaning back, letting me get a view of her tits bouncing with each thrust. I’m almost howling as I fuck her faster and faster, burying myself deep, knowing there’s nobody else for me, ever. Knowing she’s the only one.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I growl when she grabs onto her tits, pressing them together.

“Is that good?” she moans.

“Do you have to ask?”

I explode into my next thrust, causing the bed to make a whining noise like I might’ve broken it. For a second, I think I’ve gone too hard, but then my woman grabs onto my shoulders and sinks her nails in.

“Again,” she gasps. “Oh, Luca... again, again.”

I slip out and then drive back in, even harder this time. When she pulls on my shoulders, I slip into an obsessive rhythm, claiming her, my head burning with the knowledge I’m the only one who’ll ever own her, my dick burning with the fact of her tight slit, gripping me like she never wants to let go.

Somehow, compared with every other perfect aspect of her, the hottest part is the way her mouth moves, the smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she bounces on my dick.

When she grabs her tits again, I almost lose it, but I’m determined to feel her creaming down my length before I erupt. What about after? We’re not using protection.

“Oh, oh,” she yells, clawing big handfuls of the sheets like she can’t take it anymore. “Luh-luh-*Luca*...”



Her pussy tightens around my dick, like her body's talking to me, telling me this is her time. I look down with a shuddering growling noise when I see thick whiteness creaming down my dick, her pussy quivering for me.

I collapse atop her, roaring into the sheets, into her neck, feeling like I'm melting into her as my balls empty and seed rushes up my dick. A thought flares in my mind. *This is it. I'm getting her pregnant. I'm filling her virgin body. The first time I fuck her, I'm going to secure our future.*

Yet it's in the background. Mostly, I just feel her pulsing around my cock, coaxing the come out of me, hear her moans, and live in the moment. The light. *Us.*

After, I rest my weight on her, kissing her cheek and letting the heat of her body press against me. She wraps her arms around me, and I shift to the side, allowing me to roll over and look into her eyes. She lies on her side, her curviness shifting with her frantic breaths.

Her face is bright, her eyes alight, her lips curved into the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

"Not as bad as you thought it'd be?" I tease.

She giggles. "It wasn't *bad* at all."

"What do you want to do about—"

Somehow, my woman knows what I'm about to say—the lack of a condom, a possible pregnancy. She presses her finger against my lips. "Let's not talk about that."

"We have to, Ruby," I tell her. "Otherwise..."

"I know what I said, but I know what I *feel*, too. I think we should just let whatever happens happen."

"What about your studies?"

Panic flutters in her eyes. "I thought you said nothing would interfere with that?"

Leaning forward, I tenderly kiss her on the cheek. I have to force myself to be gentle just in case my lust takes over again. Hell, not *just in case*. It's a certainty. "Nothing will," I tell her.

“I’m always going to be here for you every step of the way. I’m never leaving your side. Pretty soon, you’ll want to get rid of the mafia prince.”

“Ha, ha,” she says, rolling her eyes. Then she gets serious, cuddling closer to me. “I don’t ever want to get rid of you. You know, Luca, the first time I saw you, I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life.”

“I felt the same,” I tell her passionately.

“Which means we’re as crazy as each other...”

“Which means we belong together...”

“Like Bonnie and Clyde?” she says.

“Or...” I think for a moment. “Cleopatra and Anthony... no, what was his name? Jerry?”

She giggles. “*Jerry Anthony?*”

I playfully tickle her on the side. “Don’t make me *maul* you, Ruby.”

“Mark Anthony,” she says. “I’m not sure we’ve picked the best examples. What about Napoleon and Josephine? But that didn’t end well either, though there was an age gap.”

I smirk. “I’ve got an idea, beautiful,” I tell her. “Luca and Ruby. How does that sound?”

She beams. “It sounds perfect.”

When we kiss, sinking deeply into the passion, I know I’ll never be the same again. There have been three distinct eras in my life. The party boy. The workaholic. Now, it’s time to start my life for real. It’s time to be the man I was meant to be: a husband, father, lover, and provider.

She strokes her hands over my back, pulling her body close, rubbing her heat against me.

“Is it too soon to do it again?” she whispers.

