



**THE DON'S**

TEQUILA QUEEN

AMBER ROW

# **The Don's Tequila Queen**

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An Enemies to Lovers Mafia Romance

Amber Row

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# Chapter 1

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# Isabella

The crack of gunfire pierces my ears. To an amateur, it would sound like a car backfiring, but where I come from, I know a gunshot when I hear one. I sprint from the shed, gravel crunching under my boots.

"Papa!" My voice is lost in the roar of engines as tinted cars speed across the road.

I spot Papa ahead, his back to me, his shadow looming over the agave fields.

"Papa!" I call out again, in panic.

He whips around. The roar of engines drowns me out—a convoy of black SUVs barrels down the dirt road in a cloud of dust.

Papa gestures urgently. A warning. Hide! His eyes are wide with fear. I dart behind a barrel, pressing myself flat. Bullets pepper the air as the SUVs pass in a blur. Papa staggers, clutching his chest. *Dios mío!* Good gracious, what is going on? Before I can react, his body crumples to the dusty ground.

The last SUV fishtails around the bend, leaving silence in its wake. I race to Papa's side. His white guayabera slowly blooms red. Blood pools beneath

him, turning the parched soil dark. I press my hands over the bullet wounds in his chest, slick warmth coating my fingers.

"No, Papa, no!" I kneel in the dirt.

His breathing is shallow, almost non-existent. I clutch his hand—his skin already cold.

"*Mija...*" My daughter. Blood bubbles on his lips. "The empire...yours now."

"Papa, no! Stay with me!" His breathing suddenly turns to ragged gasps as his blood spills over my hands.

I blink back tears, willing him to live through the sheer force of my love. His eyes, once shining with wisdom and humor, stare past me. His chest falls still. His fingers go limp in mine.

Papa's eyes stare vacantly at the sky.

"No, no, no. Papa..." I shriek, placing my two fingers on the artery on his neck, feeling for a pulse, for life.

I feel nothing.

Sobs wrack my body. My father - my anchor, my guiding light - is gone. Numbness spreads through me, even as my mind reels.

I look out over the acres of blue agave, blanketing the valley below. Hundreds of workers usually tend the plants that supply our family's tequila empire, but they're all gone now. *Siesta* – Resting hour. An empire that now falls to me.

I take a deep, steadying breath and gently close Papa's eyes. Though my heart is shattered, there will be time to properly mourn later. For now, I must focus. Tears stream down my face, but it comes to me like breathing. I barely even notice them until they fall on my hands.

I lower my head and sob. Around me, the field seems to bow in grief too. I am alone. I can't just leave him lying here. In the heat. It's too hot. He'll be

hot.

Carefully, I lift Papa's limp body, half-carry, and half-drag him behind the shed. Out of sight, closer to our home. I swallow hard, fighting back a fresh wave of anguish.

"Stay strong, Isabella," I whisper to myself. Papa would want me to be strong. I can't carry him back to the house. I'm too weak to make it the distance.

I sit behind the barn, cradling his head on my lap. Even in death, I failed him. I am filled with guilt, as the inevitable thought passes. Could I have saved him? Had the roles been reversed, he would have taken a bullet for me and... I failed him in his greatest hour of need. My chest begins to feel heavy, and in release, I begin to wail. Loudly.

I cradle Papa's lifeless body, unable to comprehend that he is truly gone. My tears fall onto his unmoving chest as I rock him gently.

"No, my dear Papa," I whisper. "Don't leave me."

In the distance, shouts ring out as the staff notice us. Hurried footsteps approach. I clutch Papa tighter, even as his skin grows cold against mine. I cannot let him go.

Strong arms encircle me, lifting me up. I scream and fight against them.

"*Señorita Isabella, por favor,*" Juanita, my old nanny, pleads.

I go limp, allowing them to pry me away from Papa's body. The men carry him inside while Juanita guides me back to the hacienda, our familial estate, her worn hands firm yet comforting on my shoulders.

Inside, the staff bustle about, calling for ice-making arrangements. I sink into a chair, numb. Juanita presses a glass of water into my hands, stained with blood and soil, but I don't even notice.

How can I do this alone? I am not ready to lead our empire, to avenge my

father against such powerful enemies. Partly for I'm just a child at twenty-four. And largely because I can not imagine who would do such a thing. I must be strong. The answers will come in time I hear Papa's counsel.

I dash the tears from my eyes. There is much to do before we can properly mourn. I straighten my back and start issuing orders.

Papa's empire is now mine to defend. But first, I must give his life a goodbye that will be spoken of for generations.



Slowly I stand up. With new determination I make my way through the whispering staff towards the kitchen, certain that some of the staff there are still in the dark.

"*Señorita?*" Rosa gasps, taking in my disheveled, blood-stained appearance.

"Rosa, listen closely," I say, my voice sounding calmer than I feel. "Papa is dead. Gunned down. You must help me make preparations for the wake."

Her face pales, but she nods. "*Sí, señorita.* I will gather the others."

"Quickly. And discreetly," I add. "No one must know what we have planned. His funeral will be the greatest talk in town. The enemies who killed him will cower to learn who came."

Rosa and the others nod. Just then, the door opens and the remainder of the staff, led by Juanita, gather near the entrance. They stare at me like I'm made of glass. Little do they know, I won't shatter. I refuse to.

I take a deep breath to steady myself as Juanita and the others look to me expectantly. There is no time to grieve just yet.

"Prepare my father's body for his funeral. Call the church and make arrangements," I say, my voice wavering only slightly.

Juanita nods. "*Sí, señorita.* We will take care of everything."

"I want the A-list guest to be invited. This time, Alejandro," I address my father's butler, who has been privy to our business for decades. "I want no talk of posturing and keeping certain members secret. I want the mafia dons, the local cops, the richest heirs and the goddamn politicians from all across the country present at the funeral. We have one message and it shall be delivered swiftly. We fear no one. When we call, the world arrives, enmity be damned as politicians and the men they previously imprisoned sit side by side. And when we find who did this, foes will join hands and help us bring them down. Are we clear? If anyone asks who is attending, be honest and then gently, remind them that the Torres heir will remember who showed up at her hour of need in Jalisco, Mexico."

He nods briskly.

I manage a small, grateful smile. At least I do not have to shoulder this burden alone. My father's loyal staff will support me through this difficult transition. I make my way to my father's office, where just yesterday we shared our afternoon coffee and spoke of the future.

It still smells of his tobacco and cologne.

His ledger sits open on the desk, pages covered in his tidy script. I run my fingers over the ink, feeling closer to him.

"Do not worry, Papa," I whisper. "I will make you proud."

There is so much to learn about managing the crews, negotiating with suppliers, and distributing our product. But I will rise to the challenge. I am a Torres, after all.

I take a deep breath and walk over to the window overlooking the agave fields. The sun beats down on the blue-grey plants that will soon provide the lifeblood of our business.

This fertile valley has been in my family for generations. My ancestors built this empire from the ground up, through hard work and sacrifice. Now my father's spirit will join those who came before.

I blink back tears, leaning my forehead against the cool glass.

A soft knock at the door startles me from my thoughts. I turn to see Juanita, her eyes downcast.

"Pardon, señorita, but your father's lawyer is here. Alejandro sent for him. He asks to see you right away."

"Send him in," I say, curtly.

"Señorita," she whispers, but chokes back her words as she looks me up and down and averts her gaze.

"What is it, Juanita?" I ask, impatiently.

"Your clothes."

I look down. I'm still drenched in blood. Bile rises to my throat. "Tell him I'll join him shortly. Make him comfortable in the formal sitting room."

Juanita bows her head and sees herself out. Alone again, I move to the small altar in the corner, lighting a candle for my father. The flame dances, casting shadows on the walls.

"Guide me, Papa," I whisper. "I still have so much to learn."

With a final prayer, I straighten my back and head upstairs to clean and change. Once dressed in a simple black dress, I am ready to receive my father's lawyer. I make my way down the stairs and along a hallway lined with family portraits stretching back several generations. My heels click sharply against the tile floors, echoing through the empty halls.



As I near the sitting room, I see a man standing stiffly by the door, hands clasped behind his back. He is dressed in a crisp black suit, with a leather briefcase at his feet.

"Señorita Torres," he says with a slight bow of his head. "I am Javier Nuñez, your father's attorney. I am sorry we have to meet under these circumstances. Please accept my condolences. *Por favor acepte mis condolencias.*"

"Thank you. Please, come in," I reply, pushing open the heavy wooden door. The familiar smell of aged leather, rich mahogany, and cigar smoke washes over me. I blink back fresh tears, willing myself to remain composed.

Javier offers his condolences as he walks briskly over to the massive coffee table and begins removing documents from his briefcase. I take a seat across from him in one of the large leather recliners.

"There is much to discuss," he says without preamble. "First, your father's will."

He passes a thick stack of papers across the desk. With a slightly trembling hand, I accept them.

"As expected, since your mother's passing, you are the sole heir to the Torres Tequila Company.," Javier continues. "However, the board will want assurances that you are prepared to lead."

I nod silently, skimming the legal jargon on the page. This is what I have been groomed for my entire life. I will not let my father down.

"There are also significant holdings in property and other investments," he adds.

"I understand," I reply evenly. "What is the net worth of the holdings I am to inherit?"

"4.2 billion American dollars. A great responsibility has been placed on your shoulders, señorita Torres. I had your father's trust and will serve you with

the same loyalty."

We spend the next hour reviewing assets, taxes, and the complex inner workings of the company. My mind spins but I force myself to focus.

Finally Javier snaps his briefcase shut and stands. "I will be in touch soon with the board members. *Hasta entonces, si tienes alguna pregunta, no dudes en llamarme.* Until then, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call me. My condolences again, *señorita.*"

I walk him to the door, my new reality sinking in. Alone at last, having held strong for so long, I decided to sit in here for a few more minutes before going to check on the arrangements.

The house feels empty without his presence. Memories flood my mind.

His favorite brandy sits on the bar, the smell as familiar as his smile. I run my fingers over the leather-bound books, the collections of art and artifacts from our family's generations in the tequila business. So much history lives within these walls.

I gaze out the window at the terraced hills blanketed in blue agave. Workers once again tend the crops that are the lifeblood of our company. Papa built this empire from the earth itself, through years of toil and determination.

Now it is my duty to steer our destiny.

I pour two glasses of brandy, setting one aside in honor of my father.

"*Salud, Papa.*" I say softly before taking a sip.

There is a quiet knock at the door. Juanita enters, her eyes full of sympathy.

"*Puedo traerle algo, mija?*" Can I bring you anything?

I shake my head with a sad smile. "*Gracias, pero estoy bien.*" Thank you, but I'm okay.

She has been like a second mother to me since Mama passed. Now we must comfort each other during this difficult transition.



Juanita nods in understanding. "*Llámeme si necesita algo. Estaré cerca.*" Call me if you need anything. I'll be close by.

As she leaves, I take a deep breath and steady myself. There are arrangements to be made and calls to be taken. The world keeps turning even as my own has been shaken.

The phone rings and I pick it up with a heavy heart. As people who knew my Papa called to express their sympathies, my voice begin to waver, but I push through.

Papa did not raise a coward.

Soon, the house is bustling with activity, our staff hurrying to and fro. In the midst of the controlled chaos, I am able to slip away to my room unnoticed.

Finally alone, I sink to my knees and let the tears flow freely.

"*Ay, Papa,*" I whisper. Oh, Papa.

Grief wells up inside me, a bittersweet ache. I mourn the loss of my hero, my guide, my strength. But even as I weep, strength grows within me—his legacy, his gift.

The empire will live on.



The funeral is a lavish affair, a spectacle of power and influence as Papa would have wanted. Important figures from all walks of life attend to pay their respects—politicians, celebrities, criminals. Each guest offers condolences and pledge thier support to me, the new heir of the Torres empire.

I stand at the front of the room, accepting words of sympathy instead of well wishes. Although my heart still aches with grief, I keep my expression

neutral. To show weakness now would be a mistake.

As the funeral concludes, I feel a hand on my shoulder. "Isabella."

I turn to see my only first cousin, Juan Torres. His dark eyes framed by heavy lashes hold warmth and sympathy. "Your father was a great man. If there is anything you need, anything at all, you have only to ask. We are family, after all."

I clasp his hand firmly in gratitude. "Thank you, Juan. Your support means a great deal."

Even now, alliances are forming and shifting around me. I must tread carefully through this web of power and deceit. But for now, I will accept this gesture of goodwill. I need all the allies I can get.

The guests begin to depart, and I am left alone at last in the lavish chapel. I approach Papa's casket, resting atop a sea of flowers. His face looks pale and waxy, but still noble in death.

I place a hand on the cool wood, tears stinging my eyes once more. "*Adiós, Papá. Te extrañaré.*" Goodbye, Papa. I will miss you.

As I exit the chapel, a young woman approaches me. She is striking, with porcelain skin and fiery red hair tumbling over her shoulders. I recognized her immediately. Clara Labourine Herrera, the sole heir to the Jalisco Cartel. A powerful friend to have and a dangerous enemy to make.

"*Señorita Herrera,*" I say. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Please, call me Clara," she says smoothly. "I came to offer my condolences for your loss. "And..." She hesitates. "To pledge my loyalty to you, if you will have it."

I arch a brow in surprise. This is unexpected. And potentially dangerous. But if she is sincere, an alliance with the Jalisco cartel could prove useful. I must tread carefully here.

"That is most generous of you," I say. "Especially considering our families' history."

Clara's eyes flash. "The past is the past. I only wish to look toward the future, *uno donde las mujeres no repitan los errores de sus antepasados*, one where women don't repeat the mistakes of their forefathers. With my father soon to retire, it will fall on us to lead. An alliance could benefit us both."

I study her closely. She seems earnest, but one can never be too cautious in this world.

"And what brought about this change of heart?" I ask lightly.

Clara steps closer, lowering her voice. "The Sinaloa grow restless. They seek to control the entire trade. Together, we are strong enough to stop them. But alone..."

She lets the implication hang in the air. I feel a growing respect for this woman and her boldness. Perhaps she is right, and the time has come to set old grudges aside.

Still, caution tempers my words. "You pose an interesting idea. I will consider it carefully."

Clara nods. "I understand. All I ask is that you do not dismiss it outright. We could do great things, you and I." Her eyes burn with ambition.

The conversation ends as mourners stream from the chapel. Clara's security guy tells her it's time to leave. I bid her a polite farewell, my mind spinning with her startling proposal.

As I greet those who have come to pay respects, one thought rises above the rest: *El juego ha cambiado*. The game has changed. I must adapt, or risk losing everything.

# Chapter 2

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Stefano

The heavy oak door creaks open and I step into the dimly lit office. Shadows dance across the dark wood walls and plush Persian rugs. At the far end, behind an imposing mahogany desk, sits Luca Conti.

Even relaxed in his leather chair, he exudes power. His piercing black eyes fix on me as I approach.

"Stefano, *mio amico*, come in," his deep voice rumbles.

He's calling me his friend, and my nerves go into overdrive.

I nod, forcing confidence into my stride. My polished loafers sink into the rug with each step. Luca's gaze follows me. My palms grow damp. Does he sense my nerves? I clench my fists and meet his stare.

"It's good to see you, Luca," I say.

My voice sounds steady despite the hammering in my chest.

Luca leans forward, pressing his meaty hands on the desk. His diamond pinky ring flashes under the green glass lamp. "Please, sit."

I settle into the leather chair across from him. The scent of his cigar lingers in the air. I resist the urge to loosen my tie.

Luca studies me, his expression unreadable. The silence presses down. I resist the urge to shift in my seat.

Finally he speaks. "I have an opportunity for you, my friend." His eyes glint. "A chance to prove your worth to the family."

My pulse quickens. Does he know about my doubts, my longing to break free from this life in the mafia? It's not the life I hate, per se, as much as the unnecessary violence it dictates. No, I must stop this self-doubt. This is my

chance to step up, to earn Luca's trust. If I move up the ranks, I can actually make a change around here. I meet his gaze and nod.

"Anything for the family, Luca. You know I've been waiting for a chance to prove myself."

He smiles, white teeth flashing against his tanned skin. "Good, good. I like your ambition, Stefano."

He leans back, linking his hands over his stomach. His black silk shirt pulls taut against his barrel chest.

"As you know, we've been looking to expand our enterprise." His voice drops. "The tequila market is ripe for the taking. Acres of untouched agave in Mexico, just waiting for the right investors."

I nod, thoughts racing. The tequila business - it could be our biggest score yet.

"I'm putting you in charge of this operation," Luca continues. "You'll go to Mexico, scout locations, find suppliers and distributors we can work with."

My pulse leaps. He's trusting me with this? Me, not one of the older men?

"You won't regret this, Luca," I say. "I'll make the family proud."

He nods. "See that you do." His eyes bore into mine, sharp and assessing. "Be discreet, but take care of any...obstacles. You'll be representing us. You are the new underboss, after all."

"Of course." My voice comes out steady despite the anticipation buzzing through me.

I glance around the office, taking in the heavy curtains, the marble busts staring down at us. So much history in this room. How many deals has Luca brokered from this grand desk?

I meet his eyes again. "When do I leave?"

"Tonight." He smiles, wolfish. "Private jet's already waiting."

Of course. Luca doesn't waste time.

I stand, adjusting my suit jacket. "I'll start packing."

As I turn to leave, Luca's voice stops me. "Stefano."

I look back. His expression is grave now.

"This is a big opportunity for you. Don't mess it up." His eyes flash.

"*Capisci?*"

My mouth goes dry, but I keep my face neutral. "*Capisco, Luca. I understand.*"

He nods, leaning back. "Good. I'll expect regular updates. And you don't need to pack."

He shakes his head toward the corner and there lies a suitcase, a briefcase, and my passport. Trust Luca Conti to leave no chance.

I dip my chin in acknowledgment, collect my things and stride from the office, excitement and nerves churning inside me. This is it - my chance to prove I have what it takes. Failure is not an option.

The family is counting on me now.

I step out into the marble hallway, my polished shoes clicking on the floor. My mind races as I head for the front door.

Mexico. Tequila. If I play this right, it's a whole new empire for the Conti family. But also new enemies. New dangers.

I pass by a gilded mirror and catch a glimpse of myself - crisp dark suit, hair slicked back. I look the part. But underneath the expensive trappings, I'm still just a kid from Brooklyn. I still have to prove I deserve to stand alongside Luca and the other bosses.

Outside, the sun glints off the row of sleek cars. The private jet sits on the runway in the distance, the engine already rumbling.

No turning back now.



I slide into the back of the waiting town car, nodding at the driver. As we pull away from the sprawling estate, I watch it recede in the tinted window.

So much has changed since yesterday. Just 24 hours ago, I was just another soldier. Now I've taken Jimmy's place.

Jimmy. I never saw eye-to-eye with the old underboss. He was always on my case for being too reckless and too impatient. But still. Murdered in his own home, in his favorite leather armchair. Never had a chance.

My jaw tightens as I remember Luca's words from the previous day. *The Carlisis. Had to be them. They've been trying to muscle in on our territory for months. And with a new don, that imbecile child Felix Carlisi, at the helm, they must have decided to take a shot at us while we're unsuspecting.*

It won't go unanswered. Once I'm back from Mexico, I'll make sure they regret ever crossing us. I'll...

The driver's voice interrupts my thoughts. "We've arrived, Mr. Nitti."

I look up to see the small private airport outside my window. Time to focus on the task at hand. The future of Luca's family business is in my hands now.

No room for error.

I step out of the car and straighten my tie, mentally preparing for the journey ahead. A gust of wind tousles my hair as I walk across the tarmac toward the gleaming private jet. Two of Luca's men stand waiting at the base of the stairs. They nod respectfully as I approach.

"Welcome, Mr. Nitti. The plane is fueled and ready for take-off."

"Good," I reply brusquely as I climb up the steps.

Can't let them see any hesitation.

Inside the cabin, I sink into a plush leather seat. As the jet engines rumble to life, the gravity of my new position hits me. Underboss. Me.

I've dreamt of this day since I was a kid looking up to the big shots strutting

around the social club. I wanted that power, that respect. Now it's mine.

But with the opportunity comes danger.

The Carlisis will be out for blood after we retaliate for Jimmy's murder. And who knows what awaits me in Mexico. Luca was right to warn me it won't be easy down there. But I can't fail. Too much is riding on this mission.

As the plane lifts into the sky, I gaze out the window at the city shrinking below. The empire Luca has built. That I'm now tasked with expanding.

I close my eyes and say a silent prayer to Jimmy, hoping he'll watch over me. Wherever he is.

When I open them, my jaw is set. I'm ready.

Mexico, here I come.



The flight is smooth and quick thanks to Luca's top-of-the-line Gulfstream. Before I know it, the pilot announces our descent into Mexico City.

I cinch my tie and straighten my jacket as the wheels kiss the tarmac. First impressions matter. I need these Mexican big shots to see me as a man who commands respect.

A sleek black SUV is waiting on the runway to whisk me directly to the estate of Don Herrera. He's the padrino down here, the king of all mafia - the Godfather of the Mexican liquor trade.

Luca had warned me to tread lightly with him. We need his blessing if we're going to get a piece of the tequila pie.

The SUV pulls up to an imposing iron gate flanked by armed guards. They give me a quick pat down before letting us through. Can't be too careful in this business.

We roll up a palm tree-lined drive to the sprawling hacienda. More muscle at the entrance. I keep my chin up and chest out as they usher me inside to meet El Don.

The foyer is all marble and mahogany. Crystal chandeliers glitter overhead. A far cry from the dark, smoky social clubs back home.

A striking woman in a red dress appears. "Mr. Nitti?" she purrs. "This way, please."

My pulse quickens as I follow her swaying hips. Here we go.

She leads me into a grand study where a gray-haired man sits smoking a cigar behind a massive desk.

Don Herrera himself.

He sizes me up through a cloud of smoke. I stand firm, refusing to be intimidated.

"So you are the new underboss I've heard so much about," he says finally. His Spanish accent is thick.

I dip my head respectfully. "Stefano Nitti. A pleasure to meet you, Don Herrera."

He indicates for me to sit. The woman in red perches on the arm of his chair, one hand draped possessively over his shoulder.

"Luca tells me you are interested in the tequila business." He takes a puff of his cigar, regarding me shrewdly.

"That's right. We feel mutually beneficial opportunities exist for us to partner in the industry."

He nods slowly. "It will not be easy to break into. The cartels control much of the agave production."

My pulse quickens. This is it - my chance to prove myself to the family.

"With all due respect, Don Herrera, I'm here to do whatever needs to be done

to secure our piece of the pie. You have my word that I will not fail."

Herrera studies me for a long moment before a slow smile spreads across his face. He stands and extends his hand. "Then we have a deal, my friend. My men will drive you around and show you some land."

I grin and shake firmly. The chance for the empire to expand.

I leave his opulent hacienda with a spring in my step, invigorated by our agreement.

The sun beats down as I make my way through the dusty streets. I nod to the men stationed around the perimeter - Luca's insurance that this meeting goes smoothly.

My mind races with plans. First, I'll need to scout locations for agave farms and production facilities. Security will be crucial; I'll have to vet men we can trust to run a tight operation. Distribution and transport of the tequila will take finesse to avoid scrutiny at the borders.

I'm shaken from my thoughts as a rag clad child darts in front of me, attempting to lift my wallet. I grab his wrist firmly and meet his frightened eyes.

"Easy, *amigo*," I say gently in Spanish. I slipped him a few pesos. "Go, buy some bread for your family."

He scampers off. I watch him go, reminded of my own humble beginnings on the streets of Palermo before my family moved to Brooklyn. The same hunger drove me to do what was needed to survive. To build something.

I harden my resolve. Our expansion into Mexico will be profitable, but it will also provide opportunities for the people. Schools, jobs, order. A chance at a better life, like the one Luca gave me.

This is about more than money or power. It's about building a legacy.

I arrive at the cantina and push through the swinging doors. My contact is

waiting in the back corner booth. I slide into the seat across from him.

He is in his 50s, face leathered from years working tequila ranches. I know I can rely on his knowledge of the land and industry.

"*Hola, Stefano,*" he greets me. His Spanish is rapid, idioms I don't fully grasp. I'm grateful for the translator Luca insisted on accompanying me.

We exchange pleasantries before getting to business. He spreads a map on the table, pointing out regions ripe for cultivation. His local connections will prove invaluable. As we talk, a mariachi band strikes up a tune, the trilling guitars and soulful voices filling the cantina.

I glance around at the patrons - weathered farmers, laughing children, lovers dancing.

This place may be foreign, but the people are the same. My purpose is renewed. I will honor these simple dreams that rest at the heart of us all - home, family, land to call your own. Dreams my ancestors held when they too were strangers in a new world.

I nod along as he explains the intricacies of running a tequila operation - irrigation, soil conditions, harvesting methods. My mind whirs, already visualizing the potential.

The mariachi band transitions into a slower number, a woman's voice rising in a haunting lament.

"*Una pena,*" he murmurs. A sadness.

I sense the grief woven into the melody, yet also hope.

I think of Luca, the only family I have since mine were killed. The sacrifices we make in the New York Cartel in service of a greater purpose: to protect people who have no one to turn to.

He orders us two shots of añejo tequila, its caramel hue like liquid gold in the dim cantina light. We toast "to new ventures."

The liquor burns smoothly down my throat.

I see it now - acres of azure agave blanketing the valley, modest casitas where workers can raise their children, a distillery churning out the finest tequila north of Jalisco.

But then, he tells me the deal.

Don Herrera gets 30% of all revenue and there's no way Luca Conti will stand for that. I get up and walk right out.

# Chapter 3

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Isabella



A week has passed since the funeral, and I still feel like every ounce of energy has been sapped out of me. Someone knocks on my door.

“Come in,” I state flatly.

Alejandro enters and puts forth a silver tray. On it lies a note, calligraphed, with my name on it. He leaves.

I sigh and for a brief moment, think of discarding it. It must be another condolence note. But I remember what my father would want. He would want me to thank each person. I pick up the letter opener with our family name engraved on it and slice it open. I pull out a thin, small card.

On it, in beautiful cursive, are two words. “You’re next!”

I gasp and the note falls to the ground. I pick up the intercom and call the security desk. “Call the police,” I whisper. “Right now.”



The investigators and police arrive shortly. My heart has not stopped racing since I have received the message. Juanita ushers them into the formal sitting room and I look at my private security. They remain in the corner while Juanita leaves. I don’t want to be left alone for a single moment.

“Gentlemen,” I say, passing them the note.

The lead investigator clears his throat. He passes the note around. They scrutinize it.

“As you can see,” I say, “I’ve been threatened.”

“Well, yes,” the investigator says. “We will have it checked for fingerprints, but we doubt anything will show up.”

“Clearly, it’s from the people who murdered my father,” I say.

“There’s no proof of that,” he says.

“No proof of that?” I cry out. “No proof of that. A week ago, my father was shot dead right in front of my eyes and now I’m being threatened the same way. What more proof do you need?”

“Ma’am, it could be a prank. It could also be from another enemy. Someone who wants you out and is taking this chance to scare you. The possibilities are endless.”

I wring my hands. My father had trained me on what to do about the infamous laziness of the Mexican police. “When they don’t act, you must take matters into your own hands,” Papa drilled into my head.

“Well,” I say, trying to keep my voice calm. “Would you please try to get to the bottom of this? And find my father’s killers?”

“Ma’am, your world is a dangerous one. Your father had powerful enemies. We will see what we can do but you must prepare yourself that there might never be any answers. Our hands are tied sometimes.”

I stare at the investigator and nod. There’s no point. I thank them without the slightest hint of genuineness and show them out. Then, I withdraw to think.

The funeral flowers still scent the air as I step into father's study. My head hurts. I just finished speaking with the investigators and they're taking it as a passive investigation. My father was killed by men he upset, they say. And in our circle, the suspect is usually too powerful to catch. *You know how things are*, they said to my face.

My heels clicked on the marble floors he loved. I trail my fingers over the mahogany desk where he planned each step that would expand his empire. I can't let his murder go unanswered. If the investigators plan to work slowly, then I will have to take matters into my own hands.

My father had many enemies, but I don't believe any of them would kill him. I've gone over each name and motive. No one was scorned enough for murder. My father was, after all, an honorable man.

I look outside the window, to where it all began, generations ago. The first Torres man who turned agave into tequila. Who built an empire from the earth. He cherished it and it was his religion.

Now it's my duty to protect that empire. But I don't know who to trust.

With a sigh, I sink into my father's leather chair. The creases still hold the shape of his body. I pull open the top drawer, to the false back he showed me when I was just ten. My fingers find the latch. Inside lies his journal. His real accounts. On the front cover, edged in 24 karat gold, his name. Diego Torres. I flip through the pages, looking for clues - for secrets that may have led to his death. My eyes catch on one name: Clara Herrera. I skim through the entry. There's not much written here, except a few of his thoughts. He believes the apple can fall far from the tree, which means he thought she was nothing like her father. My father considered her worthy of his trust.

At the funeral, she took my hands in hers. Promised her loyalty. But can I believe her?

I turn to the computer on my father's desk. A quick search shows Clara's reputation is honorable. She's served her family faithfully for decades before becoming heir to the Jalisco Cartel. She's never betrayed a soul. She's turned foes to friends where there was no hope. There are rumors of her brilliance in crypto, hacking and software engineering. She's a part of an alleged network of anonymous hackers - an all women crew.

Perhaps I can trust her to help investigate my father's murder. She may be the ally I need for this job.

I picked up the phone to call Clara immediately. My heart pounds as the line

rings. I must learn the truth about my father's death. Even if it puts my own life at risk. I take a deep breath as the line clicks and Clara's voice comes through.

"Miss Torres, how may I be of service?" she asks briskly.

"Clara, I...I need to speak with you. In person. It's urgent. And please, call me Isabella." My voice wavers slightly.

"Of course. I'll come right over."

"Thank you. I'll see you soon." I hang up, smoothing my hands over my skirt. I chose the smaller parlor to meet, away from prying eyes. But as I pace the oriental rug, the door suddenly bursts open.

I gasp, my heart lurching. But it's only my cousin, Juan, striding in.

"Juan! You startled me," I say, pressing a hand to my chest.

"*Lo siento, prima*. I didn't mean to scare you," he says.

His eyes dart around the room suspicion.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

My instincts bristle, wondering if I can trust my own cousin.

"I came to check on you. Make sure you're okay."

His words sound sincere, but unease prickles my skin. I need to tread carefully. Trust no one. I have no reason to feel this way about Juan. After all, he is the only living relative I have. He's my mother's sister's son. Unfortunately, his parents died in the same plane crash that took my Mama's life.

The doorbell rings signalling Clara's arrival. Now the real test begins. I open the door to find Clara standing there, her eyes solemn.

"Come in, please," I say, ushering her into the parlor. Juan rises from his chair as we enter.

"Clara, this is my cousin, Juan Torres," I say. They exchange tense nods.

"What is she doing here?" asks Juan.

Both Clara and I ignore him.

"What did you need to discuss, Isabella?" Clara asks, getting right to business.

I take a deep breath. "As you know, my father's death was ruled as murder in revenge by one of the many people he's angered in his lifetime. But I...I have doubts."

Clara's eyes sharpen. "Go on."

"I believe he may have been murdered for a different reason. Someone wanted something from him and might still want it. I don't believe his death was by an enemy itself. It could be a foe posing as friend." I say in a rush.

Juan sucks in a breath. Clara's gaze turns piercing.

"With papa gone, I've inherited the tequila empire. I need to know who murdered him. What if that person is in my corner, pretending to be my ally?" I explain.

Clara nods slowly. "A logical conclusion. But do you have proof?"

I wring my hands. "No hard evidence. Just a feeling, in my bones. Actually, I received this note." I share it and they read it. I explain the situation pertaining to it and continue. "You see, they're courageous enough to have it delivered to my doorstep, with no fear of consequence. Call it instinct, but I believe my father's ally knows how our world works. Knows the note would be delivered straight to me and not to a press room. He knows it would rile me up. He knows the cops would do nothing. He knows me and my world."

Clara and Juan exchange a look. He steps forward.

"Isabella, perhaps we should take precautions. If what you say is true, I fear you could be next. A prime target. I have connections in New York who could protect you," Juan says.

I hesitate. The thought of leaving everything behind fills me with uncertainty. But staying could mean death.

"Let me think about it," I say finally.

Clara touches my arm, her eyes solemn. "Trust your instincts, Isabella. But trust no one else."

Her words send a chill down my spine. I have only myself to rely on now. I nod, letting Clara's warning sink in. She's right - I can't fully trust anyone anymore. Not even family.

Juan frowns, looking between us. "Surely you don't mean me. I only want what's best for Isabella."

I force a smile. "Of course, Juan. But these are dangerous times. Caution is key."

He sighs. "You're right. That's why you must go to New York. I'll make the arrangements today."

My heart pounds as I consider his offer. To flee under cover of darkness, leaving my home and birthright behind. But staying could mean betrayal or worse.

"Give me until tomorrow to decide," I say finally. "I need time to think. Who will take care of me in New York?"

"We have allies," says Juan. "For your safety, it's better I don't divulge. What if by error, someone slips up and people know where to find you?"

Clara narrows her eyes, perching her lips.

I know he speaks the truth. Each moment I remain feels heavier with dread. But the choice still weighs on me.

Clara turns to Juan. "Let her ponder this carefully," she says. "Rash decisions now could prove unwise."

Juan dips his head in acquiescence. "Of course. Forgive my urgency, Ms.

Herrera. I only want my cousin protected."

I manage a small smile. "I know. Let me reflect on it tonight. We'll speak in the morning."

He kisses my hand in farewell. After he leaves, I turn to Clara.

"What should I do?" I ask desperately. "Can I even trust Juan?"

She fixes me with her steady gaze. "Trust yourself, Isabella. The answer lies within."

I stand in the parlor, my mind swirling with doubt. I have a decision to make. And not much time to make it. Clara's words echo in my mind as I pace the marble floors. Trust no one. Not even Juan, my own cousin. Especially not him. She said it once and when I didn't immediately take action, she didn't repeat herself.

I now know Clara Herrera is not a woman who uses words freely.

I stop and take a deep breath. I know what I must do.

"Clara!" I call out, my voice ringing through the empty halls.

She takes a step forward, poised as ever. "Yes, Isabella?"

I take her hands in mine, meeting her eyes. "You spoke the truth. I cannot blindly trust Juan's plan. But I also cannot remain here, not if I wish to uncover the truth about my father's death."

Clara nods. "I understand. You must be careful, but you must also follow your instincts."

"Will you help me?" I ask.

"Of course. Tell me what you need."

I explain my idea to slip away to New York under anonymity. However, Juan's plan is dangerous, for if he won't tell me where I am to go, I could meet with an unexpected end. I ask her for a favor. To be my spy here in

Jalisco. For us to share phone numbers for burner phones that no one can trace.

Clara listens intently, then smiles. "A clever plan. I will make the arrangements at once."

Relief washes over me. With Clara's help, I will escape to New York on my own terms. I will honor my father by finding his killer, no matter the cost.

Tonight, my journey begins.

I take one last look around the hacienda that sheltered my childhood. Then I steel myself and walk up the stairs to call Juan and begin packing.



I nod to Clara as the car pulls up to the airport entrance. This is it. Discreetly she slides a phone into my bag. The SIM card already in it, like we arranged. Juan steps out and opens my door, his eyes searching mine, which look confused to not be at the private runway. "You can't take the private jet for tongues will wag. I got you a first-class ticket on a commercial. The flight is booked under an alias. You'll be safe in New York."

I hesitate before getting out, gripping my purse tightly. "Juan, are you certain this is the only way?"

His face softens. "Isabella, I know leaving your home and duties is difficult. But we cannot take risks with your safety. I have associates who can protect you in New York while we investigate your father's enemies."

My doubts linger. But Juan has always had my best interests at heart. He's my cousin. The closest thing to a brother. I take a deep breath.

"Very well. I will go to New York. But you must promise me, Juan, that you will discover the truth about my father's murder." My voice shakes slightly. "I



cannot rest until his killer faces justice."

Juan pulls me in for an embrace. "You have my word. We will find out who did this evil deed. But first, we must get you to safety."

Reassured, I hug him back tightly. Then, squaring my shoulders, I turn and walk into the airport alone. The glass doors close behind me with an air of finality. I do not look back.

The die is cast. My new life begins now. With a new fake passport, I walk into the airport, suitcase in hand. For a moment, this world is unfamiliar and chaotic. This is what commercial feels like?

Standing in the check-in queue like any other ordinary passenger helps me protect my real identity. But as I wait for my turn the doubts from last night creep back.

But the longer I sit, the more I think. Did I do the right thing by trusting Juan? Will Clara prove to be an ally or has she covered all her dark secrets?

My father once told me I should trust my instinct, which right now tells me that Clara is on my team, but my instincts have never had to work in situations this dire before.

I decide to buy a magazine in the lounge later, to keep my thoughts from swirling in every direction.

# Chapter 4

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Stefano

The glowing departure board flickers again, the little plane icon sliding from "On Time" to "Delayed." I clench my jaw, glaring at the offensive display. Another delay. Of course.

I storm over to the ticketing counter, cutting off a bickering couple. "This is unacceptable," I bark at the attendant. "My flight was supposed to leave an hour ago. Now it's delayed again?"

The attendant shrinks under my tirade. "I'm very sorry, sir. The plane is having a minor mechanical issue. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"That's what you said before!" I slam my palm on the counter. "This is ridiculous. I have important business in New York. Get me on the next flight out, now!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing available until tomorrow morning..." the attendant stammers.

"Useless," I scorn.

Spinning on my heel, I stalk away, fuming. First, Don Conti's jet is out of commission, now this third-rate airline can't even get a plane in the air. The entire world is conspiring to mess with my schedule.

I drop into a seat near the gate, glaring out the window at the tarmac. The plane sits there, motionless. Taunting me with its passiveness. I grit my teeth, imagining all the ways I will make the airline pay for this incompetence.

I pace back and forth ceaselessly. Then, an announcement. "We regret to inform that Flight 724 to New York has been delayed by one hour. The flight will now depart at..."

What the hell? I stand and go back toward the boarding gate. This time, to face another employee.

"Are you serious?" I bark. "Look here, I didn't buy a 3,000-dollar first-class ticket to be waiting at the airport for an entire day. You and your team should do your research before updating us about the delays," I yell.

"Sir, we are so sorry for the inconvenience," she stammers.

"Don't you think you should know how long the plane will actually take to get off the damn runway?" I fume. "For God's sake. How do I know it won't get delayed again? Incompetent!"

I'm not an unreasonable man. But I do expect the airline to actually know what the problem is and how long it will take to solve it.

"Sir, the engineers are working on it," she mumbles as more people crowd around to get answers.

"Your engineers don't know how long it'll actually take?" I bellow. "You've rescheduled three times already! This is unacceptable!" I snap at the attendant. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

My fists clenched, pulse pounding. I needed to be on my way back to New York. Now.

A woman's clipped, accented tones cut through my anger. "Oh, we're all quite aware of who you think you are."

For a moment I'm struck speechless, caught off guard by her beauty. Thick dark hair cascades halfway down her back, contrasting with smooth olive skin. An hourglass figure fills out her tight dress perfectly. But it's her eyes that transfix me - piercing green, full of fire.

A thrill of something dangerous sparks through me.

"You seem to believe your time is more valuable than anyone else's," she continued, indignation etched into her delicate features.

“Perhaps if you were less rude, the staff might actually want to help you.”

Her audacity leaves me momentarily speechless. No one dares speak to me like this. I narrow my eyes, a biting retort on my lips. I regain my composure quickly.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion," I snap.

She doesn't flinch. "Well, you're going to get it anyway. Throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child isn't going to make your plane leave any sooner."

I bristle at her words. "You have any idea who I am, do you?"

"Someone who thinks the rules don't apply to them?" she retorts. "All your yelling won't change the laws of physics. The plane is broken. It will leave when it's fixed, and not a moment before."

I'm taken aback by her boldness. No one speaks to me this way, certainly not a complete stranger. Yet, despite my irritation, I can't help but admire her confidence the quickness of her wit. She's unlike any woman I've ever met.

"I don't have time for delays," I say sharply. "My business in New York is urgent."

She arches one perfect eyebrow. "More urgent than the hundreds of other passengers trying to get home?"

I have no response to that. She's knocked me off balance left me grasping for words. An unfamiliar feeling. I'm accustomed to a strict hierarchy, where those in the lower ranks do not speak their mind, and definitely do not call out anyone higher up in the pecking order. But this woman is a worthy opponent, countering my anger with cool logic and well-aimed barbs.

The boarding call sounds interrupting our verbal sparring match.

"See," she mutters. "We didn't even have to wait the whole hour. Looks like they tried their best."

She gives me one last pointed look, then turns and leaves. I watch her go, a

strange mix of irritation and intrigue swirling inside me. Against my better judgment, I hope this won't be the last I see of this maddening beauty with the mysterious green eyes.



I settle into my first-class seat, stretching my legs out and trying to relax. This debacle of a travel day has set me on edge. As the other passengers file in, I close my eyes, longing for a stiff drink and a few hours of uninterrupted peace.

Then I detect a subtle, familiar scent - vanilla and something richer, spicier. My eyes fly open, and I find myself staring at dark cascading hair and an hour glass figure.

It's her. The woman from the gate.

As if sensing my stare, the woman turns. Her eyes widen when she sees me, then narrow. "You."

My lips twitch. "Fancy meeting you here."

She sniffs. "I'm afraid this is my seat."

I glance at my boarding pass. "What a coincidence. It seems we're sitting together."

Her gaze could have cut glass. "The only thing we'll be doing together is tolerating each other's presence until we land."

"Come now, is that any way to speak to your seat companion?"

Without a word, she takes the seat beside me, smoothing her dress and crossing one long, slender leg over the other. She doesn't acknowledge my presence further.

I enjoy my bemusement in silence. What twist of fate has landed her right next to me? In first class, no less?

I observe her discreetly from the corner of my eye. Everything about her - from her quality tailored, but understated clothes, to the graceful yet easy way she carries herself - whispers old money. Not nouveau riche or a kept woman, but class that goes back generations.

My curiosity gets the better of me. "What takes you to New York?" I ask casually, as if we are old friends.

If we are to sit together for the hours to come, I'd like to break the ice.

She regards me with a hint of wariness. "Business," she says after a moment.

"And you?" She offers me a way in for the conversation to move forward.

"The same."

We lapse into silence again. I sip the pre-flight champagne and try to come up with an approach that will get past her defenses. She's clearly intelligent and not easily impressed by status or wealth. I'll have to use more subtle means of persuasion.

The game, it seems, is on.

I decide to start with a bit of humor to catch her off guard.

"You know, you never apologized for scolding me earlier," I say, affecting a wounded tone. "My ego may never recover."

Her lips quirk upwards slightly. "Somehow I suspect your ego will survive."

"You don't know that. I'm very sensitive."

"Oh, I'm quite certain you have a thick skin. You strike me as the type of man who is used to getting his way. You told me so yourself. Given you get what you want, just wish for a soothed ego."

I put my hand over my heart. "You wound me. I'll have you know I can be very agreeable."



"I don't doubt it. When it suits you."

I grin, enjoying the back and forth. "Perceptive. I knew I liked you."

She arches an eyebrow. "You don't know me well enough to like me."

"An oversight on my part. One I'd be happy to correct, if you'll permit it." I turn on the charm, giving her my most roguish smile.

She regards me thoughtfully, and I have the distinct sense she is taking my measure. "Perhaps," she says after a moment. "If you prove less insufferable than you first appeared."

I laugh. "I accept the challenge."

We are interrupted by the flight attendant offering drinks. The woman requests a Torres tequila neat. Just Torres. Nothing else will do, she demands. Interesting choice. She turns to me and declares. "If you're smart, you should order the same."

I comply.

When our drinks arrive, I lift my glass. "To new acquaintances," I say.

Something like amusement flickers in her eyes. But she touches her glass to mine.

"To not judging books by their covers," she counters.

The game, most definitely, is on.

I take a sip of the same Torres tequila, watching her over the rim of my glass. She downs her tequila in one smooth shot, barely reacting to what must have been a hefty dose of alcohol.

Impressive.

"I don't think I caught your name earlier," I say.

She regards me for a moment before answering. "Isabella."

"Isabella," I repeat. "Lovely name."

"And you are?"

I hesitate. My name carries weight and has been known to change people's attitudes toward me. But that's in New York and she's from Mexico. It probably won't matter to her.

"Stefano," I say after a beat. "Stefano Nitti."

She nods, accepting this without further questions. She doesn't give me her last name. I find myself intrigued by her poise and self-possession. Most women I meet fawn over me, but she seems largely immune to my charms.

I search for a way to draw her out. "That was an excellent tequila. You must know your spirits."

"I should hope so. I am Mexican and I've worked in the tequila business on and off."

"Oh? Which distillery?"

Her eyes flash with amusement. "One you haven't heard of, I'm sure."

I lean forward. "Try me."

She shakes her head, a mysterious smile playing about her lips. "I think I'll keep you guessing."

"It's okay if you are not in the tequila business, you do not have to lie to impress me," I baited her.

She gave me a baffled look. "I don't have to lie. Ask me anything about tequila," she challenged.

I thought for a moment. "Okay, here is something simple. How is tequila made?"

She started to break down the six stages of tequila production with ease.

"The traditional method of harvesting the blue agave plant and how a special knife called a *coa* is used to cut the leaves on the agave plant away from the underground *piña* bulb.

The agave core or the *piña* bulb must be baked in order to extract its

fermentable sugars. Traditionally, *piñas* were baked in pits lined with rocks, but today, they're baked in either clay and brick ovens called *hornos*, or large stainless steel ovens.

After the *piñas* are baked, they are crushed and shredded to extract the sweet juice inside, which is called *mosto*. *Mosto* is extracted in one of two ways: by using an industrial mechanical shredder (the most common modern way), or by the traditional method of using a *tahona*, a large stone wheel that crushes and juices the *piña*.

Next, the *mosto* must ferment into ethyl alcohol in order to become a spirit. The *mosto* is combined with yeast and water in large fermentation tanks. This process uses either large stainless steel tanks, or large wooden barrels.

Then the agave juices are distilled, which purifies the liquid and concentrates the alcohol in the mixture. Tequila is typically distilled twice. The first distillation produces a cloudy liquid called the *ordinario*. The second distillation produces the clear silver tequila, which is then ready to be aged and bottled.

All tequila is aged for at least 14 to 21 days. Silver or *blanco* tequila is aged for the minimum time. Aged tequila comes in three types: *reposado* ("rested," aged for two months to one year), *añejo* ("aged," aged for one to three years), and extra *añejo* (aged for over three years). To produce a more aged tequila, the distilled *blanco* is put into aged oak barrels, which gives the tequila a golden color. There is also a fifth kind of tequila called *joven* ("young") or *oro* ("gold"), which is a mix of silver tequila and *reposado* tequila."

After her complete breakdown, she looked at me with a smug smile. "Now, do you think I know what I'm talking about?"

To be honest, I was highly impressed. I didn't expect her to give me a

complete breakdown, but I couldn't let her know that. My first thought was to ask if she knew Don Herrera, but I thought better of it.

"Sounds like you know your stuff," I said nonchalantly.

"Whatever," she said as she signaled the flight attendant for another shot.

I'm surprised to realize I'm enjoying this game of verbal cat and mouse. Our banter continues, growing increasingly playful and flirtatious. The more she parries my questions with evasiveness and wit, the more fascinated I become. As the flight continues, I find myself lowering my guard. The armor I habitually wear feels oddly unnecessary with her. Our conversation flows easily, two strangers finding common ground high above the clouds.

I signal the flight attendant for another round of drinks. Isabella loosens up even more after her second shot. She has a wicked, delightful sense of humor. Her green eyes dance as she teases me.

We talk and laugh with the ease of old friends. The initial antagonism between us transforms into an unexpected connection.

This chance encounter feels strangely intimate. Two ships passing in the night, finding safe harbor for a few rare hours. I know our time is limited, but I intend to make the most of it.