My body responds right away, my balls flooding and my dick getting solid.

## CHAPTER 30



Ruby

“Thank you for having me, sir,” Luca says, seeming very formal tonight.

I smile across the dinner table at him, my heart filled with so much love. It’s been two weeks since our *first time*, and everything has been so magical and perfect since then. I was able to transfer to a college closer to home, which means I don’t have to leave the city, though Luca told me he would follow me anywhere.

*“I don’t want to go back to that college,”* I told him. *“Too many memories.”*

After it all came out about Nate, Mom and Dad instantly liked Luca. How couldn’t they? He defended my honor more definitively than any other man ever would.

Holding hands and still going strong, Mom and Dad exchange a look. Then Dad smiles at Luca and says, “You don’t have to call me *sir*.”

Luca swallows, seeming slightly on edge this evening. He’s been awkward all night, especially when he asked Dad for a private conversation. My thoughts swirl as I try to figure out what that could possibly be about. I’ve got an idea, but I won’t dare let myself think it.

“I think I do,” Luca says. “Since I’m going to ask you if I can steal your daughter for the night.”

Mom laughs. Dad chuckles. It would've been unthinkable just a month ago.

"That's not our choice," Dad says.

I smile, relieved we can all be in the same room together. I've got the feeling they all know something I don't. Even Lexi, who's been grumpy over the past couple of weeks, has a slight smile on her face.

"I choose *yes*," I say.

---

"Another museum date?" I say when he pulls up outside The Museum of Time and Terra.

Luca pulls the car to a stop, running a hand through his hair. I have to resist the urge to pounce on him. After the nerves faded away, I discovered I really, really like having sex with my man. I love it. It feels like melting into him, bonding on a level I never envisioned.

"Something like that," he says.

Reaching over, I touch his arm. "Why do you seem *nervous*, Luca?"

He smirks. "Nervous? Me? I just want to show you the new exhibit."

"There's a new one? I had no idea!"

He nods, an enigmatic glint in his intense eyes.

Taking my hand, he leads me into the museum, into the big central area. Usually, there's a dinosaur taking center stage, but now there's something covered in a big black sheet. All over the floor—I gasp when I see them—tens of thousands of rose petals cover the vast area.

As I turn in a small circle, taking it all in, I realize Luca is on one knee. I gasp and cover my hand with my mouth, tears welling in my eyes.

"Don't look so surprised," he says. "I love you, Ruby. I love you so, so much."

“I love you too,” I whisper, the world blurring as tears flood my vision.

He smiles, reaching up and taking my hands. Heat burns up my arms, into my soul. He reaches down and presses something on the floor, a button buried beneath a layer of rose petals.

The sheet suddenly *whooshes* off the display. Where the dinosaur once was, glittering silver letters now stand, looking like they’re floating, spelling out a phrase that has my soul soaring like it never wants to land.

***Will you marry me?***

“Yes,” I whisper, or I think I do, but all that comes out is a tangled sob.

I look down as Luca opens the ring box, showing me a big, glittering diamond set within a sophisticated setting and an elegant white-gold band.

“Yes,” I try to say again, but the sobs keep choking me up.

“Ruby Fitzgerald...” He clears his throat, fighting off a sob of his own. “Make me the happiest man alive. Marry me.”

The third time’s the charm. Focusing hard, I push the words past my bubbling happiness. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He slips the ring onto my finger, the metal kissing me coolly, promising so much happiness in the future. When he sweeps me into his arms, I collapse in happy tears, sobs of pure joy escaping me.

“Are you sure you want to kiss me with all these tears?”

He laughs and spins me around, leaning down and claiming my lips with his. We fuse in a configuration of heat, belonging, and love.

“Are those letters floating?” I ask, nodding up at the silver, glittering letters.

He tickles my side, looking almost boyish with the happiness lighting up his face, a far cry from the shrouded-in-darkness mafia prince I first saw in the gym.

“Small wires are holding them up, but let’s pretend they’re floating, Ruby.”

“Like us,” I say, hugging tightly to him.

“Exactly. Like us... floating into the future.”

“Together.”