I turn to Isabella with a rakish grin. "What do you say we continue this conversation over dinner? I know a delightful little restaurant in Manhattan..."

She smiles slowly. "Oh Stefano, in another life, maybe."

I chuckle. "You've got a man back home?"

Her eyes gleam with a lingering sadness.

"Nothing like that," she says evasively.

"You know, I don't usually open up like this with strangers," I confess to Isabella. "It took courage to ask you out."

She nods, swirling the remnants of tequila in her glass. "Neither do I..."

Her voice trails off. I find myself leaning in, not wanting this moment between us to end.

"Tell me about your family," I say gently.

Sadness flickers across her face. "My mother died when I was young. My father..." She hesitates. "There's not much to tell."

I nod, surprised by how much I relate to her story. "I understand. My parents passed away years ago. Since then it's just been me and my work."

"No siblings?" she asks.

"No, I'm afraid it's just me."

She smiles softly. "Well, no wonder you turned out so spoiled."

"Ouch," I grimace, clutching my hand to my heart.

What is with this woman, playing push and pull with me. One minute she's the meekest dove and the next she's a vicious feline.

# Chapter 5

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Isabella

The world outside the airplane window is a blur, and Stefano's voice is drowned out by the roaring engines. My hands grip the armrests tightly as the plane lurches violently, and fear coils in my stomach like a venomous snake.

"Isabella, are you alright?" Stefano's concerned gaze meets mine, but I barely hear him.

The turbulence sends my mind spiraling back to a memory I've tried so hard to suppress – my mother's death in a plane crash when I was barely eight years old.

"Isabella, breathe" Stefano urges, his dark eyes searching my face for any sign of calm.

But I can't breathe deeply, not with the ghost of that fateful day clinging to me like a second skin. I see my mother, Evangeline Torres, her green eyes smiling down at me as we say our goodbyes at the airport.

"I love you, darling," she had whispered, pressing a kiss to my forehead before boarding the private jet that would become her tomb.

"Isabella, focus on me." Stefano's voice cuts through the fog of memories, and I force myself to look into his eyes. They anchor me to the present moment, but my heart races with the echoes of loss and fear.

"Sorry," I whisper, feeling vulnerable and exposed. "I lost my mother in a plane crash," I try to explain, trying to prevent him from thinking I'm a wreck without cause.

"*Mio Dio*," he murmurs dear god, resting his hand on mine. Another violent jerk has me pulling my seatbelt tighter and putting my head between my



arms, resting on my knees.

My mind is yanked back to the day I found out. I was sitting on the living room floor, playing with my dolls when the news flashed on the TV screen. Evangeline Torres, dead in a private plane crash off an island in the Maldives. My heart leapt into my throat as the newscaster delivered the devastating details – no survivors. Photos of my mother flashed across the screen.

"Accompanied by the pilot and two family members," they said, their voices hollow, devoid of emotion. I couldn't understand how they could be so cold, so detached, when my entire world came crashing down.

My father came running into the room, flinging his phone across the couch.

"Isabella, no," my father's voice trembled as he reached for the remote, abruptly switching off the TV. His face was pale, his eyes rimmed red with tears that refused to fall. He pulled me into his arms, trying to shield me from the pain, but it was too late – the tsunami had already hit.

"Mamá!" I screamed, clinging to him as if he were my lifeline, my only tether to sanity amidst the chaos of grief and loss.

"*Mi amor*," he whispered, rocking me back and forth. My love, my love, my love is all he could say.

Suddenly, a huge turbulence jolts me back to the present moment. The plane lurches violently again, causing an overhead compartment to spring open. A scream pierces the air as someone in the back is struck by a falling backpack.

"Oh my god!" I gasp, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Isabella, take deep breaths," Stefano says, his voice steady despite the panic swelling around us.

I instinctively reach out, grabbing his hand for support. Our fingers interlock, and I find solace in his touch – a lifeline in the stormy sea of fear and

uncertainty that threatens to pull me under.

"Just breathe," he urges and our eyes lock, anchoring me amidst the chaos.

I do as he says and squeeze his hand tighter. I take a deep, shaky breath, trying to steady my racing heart.

"My mother died in a plane crash when I was eight," I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper.

I already told him that, didn't I? So why am I saying it again and again, like the truth can be changed? The words hang heavy in the air, and I can feel Stefano's grip on my hand tighten as he processes the information.

"Isabella, I'm so sorry," he says gently, concern etched across his handsome features. He shifts in his seat, turning to face me fully, and I can see the protectiveness that flares in his dark eyes.

"I've been terrified of flying ever since," I admit, vulnerability creeping into my voice. "But I thought I could handle it this time."

"Hey," Stefano says softly, cupping my face with his free hand, forcing me to look at him. "You're doing great. We're in this together, okay?"

His touch is warm and comforting, and I can't help but lean into it. I nod, grateful for his reassurance, and watch as his gaze softens further. It's clear that witnessing my vulnerability has stirred something within him, and I can sense his growing feelings for me.

"Focus on your breathing," he instructs, his voice calm and steady despite the turbulence. "Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth. Nice and slow."

I follow his guidance, forcing myself to take deep, measured breaths. With each exhale, I can feel some of the tension in my body dissipating, replaced by the calm Stefano's unwavering presence brings.

"Good job, Isabella," he encourages, his thumb gently stroking the back of

my hand. "You're doing great."

As the plane continues to shake, I cling to Stefano's words, allowing them to ground me. The fear that had threatened to consume me earlier begins to recede.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, the turbulence subsides, leaving behind only a faint tremor in its wake. I release a shaky breath, feeling as though I've just been given a reprieve – however brief it may be.

"Stefano," I say, my voice hoarse with emotion. "Can you ask the flight attendant for shots of Torres tequila? I need something to settle my nerves."

"Are you sure?" he asks, concern etched across his features. "Alcohol might not be the best solution right now."

"Please," I implore, my eyes pleading with him to understand.

Stefano studies my face for a moment, then nods. "Alright, I'll get it for you," he concedes, pressing the call button for the flight attendant.



The flight attendant arrives, her hands full of shot glasses filled with my family's golden liquid. Stefano smirks as he watches me take the first one, downing it in a single gulp.

"Wow, Isabella, a woman renowned for putting arrogant men in their place, drowns her sorrows in world-class tequila," he teases playfully, picking up a shot for himself. "You're really living the stereotype, aren't you?"

I roll my eyes but can't help the smile that tugs at my lips.

"Hey, if it works, it works," I say, lifting another glass to my mouth.

"Besides, it's not every day I nearly reenact my mother's tragic fate."

"True, but just don't make a habit out of it," he warns, clinking his shot glass against mine and downing it. "Or soon you'll need an intervention from your very own knight in shining armor."

"Knight in shining armor?" I laugh, feeling the warmth of the tequila spreading through my veins. "You do realize you didn't actually save me from anything, right? You just sat there, holding my hand."

"Ah, but sometimes that's all it takes," Stefano says, winking at me. "One simple action can make a world's difference."

"Is that so?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Well, then maybe I should be thanking you for being my lighthouse during the turbulent storm."

"Your gratitude is always appreciated," he replies, taking another shot and grinning. "Just don't go falling in love with me now, okay?"

"Please," I scoff, playfully swatting his arm. "As if I'd ever fall for someone who mocks my drinking habits."

"Mocking?" He feigns hurt, pressing a hand to his chest. "I'm simply observing with great admiration how you embrace your country's legacy with such gusto."

"Admiration, huh?" I say, feeling the edges of my world begin to blur as the alcohol takes effect. "Well, I'll be sure to remember that next time I'm accused of being an alcoholic."

"Deal," Stefano agrees, grinning as he downs another shot. "Now, let's enjoy this flight and the lovely company we have."

As we continue to drink, the flirtation between us intensifies, fueled by both the tequila and the adrenaline from surviving the turbulence. Our laughter fills the air, and for a moment, it feels like all our worries have vanished, replaced by a growing connection that neither of us can deny.

"Stefano," I whisper, leaning in a little closer than necessary. "Thank you."

You've helped me more than you know."

"Anything for a woman as beautiful as you," he replies, his dark eyes meeting mine with a sincerity that leaves my heart racing.

"Beautiful, huh?" I ask.

He takes a shot of tequila, draws his tongue over his lips and turns to face me. His eyes linger over my figure, starting from my legs and going all the way up. He looks over my legs, my belly, my breasts and finally settles on my eyes.

"The most beautiful woman I've ever met," he whispers.

My heart begins to race.

The laughter between us begins to fade, replaced by a heavy silence as I consider the fragility of life. The turbulence earlier, my father's recent passing reminds me that we are never truly in control. These thoughts stir something deep within me, a desire to take risks and embrace the uncertainty of the unknown.

"Life is so fragile," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "You never know when your last moment will be."

Stefano nods solemnly, understanding the weight of my words. "That's why we have to make every moment count, right?"

"Exactly." My heart pounds in my chest, the adrenaline from our earlier conversation still coursing through my veins. "We can't waste any time on regrets or fears."

A newfound determination burns within me, and I make a decision. I need to feel alive, to push the boundaries of what's comfortable and familiar. And as I glance over at Stefano, a fire spreads between my legs.

Since the very first glance, I've been drawn to him. He's a man, not a boy. And something tells me he'd help me feel alive.

"Excuse me for a moment," I announce, standing up and smoothing down my skirt.

As I walk towards the washroom, I lift my skirt ever so slightly, revealing a glimpse of my smooth thigh. Turning my head, I catch Stefano's gaze and motion for him to follow me with a crook of my finger.

His eyes widen, but the hint of a smile plays on his lips.

"Be right behind you," he murmurs, watching me disappear around the corner.

# Chapter 6

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Stefano



I can't believe she's inviting me to follow her. Isabella glances over her shoulder, green eyes smoldering with flamed speckles, and jerks her head toward the bathroom. My pulse races.

I watch her hips sway as she walks away, that tight red dress clinging to her curves. Perfect ass.

A few minutes later I knock on the bathroom door, pulse throbbing. "Are you sure?"

She doesn't answer, just closes the door behind me with a click. The room is dim, lights flickering overhead. The bathrooms in first class was three times as big as the normal ones you see in commercial.

Isabella lifts the edge of her dress slowly, inch by inch, revealing smooth thighs and black lace panties.

I swallow hard. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" She smiles and trails a finger down my chest.

"You've wanted this all night."

She's right. I have. But this is dangerous. Reckless. We've only just met.

Isabella presses closer, the swell of her breasts against my chest, and runs her tongue along my jaw. "Relax, papi. Live a little."

I groan, the last of my resistance melting away, and crush my mouth to hers.

She tastes of tequila and heat, her lips soft and eager. My hands roam over her body, exploring her curves as she moans into my mouth.

I hike up her dress farther, squeezing her ass and tugging at her panties. She steps out of them readily.

"Fuck," I breathe against her lips. She's ready for me, hot and wet. I slide two fingers inside and she gasps, eyes fluttering shut.

"Stefano." My name on her lips is pure sin. "Please."

I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her scent.

Isabella slides off the counter and drops to her knees, nimble fingers working at my belt. Stunned and aroused, I stare down at her as she frees me from my pants.

I groan when her lips close around me. Heat envelops me and I clench my fists through her hair, fighting for control.

She takes me deep, tongue swirling, and pulls back slowly. The sight of her on her knees, lips stretched around me, is almost enough to undo me.

Isabella sets a rhythm, fast and deep, moaning as she pleasures me. The vibrations shoot straight to my balls and I gasp, fingers tangling in her hair.

"Isabella, wait." I tug at her hair but she ignores me, sucking harder.

"Isabella!"

She releases me with a wet pop, eyes glinting up at me. "What is it, Papi?"

"I'll cum if you don't stop," I groan, hauling her to her feet and crushing my mouth to hers, tasting myself on her lips. My hands roam over her body.

"Stefano," she breathes, pupils blown wide with desire. "I need you inside me. Now."

She's going to be the death of me.

I grip Isabella's hips and lift her onto the counter, settling between her spread thighs. She wraps her legs around my waist, drawing me close, and I slide into her tight, wet pussy.

We both gasp at the sensation, clutching at each other. I pull back slowly and drive into her again, setting a hard, fast rhythm.

Isabella cries out, fingers digging into my shoulders. I bury my face in her

neck, breathing harshly. The pleasure is almost too much to bear, spiraling higher with each thrust.

She clenches around me and I groan, barely holding on to my control.

"Isabella," I rasp against her skin. "Slow down or this will be over too fast."

She drags her nails down my back and nips at my ear, her breaths coming fast. "I want to cum for you. Now."

I grip her hips harder, thrusting wildly, holding back my release.

Her orgasm explodes around my triggered dick, but I'm not ready to cum just yet. I want to pound her, fill her with pleasure, until she passes out.

When the waves of her first orgasm pass, I slide to my knees in front of Isabella, trailing kisses down her stomach. She grips the counter behind her, chest heaving.

I run my hands up her smooth thighs. She spreads them wider with a soft moan and I lean in, drawing my tongue through her wet folds.

Isabella cries out, tangling her hands in my hair. I find her clit and circle it with my tongue, sliding two fingers into her tight pussy. She rocks her hips, grinding against my mouth, gasping and moaning.

I thrust my fingers faster, sucking on her clit, driving her higher.

"Stefano, please," she begs. "I'm so close."

I curl my fingers inside her, stroking the sensitive spot I know will send her over the edge. She shudders and comes with a sharp cry, inner walls clenching around my fingers.

I lap at her gently as she comes down, still trembling. Isabella tugs me up for a searing kiss, tasting herself on my lips and tongue.

I stand and Isabella pushes me back against the counter, desire burning in her eyes. She pulls down her dress to her waist, reaches behind her back and unclasps her bra, letting the straps fall down her arms.

The bra drops to the floor, revealing her full, round breasts. I stare, transfixed, heat pooling low in my stomach again. Isabella smiles, a hint of mischief in her gaze, and reaches for the hem of her dress.

She lifts the silky material up and over her head in one smooth motion, tossing it aside. Her body is a vision of lush curves and pale, flawless skin. I swallow hard, arousal stirring.

Isabella steps closer, sliding her hands up my chest. She presses against me, bare skin to bare skin, and kisses me deeply.

I grip her hips, pulling her flush against me. Our kisses turn hungry and desperate, hands roaming freely. I palm her breasts, teasing her nipples to hard peaks, desire building between us again.

Isabella breaks the kiss with a gasp, eyes dark with lust. "Take me again," she breathes. "Now."

I don't need to be told twice.

I spin Isabella around so she's facing the counter, grabbing her hips and pulling her back against me. My cock slides through her wet folds, nudging at her entrance.

Isabella moans, bracing her hands on the counter. "Yes, please..."

I thrust into her in one smooth stroke, burying myself to the hilt. We both groan at the sensation. Isabella is hot and slick around me, her body molding to mine perfectly.

Our hips move as one, slow and deep at first. The only sounds in the room are our ragged breaths and the wet slide of our bodies.

Isabella rolls her hips, taking me even deeper. A strangled moan escapes my throat at the exquisite friction. I grip her hips tighter, fingers digging into her soft flesh, and start driving into her harder and faster.

Isabella cries out, the sound echoing off the tiled walls. She pushes back to

meet each powerful thrust, her ass slapping against me. I can feel her inner walls start to flutter and clench around my cock.

"Yes, just like that," she gasps. "Don't stop..."

I pound into her relentlessly, chasing our release. The tension coils tighter and tighter within me. Our eyes meet in the mirror, dark eyes gazing into green. There's a hunger in Isabella's eyes that matches the one raging inside me.

I caress her cheek, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. My lips find the curve of her neck, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper against her ear before biting down on the lobe.

A soft moan escapes her lips. Her hands slide into my hair, nails raking against my scalp. I thrust into her again, hard and deep, eliciting another cry of pleasure.

"I love the sounds you make," I growl. My hand comes down on her ass with a loud smack. The sting only seems to heighten her arousal. Her inner walls clench around me, greedy for more.

"Harder," she pants.

I comply, spanking her again and again as I piston into her slick pussy. The mix of pain and pleasure has her writhing against me, begging for release in a string of Spanish and English.

"I'm going to cum," I whisper, my hands now reaching for her tits and grabbing onto them as they jiggle in my line of sight.

"There's something you should know," she says hesitantly. Her fingers play with the hair at the nape of my neck. "I'm not on birth control."

"Fuck," I whisper. I hold myself back and continue fucking her. "Cum for me," I whisper. "Cum fast. I don't know how long I can carry on."

She throws her head back against my shoulder, nails digging into my arms as her body shakes with the force of her climax, her inner muscles rippling around. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close as she comes down from the high, our heartbeats racing in tandem.

I pull out of Isabella reluctantly, missing the warmth and intimacy of our connection already. She turns in my arms to face me, emerald eyes soft with sated pleasure.

"That was..." Isabella trails off, at a loss for words.

I chuckle, nuzzling her neck. "Yeah."

I begin to put on my clothes.

"Stefano, wait." Isabella stills my movements with a hand on my chest. "Not yet."

I frown down at her, desire and frustration warring within me. "What's wrong?"

"I want to try something different this time," she purrs, sliding off the edge of the counter to her knees.

My eyes widen as Isabella wraps her fingers around the base of my cock, her full lips curving into a wicked smile.

"Trust me, you're going to love it."

I stare down at Isabella, barely daring to breathe as she leans in closer. Her warm breath ghosts across my sensitive flesh, and I shudder in anticipation.

When her lips close around the tip of my cock, I can't stifle the groan that rumbles in my chest. Isabella takes me deeper, inch by inch, her tongue swirling along the underside in a way that makes my knees go weak.

I brace one hand against the sink behind me and slide the other into Isabella's thick hair, gripping tight. She moans around my length, the vibrations shooting straight to my balls.

"Fuck, your mouth," I pant, guiding her into an eager rhythm.

Isabella complies beautifully, pumping what she can't fit in her mouth with a firm grip.

The coil of tension winds tighter and tighter until I'm trembling on the edge of release.

"Isabella, I'm close," I warn through gritted teeth.

Rather than pulling away, Isabella redoubles her efforts, hollowing her cheeks as she sucks hard. The added sensation tips me over, and I come with a strangled shout, spilling down Isabella's throat.

She swallows around me, milking every last drop until I have to push her away in sensitivity. Isabella releases me with an obscene pop, a self-satisfied smile on her swollen lips.

"I told you you'd love it," she purrs, wiping the corner of her mouth with a thumb.

# Chapter 7

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Isabella

I emerge from the lavatory, my cheeks flushed. My heart pounds as I think of Stefano's hands, his lips, the heat of his body against mine. I walk on unsteady legs to my seat in first class, a tumble of emotions swirling inside me. Excitement, desire, uncertainty.

What have I done?

Diego would have killed Stefano for what just happened. My father was fiercely protective of his little girl. But Diego is gone too soon, and I am adrift in a world both familiar, yet strange without his guiding hand.

I sink into the plush seat and gaze out the window at the retreating coastline of Mexico, the land of my birth. So much has changed in the past two weeks.

Now, I'm running from my home, from Torres Tequila. To embrace a life of safety in the hands of people I am yet to be acquainted with. I'm not sure I'm ready for what's to come, since I don't even know what's coming my way.

My thoughts drift back to Stefano. That kiss, his hands, his gaze.

But we can't. I have a duty to my family, to my father's legacy. No matter how Stefano makes me feel with a single touch, I can't lose myself in his embrace. I've only just met him. This was only a one-time thing. I better not give him false hope.

I steel my resolve and take a deep breath. When Stefano emerges from the lavatory, I will tell him this can go no further.

Even as the words form in my mind, I know that will be far easier said than done.

My lips still tingle from his kiss.

Stefano slides into the seat beside me, the scent of his cologne invading my senses. My traitorous heart skips a beat.

He turns those fathomless eyes on me, a hint of a smile playing about his lips. “Have you reconsidered my offer for dinner at that little place in Manhattan, Isabella?”

I fold my hands in my lap to hide their trembling. “There is nothing to reconsider. What happened between us cannot continue.”

One dark brow arches. “Cannot? Or will not?” He reaches out, catching a tendril of my hair between his fingers. My breath hitches at his touch. “There is passion between us, Isabella. Deny it all you want, but I see the truth in your eyes.”

I jerk away from him, ignoring the pang of loss I feel at the absence of his touch. “You see what you wish to see, nothing more.”

“Do I?” His gaze bores into me, seeing too much. “Tell me you felt nothing during our little escapade and I will not bother you again.”

I open my mouth but the lie will not come. Because I did feel something. A spark I've never known, a fire that threatens to consume me from within.

But I cannot have this. I cannot have him.

I lift my chin and meet his gaze. “It meant nothing.” The words taste bitter on my tongue. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to catch up on my reading.”

I turn pointedly away from Stefano and pick up my book, but I can feel the weight of his gaze on me. He does not believe my lie.

And deep in the recesses of my heart, neither do I.



My heart pounds as the plane rolls to a stop at the gate.

I'm really here: New York. To many it's the city of new beginnings, to me the city is a daunting sight.

How long will I be here? Where will I stay? Long enough for the sharp edges of memory to dull, for the ghosts of the past to fade into shadows. For the killers to be caught.

Or so I hope.

Sitting here listening to the bustle of activity beyond the plane, the crisp accent of the announcements echoing through the cabin, the hint of exhaust and pretzels in the recycled air was too much.

I grip the armrests of my seat, knuckles whitening, and take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

The door of the plane opens with a hiss. My gaze jerks toward the front, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Two men in dark suits stride through the doorway, scanning the aisles with hard, watchful eyes. FBI agents. I'd recognize them anywhere.

A ripple of unease spreads through the cabin. These men mean business; whatever they're here for isn't good.

My fingers dig into the armrests as they draw closer, an icy fist of dread clenching in my gut. They're not here for me. They can't be here for me. Is there a criminal on this flight? What if they know who I am? What if they're in touch with my father's killers?

But then one of the agents meets my gaze, and I know with sinking certainty. They're coming for me.

My heart pounds wildly as the agents stride down the aisle straight toward me. This can't be happening. Has something happened? Did someone harm my empire? Am I in danger?

I glance at Stefano, but his eyes are fixed on the agents approaching us. His

jaw is tense, hands curled into fists in his lap.

The agents stop in front of my seat, looming over me. The taller one gives me a grim smile. "Isabella Torres, you're under arrest for possession of illegal narcotics with intent to distribute."

"What?" The word bursts from my lips in a gasp. "No, that's impossible!"

"Torres?" mutters Stefano, looking at me with new light. Of course. He must have put two and two together. He now knows who I am. Fuck. I shouldn't have had all that Torres tequila.

"I'm afraid it's very possible, Ms. Torres." The agent's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "When we searched your luggage, we found three kilos of cocaine. Quite a lot for personal use, wouldn't you say?"

My mouth falls open. My mind spins in circles, unable to process his words. Cocaine? In my luggage? That's insane. I don't do drugs—I would never—

"There's been a mistake," I choke out. "I don't know how that could have gotten in my bag, but it wasn't me!"

"That's not what the evidence says." The agent grabs my arm, wrenching me up from my seat. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"No, please!" I struggle against his grip, panic flooding my senses. They can't do this. I'm innocent!

But it's no use. As the agents start to drag me off the plane, I stare at Stefano, silently pleading for help. His face is pale with shock, and I see uncertainty in his eyes for the first time since I've met him.

"Listen, officers," I plead. "Please, trust me. I swear to god I have no idea what you're talking about. I made a mistake and the only mistake I've made is not locking my luggage. Look, you must have CCTV footage from the

airport we flew in from. Just look at it! This happens all the time on TV,” I plead. “Someone must have framed me.”

I stand and begin to open my carry-on bag. Stefano is still staring at me, and then the FBI agents, mute. “Look, look,” I say, throwing my things everywhere. “Nothing here.”

I pass the things to them. “Check for fingerprints. Please. I swear, if there are any prints on the cocaine, it won’t be mine. It can’t.”

I begin to sob. I have no idea what’s going on. I know no one in New York. If I’m sent to prison, I don’t even know who to call. I won’t survive jail. I just won’t.

I look at Stefano and take his hands in mine, as the FBI agents try to grab my hands from behind. “Please, Stefano. I’m all alone. Help me. I’m innocent.”

Suddenly, something shifts behind his eyes, as though he had blanked out for a brief couple of seconds and has now returned, fully present. He gets on his feet, and whispers. “I believe you.”

The officers try to grab my arms. One pulls out handcuffs.

“Stop right there,” says Stefano sternly. The agents stare at him, stunned. There’s something in Stefano’s voice that is not to be trifled with. “Before you arrest her, give her a chance to prove her innocence. Investigate her things right now. Show us something, anything to link her to the crime. I don’t know if you know who I am, but I have powerful friends in high places, including the chief of police in New York. Including the head of Interpol. Including the ex-boss at the FBI. Now, follow protocol because from what I see, you’re not.”

The men look at each other like they know they’ve skipped protocol. My heart pounds as the agent’s rifle through my clothes, unzip every pocket, and

shake out each article of clothing in front of the other airline passengers. Gloved hands touch everything, tainting it all with suspicion.

I want to scream at them to stop, to leave my things alone - but I know that will only make me seem more guilty. So I stand by helplessly, my nails biting into my palms, as they systematically invade my privacy.

Stefano's hand finds the small of my back, a subtle reassurance. I lean into his touch, drawing strength from his quiet support. His trust in my innocence is a lifeline I cling to, the only thing keeping my head above water as the sea of confusion and betrayal threatens to drown me.

And then, to my shock, from my coat pocket, they pull out the tiniest piece of what looks like cocaine.

"No," I gasp, my hands reaching for my mouth. "I swear, that's not mine."

"Ms. Torres," they say, "You're under arrest."

They handcuff me, while tears spring to my eyes.

Stefano steps forward, his hand still resting on my back. "Is there any way we can post bail for Miss Torres?" His tone is polite yet firm, standing up for me in a way that makes warmth bloom beneath the panic. "There is no flight risk. She will appear to all court dates until her innocence is proven."

The agent shrugs. "That will be up to the judge to decide. For now, she's coming with us."

He reaches for my arm, but Stefano blocks his path. He looks straight at me, and whispers, "Don't answer a single question until you have a lawyer."

"I don't know anyone in New York," I mumble, as the officers lead me away. Stefano walks by my side, trying to keep up with their pace as they push me forward. Everyone's looking. Everyone's staring. I want to hide.

"Don't worry," he says. "I'll try to arrange one."

"Listen," I say, arching my neck back as the officers bring me out onto the

tarmac where a police car with the lights on awaits. “Call my cousin Juan in Jalisco,” I shout out the number from the back of my head as the police pull me into the waiting car.

As the car speeds away, I arch my neck, to see Stefano standing there, looking as helpless and confused as I feel.



# Chapter 8

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Stefano

The police car speeds away, red and blue lights flashing across Isabella's panicked face as she looks back through the window.

My chest tightens. I don't know this woman, not really. We shared a reckless, lust-fueled moment on a plane—nothing more. Yet the urge to protect her surges through me, hot and primal, the way I felt when I pulled her into my arms a few hours ago.

I close my eyes, remembering her cry of alarm when the FBI agents swarmed towards her, the terror that flooded her gaze. I've seen enough criminals as I came up through the Mafia ranks, and I know a guilty look when I see one. It's my job to learn to read people, for my life depends on it.

So, I can say with certainty that she isn't a criminal. However, she's tied to this mess, she didn't smuggle drugs. I can bet my life on it.

I rake my hands through my hair and curse. My life is complicated enough without getting entangled in someone else's disaster. But I can't ignore the insistence pounding through my veins, demanding I keep her safe.

As I glimpse the FBI van disappearing behind a hanger I make my decision. I'm going after her until help comes along.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I find Luca Conti's name. My boss will have connections that could help Isabella, but I hesitate. If I involve him, he'll want answers and leverage over her life. You don't just take favors from the mafia without giving something in return.

If Conti steps in to help, Isabella, who isn't a criminal right now, she will be forced to become one in her attempts to repay his debt. He'll make her repay

it, whether she wants to or not. He'll dig into her life, her family, her secrets—and he won't stop until he uncovers the truth to get what he wants.

Isabella will be drawn into a world she doesn't belong in. A world of power and violence and things better left unknown.

I slam my phone back into my pocket. No. I won't do that to her.

Instead, I search my memory for the number Isabella gave me, the one she said to call if anything happened to her. I find a bench and sit, entering the series of digits to make the international call to Mexico, with shaking fingers. The line rings twice before a male voice answers. "*Hola?*"

"Is this Juan?" I ask. My heart pounds as I wait for his response, hoping I've contacted the right person. Hoping he can actually help.

"Who is asking?" His tone is edged with suspicion.

I wet my lips, gathering my nerve. "My name is Stefano Nitti. I am phoning because of your cousin, Isabella Torres. She and I were on the same flight to New York. She told me to call you. The FBI just took her away, accusing her of drug possession."

A pause. "Isabella was arrested?" Disbelief and anger color his words.

"No, not arrested," I say quickly. "Detained for questioning."

"No way. Why should I believe you?" he demands. "How do I know you're not trying to mislead me?"

"I have no reason to lie," I tell him. "Does your family know anyone in New York who can help her?"

Silence. Then, "Where are they taking her?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But I can try to find out."

"Do that," he says. "Call me back as soon as you know. I will send someone. And if this is a trick..." He doesn't finish the threat, but the menace in his tone is clear.

"It's not a trick," I assure him. "Please, send help as soon as possible. I don't know Isabella, but no one should be left to fight the system alone."

The line goes dead. I lower the phone, staring at it for a long moment. What have I done? I don't know these people, don't know the world they live in.

This might cost me, but Isabella's terror-stricken face remains seared in my mind. Abandoning her is not an option.

I then call the police chief, calling in the favor he owes me for when I helped him take down some arms smugglers back in the day when the Conti Unit of the New York Mafia did favors for cops. "I need to know where the FBI has taken a woman named Isabella Torres. Now."

"I can't give out that kind of information," he protests.

"You owe me," I remind him. "And you know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

A heavy sigh. "Fine. I'll find out what I can and call you back."

I wait impatiently. Minutes pass by. He calls back and I pick up on the first ring. "They've taken her to the airport for questioning. But listen, Stefano, you need to stay out of this. It's an FBI matter now."

"Where at the airport?"

"The basement interrogation rooms." He pauses. "Don't make me regret this."

I don't bother responding, just hang up and head for the airport. My heart pounds as I make my way through the basement, dark and dingy. At last I find the interrogation room where Isabella is held, two FBI agents grilling her.

"That's enough, gentlemen. May I suggest we talk outside for a moment? Trust me, you'll want to hear what I have to say."

One follows me out. "And you are?"

I give him a stern look. "My name is not important. But if you don't let her go, you'll answer to Luca Conti."

I hate dragging my boss's name into this, for if he finds out I did so, there could be repercussions for Isabella. But I'm hoping he won't find out. As far as I know, the cops and agents mostly try to stay out of our way.

The man's face turns white as he recognizes the name. He goes in and exchanges a glance with his partners, and gives them a slight gesture to follow his lead.

"We're done here for now," he says, and they silently file out of the room.

I sink into the chair beside Isabella's. "It's alright," I tell her softly. "Help is coming."

She stares at me with eyes full of unasked questions. I take her hand, hoping to offer some small comfort. We have only just met, yet I feel bound to her, responsible for her in some strange way.

Together, we wait. The silence thick between us. I lean back and study Isabella's profile...taking in her high cheekbones and full lips, the way her hair falls in waves over her shoulders. She is a striking woman, but beyond her beauty there is a strength and dignity about her that moves me.

At last she speaks, her voice soft. "Why are you doing this?"

I consider how best to explain when I hardly understand it myself. "You seemed afraid," I say. "Vulnerable. And no one deserves to face something like this alone."

She squeezes my hand. "Thank you." A pause. "My father always said there were still good men in the world."

Her voice catches, and I realize she is speaking of him in the past tense. My chest aches, and I wish I could take her into my arms.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I tell her, realizing from the way she spoke that he no longer was a part of our world.

She nods, blinking back tears. "He was a good man. An honest man, in a world where that is rare. I don't know how I'm going to go on without him."

"You will," I say gently. "Because that is what he would want. Because you are strong, like he was." I offer her a smile. "And because you are not alone. I will help you in any way I can, Isabella."

Again she squeezes my hand, and I feel our unspoken bond grow stronger.

"Did you call Juan?" she asks.

"I did. Help is coming. Although, I don't know how long it'll take to come. But I will stay here by your side until then."

We have been through much together already, it seems, though we only just met. I know little about who she really is, beneath the fear and grief—but I want to learn. I want to discover the woman who inspires such depth of feeling in me, a near stranger.

The door opens, and we look up to find Luca gazing down at us, one brow raised. "Now, isn't this cozy?"

My stomach drops like a stone.

Shit. How did he find out about this? I was so careful not to involve him, not wanting to drag Isabella into the dangerous world my boss inhabits.

Luca's gaze lands on me, narrowing. Then he looks at Isabella—really looks at her, in that way he has that seems to strip a person bare. His eyes widen almost imperceptibly.

"Well, well," he says softly. "What have we here?"

My heart pounds. This is bad. This is very, very bad. Luca's interest in Isabella can only lead to trouble.

But I no longer have a choice. What is done is done. I'm in too deep to back

out—and I won't leave Isabella alone to face this. I stand up, putting myself between them to hide her from his view.

"Boss," I say evenly. "What are you doing here?"

"I think the better question is, what are you doing here, Stefano?" His tone is deceptively mild. "And you, the lovely creature that you are, must be Isabella Torres."

I glance at Isabella. She has no idea who Luca Conti is. She watches us with wary eyes, sensing the sudden tension.

There's no escape now. Isabella is part of this, whether I want her to be or not.

All I can do is hope to protect her.



# Chapter 9

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Isabella

I stare at this acquaintance of Stefano's who has just walked in here. How does he know who I am?

"Did you call him?" I ask Stefano.

Conti snickers. Just then, three FBI agents walk in. The man motions in my direction and one of the agents jogs over, as fast as he can.

"Hands," he says.

I show him my hands. He unlocks my handcuffs and step aside as the tall, dark-haired man walks over to the table. One of the agents follows.

"Mr. Conti," he says, tipping his hat to the man who is now responsible for releasing me from the cuffs.

Conti slides a thick stack of bills across the metal table.

"*Grazie, signori.*" He thanks the cops.

His Italian accent is smooth as silk. The agents grab the money and practically run out of the room.

Who is this man who can bribe the FBI? And how does he know me?

He turns to me, eyes glinting, explanation in tow. "Juan called. He sends his apologies for the inconvenience of you having to wait."

Inconvenience? Someone just tried to frame me and nearly succeeded, yet this man hasn't even bothered to ask me my version of events. Almost as though me being a potential criminal doesn't faze him one bit.

I clench my fists under the table, rage boiling inside me.

The man clears his throat. "I am Luca Conti. I will keep you safe now."

Safe? This man radiates power and danger. I have to play along until I can get away. Away to where? I don't know. Is this the man Juan sent me to, who

would assure my safety until my father's killers are found? I need to call Juan and find out what's going on. Until then it's best to play along.

Luca Conti strides out of the room, motioning at Stefano to follow. It seems, between the two of them, Conti is the one with authority, as he barks orders at the agents. He and Stefano talk in hushed tones, Stefano glancing at me nervously.

What is their connection?

We witness how every piece of paper, including the FBI report and my statement, anything that could leave a paper trail being shredded. Conti approaches me with soft, pitiful eyes, but I know it's just a clever act. Kindness does not come naturally to men like him.

"Signorina Torres, I am sorry for your loss. I will do everything I can to protect you. You are to stay with me in New York until matters at home are settled."

I clear my throat. Mr Conti, I hope you can forgive my forwardness, may I please phone my cousin? Juan must be very worried for my well-being after Stefano's call.

Conti's piercing black eyes narrow, but he shrugs and holds out a sleek smartphone. "As you wish."

Heart pounding, I take the phone and dial Juan. He answers on the first ring. "Isabella! Are you okay? Has Conti managed to get you released? I'm so sorry you found yourself in this mess with the FBI. You can trust Conti, he'll make it all disappear."

"Juan, who is this Luca Conti?" I demand. "Why have you involved a complete stranger in our family's affairs?"

There is a heavy silence. Then Juan says quietly, "Luca Conti is the head of one of the five major crime families in New York. He is a powerful man, but

also an old friend. I asked him to keep you safe after your father's death. He owed your father his loyalty."

I suck in a sharp breath as the truth sinks in. The Mafia. My cousin has handed me over to the mafia. How could he do this to me? To my father's memory?

Huge relief washes over me at hearing my cousin's voice and I don't pay his last comment much attention. "Juan! Yes, he's here, Luca Conti." I look up and see Conti and Stefano both eyeing me with interest.

"You're lying," I whisper carefully so Conti and Stefano can't hear me.

Juan continues, "Isabella, please listen. You didn't know everything about your father. He sheltered you from certain things he had to do. Alliances he had to make. Trust me. As much as I dislike involving Conti, he has the means to protect you in a way I cannot. This is for your own safety, until we find your father's killer. Please, trust me on this."

I clench the phone so tightly my knuckles turn white. I cannot trust Juan, not after this ultimate betrayal. He has turned me over to a crime boss, shattering any remaining family loyalty I had left. I am on my own now, in a den of vipers.

There is no one left I can rely on. Not even Stefano. I just fucked a stranger, and the realization hits - the stranger turned out to be the mafioso.

My mind is a jumbled mess, dizzy with all the thoughts crashing in on me at the same time. How could Juan just hand me over to the mafioso without discussing it with me? How does he even know them? How does Stefano know them?

A steely focus cuts through my whirling thoughts. I will do whatever it takes to get through this situation. I will outsmart these men and escape from this den of vipers my cousin has thrown me into. I will make Juan regret the day

he crossed me and cruelly lied about my father. His memory demands no less.

I take a deep breath, open my eyes and lie smoothly, "Thank you for explaining, Juan. I understand this is for my safety. I will cooperate fully with Signor Conti."

"Thank you, Isabella. Be careful. I will contact you again soon." Juan hangs up, oblivious to the rage of betrayal seething inside me.

I hand the phone back to Conti, meeting his gaze steadily. "My cousin has confirmed your identity, signor. I am at your disposal."

For now, I will play the obedient guest.

Conti's lips curl into a reptilian smile.

"*Bene.*" Good, he says, like I'm a little dog. "Now, we leave."

He gestures to Stefano, who opens the door of the FBI interrogation room. I stride out between the two mafiosos, hyper-aware of their looming presence on either side of me. My heart pounds in my chest, but I keep my face an emotionless mask.

I will not give them the satisfaction of seeing my vulnerability.

A sleek black sedan idles outside, two armed men standing beside it. As we approach, they pull open the doors and usher us in. I slide into the backseat, Conti and Stefano boxing me in. The goons take the front seats, casting wary glances at me in the rearview mirror.

Conti raps out something in Italian, and the sedan purrs to life, pulling out into the busy New York traffic.

"Now, tell me about yourself, Isabella," Conti says silkily. "How did a pretty little thing like you inherit an empire?"

I clench my jaw, staring out the tinted window at the city streets flashing by. I do not owe this snake any explanations. But I sense refusing to answer will

only anger him, and I am in no position to make an enemy of the head of New York's oldest crime family.

With reluctance, I say, "My father built his company from nothing. When he died, everything passed to me."

I keep the details sparse and my tone flat, not wanting to invite more questions.

"And where is this empire of yours now?" Conti asks slyly. "Who is running it in your absence?"

I bristle at his suggestive tone. My father's company is none of his business. But I need to play along, for now. "My executives are maintaining operations until I return."

"Hmm." Conti seems unconvinced. I feel the weight of his gaze on me but refuse to look at him. "Perhaps it is time your empire came under new management. I am always here to advise you, if need be."

My hands curl into fists in my lap. Over my dead body. Conti and his mafia thugs will never get their hands on my father's legacy. I bite my tongue to avoid replying with something I will regret. There will be time enough to put this arrogant mobster in his place. But not now, not yet.

The sedan slows and turns between two stone pillars, passing under an ornate wrought-iron gate. We have arrived at Conti's estate.

I steel myself for whatever comes next in this viper's nest I have been thrown into.



The sedan pulls up a winding gravel drive, stopping before an immense Tudor mansion. Armed men flank the entrance, eyeing our approach warily.

My heart pounds as I step from the car, Stefano's hand gripping my elbow. I don't know whether he's doing that to comfort me, or control me.

I try to appear calm and aloof but I'm overwhelmed by the display of armed men surrounding us. This is a world I know nothing about, a dangerous world I want no part of.

Conti strides past us up the front steps, barking orders in Italian at his men who, I presume, just gave him some terrible news.

Stefano leads me inside the mansion, its opulent decor a stark contrast to the modernity that New York usually offers.

"Make yourself comfortable," he murmurs. "I need to speak with the Don for a moment. I will return shortly."

I just nod, too stunned to reply. Stefano squeezes my arm and hurries off after Conti.

Alone, I wander the foyer, examining priceless artworks and antiques. Voices drift in from another room, rising in anger. I creep toward the sounds, peering through an arched doorway into a grand study.

Conti paces before a massive desk, shouting at a man cowering before him and Stefano.

"How dare you come to me with such incompetence!" Conti roars. He hurls a glass decanter at the wall, shattering it. The man cringes away, pleading for mercy. But Conti has none. "You have failed me for the last time," he growls, drawing a gun from inside his jacket.

My breath catches in my throat. In the blink of an eye, Conti raises the gun and pulls the trigger. A shot cracks through the room. The man collapses, blood pooling around his head. I slap a hand over my mouth to stifle a scream, my heart pounding.

Conti tucks the gun away and adjusts his cuffs, unperturbed. Only now does



he glance up, meeting my wide-eyed stare. A sinister smile curves his lips. "I trust this has been an illuminating experience for you, Signorina Torres. Welcome to my world."

I can't bear to look at Conti. Horrified, I turn my gaze to Stefano, who looks away from me.

"Come now," he tells me, inching closer. "Let me show you your home."

Conti's arm wraps around my waist, tugging me against his side as we walk up the winding stairs of his ostentatious mansion. His fingers dig into my hip, a sharp reminder of my helplessness here.

"Such a rare beauty," he purrs, his gaze raking over me in a way that makes my skin crawl. "It will be a pleasure keeping you under my roof."

Revulsion and fear curdle in my gut at his implication. I try to pull away, but his grip only tightens, a warning. I force myself to stay still, not daring to provoke his anger. We both know I am at his mercy, a lamb led to the slaughter.

Stefano trails behind us, his stoic expression betraying nothing. But I see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands clench at his sides. Like me, he owes this monster beside me something, this don who can end a life without a second thought.

In our own ways, we are both Conti's prisoners here, doomed to do his bidding. Except, I don't know how Stefano feels about it. From what I've observed, Stefano respects his Don.

But I also remember how he was on that flight. Caring and concerned for me during the turbulence. Speaking to me in a calm voice to get me through a panic attack.

My heart aches at the thought of Stefano trapped in this web of violence and crime, I don't belong here, but neither does he. I wish I had never laid eyes on

Stefano, or trusted Juan to send me to a country where I know no one. But fate has bound me to the whims of this devil in an expensive suit.

I have entered Hell itself, and Luca Conti is its king.

"Now, Isabella," he says. "I'll show you to your room. The showers are lovely. You know," he says, pushing me gently against the wall and leaning over me, his fingers tracing the curve of my breast. "Your stay here can be a lot more pleasurable, if you so desire."

I feel my throat closing, as if being suffocated by an unseen hand. This man has a power over me that I cannot figure out. I manage to shake my head slowly.

I can only deny him with my gesture, fear having robbed me of my voice. He gives me a smirk, takes a step back, and leads me further.

Conti's grip on my arm is like a vise as he steers me toward a door, my bedroom I presume. Somewhere behind us, Stefano clears his throat. "Don Conti, there is a situation that requires your immediate attention."

Conti's head snaps up, eyes narrowing. "What is it?"

"I just heard over the radio. Some of the men are arguing again. They say if you don't intervene, blood will be shed."

Conti curses under his breath, releasing me to stride over to Stefano.

"Where are they?"

"By the stables, Don Conti. They're armed and tensions are high."

Beckoning to one of his men, Conti orders, "Keep an eye on our guest. I will be back shortly."

Then he marches off in the direction of the stables, Stefano trailing behind him.

My shoulders sag in relief as Conti disappears from view, my arm throbbing where he had gripped it.

Stefano had lied to save me, risking Conti's wrath to get him away from me. My heart swells with gratitude for this man who is fast becoming my only ally in this viper's nest. Perhaps there is still hope for escape, as long as Stefano and I are on the same side.

I stand there, aimlessly, under the watchful eyes of one of the guards, waiting for someone to tell me what to do.

Never before have I felt this helpless and lost.

# Chapter 10

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Stefano

**W**hen we reach the stables, as expected, the stables are empty. Fuck. I am in so much trouble.

"There doesn't seem to be a problem, Stefano," the Don looks at me, like he can see my lies etched on my face.

"Sorry, boss," I mutter, shrugging my shoulders. I try to keep my cool.

But just then, an associate walks up and whispers something in Conti's ears. Conti nods, then looks at me.

"I am going to be tied up for the rest of the evening, I'm afraid. Now, I need you to make our guest comfortable. She's important to us- a billionaire heir who just lost her father. Make sure she's not lonely, and collect her important documentation for safekeeping."

I nod, knowing exactly what he means. The Capo's orders still echo in my mind when I find Isabella standing exactly where we left her. I force a smile.

"The Capo had urgent business to attend to. He sent me to show you around." She simply nods. There is a gaping chasm of silence separating us.

The same woman I exchanged unsheathed banter with just hours ago now follows me wordlessly down the marble stairs. Her frown deepens at the sight of armed guards flanking every corner, hands resting on their holsters.

Dios mío, she must feel like a caged animal. I clench my jaw, hating how vulnerable she is in this place.

We walk through towering wooden doors into the grand foyer, lit by a glittering chandelier gleaming over Isabella's face. She peers at the lavish decor and priceless art as if preparing to flee at any moment.

"The Capo values security and opulence," I say through gritted teeth.

Isabella stiffens at the mention of his name, her distrust palpable. I can't blame her. If our roles were reversed, I would feel the same.

"This way." I place a hand on her back to guide her, ignoring the electricity that sparks at our touch.

She flinches but allows me to lead her across the black and white tiled floor, past armed guards that track our every move. With each step, the walls seem to close in around us.

By the time we climb the winding staircase to the residential wing, Isabella is trembling.

I steal a glance at her ashen face, a pang of guilt hitting me square in the chest.

I am supposed to protect her, not lead her into a gilded cage.

But I made a promise to the Capo. And I always keep my promises.

We reach the end of a long hallway and I pause outside an ornate wooden door.

"This is your room." I gesture inside. "Only the finest for our honored guest," I grin, trying to lighten the mood.

She doesn't take the bait.

Isabella peers into the suite, eyes widening at the luxurious space. Her gaze settles on the large window overlooking the sprawling grounds, a flicker of longing crosses her face.

I clear my throat. "For your safety, I'll need to take your cards, passport and phone."

She whirls around to face me, eyes blazing. "Like hell you will."

"I'm sorry, but it's procedure. We can't risk you being traced." I hold out my hand, steeling myself for the coming tantrum.

"I won't give you my things, you creep." Isabella shoves me away, slender

hands pushing against my chest. I don't budge an inch.

"There's no need for hostility. I'm just following orders."

"Whose orders? Your criminal boss'?" She scoffs. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted a lying snake like you."

Her words cut deep, reawakening the guilt inside me. But I shove it down and harden my expression.

"You seemed happy enough to accept our help when you were shivering in that interrogation room, accused of drug possession."

Isabella flinches as if struck. For a long moment, she simply stares at me with a look of pure loathing. When she speaks again, her voice is deadly calm.

"If you dare take my things, I swear you'll regret this."

I hold her gaze, unflinching. "I don't make empty threats. Don't make me take them by force."