## EPILOGUE



ONE WEEK LATER

*Luca*

*I've just got a couple more rounds,* I type, kneeling at the side of the ring next to the round timer. *Then I'll come pick you up.*

She replies almost right away, making me smile like a wild man. I never knew happiness like this existed. I never knew a woman or anybody could bring so much light into my life. I can't connect to the man I was before my Ruby came along, can't connect to the partying days, the depressed days. Life is just too damn sweet now.

*I've got a feeling you might see me before that.*

*I love it when you get all mysterious on me, Ruby.*

*Just call me Adelaide...*

I smirk. *I think that reference is too random for me.*

*Adelaide Herrmann. She was a famous magician, but you're right. I'm getting way too esoteric, but something magical has happened.*

Before I can reply, the timer starts. I stand up to find Colt looking at me coldly. Behind him, Shadow watches with the same icy intensity in his eyes. I haven't talked to Colt about Lexi since the phone call before the party, but ever since then, he's seemed even *more* intense. That's saying a lot.

Still, he doesn't escalate the sparring. It's a technical session, and he takes it at the correct pace, but there's no banter, no

jokes. It makes me realize I was wrong before when I thought Colt was clouded in darkness. There was the occasional smirk, the funny comment. Now, he's like a man possessed by some dark demon.

Whenever I land a punch on him, he doesn't flinch, doesn't make a noise. He just stares at me.

When the timer goes off, I say, "You good, Colt?"

"Hmm," he grunts.

"We can take it a little harder next round if you want."

"I do want that," he says coldly. "But I don't think it's a good idea. I might get carried away."

"You think I'm scared of you?" I say, grinning, meaning for it to sound joking.

"No, Luca," he replies, "but I'm scared of myself."

*Jeez.*

We go another round, and then, without any small talk, Colt clicks his tongue and heads for the exit. Shadow trails after him.

"See you soon, Colt, old buddy, old pal," I call after him. Then, under my breath, I mutter, "Douchebag."

Yet I can't hold a grudge when I see my woman running into the gym. Right away, I know something is different. I rush over to her, taking a moment to savor the flush in her cheeks. She's wearing a dress that outlines her curvaceous form, making me breathe hard as I pull her into a hug.

"I take it you aced the essay?" I say.

"What? I mean, yeah. I did pretty good, but this isn't about that."

I wait for her to go on. She leans back in my embrace, beaming up at me. "I'm pregnant."

I smile and then wipe the smile away. I want to cheer. "You're smiling," I whisper, not daring to let myself hope. "I thought you said—"



“I know what I *said*,” she cuts in, “but I was so happy the second I saw the test, Luca. I knew I had it all wrong before. This is *good* news. *Great* news!”

Finally, I let out a cheer, sweeping her into my arms and spinning her around and around, the happiest I’ve ever been. Since Ruby came into my life, that’s a big statement.

“I love you so much,” I say, finally putting her down.

She beams up at me. “I’m all dizzy now.”

I grin and motion my hand to brush her hair from her face, an old habit. Then I let my hand drop. She doesn’t hide behind her hair anymore.

# EPILOGUE



NINE MONTHS LATER

*L*exi

“Her name is Lexy, with a y,” Ruby says, handing me my niece.

My heart glows in my chest as I cradle her in my arms. For almost a year, I’ve tried to lock my feelings down. As Ruby planned her wedding and flew into the most love-filled relationship a person could imagine, I stubbornly ignored the silliness clinging to me. But Lexy breaks down my walls.

Ever since that tall, silver-haired, intense stranger stopped me from making that mistake—with his dark eyes, cute dog, and aura of mystery and fierceness—I’ve felt things I promised myself a long time ago that I’d never let myself experience. It doesn’t matter that Mom and Dad are still going strong. It doesn’t matter that they’ve proven me wrong. It doesn’t matter because I’m simply not built for love.

Even if Ruby has found the impossible, I can’t assume the same would ever happen to me.

*Focus.* I’m ruining the moment by letting my mind go there. Tears flow down my cheeks as I look into Lexy’s eyes. She makes a cooing noise, curling her entire hand around my finger.

Across the bed, Ruby looks tired but accomplished, and I’m so proud of her. Luca, Mom, and Dad watch with big smiles on their faces. Mom and Dad are holding hands with all thoughts of divorce long in the past.