She hesitates, no doubt weighing her limited options. With a frustrated cry, Isabella digs into her bag and slaps the items into my outstretched hand.

"Happy now?" she snarls.

I clench my jaw, despising myself for what I've become. "Overjoyed."

Isabella glowers at me for a long, charged moment. Then she turns on her heel and storms into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

The sound echoes in the cavernous hall like a death knell, sealing her fate in this gilded prison.

And mine as her reluctant jailer.



The Capo looks up from his desk, raising one eyebrow as I place Isabella's phone and personal documents before him.



"She tried to put up a fight, but I have everything."

I stand rigid, hoping I've regained enough control of my expression to seem emotionless, pushing down the guilt, anger and frustration that still churned in my gut on my way here.

"Excellent." The Capo's eyes gleam with satisfaction as he stands up and places the items in the safe, I only now notice, is open.

For a moment I am stunned. The Capo has never allowed me to see his safe before, this means his trust of me must be growing. But I'm not sure why, with involving us in Isabella's mess I've invited trouble to our doorstep, drawn attention of yet an unknown enemy.

My stomach sinks as he turns back and I catch the cold glimp of metal in his hand. My limbs go numb as thoughts flood my mind.

I should have anticipated this, considering the Capo executed a man, right here, for a lesser infringement. Isabella, who will protect her if I am dead?

The Capo places the pistol on the desk and slides it over to me. "Take this, you'll need it to ensure her safety."

I nearly panick. Can he read my mind? Perplexity written all over my face, the Capo looks up and frowns.

"Are you questioning my orders?" The Capo's eyes narrow dangerously.

"No, of course not," I say quickly, shaking my head to force my mind back into the game. "I just think my skills would be better used elsewhere. We have more than enough men to watch one woman."

"With pursed lips the Capo nods. "You did well, Stefano. I do not yet possess all the details of how you managed to bring the heiress of one of the biggest Tequila manufacturers into our fold, but I am VERY pleased. She's an

invaluable asset who, unfortunately, knows too much." He reptilian grin spreads across his face.

"We don't want her to get any ideas into that pretty little head of hers, so you'll see to it that she only has restricted access to the house staff and the property." "I will take no chances with her. I want you on this, Stefano. Don't let me down."

The dismissal is clear. I nod once and take my leave, swallowing down the tightness in my throat, relieved that my head is still in one piece.

There is just a slight bitter taste in my mouth too - Babysitting duty. Just how I always dreamed of advancing in the syndicate.

This is going to be a long assignment.



I find Isabella pacing the room like a caged animal when I return, her green eyes flashing with anger.

"Are you settling in okay?" I ask, gently.

She must be so confused and tired with everything going on.

"Settling in? I feel like a prisoner. Do I have to beg for food around here?"

Her dinner. Of course. "I will have the maid send it up for you," I say, kindly.

"There's also intercom there," I point toward her bedside table. "You can dial 9 for housekeeping or the kitchen. For anything else, you can dial 0. But you should know, all calls are recorded and that the phone doesn't connect to any phone numbers. It's only connected to other landlines within the compound."

Her eyes slit into thin sharp edged jagged edges, reflecting her emotions clearly. "Why are you back?" she asks. "What do you want?"

"I am here to tell you that from now, I am to be on your duty."

"My duty?" she asks, tasting the words in her mouth.

I smile, trying to repackage the fact that I've been asked to keep an eye on her in a more welcoming manner. "To just be by your side. Keep you safe, entertained, comfortable. The Capo understands you're new here and that you know no one. He thought you might appreciate a companion while you're here with us, to keep you from getting bored. And of course, if there's anything you might need that can make your stay more comfortable, I'm here to make that happen for you."

"Well, thank you for that 5-star hospitality, then. Now, put your words into action. There is something I want that will make me comfortable," she looks at me.

"Oh?" I ask, giving her a small smile. Good. She's warming up and this whole journey would be so much better once we're more companionable.

"Anything. What can I do for you?"

"I want my things back," she snaps. "Now."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," I say calmly. "The Capo has ordered them confiscated for security reasons."

"Security reasons?" Isabella scoffs. "What you mean is he's holding them hostage. Just like he's holding me."

"You're not a hostage," I say, a flare of irritation rising in me. "You're a guest."

"A guest who can't leave!" Isabella exclaims. "I never should have come here. I never knew you were all criminals."

The accusation stings, reawakening the conflict within me. I shove it aside, focusing on the defiance in Isabella's eyes.

"You didn't seem to have a problem accepting our help before," I point out.

"And you were quick enough to call my boss for bail when you landed

yourself in jail."

Isabella's cheeks flush an angry red.

"I was desperate and not thinking clearly. I never imagined you'd turn out to be mafioso." She spits out the word like it's poison.

"Is that what you think of us?" I say quietly. "We're not all bad, Isabella. The Capo took me in when I had no one. He gave me a purpose and a life."

"Some life," Isabella retorts. "Living like a criminal. Hurting people and profiting from their misery."

"It's more complicated than that," I say, an old ache rising in my chest.

I've grappled with the moral implications of this life before, but Capo's generosity binds me to him. I owe him everything.

"There's nothing complicated about it." Isabella's eyes flash with disgust.

"You're either too blind to see the truth or don't care."

"The truth isn't always black and white," I say through gritted teeth.

"Maybe not for you," Isabella says coldly. "But I know right from wrong. And everything about this place is wrong."

I clench my jaw, anger simmering in my veins. Isabella acts as if she's better than us, judging what she doesn't understand. Doesn't she realize we've helped her? That if it weren't for the Capo's intervention, she'd still be rotting in a jail cell for drug possession?

"If this place is so wrong," I say tightly, "then why are you still here?"

Isabella glares at me, hands curled into fists. "You took my things, remember? I have nowhere else to go."

"You should be grateful we helped you at all," I snap.

"The only thing I'm grateful for is that my father isn't alive to see what I've gotten myself into." Isabella's words slice into me, sharp as a knife.

I stare at her for a long moment, a maelstrom of emotion churning inside me.

Finally, I turn on my heel and stalk to the door, unable to stand her company for another second. But after today, I want nothing more to do with the infuriating woman he's asked me to guard. Let her rot in her gilded cage for all I care.

I have enough problems of my own to deal with.

# Chapter 11

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Isabella

I toss and turn beneath silk sheets, unable to quiet my racing mind.

Trapped. I'm being treated like a prisoner, whether the mafia will admit it or not.

By now, my anger at Juan has subsided. Perhaps he too doesn't understand what situation he's put me in. Longing to call Juan, to hear his voice, I reach for my phone before remembering it was confiscated.

Sighing, I rise and pad across cold marble floors to the window. The estate is shrouded in darkness. Skyscrapers, lit like lanterns, jut against starry skies in the distance.

Somewhere out there, killers hunt for me. My heart aches with each breath. How did I end up here, a pawn in this dangerous game?

Rubbing my arms, I gaze at the locked door. Guards are stationed outside, Stefano's men. I'm ostensibly protected, yet I know I'm also captive. But why? What do they want from me?

With no answers forthcoming, sleep remains elusive. The truth lingers at the edge of consciousness, a viper waiting to strike. I'm in over my head, trapped in a world of drugs, money, and power. A world that already took my father from me.

Fear coils in my belly as realization dawns. I'm at the mercy of forces beyond my control. Forces that may demand a price I'm unwilling to pay. The tequila empire, this mafia syndicate, they now own me, body and soul. I'm in too deep, with no way out.

Rubbing my temples, I pace the room. My mind races in circles, panic rising in my chest. I need to get word to Juan, ask him more questions. But how?



Then I remember. The burner phone.

Clara slipped it into my bag as I reached the airport, a secret method to help me. I never used it, fearing they were monitoring communications. But now, it may be my only hope.

I retrieve the phone from my bag, turning it over in my hands. Such a small thing, yet it could mean freedom. Still, using it puts me at risk. Juan might mention I spoke to him to someone within the mafia. Stefano or his men might discover it, angering the Capo. I don't know what he's capable of, but harming me to keep me under control is not out of the question.

Do I dare? Summoning my courage, I power on the phone, hands shaking. As it boots up, indecision wars within me. To call or not to call, that is the question. A question that could determine my fate.

Rubbing my neck, anxiety swells inside me. I yearn to hear Juan's voice, to tell him where I am. But can I chance angering the Capo?

I stare at the phone, wavering, the moment stretching out. Finally, I switch it off and return it to my bag. I'll use it just when needed. When it's a matter of life and death. Maybe right now, the change is just too much for me.

As much as it pains me, contacting Juan is too risky. Not yet. Not until I have a better sense of what's happening and how much danger I'm actually in.

Exhaustion washes over me as I down a miniature bottle of tequila from the minibar. The alcohol burns my throat, dulling the ache in my heart. At least for now, for tonight, I can find sleep in alcohol.

Closing my eyes, I give in to the tequila's embrace, hoping for a few hours of oblivion before dawn breaks over the city and this nightmare begins anew.



The next morning, a knock at my door startles me awake. For a disorienting moment, I can't remember where I am. Then it all comes flooding back: the mafia, my captivity, the unanswered questions swirling in my mind.

I drag myself from bed as the knock sounds again, more insistent this time. At the door, I find Stefano holding a tray of food. "Good morning, Bella. I brought you breakfast."

His charming smile does little to mask the threat underlying his courtesy. I'm under no illusions this is anything other than a power play, a reminder of how completely under the Capo's control I remain.

Stefano brushes past me into the room, settling the tray on a table.

"Call me Isabella," are the only words I say to him. "Bella is for my friends."

He turns to me, the warmth now gone. "The Capo requests your presence at dinner this evening."

With that, he turns on his heel and strides out, closing the door behind him.

I'm left staring at the lavish spread of food, nausea churning in my stomach.

The last thing I want is to spend an evening forced to make pleasantries with my captor. But refusing isn't an option. I have no choice but to play along, biding my time until an opportunity for escape presents itself. If it ever does.

The rest of the day drags on, hours of boredom and uncertainty punctuated by moments of stark terror at my predicament. More than once, I consider using the burner phone, consequences be damned. But each time, I talk myself out of it.

As much as I hate this waiting game, rash actions will only make my situation worse. Patience has never been my strong suit, but now more than ever, it's a virtue I must cultivate if I'm to survive.

By evening, I'm a bundle of frayed nerves. Part of me hopes the Capo has forgotten about dinner, but I know that's wishful thinking. Mafia bosses don't

forget. At the stroke of seven, a knock sounds at my door. Here we go again.

I open the door to find Stefano, impeccably dressed.

"The Capo is waiting," is all he says, offering his arm.

Taking a deep breath, I ignore his arm and walk out, ahead of him. He follows, with a sigh. Best to get this over with.

Stefano escorts me downstairs to an opulent dining room. But to my surprise, we're the only ones there. Just the Capo, wine glass in hand, gazing into the fireplace.

He turns at our entrance, face creasing into a smile that never reaches his eyes. The doors close behind us with an ominous thud.

We're alone. God help me.



Stefano pulls out my chair, and I sit, heart pounding. He takes the seat beside me, and I'm torn between relief and disappointment that he's staying. At least I'm not alone, but if things go south, what can he do against the Capo?

The Capo swirls his wine, studying me. "I have heard some disturbing reports about you, Isabella."

I frown, confused. "Reports? What are you talking about?"

"That you did, in fact, smuggle the drugs across the border and proclaimed you were innocent when you were not. Cocaine, to be precise." His gaze sharpens. "Is this true?"

"What? No!" I burst out. How dare he accuse me of such a thing. "I have never smuggled drugs in my life."

Stefano looks between the Capo and me. Earlier, the man seemed to trust me. Now, he looks as confused as I feel.

The Capo's lip curls. "Do not lie to me. I have eyes and ears everywhere. If you wish to remain under my protection, you will not deceive me."

I glare at him, outraged. "I'm not lying. I don't know who's spreading these malicious rumors, trying to set me up, but I have done nothing illegal."

"We shall see." The Capo sets down his glass and steeples his fingers. "I have decided to give you a chance to prove your loyalty. You will undertake a job for me to make amends for your...indiscretions."

My mouth drops open. "What job? What indiscretions? I haven't done anything!"

I look to Stefano for support, but his face remains impassive. No help there.

The Capo's eyes gleam. "All in good time, Isabella. For now, let's enjoy the meal. We have much to discuss."

Dread pools in my stomach. I've been ensnared in this man's web, and escape will not come easily. But I'll be damned if I become a pawn in his sick games. But it's clear that with this stroke of ingenuity, posing my release from a crime I didn't commit as a favor for one he claims I did, he just struck his first win by making me owe him a favor.

The battle has begun.

The rest of the meal passes in tense silence. I push the food around my plate, appetite gone. The Capo watches me with hawk-like eyes, as if waiting to pounce on any sign of weakness.

When the dishes are cleared, he leans back in his seat, steeping his fingers once more. "Now, about this favor you owe me." His tone brokers no argument. "I have recently acquired a...problematic business associate. He has proven difficult to persuade through conventional means. I believe a woman's touch may yield better results."

My stomach churns. "What exactly are you asking?"

"Seduction is a powerful tool. I want you to gain this man's trust and extract the information I need."

"No." The word slips out before I can stop it.

Seduction and manipulation are not in my skill set. I have no desire to become a honey trap for the mafia.

The Capo's eyes narrow. "You seem to have forgotten your place. You owe me your life, and you will repay that debt however I see fit."

"I won't do it." I glare at him, uncowed. "You can threaten me all you like, but I will not become your whore."

"You have to earn your keep, Isabella."

Rage burns through my shock. What does he mean by I have to earn my keep? I lunge across the table, swiping at his wine glass. The Capo jerks back with a shout, crimson liquid spilling down the front of his shirt.

Footsteps pound behind me. Stefano's arm locks around my waist, wrenching me off the Capo and pinning me against his chest. I scream and struggle, kicking out at the Capo as he rises from his seat, face mottled with anger.

"Let me go, you bastard!" I shriek at Stefano. He holds me fast, breath warm against my ear.

"Calmati," he murmurs. Calm down.

The Capo straightens his shirt, eyes blazing. "You foolish girl," he snarls. "You've made a grave mistake."

He stalks over to us, raising a hand to strike me across the face.

Stefano shifts to shield me, blocking the blow. "Capo, please," he says quietly. "Violence will not solve this."

The Capo hesitates, then lowers his arm with a scowl. "You're right. There are other ways to tame a wild mare."

He fixes me with a threatening glare.

"Very well. If you insist on being difficult, I will find other ways to make use of you. Perhaps this was asking for too much. But know this - you belong to me now for what I did for you, and there is no escape. You will do as you're told, or suffer the consequences. At some point, there will be something I need which you won't be in a position to say no to. Fortunately for you, I do have others in my army who can be tasked with the art of seduction. Stefano, lead her back to her room."

Stefano inclines his head. "As you wish."

His arm remains firmly around my waist as he steers me from the room, each step filling me with dread. I've unleashed the beast, and now I'm about to pay the price.

"Isabella," he says, touching my arm. I stop, and look into his eyes. It looks like he wants to say something. Apologize, maybe. However, I stop him before he can say a word.

"Your Capo is a bastard," I spit at Stefano's feet. "Are you happy now? You think I'm an honored guest, when all I am is a pawn in some game of his. You're just like him."

He shakes his head. "You don't understand, Isabella. He thinks you're one of us and in our world, these things are normal. Trust me, once the Capo understands you, he won't ask such a thing of you."

Stefano marches me up the grand staircase, grip tightening when I try to wrench away. We reach the second floor hallway, dimly lit by sconces on the wood-paneled walls. My heart pounds as he leads me to the end of the hall and through a set of double doors into my room.

He releases me once we're inside, closing the doors behind us with an ominous thud. I back away from him, trembling. "Stay away from me."

His expression is unreadable. "I cannot do that."

He pulls a key from his pocket and locks the doors. "You are to remain here. And Isabella, for your sake, I do hope you apologize to the Capo. Trust me, things would only be easier for you if you did."

"I won't apologize," I say hotly. "He had no right to threaten me like that."

"You gave him reason to." Stefano's tone holds a note of censure. "You should not have attacked him."

"And you should not have stopped me!" I shout. "You're supposed to protect me, not help him terrorize me!"

"I am trying to protect you," he says wearily. "The Capo is not a man to cross. Your outburst has angered him, and there will be consequences to pay."

"So, you're on his side, then." I give him a scornful look. "Tell me, Stefano, do you always do as you're told? Or do you have a mind of your own?"

His jaw clenches at the insinuation.

When he speaks again, his voice has an edge. "You know nothing about me or my motivations. I am trying to keep you safe in a difficult situation, but you seem determined to make that impossible."

"This isn't about safety," I retort. "It's about control. The Capo wants to control me, and you're helping him do it."

"Enough." Stefano stalks over to the minibar and pours himself a drink. "You will stay here until you decide to hold your tongue."

"Or what?" I challenge. "You'll lock me in the dungeon?"

I felt the glass slam down on the counter, his eyes blazing. "Do not tempt me!"

# Chapter 12

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Stefano

Since our altercation post dinner with the Capo, Isabella and I barely speak. Yet, I follow Isabella everywhere she goes this week, watching her every move like a hawk, as ordered by the Capo.

He's out of the country on business, which means I have to spend more time with her, which isn't pleasant for either of us.

When Isabella says she wants to go for a run, I tell her I'll change into my running gear. She glares at me, those emerald eyes flashing. "I don't need you for everything. Stay here."

Like hell I will. The Capo was clear - I don't leave her side. I'm tired of explaining it to her, over and over again so I simply stop at "I go where you go."

She huffs in annoyance but starts jogging down the path on the edge of the compound. I run beside her, taking in the sway of her hips and the bounce of her breasts through her tank top.

Jesus, she'll be the death of me.

We run in silence for a mile, the sounds of our feet pounding the dirt road and my ragged breathing. Isabella isn't even winded, the little minx. She speeds up, trying to lose me, but I catch up easily.

"Why must you always follow me?" she demands, breathless.

"You know why." To protect her. To keep her safe. Even from herself.

She shakes her head, sending her thick hair flying. "You can't protect me from everything."

"I can try." I grab her arm, forcing her to stop. "The Capo tasked me with keeping you alive. I will follow every order to the letter, even if it means

protecting you from yourself."

Isabella jerks her arm away, eyes flashing with anger and something else I can't name. Before I can react, she increases the distance between us. I run to catch up. After running miles in circular laps, we return to the mansion.

I bend over at the foyer steps, panting to catch my breath. She, on the other hand, looks like she's barely broken a sweat.

She comes up to me, and bends to my level. I stand and she rises too. She looks me in the eye, gives me a sweet smile, and cuts me with her words.

"Not bad for an old guy."

An old guy? I'm only 32! Before I can respond, she jogs up the steps. I sigh, and follow.

She goes to shower, so I place a guard at her door, and go shower in the guest room. Within fifteen minutes, I am back at my post.



Isabella emerges from her room dressed in tight jeans and a sheer top, purse slung over one shoulder. "I'm going shopping. Alone."

I cross my arms, standing in front of the mansion's heavy wooden doors.

"No."

She raises a brow. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I can't allow you to go anywhere alone."

"I don't need a babysitter!" Anger flares in her eyes. "You need to remember that you're not my fucking father."

As if I ever could. "I haven't forgotten. But my orders come from your new guardian, the Capo, not your father."

"The Capo isn't my guardian!" Isabella shoves past me and wrenches the door open. "He's nothing but a corrupt, murdering—"

I grab her arm, spinning her to face me.

"Watch your tongue, Isabella." My grip tightens as I struggle to rein in my temper. "You will not speak of the Capo that way. My duty is to him, and to keeping you alive. You will stay here, where I can protect you."

"Let go of me!" She tries to jerk away, but I hold fast.

The Capo was clear—Isabella's safety is my top priority, even if it pisses her off.

"I will not." I pull Isabella flush against me, trapping her arms at her sides. She struggles wildly, cursing at me in Spanish, but she can't escape.

Finally she goes still, chest heaving. "You bastard. You have no right—"

"I have every right." My voice is tight. "The Capo has given me rule over you, and I will keep you safe. Even if it means locking you in your room."

Isabella's eyes flash with fury and something else I can't name.

A long moment passes where we stare at each other, tension crackling in the air around us. Then she surges up on her toes and crushes her lips to mine. I stiffen in shock, my grip instinctively tightening on her arms.

Her mouth is hot and demanding against mine, and for a single moment I'm lost in the sensation. Then I wrench away, panting.

Isabella stares up at me, eyes dark with desire and challenge. I swallow hard, shaken by the force of my reaction and the desire still burning through my blood.

"No," I grit out. "I will not be manipulated."

Isabella tosses her head, a smug smile curving her full lips. "So now you see, Stefano. You can't lock away what you crave."

A growl rumbles in my chest. I release Isabella and stride away, dragging a

hand through my hair. My body thrums with a need I can't satisfy, my thoughts swirling in chaos.

When I glance over my shoulder, Isabella is watching me, a knowing look in her eyes. I scowl at her. "Get dressed. We're going shopping, as you wanted. But I will come along."

I need to get out of this house, away from the temptation she represents.

Isabella smiles, slow and predatory, and turns toward her room.

I curse under my breath, already dreading the hours ahead. She means to torment me, in retaliation for refusing her free will.



We go from store to store. Isabella is on a spree, and I fear my credit card limit will soon be maxed out. We exit Gucci, Fendi, Prada.

How many bags does she need, considering she isn't going anywhere?

We reach a high-end boutique clothing store.

"Well, since you're here," she states. "Might as well tell me how the outfits look on me."

"Sure," I shrug, slightly happy she's involving me without any ulterior motive in an innocent act of what could be perceived as friendship.

Maybe she just needs to get out more. It seems to be good for her mental health.

As Isabella emerges from the dressing room in a slinky red dress, my thoughts turn explicitly to imagining what's underneath. She's not wearing a bra and I can see her nipples through the sheer silk.

What the hell does she think she's doing? She turns and shows me the back. She slides down the zip.

"What do you think?" she asks. "Would it look better if it was backless?"

Her ass beckons me. I picture the curve of her hips, the swell of her breasts barely contained by lace and silk. Heat coils in my gut as I envision peeling the dress away, baring her body inch by inch.

I imagine what it would be like to rip that dress off her, smack that ass, take her from behind as I bend her over that chair in the corner. How she'd moan my name ..."Stefano, Stefano, Stefano," as I grab her tits and fuck her mercilessly, my dick pounding her hard, harder, as hard as it can. The slap of my skin against her ass.

I'd love to pull back her hair, bring her ear close to mine, tell her how fucking horny she makes me feel as her wetness consumes my cock. I'd like to see her on her knees, my cock in her mouth as she pops it in and out. I imagine cumming on her round, big tits, watching her take a finger, catch the drip and suck her finger dry.

My breaths come faster, and I have to clench my fists to avoid reaching for her.

Isabella smiles, slow and knowing, and does a slow turn. The dress clings to her figure, accentuating every line and curve.

I imagine taking her in the dressing room, pressing her against the wall as I lift her thighs around my waist. I imagine the sounds she'd make as I thrust into her, hard and deep. The fantasy is so vivid I can almost feel her pussy, taste the salt on her skin.

When Isabella turns back to me, eyes gleaming, I know she can read the hunger in my gaze. But she's pushed me too far this time. I stalk forward and grasp her arm, all but dragging her from the store. "Change, now."

"Oh come on," she whispers. "We're just having fun."

"Change," I demand.

"No," she says, pouting. "I want this dress. And I have another I am yet to change into."

I am on thin ice. If I say no, I will be facing her wrath for weeks to come. If I just shut up, perhaps she'd be nicer.

"Fine," I say. "Hurry up."

She emerges a few minutes later. Only this time, she's wearing lingerie. I sit there, stunned, as I take in the garter going up her thighs, attached to a slinky, see-through black lace thong.

"How about this?" she says, turning for me, showing me her perfect peaches.

"Enough," I say, through gritted. What does she think she's doing? People can see her. Fuck. I shouldn't be seeing her, like this. I stride across the room and grabbing her shoulder and pushing her into the dressing room.

"Get dressed," I bark. "Now."

She arches a brow. "Aren't you going to help me choose an outfit?" Her tone is coy and flirtatious. It only serves to anger me.

"I will not play your games," I snarl. "Get dressed. We're leaving."

I turn on my heel and stalk to the other side of the room, putting distance between us before I do something I'll regret.

I have a duty to protect Isabella, not seduce her. I will not fail my Capo again. Isabella emerges from the closet a few minutes later, dressed in her jeans and a simple top. I throw her a dark look and she holds up her hands in surrender.

"I'm dressed. Satisfied?" Her tone is mocking, but there's a thread of unease running through it. She's realizes she's pushed too far.

Good. She needs to understand that I am in control here, not her. I am the one protecting her, and if she thinks she can manipulate me, she is sorely mistaken.

I jerk my head toward the door. "Get in the car. Now."

Isabella opens her mouth like she wants to argue, then thinks better of it. She stalks past me without a word. We're out the door and in the car before she protests. I start the engine and pull into traffic, my jaw clenched.

Isabella scowls at me, crossing her arms over her chest. "What are you doing? I wasn't finished shopping."

I cut her a sharp glance. "We're done."

"You can't just order me around like this!" Isabella snaps.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as I struggle for control. She's right, but I won't admit it. Not when she's deliberately provoking me.

"You've had your fun," I say flatly. "Now we're going back to the house, where you'll stay out of trouble."

Isabella makes an outraged sound. "You arrogant bastard! Who do you think you are?"

I don't respond, keeping my gaze fixed on the road. The drive back to the house passes in angry silence. But beneath the anger simmers a current of desire I can't escape.

Isabella has ignited a fire in my blood, and I have no idea how to put it out.

The memory of Isabella in that red dress assaults me again, and I can almost feel her soft lips wrapped around my cock. I picture her gazing up at me with those emerald eyes as she takes me deep in her mouth.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel as I struggle to stay focused on the road. I shift in my seat, uncomfortably aroused. Isabella remains stubbornly silent beside me, but I know she's aware of the effect she has on me. We both know she did that on purpose.





By the time we reach the house, I'm fit to burst. I throw the car into park and drag Isabella up to her room, kicking the door shut behind us.

In my mind, I see her bent over the chair in front of my desk, skirt hiked up to reveal the lacy black panties she wore to torment me today. I rip them aside and thrust into her wet pussy, pumping hard as she cries out in pleasure.

Breathless, I lean back against the door of my room and rake a hand through my hair. I can't do this. I can't give in to these primal urges, no matter how much I might want to.

Isabella stands in the center of the room, watching me. Waiting.

I meet her gaze and see the challenge there.

"Drink?" Her tone is brittle.

I should refuse. "Why not."

She pours two shots at the bar in the corner of the room and slides one over to me. I knock it back, the familiar burn chasing away my doubts. The second shot follows quickly after.

Isabella watches me, her expression inscrutable. When I reach for the bottle again, she places her hand over the top.

"I think that's enough for now." Her gaze meets mine, and in her green eyes I see an echo of my own turmoil. "This thing between us..." She trails off with a shake of her head.

"There is nothing between us." My denial is automatic, but the look she gives me says she doesn't believe it.

"Goodnight, Stefano."



After eating my dinner alone, I stand in the kitchen for a long time.

When I finally make my way upstairs for one last check, the mansion is dark and silent. Isabella's door is closed and there is a guard stationed outside for the night, but I pause outside it, listening for any sound within.

There is nothing but the pounding of my heart, the rush of blood in my veins. I close my eyes, her scent lingering in my memory—tequila, jasmine, and woman.

With a curse, I turn away from her door.

I should not be having these thoughts. Isabella is under my protection, nothing more. To act on my desire would be a betrayal of my duty. Of my honor.

In my own room, I undress and step into the shower, turning the water to scalding. The heat does nothing to erase Isabella from my mind. Her eyes, her lips, the slope of her neck—everything about her haunts me.

When sleep finally claims me, my dreams are filled with images of Isabella. Of peeling that red dress from her body and tasting every inch of her sun-kissed skin. Of her hands on me and the sweet ache of being inside her.

# Chapter 13

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Isabella

L ater that night, after the compound has quietened down, I close my eyes and relive the memory of Stefano's eyes drinking me in as I emerged from the changing room in my red dress. His jaw had slackened, pupils dilating as his gaze slid down my body.

"It's fine," he had rasped, the hunger in his voice sending a bolt of desire through me.

Satisfaction and guilt war within me now. I had gotten exactly what I wanted, but at what cost? I used my body as a weapon to make shadowing me as difficult a task as I could, and secondly, to get my hands on his spare phone.

The one he hardly uses. The one I've had my eyes on for weeks. The gamble I took, standing naked in that lacy lingerie, paid off when he walked up to me, all angry and aroused. He saw only a seductive woman, not the woman who is scheming to destroy his Capo.

Still, the memory of my one hand on his chest, feeling his warmth, while my other hand snuck the phone from his back pocket, ignites heat in my body. I press my thighs together, craving more, even as I despise myself for my weakness.

I have a duty to fulfill, a score to settle, and no man will distract me from my purpose.

Not even one as dangerously alluring as Stefano Nitti.



I slip out of bed and quietly pad to the door, pressing my ear against the wood. Silence greets me. The night guard's soft snores vibrate through the

bedroom door—he's fast asleep.

My heart kicks into overdrive as I silently make my way to the vintage armoire.

The night guard moans in his sleep. I stand up on tiptoes as I stretch to reach on top of the armoire. I freeze in place, waiting with bated breath.

Nothing. The blood rushing in my ears sounds as loud as the Piedra Volada falls. For good measure I mentally count to sixty. Still no sound.

I stretch again, sliding my hand along the top of the armoire until my hand closes around the sleek metal of Stefano's spare phone.

Triumph and panic mingle in my chest as I ease the drawer shut. I have what I came for, but escaping unseen will be the real challenge.

I creep toward the bathroom door, wincing at every creak of the floorboards. I slip in and gently close the door behind me. The phone is a lead weight in my hand, damning evidence of my deception. But it's a means to an end, a way to find the truth.

I lock the door behind me, my heart pounding.

She uses a towel or gets into the cupboard under the sink to keep her voice from echoing in the huge bathroom. I stare at the sleek phone in my hands, wondering if this is wise.

Any punishment resulting from being caught with Stefano's phone, will be bearable knowing I still have the burner phone.

So with trembling fingers, I dial Juan's number. It rings once, twice, three times. Panic rises in my chest. What if he doesn't answer? What if—

"Hello." Juan's smooth voice comes through the line.

Relief washes over me, quickly replaced by a surge of anger. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I don't know what you mean," he says calmly. Too calmly. "Why are you

calling me from Stefano's phone?"

I ignore his question.

"The mafia, Juan. You didn't think to mention that you were sending me to New York to be involved with the mafia?"

Silence.

Then, "Isabella, you shouldn't concern yourself with such things."

His patronizing tone makes my blood boil.

"Don't give me that." I grip the phone tighter, my knuckles turning white. "If the Capo is as dangerous as everyone says, I have a right to know the truth."

Juan sighs. "The mafia is complicated. But they are loyal to us, to your Papa's memory. They will keep you safe."

"Safe?" I scoff. "Or under their control?"

"Isabella, please trust me," he says softly. "This is the only option until it's safe for you to return."

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, pale and wide-eyed, and see the truth in it: I'm in over my head. But I won't back down now. Not until I'm free.

"If you won't tell me the truth, I'll find it out myself." My voice comes out steady, betraying none of my doubts. "You might not realize it, but I am being kept prisoner here."

Juan starts to protest, but I end the call before he can respond. The phone slips from my hands and clatters to the counter as the full weight of what I've done sinks in.

I'm playing with fire now. I might have just turned Juan into a foe. And if I'm not careful, I'll get burned.

I grab the edge of the counter, knuckles white, and take a deep breath. No time for doubts. I have work to do.

After splashing cold water on my face, with shaky hands, I dial the only

person I can think of who might be able to help.

Clara Laborin Herrera.

The phone goes unanswered for a few rings, and I pray she picks up the unknown call.

"Hello?"

"Clara, it's Isabella."

"Isabella," she says, in a slow drawl, like she'd been waiting. "Where's the burner?"

"Can't use it," I whisper. "I'm hiding it."

"Why?" she asks calmly. "Are you safe?"

"Safe, yes. But I'm basically a prisoner."

"Can you tell me where you are?"

"I'm in New York, with the man Juan has trusted to keep me safe, Don Luca Conti."

"Conti? You've got to leave.," said Clara.

"I can't. He has my passport, my cards. He's got guards watching me."

"Look, Isabella, we've come across Don Conti's name in connection to some really dangerous deals. How is your cousin connected to him?"

"I don't know. Juan claims my father and Conti were friends. But in my heart, I don't believe it to be true."

"Okay, we'll see what we can find out for you."

"We?! Please, Clara, no one can know about this."

"Clara gives a soft chuckle. "Isabella, the team of girls that are Illuminati, have stealth, discretion and loyalty in their DNA. Our clients recommend us for our quick, anonymous, no-questions-asked approach. Trust me, Isabella."

"Fine," I state. "Find out what you can. I'm a little low on trust right now. And there's more. Someone tried to frame me. The FBI took me in at the



airport accusing me of smuggling cocaine. Conti was able to get me out of there, but now he says I owe him."

"Woa, Isabella, this is getting serious. Are you sure you're okay?"

I swallow back the tears. Unable to speak."

"Clara's voice softens when she speaks again, no longer just business. "I'll see what I can find out. How do I contact you?""

"Don't try to call me on this phone!" The thought of Stefano intercepting a call from Clara nearly chokes me. " I stole it and need to plant it back. I'll make a plan to call you, when it's safe."

"Wait," says Clara. "Remember to delete the call log. I'll get into the network and erase the call data, so it doesn't show up on their phone bill."

"The network?" I ask, confused.

"Network, now Isa."

I nod, even though there's no chance she can see me. I put the phone down and stare at it. "Verizon," I say.

"Good. I need 6 hours."

I find my heart racing with fear and panic. My plan was to sneak out and place the phone somewhere random, like a bookshelf, so that Stefano would think he misplaced it by error. But the longer I have to keep it on me, the higher the chances of Stefano noticing it missing and I can't risk placing it by error at a space he already might have checked out. It would be too suspicious.

"6 hours for what?" I ask. "Please, I can't keep it on long. It's risky."

"The fact that you called from this means the call history can be traced. Delete the call log from the phone, but I need to hack into Verizon and delete

data that these calls were ever made. You get it? It shouldn't even appear on their phone bills, Isabella."

"I breathe out a sigh of relief and whisper my thanks to Clara."

"Good. Stay safe. Talk soon."

She cuts the call and I delete the call logs.

In the past thirty minutes my world has shifted on its axis. It seems Juan is no longer an ally I can count on. And if that's the case, what else that I believe to be true, is in actual fact a lie? What if it isn't an enemy I should be afraid of, but the very people I've trusted since childhood?

The thought sends a ripple of fear down my back. I shake it off. I'm just overthinking. Right?



I wake up famished the next morning and Stefano shuffles in with my breakfast plate.

"Can I go for a run?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

He sighs, "Sure."

"You didn't ask me where to," I point to the obvious.

"What do you mean where to? The compound boundary stretches into miles."

"I want a new challenge. Different scenery. Central Park. It's really boring doing the same thing every day, and I figured it would be alright to go since we went shopping yesterday," I say quickly in justification as I shovel bites of omelette into my mouth.

The thing is, I don't care if it's Central Park, Riverside or Bryant Park. I just need an excuse to get back in his car.

He rolls his eyes but then nods, slowly.

"Sure," he mumbles. "Get dressed. I'll be back in 5. Need to get changed."

Thank god. My plan is working. With the Capo still out of town, I can get away with a few leniencies.

Fifteen minutes later, we walk to Stefano's car. He waits till I slide into my seat before shutting the door, then walks around to his side. Quickly, I chuck the phone near the accelerator, on the driver's side. He gets in, starts the engine and then comes a loud clang. He looks down, to see what his foot kicked.

"Oh," he mutters, looking confused as he bends over to pick up the phone.

"So that's where you've been."

He looks over and sees me smirking.

Feeling embarrassed at having been caught talking to a phone, he blushes and says, ever-so-quietly, "I lost it yesterday."

"Uh-huh," I nod, my anxiety finally easing up. This time, I wasn't caught.

# Chapter 14

---

Stefano

**W**e emerge from the shady path into the sunlight, sweat dripping down our backs from the exertion of our run.

Isabella smiles at me, cheeks flushed, and I can't help but smile back. In moments like these, when she's completely free, I can see glimpses of the fascinating woman I had met on the flight. I wonder when she'd feel comfortable being herself around me again.

I yearn to explain to her that I'm not like the rest of the mafioso. That I do what I do within the bounds of duty, but beyond that, I pray for peace. We get in the car and drive back.

I play some music for a change. She begins to hum, and for a few minutes, we both sing, before she gets quiet.

The compound draws closer, explaining the shift in energy. I try to make pleasant conversation—until I see the black sedan parked in the drive.

My heart leaps into my throat. The Capo has returned early.

As we walk up the winding drive toward the mansion, my mind races.

I grab Isabella's arm, pulling her to a stop. "Go straight to your room. Do not come out for any reason."

Her eyebrows knit together. "What? Why?"

"Just do as I say." My tone leaves no room for argument.

After a moment, she nods and heads into the house.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself, before approaching the Capo as he emerges from the backseat. "Welcome back, boss"

The Capo narrows his eyes, glancing toward the mansion. "And where did you take her just now?"

"Just for a run. She was getting impatient around the house and I thought she's easier to control, the more tired she is," I meet his gaze steadily, hoping he can't see the lie in my eyes.

I can't betray any feelings for Isabella. Not if I want to keep her safe.

The Capo is silent for a long moment, scrutinizing me. Finally, he nods. "Very well."

Relief floods me, though I keep my expression impassive.

The Capo strides into the mansion, leaving me alone in the drive. I breathe out slowly, running a hand through my hair. I have to be more careful.

Isabella's life depends on it.



I make my way inside and up to Isabella's room, where I find her pacing like a caged animal. At the sight of me, she whirls around, green eyes flashing.

"What was that about? Why did you rush me inside like that?"

"The Capo returned early." I close the door behind me. "He wasn't supposed to be back so soon. I'm not supposed to take you out. If he grows suspicious of something between us, then there'll be trouble."

"Nothing is going on between us," she echoes, but the words sound hollow.

We both know that's no longer true.

I move closer, taking her hands in mine. "I had to lie to protect you. If he knew the truth..."

I trail off, not wanting to voice the threat that lingers unspoken.

Isabella looks away. "I hate being confined in this place like a prisoner." Her hands clench in mine. "Will I ever be free?"

The anguish in her voice cuts me like a knife. I pull her into my arms, holding her close.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper against her hair. "If there was any other way..."

She relaxes into my embrace with a soft sigh. "I know. It's not your fault."

Her arms slide around my waist as she tilts her face up to mine. "At least when I'm with you, I can forget about these walls for a while."

Our lips meet then, slow and deep, and for a few perfect moments I can also forget. Forget about the constraints of my duty, the Capo's control, the secrets I must guard. With Isabella in my arms, I'm finally free.

Until my phone beeps. The Capo is calling me to his study.



I steel myself as I walk into the study, my heart pounding. What did I just do? I kissed Isabella. How will we ever turn back from this?

The Capo stands gazing out the window, his hands clasped behind his back.

He turns at the sound of my footsteps, eyes narrowed. "Where have you been taking her?"

I swallow hard, keeping my expression neutral. "Just for exercise, as I mentioned. A walk around the grounds, nothing more."

"You expect me to believe that? I have eyes everywhere, Stefano. I know you've been taking her into the city. You took her shopping yesterday. To Central Park today." He strides forward, anger etched into every line of his face. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

I force myself not to glance away, to reveal nothing in my gaze. "I apologize for the deception. I should not have done so without your permission. I hadn't realized it wasn't permitted to take her to town."



The lies spill from my lips, each word another betrayal.

"I do not tolerate dishonesty. Especially not from you. "He stands before me now, close enough that I can see the fury smoldering in his eyes. "Have you forgotten your place? Forgotten who you work for?"

I drop my gaze, the picture of contrition. "No, Capo. I apologize. It will not happen again."

He grabs my chin, forcing me to meet his stare. "See that it doesn't. Unless you want her to suffer the consequences. You see, something tells me she has a hold over you. Something tells me you might be falling in love with her."

"Never, Capo," I say vehemently. "I feel nothing for the girl."

"Are you sure?" he asks, looking into my eyes. "Because if you have been compromised, I can find a replacement to guard her."

Fear echoes in my heart.

A replacement could mean someone more violent. Someone cruel. Someone who plays with her like he would a toy. In this very instant, I realized I care about her enough to make sure that doesn't happen.

"Boss, I swear I'll put her in her place," I proclaim with as much nonchalance as I can.

He smiles and releases me with a shove. "Now get out of my sight and make sure she knows that things will be different around here."

I bow and take my leave, shaken. Once out of view I quicken my pace. The Capo's threat looms over me, a dark promise of what's to come if I slip again. Yet, at the back of my mind, I wonder what he's so scared of? Why can't she leave the compound guarded? Is it truly her protection he desires or is there something more?

I shake my head. Banish the thought from my mind. I can't think like this about the man who has saved my life more than once. He's family.



My feet carry me swiftly to Isabella's room. I find her pacing before the window, frustration etched into every line of her body. At the sight of me she whirls around, green eyes flashing.

"What happened?" she demands. "Can we go for another run tomorrow?"

The hopeful note in her voice is a knife to my heart. I shake my head, unable to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry. He has forbidden it. You are to remain confined to the mansion from now on."

"What?" She strides over to stand before me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from her skin. "You can't do this to me, Stefano. I need to get out of here. I'm going mad cooped up in this place day after day."

Her proximity unravels my composure. I reach for her hands, cradling them in my own. "I know this is difficult for you, Isabella. But it's too dangerous. The Capo is already suspicious. If I defy him again..."

I trail off, loath to voice the threats against her.

She searches my face, her expression softening. "You're afraid for me." Her fingers tighten around my own. "You care for me."

I close my eyes against the truth written in her gaze. "Isabella, please. Do not say such things."

My heart pounds at the feel of her hands in mine, a sweet ache that both excites and terrifies me. I cannot portray such weakness, not now.

"Why?" Her voice drops to a whisper. "Because you know it's true?"

I wrench myself away from her, shaken.

"Guard her door at all times," I order the men stationed outside. "Do not let her out of this room for any reason."

Their "Yes, sir" follows me down the hall, like a gavel sounding the finality of my choice. But her safety is all that matters now. Even if it means breaking her heart to ensure it.



I pause outside the Capo's study, steadying my nerves before entering. He looks up from his desk, eyes narrowed.

"The girl is secure?"

I incline my head. "She will not leave her room again without your permission."

"Good." He leans back in his chair, scrutinizing me. "You seem...distracted, Stefano. Your mind is not fully on your duties."

My heart lodges in my throat but I keep my expression impassive. "I assure you, my focus is entirely on serving and protecting you, Capo."

"Yes, of course." He waves a hand, dismissing me. "Return to your post. I will call on you if I require anything further."

I breathe again as I step into the hall, releasing the tension in my shoulders.

He suspects nothing, yet, but I must be more careful. Isabella is a weakness he could exploit, a vulnerability I cannot afford. And yet...I find myself walking past her room again, pausing to glance at the closed door. I know she is safe behind it, secure. But the thought brings me no comfort.

I close my eyes, listening for any sound within. But the room remains silent. She has accepted her fate, then, resigned to the prison I have made for her.

The realization fills me with a hollow ache. I curl my hands into fists, hard enough for my nails to bite into flesh. She may be protected but that safety has come at too high a cost. I need to check on her.

I return to Isabella's room later, after a few hours, steeling myself for the confrontation to come. She looks up as I enter, her eyes brightening for a brief moment before she remembers—and looks away.

"Isabella." My voice is rough, strained with reluctance. "I cannot allow you to leave the mansion again. The Capo has forbidden it."

She whirls on me, eyes flashing. "You can't keep me locked away in here forever! I'm not some caged bird for you to control."

"I do not wish to control you." The words burst from me in a rush. "But your safety is my responsibility. As long as the Capo sees you as a threat, I cannot let you go."

"A threat?" She shakes her head. "I'm just a girl who wants to live her own life. What harm could I possibly do?"

"You do not understand." I run a hand through my hair, grasping for the right words. "As long as you are under the Capo's protection, your life is not your own. I swore an oath to keep you safe, Isabella, even if it is against your will."

"My father would not want this for me." Her eyes shine with tears and my chest tightens. "He would not want me to be a prisoner."

I look away, jaw clenching. "Your father is gone. I can only honor the duty left to me."

"Duty." She laughs, the sound sharp and brittle. "Is that what you call this, Stefano? Or is it just another pretty lie you tell yourself?"

Her words strike deep, exposing truths I do not wish to face. I stand there in silence, at a loss for how to answer. In the end, I can only turn and leave her alone once more, her piercing question echoing in my mind.

I station two armed men outside Isabella's room and retreat to my own chambers, the weight of responsibility and guilt pressing down upon my

shoulders. Though I know confinement is the only way to ensure Isabella's safety under the Capo's rule, it does not make the bitterness of her captivity any easier to bear.

Isabella's words haunt me as I pace the floor of my room, unable to rest. Duty. Is that truly my only motivation in all of this? Or have my feelings for the girl grown beyond the obligations of my oath?

Either way, it does not matter. My loyalty is to the Capo, not my own heart. Isabella must remain here, where I can protect her, whether she hates me for it or not. There is no other choice.

# Chapter 15

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Isabella

**S**o now, I can't even go for a run? I can't go to town? It suddenly feels like I can't even breathe without Luca Conti's permission.

I clutch my hair, knowing I can't stay here any longer.

My body trembles with anxiety as I pace in the bedroom where Luca Conti has confined me. I know that he has another motive. I just haven't figured out what it is yet.

I have to convince Stefano that this is not normal. Let's just presume he's a half-mad type A personality, truly making sure nothing happens to me under his protection. But, Juan asked for this protection. I asked for it.

If I no longer want it, and am truly a guest, as Conti claims, then I have the right to say thank you and leave. Then he won't really care what happens to me. Right?

I stride out of the room.

Mustering my most assertive voice, I confront the guards standing outside. "I need your help. I want you to send a maid to pack my things, then go get my passport and credit cards from the Capo, and get me a cab. I'm leaving this place for good."

"Miss Torres," one of them replies, his expression cold and unmoving. "Our orders are to

keep you safe within these walls. We cannot allow you to leave."

"Orders?!" My blood boils at the thought of being controlled by someone else's decisions. "I am not your prisoner! Did your Capo forget to tell you that? I am under his protection by choice and I no longer need it. Help me pack my belongings, or I'll find a way to leave on my own!"



"Go back to your room," the other guard says sternly. "You're not going anywhere."

My heart stops beating. An unprecedented calm comes over me as I move from flight to fight. Now, I'm beginning to see the truth for what it is. I've been stripped of my independence, treated like a helpless child, and that's something I can no longer tolerate. If they won't help me, I'll take matters into my own hands.

"Fine," I spit out, my voice shaking with fury. "If you won't help me, I'll find a way myself."

Ignoring their protests, I attempt to walk past them to reach the staircase, determined to confront the Capo directly and demand my freedom.

"Miss Torres!" One of the guards blocks my path, his arms crossed over his chest, a clear signal that he has no intention of letting me pass.

The other guard moves closer, forming an impenetrable barrier.

"You're not going anywhere," he warns.

"Get out of my way!" My heart pounds in my chest as I try to force my way through, but they remain steadfast, refusing to budge. My frustration mounts, and I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

"Enough!" The taller guard suddenly grabs my arm, gripping it tightly as he forcibly pushes me back toward my room. "You need to stay put for your own safety."

"Let go of me!" I scream, struggling against his iron grip. "I'm not your prisoner! I should be allowed to leave if I want!"

"Please understand, Miss Torres, we're just following orders."

With one last shove, they force me back into my room, slamming the door shut behind me. My heart races, and my chest heaves with struggling gasps as I lean against the door, tears of frustration streaming down my face.