“She’s so tiny,” I whisper. “I’m afraid I’m going to hurt her.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ruby says, giggling. “You’d never hurt her.”

“I mean by accident.”

“Look at her, Lexi. She’s happy. She knows you already. She loves you already. You’re going to be the best aunt ever.”

“And you’re going to be the best mother,” Luca says.

My heart fills even more when I see the love blazing between my little sister and Luca. Maybe they met unconventionally, and perhaps people might judge them because of the age gap or the whole mafia thing, but not me. I knew Ruby had found her man as soon as she told me. After Luca buried that dirtbag Nate, he earned all the brownie points in my book.

Lexy makes another cute noise, squeezing my finger even tighter.

“Careful, little angel,” I whisper, tears flowing down my cheeks. “*You’re* going to hurt *me*.”

Ruby laughs again, and I look up to find her eyes red and tears flowing down her cheeks, too.

“I’m so happy for you,” I say.

“Me too,” Dad and Mom say simultaneously, then exchange a look like lovestruck teenagers.

Luca leans forward and gently kisses his wife on the cheek.

Behind them, the window looks out onto the parking lot. A light rain is falling. A shadow flits across the street. For a second, I’m certain I see him staring. I see Colt. I see his dog. I relive those moments outside the house, screwdriver in hand, intent on doing something. Then I blink, and the stupid, insane image turns into a rainy haze.

Leaning down, I kiss my niece on the head.

## EPILOGUE



TEN YEARS LATER

*L*uca

“Daddy, I’ve found something!” Lexy yells from her “archaeology site” in the yard.

I grin over at my daughter. She stands shin-deep in a hole we’ve spent the summer morning digging, dust all over her pants, her brown hair tied up in a bun with a pencil stuck through it. It’s her *historian look* since Ruby often does that with her hair before driving to the college to teach a class.

From the back deck, Ruby watches while bobbing our youngest son on her knee. Little Leo loves being close to his mama, and I know he’ll be the biggest mommy’s boy ever for a long time. Ruby beams over at us, wearing a flowing summer dress that draws attention to her natural beauty.

In the pool, Enzo and Sophia have the biggest splash fight in the history of splash fights, their laughter and the sound of water a constant backdrop to our archeological dig.

“Let’s see, then, my little historian,” I say, climbing into the hole.

She shows me a bright penny, beaming up at me. “I wonder who left it here. Do you think we can do some special tests on it?” She raises her voice. “Mommy, I found a coin!”

Ruby walks over, holding little Leo to her chest with one hand. I’m always in awe of my wife. Between her PhD, popular

history books, teaching, and research, she's always been the best mother anybody could ever dream of.

She takes the coin and then smiles. "Lexy, this might actually be a real find."

Lexy pouts, folding her arms playfully. "Of *course*, it's a real find. I'm a *real* historian."

Ruby grins, hands Lexy the coin, and then ruffles her hair. "I'm proud of you. Really."

Lexy beams, studying the coin. "It's the real deal, huh?"

"The real deal found by a real historian," I tell her.

She grins, clasping it to her chest. "I'm going to put it in my special case!"

When she runs inside, Ruby hugs me, whispering, "You really are the best dad, Luca. Planting a secret coin a year in advance so the grass would grow over, just for this moment."

I smile, my heart brimming with love, as I wrap my arm around my wife and son, folding them both into a big hug. "Did you see the look on her face? It was worth it."

## THE END

Want more? Check out my latest release *Illicit Temptation* [here](#), or subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) to get a free, new, original story and stay up to date.

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- 3) [Kidnapped by My Best friend's Dad](#)
- 4) [Texting My Mom's Ex](#)
- 5) [Hot for My Step-Uncle](#)
- 6) [Crushing on The Billionaire](#)
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# TEXTING MR. MAFIA



## CHAPTER ONE

### Scarlet

It's hard not to feel like a kid when my parents argue. Our bedrooms are jam-packed together, just like every room in this apartment, the walls barely thick enough to separate them, let alone block any noise. I'm sitting on my bed, like when I was a girl, my hands pressed against my knees. I'm nineteen. I shouldn't have to feel like this anymore.