"Damn them," I whisper, wiping away the tears angrily. "What the fuck do they want from me?"

My instincts scream at me that I'm in danger.

Mexico is my only salvation; there, the chances of me seeking alliances and protecting myself suddenly seem a lot more promising than here in New York.

"*Ya basta,*" I murmur, to my brain that just won't stop spinning in circles.

Enough is enough. I need to think!

As I sit on the edge of my bed, wringing my hands, my thoughts drift back to Jalisco, Mexico. If I could just get there, I know I could find people who would support me and help me regain control of my life.

My father's connections might not be helpful, since I no longer know where loyalties lie and who killed him, but with my connections - take Clara, for example - I could forge my own path.

"*Voy a regresar a México, cueste lo que cueste,*" I whisper to myself. I will return to Mexico, no matter the cost.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts. It won't be easy to escape this compound, but I have no other choice. I need to act fast, before they have a chance to tighten their grip on me even further. After all, I made a grave error, one I had to in order to test the waters. My experiment worked. It confirmed my suspicions of being a prisoner. But, it also told them what I'm thinking about.

Escape.

"*Isabella, tú eres fuerte,*" I remind myself. Isabella, you are strong. Don't let anyone control you. How can I get past the guards and out of this prison? I need to be clever and resourceful if I want to make it back to Mexico alive.

"*Si puedo llegar al consulado mexicano, estaré a salvo,*" I say, thinking

aloud. If I can reach the Mexican consulate, I'll be safe.

My eyes scan the room, searching for anything that could aid in my escape. The window catches my attention – it's large enough for me to fit through, and while the drop is significant, it's not impossible to survive. Yes, I think, that will be my way out.

All I need is to get to the Mexican embassy. I can figure out the rest once I'm safe.

I grab the burner phone, but suddenly feel afraid. If I get caught, they could find it. It's safest to leave it here. That way, even if I can't escape successfully, I'd still have a lifeline to the outside.

So, I leave with nothing.

I carefully push the window as wide as I can get it to open. The hinges protest with a soft creak. My heart catches in my throat, and I pause, listening for any signs of disturbance from the guards outside.

Nothing but the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze – I must continue.

I grip the windowsill tightly, feeling its cold, rough surface beneath my fingers as I prepare to climb out onto the ledge.

"Here goes nothing," I say under my breath, my voice barely audible.

As I hoist myself up and out of the window, the cool night air wraps around me like an icy embrace, sending shivers down my spine. The compound stretches out below me, its darkened grounds seemingly endless, a maze designed to keep me trapped.

"Uno, dos, tres..." I count silently, before pushing off from the windowsill and launching myself onto the narrow ledge below.

I manage to steady myself and slowly inch forward. first shuffling one foot, then the other. Almost there.

But then, my foot slips up and I cling to the windowsill as it twists off the

ledge, sending a shooting pain up from my ankle to the knee. I can't keep my balance. It's now or never. I need to jump. But as I try to see how to do it, still clinging to the ledge, someone notices.

"Hey! She's trying to escape!" a guard's voice pierces the night out of nowhere, shattering the silence that I had been clinging to. Panic surges through me as they give chase, their shouts echoing off the compound walls.

"*Rapido!*" I mutter under my breath, forcing myself to move faster despite my injured leg. I climb back on the ledge, each step sending jolts of pain shooting up my spine, but I can't afford to slow down – not with freedom so tantalizingly close.

*Signorina!* Stop at once!" another guard bellows.

"Capo will be furious if we don't catch her!" another guard yells, their voices growing louder and more urgent.

They're closing in, and I know I must make my move now or risk being captured again. I begin walking along the ledge, looking for a spot from where I can make an escape.

I spot the opening in the fence that I've been scouting from my bedroom window for days, barely large enough for me to squeeze through. It's risky, but it's my only chance. I jump, roll on the grass, and begin to run.

"Isabella, don't do this!" a final plea falls on deaf ears as I lunge towards the gap, my heart in my throat.

"Please, God, please!" I whisper, praying that I can make it through before the guards reach me. My injured leg protests with every step, but my resolve to escape, to reach freedom remains undampened.

The freedom I crave is within reach – all I need to do is seize it.

"Stop her!" one of them shouts, his voice filled with panic. "She's getting away!"

"Leave me alone!" I yell back, desperation creeping into my voice.

As I sprint through the night, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps, I hear more footsteps from all around the compound.

"You can't outrun me!" I hear one of the guards shout, his voice seething with anger.

My legs feel like they're about to give out as I try to dodge them, but it's no use. In an instant, they surround me, their expressions filled with triumph as they capture me. Their grip on my arms and shoulders is tight and unyielding, ensuring that I have no chance of breaking free.

"Let go of me!" I scream through gritted teeth, my body trembling with a mixture of pain, exhaustion, and frustration.

As much as I want to keep fighting, I can't deny the damning truth – my escape attempt has failed.

"Did you really think you could get away, Isabella?" one of the guards taunts, his eyes narrowed in disdain. "You're not as clever as you think."

I spit at his feet.

"Enough," another guard snaps, tightening his grip on my arm. "Take her back inside. The Capo will deal with her."

As they begin to drag me back toward the compound, I can't help but feel a sense of despair creeping in. My mind races with thoughts of what might happen to me now, and I know I need to figure out another way to escape.

But how?

"Please," I whisper, trying to appeal to any shred of humanity the guards might possess. "I just want to be free. Can't you understand that?"

For a brief moment, I see something flicker in one of the guard's eyes, but it's quickly replaced by steely resolve.

"It's not our place to question the Capo's orders, Isabella," he says coldly.

"Now come on. Let's get you back inside."

As they force me to move, my legs heavy and aching, I can't help but think of all the things I've lost – my father, my freedom, my hope.

But I refuse to let this be the end.

I won't be Luca Conti's prisoner forever.

In this very moment, I decide that someday, I will get my revenge Don Luca Conti too.



"Maybe you'll learn some gratitude in time," he sneers before signaling to the others to continue moving.

As they drag me to a room that's not my own, my heart sinks with each step. Where the hell are they taking me?

# Chapter 16

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Stefano



The shrill ringing of my phone cuts through my sleep, shattering my peace. I jump up and glance at the screen; it's the Capo. At this late hour? My heart tightens in my chest as I answer. "Yes, Capo?"

"Stefano," his gravelly voice fills my ear, "Isabella tried to escape. Meet me in the interrogation room. Now."

Fear and sadness grips me like a vice, threatening to crush my insides. I throw off the covers and quickly get dressed, my hands shaking with each button.

Why would Isabella do something so reckless? Escape? If she wanted to leave so badly, why didn't she just discuss this with me? Or with the Capo?

I rush out of my bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time, barely registering the cold marble under my bare feet. Thoughts of Isabella - her long, wavy hair, those piercing green eyes, and that defiant spirit - consume me.

How did it come to this? She wanted to run away? Without even saying goodbye?

In this moment, I realize why I'm so damn petrified. Had she succeeded, would I ever have seen her again?

This thought reveals more from my heart than intended, and I pause for a brief second, catching a breath.

What I just felt was fear, of losing her. Of never seeing her again.

How did I fall this hard, this fast? What the hell is going on between us? This is too much thinking. The only way to stop is to act, to walk, to carry on like this thought was just an illusion. And so, I cast it aside and walk toward the interrogation room.

The door is open when I reach. As I enter the room, the sight before me sends a chill down my spine. The Capo stands over Isabella, gripping her face in his hands with a venomous expression.

Her hands and legs are chained to a metal chair, but despite her confinement, she remains defiant and unbroken.

"Why are you keeping me prisoner?" Isabella demands, her voice quivering with barely contained rage.

She locks eyes with the Capo, refusing to be intimidated by him.

"Isabella, we're trying to keep you safe," the Capo replies, his tone cold and unyielding.

He tightens his grip on her face, but she doesn't flinch.

"Safe from what?" she spits back at him. "You're the ones who've locked me up!"

My heart clenches as I watch the scene unfold. I hate seeing Isabella this way – vulnerable yet fierce, a beautiful storm brewing within her. A storm that could very well destroy her – us – if it's not tamed.

"What's going on here?" I ask, stepping forward to intervene.

I can't stand idly by while Isabella is treated like this. Though I can't defy the Capo directly, I can try to distract him just enough.

"Stefano, glad you could join us," the Capo says dryly, releasing his hold on Isabella's face.

She turns to me, her green eyes filled with fury and betrayal. She must think I'm just the same like the Capo's other men, and I hate that she might be right.

"Capo, please. The chains?" I ask, addressing the Capo. "She doesn't deserve this."

"Ah, Stefano," the Capo chuckles darkly, "always the soft-hearted one. But don't forget: in our world, there's no room for sentimentality. We do what we

must to survive and to ensure that others survive."

I swallow the lump in my throat, knowing I can't say more.

"Isabella," I say softly, stepping closer to her. "I'm sorry you felt the need to escape in the middle of the night. I'll do whatever I can to help make your stay here more comfortable."

"Save your apologies," she hisses, her eyes blazing with anger. "You're just like the rest of them. Fine. You want to kidnap me? Kidnap me. Just send me to my room, please."

The Capo turns his wrath back to Isabella, gripping on Isabella's face again. His fingers tighten as he speaks, his voice cold and unyielding.

"We haven't kidnapped you, foolish girl. We've offered you protection. You know what happens if you run and get killed? Everyone knows that Luca Conti can't keep his people safe. What happens then? People stop paying me for protection. If people stop paying me, my business runs dry."

Suddenly, I'm beginning to understand the Capo's intentions. It's not really Isabella he wants captive, it's his reputation he doesn't want destroyed. I usually believe in black and white, but this time around, I can't stand for or against any.

They're both right, in their own way.

"And just so you know, Ms. Torres," he continues. "We're installing a grill outside your window, to prevent any future escape attempts. You'd best get used to the idea of staying here."

I clench my fists at my sides, feeling anger flare up within me at the sight of Isabella's mistreatment. She doesn't deserve this, I think, but I know better than to voice my dissent out loud. Instead, I focus on keeping my expression neutral – giving nothing away.

"Is that really necessary?" Isabella asks, her voice dripping with disdain. "Are

you all so paranoid about losing control that you have to go to such lengths?" In a display of power, the Capo flicks Isabella's face to the side with a swift, brutal slap. The sound echoes through the room like a gunshot, and I feel my heart lurch in my chest. How can he treat her like this? I want to rush forward and stop him, but I know what that would mean.

I'd be off her service. I'd be replaced by someone who doesn't care about her in the least. Someone who might even resort to violence. So, for the greater good, I remain silent.

But even as the sting of the Capo's blow reddens her cheek, Isabella remains defiant. She turns back to face him, her green eyes blazing with fury, and spits right in his face.

"You'll never break me," she vows, her voice low and steady.

"Isabella!" I exclaim, shocked by her boldness.

But deep down, I admire her courage.

The Capo wipes the spit from his face, his expression darkening with rage.

"Watch yourself, girl," he warns, his voice dangerous.

As the tension in the room threatens to suffocate us all, I find myself caught between loyalty to the Capo and my growing concern for Isabella. What if she's right? What if there's more to this situation than meets the eye? And what role do I play in all of this?

"Capo," I say, my voice barely audible, "is there anything else you require of me?"

"Keep an eye on her, Stefano," he orders, his gaze never leaving Isabella's face. "Make sure she doesn't try anything foolish again. If need be, never let her out of the room. If she wants out of the room, make sure she behaves. "

As my eyes meet the Capo's, I can't help but question the necessity of his actions.

"Capo, is all of this really necessary?" I ask, my voice strained with concern. Before he can respond, Isabella scoffs sarcastically.

"Oh, it's absolutely necessary," she says, her tone mocking. "After all, you can't let a little girl like me get the best of your fragile ego, can you?"

The Capo looks at her, stunned.

"Admit it," she challenges the Capo. "You enjoy treating women as toys, don't you? Just something to control and manipulate."

"Enough!" the Capo barks, his face reddening with anger. He turns to me, his eyes narrowing. "Your job is to keep her in line, Stefano. You'd better not disappoint. Make sure you take her to her room and that she's only left alone once the grills are up."

Nodding silently, I accept my new responsibility.

My stomach churns at the thought of what might happen to Isabella if I fail in my duty.

But silently, I vow to myself that I will do whatever it takes to protect her – But just then, the weight of the word "whatever" falls on my conscience.

What if it means going against the Capo himself?

Closing my eyes for a moment, I try to gather my thoughts.

What have I gotten myself into? How can I balance loyalty to the mafia and my growing feelings for Isabella?



After the Capo leaves, I walk over to Isabella. She looks me right in the eyes, and I reach out and cusp her cheek with my palm. I don't know why I did it, but I regret it the minute she turns her cheek away.

Silently, I unshackle her. Her wrists are red. I take her hands in mine, inspecting them.

"Oh, stop with the pretense. You don't really care, do you?"

"Isabella, I..."

"Do you care, Stefano? About me?"

This is it. The moment of truth.

She looks at me with such hopeful optimism, her eyes wide, her lips hinting at a smile if I just say the right thing. But what is the right thing? It's the truth, isn't it?

Should I dare?

"Stefano?"

"Yes, Isabella. I do care about you."

"Then help me escape, please," she begs, now taking my hands in her own.

"Please, Stefano."

I know I want to give this woman the world and if it were within my power, I would have.

"This is out of my hands."

Isabella's voice rises to a scream, the sound echoing off the cold walls of the interrogation room.

"You said I was a guest here, not a prisoner!" She tugs at my shoulders with frustration, her green eyes blazing with fury.

"I know it seems like that. But you heard the Capo. If something happens to you, people lose trust in his protection."

"Is that why I was chained up like an animal?" she demands, her voice breaking slightly. I can't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her – this strong, beautiful woman who has been forced into a living hell. "Will that make people trust him?"

I don't know what to say to her, and I think the silence tells her all she needs to know. That I too, am on the brink of questioning everything I believed to be true.

Her eyes narrow. "Some protection."

"Isabella, please," I interject, unable to stay silent any longer. "We want to keep you safe. If that means restricting your freedom for a while, then so be it."

My words feel hollow even as I say them, but I know I must support the Capo. It's my duty.

"Stefano," she pleads, desperately. "You know this isn't right. You know I don't deserve to be treated this way."

"Isabella," I say softly, my heart aching for her. "You're right. You don't. But there's nothing more I can do for you."

"Fuck," she says, putting her head in her hands.

When she looks up at me next, she looks defeated, broken. Her eyes threaten to wreak havoc with tears.

"Just take me to my room, please," she says, hoarsely.

# Chapter 17

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Isabella

I sit on the edge of my bed, staring at the closed door, trapped. The orders echo in my head, forbidding me from leaving, even the bedroom. Until I learn to behave, whatever that means.

My room, a prison cell.

Boredom gnaws at me, yet an overwhelming sense of depression threatens to swallow me whole. I miss my father, Diego, so much. His absence leaves a gaping hole in my heart that nothing can fill.

I want to call Juan, but I don't. Had he truly cared for me, I would not have been in this situation. Until I have the mind-space to make my next move, I share nothing. With no one.

"Miss. Torres?" a guard calls out from behind the door. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, thank you," I reply, forcing a polite smile even though he can't see it. My voice sounds distant, not quite my own. But I put on this facade of compliance, pretending everything is fine when, inside, I'm crumbling into pieces.

God forbid the consequences if I rebel.

The guard leaves, his footsteps receding down the hallway, and I'm left alone once more with my thoughts.

I wish I could let someone in, share my burden, but it's difficult to trust anyone in this world. Even Stefano.

I pull out a photo of my father from my purse, tracing the contours of his face with my fingertips. "Papa," I whisper, choking back tears. "How am I supposed to do this without you?"

But there's no answer, only silence pressing down on me like a heavyweight.

I force myself to focus on breathing, in and out, trying to steady my racing heart. And I continue to wear this mask of politeness, even if it suffocates me, because it's the only way I know how to survive in this new reality.



The darkness of the room envelops me as I lie in bed, motionless. My body feels heavy, sinking into the mattress, and my eyelids refuse to lift. A thick layer of dust coats the furniture, reflecting my own state of neglect. The smell of stale air lingers around me, suffocating me with its oppressive weight.

"Isabella?" Stefano's voice floats through the door, warm and concerned. I hear the soft creak of hinges when he enters the room. "It's getting late and you haven't called for dinner. Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm fine," I mutter, but my voice is barely a whisper, devoid of conviction. Stefano doesn't believe me, and neither do I.

"Let me help you up," he says gently, sliding his arm under my shoulders and lifting me into a sitting position.

His touch is tender, careful not to hurt me, but even his kindness feels like a burden I can't bear.

"Thanks," I force out, my eyes finally meeting his. They're filled with worry, a dark storm cloud brewing just beneath the surface. But I don't have the energy to reassure him, to offer any comfort.

"Have you eaten anything today?" he asks, glancing at the untouched tray of food from lunch on the side table.

I shake my head, my stomach churning at the mere thought of it. "Not hungry."

"Isabella, you need to take care of yourself. You can't keep going like this," Stefano urges, his voice tinged with desperation.

"You're right," I fake a small smile, but my words feel hollow. The will to take action, to fight against anything, for myself, has lost hold.

"Please, Isabella" Stefano implores, his hand squeezing mine. "You must take care of yourself."

"I'll try, I promise," I whisper, but even as the words leave my lips, I wonder if they hold any truth. Can I really find the strength to crawl out of this emotionless state?

"Why don't you eat now?"

"Sure," I say in a flat voice, not wanting to come across as ungrateful.

I reach for the tray, but Stefano stops me.

"Let's get you something fresh. This is stale now," he frowns.

Stefano rings for dinner.

The sound of Stefano's footsteps echoes through the room as he paces back and forth, waiting for the kitchen to send up a new plate. I watch him from my bed, feeling nothing but emptiness inside. Earlier, I would have told him I'm capable of feeding myself.

Now, I don't even fight his presence. Every gesture, every word, seems to require a monumental effort, like I'm a marionette with tangled strings, struggling to move. So, it's better not to move at all.

Dinner arrives and I take the tray, in bed.

Stefano stops pacing and sits down on the edge of the bed, taking my hand in his. "Isabella, please. Talk to me. I'm worried."

I hesitate, unsure if I even have the words to express the chaos that churns inside me. But Stefano's dark eyes are pleading, and I know he genuinely wants to help. So I take a deep breath and begin.

"Life haunts me. My father, gone in an instant. Killed by god knows who. The person I trusted with my life keeps me alive, but prisoner. You tell me I can't lie here all day. Where should I go? I'm not allowed out of the room. There's only so much books and television can do for a person. Right now, I'm the loneliest person in the world."

My words tumble out, raw and unfiltered, the darkness that has consumed me finally given voice.

"Isabella..." Stefano says gently, clearly unsettled by my confession. "Tragedy is a part of life but we can't let it paralyze us. You must remember that there's light at the end of the tunnel."

"Really... is there?" My throat tightens, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. "How long am I to stay here?"

"I... I don't know," Stefano replies, his grip on my hand tightening. "You have so much left to experience, so many people who care about you. Your father's legacy, the tequila empire – they need you."

"Maybe," I whisper, a spark of determination flickering within me, however faint. "But it's hard, Stefano. So damn hard when you don't know what tomorrow will bring."

"I'll talk to the Capo," he says. "See if I can get you permission to leave this room."

I don't reply, simply take a few more bites of my food and cast the tray aside. There's no point pretending like Stefano has any power over Conti. Either he's blind to not see that the Capo truly doesn't care about my fate, or I'm blinded by my predicament, unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"You haven't finished," he frowns.

"I've had enough," I say.

"Why don't you take a shower. Get cozy, read a book and sleep. I can send

over a glass of wine."

"No, thanks."

He frowns. "The maids said you haven't asked for your room to be cleaned in three days."

"The room is fine," I say.

"Isabella, this isn't healthy," he says, frustration lacing his voice. "You can't keep going like this."

"Fine," I say, blankly. "Send the maids tomorrow."

Stefano can probably feel me retreating again, just as I had when he'd entered the room.

"Okay," he says, uncertainly. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Sure. Whenever you're free. It's not like I'm going anywhere," I give him a wry smile and point each hand in opposite directions, one toward the shuttered window and the other toward the guarded door, finally cracking a joke.

Stefano awkwardly runs his hand through his hair and shuffles his feet, unable to meet my eye.

"Okay then," he almost whispers.

He takes a step forward but lurches it back, toward my bed, almost like he's going to reach out and hug me. But the motion is so small and, so unnoticeable, that I might have imagined it.

"Good night, Isabella." He picks up my tray of mostly untouched food and leaves.

# Chapter 18

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Stefano



I wake up with a start, my mind immediately consumed by thoughts of Isabella. She seemed so down yesterday and I can no longer just stand by and follow my orders without even trying to advocate for her situation.

My Capo is famiglia. The only family I have. I've never gone against him. But this time, I no longer know what he's thinking or why he's doing what he's doing.

I quickly call for the guards outside her door and ask if they've taken care of her breakfast and cleaned her room. Their response makes my heart sink. She's not hungry, she says. She's still in bed.

"Get on it," I demand, trying to keep my tone calm. "And make sure she's okay."

As I hang up the phone, I think of the woman I met on the plane. She was headstrong, witty, fun. Why hadn't I noticed her wither away in here, over the past months? How could I have let that happen?

Isabella has been through so much, losing her father and inheriting a tequila empire half of Mexico is vying for. It's a heavy burden for anyone to bear, let alone someone as young as she is.

She came here alone, looking for help. At this point, even I know we're not giving her what she needs.

I know what I have to do. I need to talk to the Capo and request permission to let Isabella out of her room. Maybe if she gets some fresh air and interacts with others, it will lift her spirits. It's worth a shot. It'll show her she's not alone. That at least I stand by her, in whatever capacity I can.

I quickly get dressed and head to the Capo's office. When I arrive, he's already deep in conversation with his advisors, discussing his new drug trade with Cuba. I wait patiently until he finally notices me standing there.

"Stefano," he says gruffly. "What do you want?"

"Capo, I need your permission to let Isabella out of her room. She hasn't had any breakfast or her room cleaned yet again today, and I'm worried about her well-being."

"Isabella?" he scoffs. "Why should I care about her? She's just a spoiled brat who doesn't know an ounce of gratefulness. We're keeping her alive and that should be enough for her."

"Capo, with all due respect, she's still part of this compound, under our protection. And if word gets out that we're confining her, it could damage our reputation."

The Capo considers my words for a moment, then shakes his head. "No. She stays in her room. If something happens to her, that will damage our reputation. End of discussion."

I can feel frustration boiling inside of me. I need to help Isabella, and the Capo is standing in my way. But I won't give up that easily.

"Of course, Capo," I reply, my resolve steady. "But consider how it would look to others: the daughter of Diego Torres locked up like a prisoner. It could hurt the image of our protection services."

He leans back in his chair, fingers tapping rhythmically on the armrest. "And what do you propose we do instead?"

"Let her out for a while," I suggest. "Maybe engage her in something to improve her mood. It could show our benevolence and help her adjust to life here."

The Capo raises an eyebrow, skepticism written across his face. "You seem

awfully concerned about her well-being, Stefano. Is there something I should know?"

"Absolutely not, Capo," I answer quickly, pushing away the flicker of emotion that threatens to rise within me. "It's just... it's harder for me to know her thoughts and plans if she doesn't trust me. And as I mentioned, what she'll say about the protection we offered, down the line, could have consequences."

Capo Conti looks away, thinking deeply. He chuckles and mutters a word. I can't quite hear it, but it sounds like "future."

I don't know why, but I feel a chill go down my spine.

"Fine," he looks at me finally. "But she better behave herself. And if she causes any trouble, she's back to her room and it'll be on your head."

"Thank you, Capo," I say, already making my way out of the room.

I don't want to push my luck any further. Yet something about this exchange has unnerved me.



"Isabella," I call out, knocking softly on her door. "It's Stefano. May I come in?"

"Uh, sure," she responds hesitantly, her voice barely audible.