*"Then why did you borrow it?"* Mom screams.

*"I wanted to give us a better life,"* Dad roars back. *"Why is that so goddamn hard to understand?"*

I close my eyes and imagine I'm somewhere else, but my imagination doesn't go very far. Singing usually helps with feelings like these, not that I'm good. But focusing on my voice—blocking out everything else—often makes things easier. The issue is I've been crying, and my throat is raw.

"Loan sharks," Mom says in a quieter voice but still loud enough for me to hear, obviously, since we can hear everything in this apartment. That means Mom and Dad might've been able to hear me crying when they first started arguing, and they didn't care.

"Loan sharks," Mom repeats. "Jesus Christ, Philip. What were you thinking?"

"We're going in circles, Jessica," Dad snaps.

"Maybe I want you to explain it to me one last time."

Opening my eyes, I stare across my small bedroom and my tiny desk with the chipped paint. We didn't always live in a rundown apartment. When I was younger, we had a three-bedroom house in the suburbs, a white picket fence, and birds singing in the morning instead of people screaming at each other. That was before Dad started his get-rich-quick schemes, which inevitably always became get-poorer-quick schemes.

"It was a sure thing," Dad says. "That butcher has been in business for decades. How was I supposed to know there'd be a black-market meat scandal the day after I bought in, huh?"

"I remember our old bed linens. They were so soft. This stuff makes my skin crawl, and you stink of booze."

"Jess—"

"You *reek* of it. Stop pretending this is all about business. I bet you never even bought into this silly butcher's. It all went on liquor, didn't it?"

I'm relieved when my cell phone rings, Charlotte's name appearing on my cracked screen. Charlotte's the only friend from our old life who still bothers to stay in touch with me. Not that I can blame anybody else. They've got college and relationships and life to keep them busy. Charlotte and I have always been Char and Scar.

I leave my bedroom and go into the bathroom, the furthest room from the argument. "Hey," I say, sitting on the cold toilet seat.

"Howdy," Charlotte says, her voice upbeat despite the circumstances. "I wanted to check in about the you-know-what."

Charlotte knows all about Dad's latest scheme. "He lost all the money. They're arguing about it now. Apparently, loan sharks will be kicking down our door any day now."

My voice sounds way too flat, way too resigned. It's like I don't even care, but that's not exactly it. It's just that I've been through this too many times.

"Are you... angry?" Charlotte asks.

“I don’t even know,” I tell her. “It just is what it is. It’s like the color of the sky or grass. It’s like the fact we breathe oxygen. Dad borrows money. Dad loses money. We move to a cruddier neighborhood, but I’m unsure how much further we can slip.”

“I wish there was something I could do,” Charlotte whispers.

“You’re helping just by calling. Believe me. Anyway, it’s not like you can fly over here and fix everything. How’s college?”

“It’s... fine, yeah, okay, not great.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to pretend just because I’m stuck here. Be honest.”

Charlotte sighs and then starts telling me about her latest assignment. I try not to get jealous or let my mind fill with foolish visions of having the time to pursue my own dreams. Not that I think I’ll ever become some majorly successful singer. Maybe a backup singer or part of a choir, anything that gives me that beautiful feeling of disappearing and not having to think.

*Slam.* The argument is spilling into the living room.

“I’ve got to go,” I tell Charlotte.

“Okay. Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

I hang up and go into the living room. Dad has his suitcase open on the coffee table. Mom is in the doorway, throwing clothes at him. Dad catches them and shoves them into the suitcase. My chest tightens, my heart aching when I notice Dad purposefully not looking at me.

He zips up the case, then finally glances at me, only for a second. He’s fifty-four, bald, a little round around the middle. His features are tightly lined, and his eyes are bloodshot from the booze. I’ve never felt truly loved by him. We’ve never had a real father-daughter bond. It’s sad, but I can’t linger on it. Otherwise, I’ll go crazy.

“Well,” Mom says, striding into the living room, her eyes as wide as saucers from her pain pills. She had a fall last year,

and even though her hip has healed, she says the pain is still there, always there. “What are you waiting for?”

“You know it’s not me who will suffer here,” Dad snaps. “I can disappear. Leave the city. Do whatever the hell I want. The sharks are going to come looking for *you*.”

Dad grabs his suitcase without looking at me again and almost runs for the door. Mom chases after him, screaming, calling him every name she can think of. I stand in the bathroom doorway the whole time, watching numbly. There are no more tears now. I’m retreating into myself, a secret room inside, with perfect acoustics and no pain, no doubt, just music.

Once he’s gone, Mom turns, falls against the door, slides to a sitting position, and starts sobbing. Maybe a good daughter would go to her, hold her, and tell her everything will be okay. However, since the pills started, my bond with Mom has begun to fray. It’s even more depressing than with Dad. At least he and I never had much of a relationship to begin with.

I go into my bedroom, shut the door, sit on my bed, and stare at the wall.

---

At first, I think I’m dreaming. The *bang-bang-bang* seems like it comes from inside me. I peel my eyes open and focus. It’s coming from the front door. This is another familiar routine. Dad leaves, vowing never to return, and then he comes stumbling back. Mom’s probably too dosed-up to answer the door. I have a double shift at the restaurant tomorrow, so I need my sleep.

Groggily, I drag myself through the apartment and open the door. “Dad, it’s late.”

A cold hand clamps over my mouth, sending an icy shiver through me. The man is wearing a balaclava, eyes narrowed as he shoves me against the wall.

“Don’t make a noise,” he says.

I was about to scream, so I bite down. My heart’s banging in my chest so hard that it hurts.

“Your father owes us money, Scarlet. Where is he?”

I shake my head, made difficult by the fact he’s holding my mouth, his grip crushing my jaws like he’s trying to twist my head off.

“You don’t know?”

I nod, wondering if I should try to remember any details about him. Green eyes, his accent indistinguishable from anybody born in the rougher parts of the city.

“That’s not good for you,” the man says, “but I believe that family is the most important thing in life. Don’t you?”

I nod again, but only because it’s what he wants me to do. So far, he hasn’t produced a weapon. He hasn’t tried to do anything to my hands—hold them in place, handcuff them, anything. I’m under no delusions about my ability to fight. I just need to let him get his speech over with, but what if he turns violent?

“That means this debt belongs to your entire family,” the man says. “I’m a generous man. I’ll give you three days. Do you have any questions?”

I nod a third time.

He slightly loosens his grip on my mouth. I can taste the leather of his glove. It makes me sick. “Don’t scream, Scarlet Smith. Don’t do anything stupid.”

It’s not hard to guess why he’s used my full name. He wants me to understand that he knows everything about me. About Mom. About Dad.

“How much?” I say, trying so hard to keep my voice steady.

“Thirty-two thousand,” he replies, “but it’ll be thirty-five tomorrow and thirty-eight the day after that. Tell you what. We can call it an even forty in three days. Unless you have thirty-two right now?”

“N-no,” I whisper.

He turns and looks into the apartment. From the way the balaclava shifts, I think he’s smirking. “I didn’t think so. Don’t

worry about finding us for the payment. We'll come to you."

He lets me go and backs off into the hallway. Another detail is that he's not very tall. Just a couple of inches taller than me. I'm five-five. So he's around five-seven. Why does that matter, though? It's not like I can go to the police. He doesn't even need to say that part. Dad has borrowed from bad people before. Never *this* bad, but still. No police.

It's like the man reads my mind. From the hallway, he says, "Call *911* if you want, Scarlet. I'd enjoy that."

He walks down the hallway. Once he's gone, I stumble against the wall, shaking all over. All I want to do is cry and scream that life's not fair. There's only so much I can take, but now the debt's on my head and Mom's.

I remember a few years ago, before the most recent move, Mom and me in the kitchen, Mom kneading dough, singing a few notes, then looking over at me with a daring, alert glint in her eyes—the kind of glint she never has anymore. "*Go on, Scarlet. I know you can do better than me...*"

When I sang, her whole face lit up. I think about that all the time. It's one of our best moments. Whatever else is true about Mom—the pills, the hopelessness—she doesn't deserve this, and neither do I. So what the hell are we going to do?

[>One-click Texting Mr. Mafia<](#)

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