As I enter, my heart wrenches at the sight of her: red-rimmed eyes, disheveled hair, and a defeated posture. It's clear that she's in depression, and I've had a small part to play in it by not fighting for her earlier.

"Listen, Isabella, I've spoken with the Capo." I hesitate for a moment before adding, "He's agreed to let you out of your room, but only if you promise to behave and not cause any trouble."

Her eyes widen with surprise, and I can see the flicker of hope light up within them. "Really?" she asks quietly.

"Yes, really," I confirm, smiling at her. "In fact, I've organized something fun for us to do. A painting session in the garden. I thought it might help lift your spirits."

"Painting?" Isabella tilts her head, curiosity piqued. "I haven't painted in years. I used to love it, though."

"Then it's perfect," I say encouragingly. "Get dressed, and we'll head down together."

But she doesn't move.

"Isabella?" I ask.

She looks at me, and gives me a sad smile. "I appreciate it, Stefano. But what's the point? I'm still not free. I have no choice."

"You do have a choice," I walk closer to her and get down on my knees, taking her hand in mine. She looks down at me, and I up, into her eyes.

"I know it's not perfect, but it's something. You can choose to sit here, and continue withering away. Or you can choose to go out and enjoy your day. Reset. Come back refreshed. Think better, smarter. Isabella, if you carry on the way you are, you won't even have a future to think of. You'd be nothing but a puppet. But by seizing every chance to make a choice, you take control. What do you choose today, Isa?"

She's silent, her gaze fixed intently on my face. At last, she speaks, hoarsely.

"That's the wisest thing anyone has ever said to me. I'll go get showered."

She disappears into the bathroom, emerging a few minutes later in jeans and a white polo looking refreshed and more vibrant than I've seen her in days. We walk side by side, the tension between us slowly dissipating as we approach the garden.

"Thank you, Stefano," she says softly, her green eyes meeting mine. "For buying me a little freedom."

"It's nothing, Isabella. Let's just focus on having fun today, alright?"

"Alright," she agrees, her lips curving into a small smile.



Isabella dips her brush in crimson paint and begins placing broad strokes across the canvas. I set up my own easel and supplies, choosing a vivid azure blue for the sky.

We paint in companionable silence for a time. Then Isabella says, "The gardens here are so beautiful. I wish I could explore them more. Alone."

"Perhaps the Capo will allow more privileges if you continue to behave well," I say.

She makes a face. "I doubt that. He hates me too much."

"He doesn't hate you," I say, though I know she's right.

Now that I think of it, I've never seen him treat someone under our protection with so much scrutiny. I, too, am beginning to believe that The Capo despises Isabella. As for why, I simply don't know. But I don't want to add fuel to the fire so I stretch the truth. "He's just being cautious."

"He's being cruel," she says bitterly. She stabs at her canvas with the brush.

I go to her and grasp her wrist gently. "Careful. You'll ruin your painting."

A little bit of paint flicks onto her white shirt.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide. "Oh no, you didn't!" she grins. "Not my favorite shirt. That too, the white one!"

"I am so, so sorry," I gasp, trying to take a napkin and wipe it clean. In the process, I smudge it even further.

Isabella dabs a smear of blue paint on my nose, her eyes dancing with mischief.

"Now we match," she says with a grin.

I flick a blob of red at her cheek in retaliation, leaving a bright stain on her tanned skin. She shrieks with laughter, the sound light and carefree in a way I haven't heard since she first arrived here.

My heart swells at the sight of her joy. I did this. I made her forget, at least for now, the dark cloud that's been hovering over her.

As Isabella flings another handful of paint at me, I catch her wrist, pulling her close. Our chests are smeared with color, our faces only inches apart.

For a moment, we simply stare at each other, breathing hard. Then Isabella tilts her head up, brushing her paint-stained lips against mine.

The kiss is soft, hesitant, but it ignites a flame inside me. I deepen the kiss, my free hand tangling in her hair. She sighs into my mouth, her body melting against mine.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless. Isabella searches my gaze, as if looking for answers. I only smile and kiss the tip of her nose, leaving a faint red mark.

"Now we really match," I murmur.

We hear a leaf crunch behind us, and pull away.

Shit. What did we just do. Did someone see us?

She looks just like I feel. Terrified, regretful. "Maybe it was just an animal, or a bird," I say.

"Stefano," she whispers.

"Isabella," I repeat.

"We shouldn't have."

"No, we shouldn't have."

She nods, as though hurt by me agreeing. She picks up her paintbrush and begins to work on her canvas again. I whisper, ever so lightly, that I don't know if my voice reached her ears.

"But I've wanted to since a long time."

The way the corners of her lips turn up, so gently, tells me that she heard and liked what I said.



Isabella stands and brushes the grass from her sundress. "I should head inside. The Capo will send his guards to check on us if I'm not in my room soon."

I nod reluctantly, though reluctance weighs heavy in my chest. "You're right."

"Would you like to do this again?" I ask, tentatively.

"Very much so," she says, her eyes sparkling in the fading sunlight. God, I want to kiss her so bad. Instead, I affirm. "Then we'll do it again."

We walk back to the main house together. At her door, Isabella pauses and turns to face me.

"Thank you again for today, Stefano. You made me happier than I've been in a long time."

"You're welcome, Isabella. I'm just glad I could put a smile on your face."

She gently reaches out and squeezes my hand.

I look around and she whispers, "No one saw. I made sure of it,"

With a teasing smile, she walks into her room, closing the door behind her.



I make my way to the Capo's office, knocking once before entering. He looks up from the papers scattered on his desk, dark eyes narrowing at the sight of me.

"The girl behaved herself today. No trouble." I keep my tone neutral, though my heart is pounding.

He grunts in acknowledgment. "That's good to hear."

I breathe an inward sigh of relief, but it's short-lived. The Capo stands, clasping his hands behind his back as he strides to the window.

"There's going to be an attack on the Carlisis tonight. Demands for justice after what that bastard, Felix, did by killing my last underboss."

My stomach drops. "An attack? Why wasn't I told?"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I? I'm doing this for you. You're the underboss now. If the crime goes unpunished, then you might be next." The Capo turns, fixing me with a hard stare. "You're to stay here and watch the girl. Keep her under control."

"But Capo, I should be there to help—"

"You questioning my orders, Stefano?" His voice is deceptively soft, but the threat is clear.

I swallow hard, clenching my jaw. "No, Capo. Of course not."

I keep my expression straight despite the unease twisting my gut. This attack on the Carlisis could ignite a war within the families, and I've seen enough inter-mafia battles to know just how dangerous they can get.

Most of all, it puts Isabella at risk.

"I'll watch over her," I assure the Capo.

I will protect her with my life, if need be.

"Good.," he said. He scrutinizes me a moment longer before dismissing me with a wave of his hand.



I leave the office, my footsteps echoing down the empty hallway.

Isabella's door looms at the end, a hulking shadow in the dim light. What if the Carlisis retaliate? What if they come for her, to use as leverage against us?

No. I won't let that happen.

I pause outside her door, listening. Silence within. She must be resting. I should leave her in peace for now. There will be time to talk of darker things in the morning.

For now, let her dreams remain untroubled.

# Chapter 19

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Isabella

I stride into Isabella's room, my heart pounding. "The Capo's left town on business. We have the run of the place."

Isabella's green eyes light up. "A night out in the city then? Should we hit up a club? I haven't had a night out in ages."

I frown, shaking my head. "You know we can't leave the compound."

She laughs, the sound like music to my ears. "Loosen up! I was only joking. It's just been so long since I've been out. Sometimes, I miss it. The carefree life I used to live when Papa was alive."

Guilt washes over me. She's been cooped up here for months. I soften my tone. "Be ready at seven. I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Her eyes gleam with curiosity. "What is it?"

I shrug, a small smile playing on my lips. "You'll see."

With that, I turn and leave, already making plans in my head.

At seven, I return to find Isabella waiting in a little black dress that hugs her curves. My mouth goes dry at the sight of her. I've dreamed of peeling that dress off her body, of running my hands over her soft skin.

I clear my throat, shaking off those dangerous thoughts. "Are you ready?"

She nods, eyes bright with anticipation. I pull a silk blindfold from my pocket and step behind her. "I'm going to blindfold you. No peeking."

My fingers brush against her neck as I secure the blindfold, sending a jolt of desire through me. I wonder what it would be like, to blindfold her in bed.

I want nothing more than to run my hands through her thick hair and kiss the soft skin under her ear. To tantalize her in unexpected places, surprise her with every move. Instead, I take her hand and lead her outside.

The tent I've set up is in the left corner of the compound, hidden away from prying eyes by thick foliage. It is lit with strands of fairy lights and filled with blankets, pillows and candles. A picnic basket holds fresh bread, cheese, fruits, olives and a bottle of champagne—Isabella's favorites from what I've learned of her eating habits while living here.

I remove the blindfold, waiting for her reaction. She gasps, pressing a hand to her mouth. "You did all this for me?"

"For you, I'd do anything." The words slip out before I can stop them. Heat rises in my cheeks but I don't look away from her gaze. "I mean, while you're here under my safety."

She steps closer, her scent of jasmine and citrus enveloping me. I can feel the warmth of her body see the flecks of gold in her eyes. "Stefano, I—"

I don't give her a chance to finish. I can't, when I'm so close to losing all perspective where this woman is concerned. But how can I resist?

"Isabella—" I whisper, inching closer.

I feel the urge to take her face in my hands, and kiss the living daylight out of her. But we stand there, skin to skin, almost, waiting for the other to make the first move.

For we already shared a kiss, while painting. That could be passed off as a mistake, in the heat of the moment, but once we open this Pandora's box, there'll be no forgetting the delicious sins we'd commit together.

She parts her lips, gently and I instinctively reach over and touch the corner of her lips, ever-so-slightly. She gives my finger a gentle kiss. I groan.

She's never looked more beautiful.

"We shouldn't—" she starts, but I place my finger on her lips.

"Don't tell me you don't want this too." I run my thumb along her jaw, feeling the rapid pulse in her neck. "I see the way you look at me, Isabella. I know

you feel it too.”

She shakes her head, eyes shining with tears. “It's not that simple.”

I sigh, resting my forehead against hers. Of course it isn't simple. Nothing in my life has ever been simple.

“Talk to me,” I say, stepping away. I leave her standing while I go and pour us champagne. I hand her a glass. “You're right. Tell me about Jalisco. Your childhood.”

A small, sad smile tugs at her lips. I give her my arm. She takes it. We go and sit on the rug.

“You really want to hear about that?” At my nod, she continues. “I grew up on a tequila plantation. My father started the business, and the land was so beautiful, rolling hills of blue agave as far as the eye could see. We lived in an old hacienda with wide verandas and clay tile roofs. Live there, I guess. I mean, I do. Papa's gone...”

Her voice takes on a wistful tone as she describes growing up surrounded by family, riding horses through the fields, learning to make tequila with her father. I can see why she misses it so much, can understand why being trapped here is a kind of personal hell for her.

“After my mama died, it was just my papa and I. We were happy, in our own way.” She pauses, blinking back tears. “And then the gunshot. Coming to New York. This imprisonment.”

Guilt twists in my gut. I was only following orders, but that doesn't make it right. I pull her closer, stroking her hair. “I'm so sorry, Isabella.”

She shakes her head. “It's not your fault. You didn't know. It's your job, right?”

“That doesn't make it any easier.” I tilt her chin up, forcing her to meet my gaze. “But I promise you, I will get you out of here, eventually. When it's

safe. Back to your home, your life. Whatever it takes.”

“You would do that for me?” Disbelief and hope war in her eyes.

“I would.”

Isabella nods, her expression softening. “I shared so much of myself with you tonight. But I still don't know much about you, or how you came to be here.”

I hesitate, the old instinct to remain closed off warring with my desire for intimacy with her. But she has earned my trust, as much as anyone ever could in this life.

“There's not much to tell,” I say with a shrug. “I never knew my parents. I grew up on the streets, an orphan and alone. I was running with a crew that cared nothing for me, peddling drugs, committing petty crime around the city to survive. Until the Capo found me, took me in. Gave me a place to belong. That man taught me loyalty. When I got in trouble, he saved me. Always has and I know, always will. He is the closest thing I have to a father.”

“He raised you?”

I nod. “He saw potential in me, gave me work, gave me purpose. Made me into the man I am today.” I shrug again, uncomfortable with the reminder of all I owe him...and all the debts I will never be able to repay. “I am loyal to him because I have to be. He is the only family I have ever known.”

“But that doesn't mean you have to blindly follow his orders,” Isabella protests. “You have a choice. You can be your own man.”

“It's not that simple.” I rake a hand through my hair, struggling to put words to the tangled web of duty and gratitude and resentment that binds me to the Capo. “I owe him everything. My life, my skills, my position. Walking away...it would be a betrayal. One I'm not sure I can live with. One the mafia wouldn't let me live with, even if I tried.”

“You don't owe him your soul,” Isabella says fiercely. She frames my face in

her hands, forcing me to meet the blaze of passion in her eyes. The champagne and our proximity is a dizzying combination. I'm losing my ability to think before I speak. "You are more than what he made you, Stefano. You have a good heart. You deserve to be free, to live your own life, to find your own purpose."

Her faith in me is humbling, blinding. I want nothing more than to believe I can be the man she sees. But old habits die hard, and the Capo's hold on me is not so easily broken.

"One day," I whisper, resting my forehead against hers for just a second before pulling back. "One day, I will be the man you deserve. The man I want to be. But not yet."

She sighs, but nods. "I will wait for you. However long it takes."

"You may be waiting a long time," I warn her.

But the warmth blooming in my chest tells me she will be worth every sacrifice. Isabella has given me something to live for, a reason to fight for my freedom. And for the first time, because of her, I allow myself to question whether my life in the mafia is all that rosy as I make it seem. I down my drink.

"How long?"

"I don't know," I shrug. "Does this kill my chances with you? Perhaps till I become worthy of you, we can be friends."

Isabella pulls away, eyeing me curiously. "So, just friends?" she teases, echoing my comment.

I grasp her hand, bringing it to my lips. "Never just friends."

Her smile could light up the night sky. "Good. I wasn't sure I could handle being 'just friends' with you either."

We fall into an easy silence, content to simply enjoy each other's company



under the stars. Isabella leans against me, her head resting on my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel at peace. Whole. As if I've finally found the missing piece of myself.

Isabella hums, tracing a finger down my arm. "Thank you for this night, Stefano. I haven't been this happy in a long time."

"You're welcome," I say, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "But I should be the one thanking you. You've given me hope, Isabella. A reason to believe there is more to life than serving the Capo. You make me want to be a better man."

She lifts her head, eyes shining with emotion. "You already are a good man, Stefano. You just needed someone to remind you."

I pull her into my arms, holding her as close as I dare. Isabella has seen into my soul and found the light I thought had been extinguished long ago. In her eyes, I am more than the Capo's soldier. I am a man capable of love, of change, of redemption.

Tonight, for the first time in my life, I feel free.

I gaze into Isabella's eyes, seeing my own longing reflected in their emerald depths. Without thinking, I lean forward and capture her lips with mine.

The kiss starts soft and sweet but quickly ignites into something more. Isabella wraps her arms around my neck, her fingers tangling in my hair as she pulls me closer. I grip her waist, holding her tight against me, our bodies pressing together.

All the pent-up desire and tension of the past weeks come pouring out. The kiss deepens, becoming urgent and passionate. I explore the softness of her lips, the warmth of her mouth. She tastes of champagne and strawberries, intoxicating and irresistible.

Every nerve in my body is on fire. I want nothing more than to lose myself in Isabella's embrace, to give in to the passion burning between us. But I force myself to still my hands, to take a steadying breath.

Isabella deserves better than a hurried tumble under the stars. She deserves rose petals and silk sheets, soft music and candlelight. She deserves a man who can keep her safe. Someone who isn't me.

I press my forehead to Isabella's, my hands resting lightly on her waist.

"We should stop," I say, though the words pain me. "Not like this."

"Fuck, no," she says, and crushes my lips with hers.

# Chapter 20

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Stefano

Isabella pulls away, her lips swollen from our passionate kissing. "Do you still have the blindfold?" she whispers, a coy smile playing on her lips.

My heart quickens at the thought. "*Sì amore mio.*" Yes, my love.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the black satin blindfold.

Isabella turns around, her hair cascading over one shoulder. I tie the blindfold over her eyes, the soft fabric contrasting with her smooth, tanned skin. She shivers when my fingers brush against her neck.

With her vision obscured, her other senses will heighten. The sounds and sights of the night will fade into the background, replaced by the pounding of our hearts, the rustle of fabric, the smack of flesh on flesh. Her sense of touch will ignite as I caress every inch of her body.

I place my hands on Isabella's hips and pull her against me, nuzzling her neck. She gasps, her chest rising and falling rapidly. I graze my teeth over her pulse point and she moans, the sound sending blood rushing to my groin.

"*Dimmi quello che vuoi?*" I whisper in her ear. Tell me what you want.

A smile plays on her lips. "Everything."

The single word ignites the fire in my blood. I crush my mouth against hers, desire and possessiveness warring within me. Isabella is mine at last, and I will give her everything she craves.

We part, our chests heaving.

The night air is cool against my skin as I slowly peel Isabella's dress away, revealing her body inch by inch. Goosebumps prickle her flesh and I smooth my hands over her arms, relishing the feel of her soft skin.

She shivers under my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips. I trail my fingers down her sides, down her nipples, over the curve of her hips, and squeeze her ass. A gasp. The sound goes straight to my cock, already straining against my pants.

"So beautiful," I murmur, placing a kiss on her collarbone. My lips graze a path down between her breasts as I drop to my knees.

I hook my fingers under the waistband of her panties and drag them down her legs. The scent of her arousal hits me and I groan, burying my face between her thighs.

Isabella cries out, her hands tangling in my hair. I tease her with my tongue, flicking and lapping at her clit until her legs start to tremble. Only then do I plunge my tongue inside her, tasting her essence.

She's close already, her inner walls clenching around my tongue. I slide two fingers into her wet pussy and curl them upwards, stroking the sensitive spot that I realize to be the holy grail for a successful outcome.

Her orgasm rolls through her in waves, her moans and gasps of pleasure like music to my ears. I lap up her release, the taste of her intoxicating.

When her shudders subside, I rise to my feet. Isabella sags against me, her breathing ragged. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close as I murmur words of affection in her ear.

The night is still young, and I fully intend to bring her to the heights of ecstasy again and again before dawn breaks. But for now, I simply hold her, our hearts beating as one under the starry skies.

Isabella tilts her head up, her lips seeking mine. I capture them in a deep, searing kiss that reignites the fire in my blood.

Her hands slide down my chest and stomach, fingers curling around my cock. I hiss into her mouth as she strokes me, her touch feather-light yet

intoxicating.

"I want you inside me," she whispers against my lips. "Now."

I lift her easily, her legs wrapping around my waist. Our kiss doesn't break as I lower her onto my cock, the head of it nudging at her entrance.

Isabella throws her head back with a cry as I slide into her tight, wet pussy. Her inner walls grip me like a velvet vise, squeezing my length.

"Fuck, you feel so good," I groan, stilling inside her for a moment to regain control. If I move now, this will be over far too quickly.

She shifts her hips, taking me deeper. "Stefano, please."

Her nails bite into my shoulders, urgency in her tone. Her tits are right against my chest, squeezing tight. I look down and the vision is one of pure ecstasy.

Just then, we hear a twig snap. We stop what we're doing, her legs still around mine, my hands still on her ass, my cock in her pussy.

I look around quickly, eyes darting. We can't risk any of the Capo's men finding us in this position. However her slick folds are against my throbbing dick and right now, I just want to throw caution to the wind.

Isabella rips off the blindfold. She looks around too, then her green eyes throw daggers at my heart, as she commands me with just a look again.

I start to move, slow, deep thrusts that make her whimper. Her legs tighten around me, heels digging into my ass as she tries to speed up my rhythm.

But I won't be rushed. I want to draw this out, to feel every inch of her clasping around me. To watch her come apart within me again and again.

My strokes remain unhurried but powerful, pushing her higher with each pass. Isabella's head rolls back, a litany of pleas and curses spilling from her lips. Her tits curve towards the sky when she does that, and I encourage it even more.

I nip at her throat, soothing the sting with my tongue. "Patience, *mia cara*. We have all night."

She whimpers in protest but I feel her body relax in my arms, surrendering to the slow, relentless rhythm of my hips. The stars shine above us, bathing our entwined bodies in their silvery glow.

Isabella's moans grow louder, mingling with the wet sounds of our bodies coming together. I bury my face in the curve of her neck, breathing in her scent, intoxicated by the feel of her.

She wraps her legs tighter around my waist, her heels digging into my backside as she tries to increase the pace. I grip her hips, holding her still as I continue the slow, deep grind of my hips.

"Stefano...please..." Her nails bite into my shoulders, desperation in her tone. I lift my head to capture her mouth in a searing kiss, thrusting my tongue between her lips even as I move to my knees and pin her hips to the ground. We move together in a primal rhythm as old as time, our harsh breathing and the slap of skin the only sounds in the night.

Isabella tears her mouth from mine with a sharp gasp. "Oh god...don't stop..." Her head falls back as her inner walls begin to flutter around me.

I quicken my pace, driving into her slick pussy as her cries grow more urgent. I bend my neck and take her nipple in my mouth. I flick it, my other hand tugging at her hair. Her whole body tenses, back arching off the ground as she shatters around me.

I brush the hair from Isabella's face, gazing into eyes filled with love and sated desire.

My need for Isabella grows desperate, an all-consuming fire in my veins. Our bodies move together in a frenzied rhythm, slick with sweat and passion.

Isabella cries out as I plunge into her again and again, her nails raking down



my back. I bury my face in the curve of her neck, inhaling her scent.  
"Isabella...my love..."

The coil of tension in my groin threatens to snap. I slide a hand between us to circle Isabella's swollen bud, rubbing in time with my thrusts.

She shatters around me with a broken sob, inner walls clenching tight.

I pull out, for I can no longer refrain myself, and cum on her belly.

She gives me a smile as I wipe her clean with a cloth. Once done, Isabella clings to me, her body trembling from all our action. I brush the damp hair from her face, gazing into eyes filled with wonder.

She draws a shaky breath, fingertips tracing the lines of my face.  
"Stefano...that was..."

A flush stains her cheeks, equal parts embarrassment and arousal.

I capture her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "I know. For me as well."

No other woman has ever made me feel the way Isabella does.

A slow, sated smile curves her swollen lips. She stretches beneath me with a contented sigh, eyes slipping closed. I roll onto my side and gather her in my arms. Isabella nestles against me, her head pillowed on my chest.

The night is warm and the stars shine above, pale pinpricks of light in the velvet sky. But in this moment, my world narrows to the woman in my embrace. Isabella's breathing evens out, her body relaxing into sleep. I brush a kiss over her temple, breathing in her scent.

My eyes drift closed, a smile lingering on my lips.

Tonight has been a turning point in our relationship. As to where this thing we just started will go, I don't know yet.

And as I drift off with Isabella curled against me, I know this is where I belong. Here in this moment, and by her side always. I look over to see her, sleeping peacefully in my arms, and I don't have the heart to wake her.

We can't risk getting caught. Soon, I must return her to her bedroom. But what harm will another hour do? I have just one task, stay awake.

I cover us with a blanket, and let her rest. She feels so cozy, and the champagne is still running through my veins and the last thing I remember before the world goes dark, is the sound of her breathing in my ear, the feel of her cheeks on my chest, and the stars shining right above.

# Chapter 21

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Isabella

I wake with a start in the pale dawn light, my heart pounding. What have I done?

Stefano's arm is draped over my waist, his breath warm against my neck. The guilt rises in my throat like bile. Papa would turn in his grave if he knew I'd betrayed everything he stood for. Getting involved with criminals. The mafia. But if Papa were alive, I'd tell him that Stefano was different. Kinder. He's taught me that good people can sometimes do bad things. And truth be told, when Stefano looks at me with those dark, fathomless eyes, I'm helpless to resist him.

Carefully, I slide out from under his embrace and stand, shivering in the chill. My dress is crumpled on the floor where he tore it off in our haste. I gather the silky fabric in my hands, remembering the feel of his fingers grazing my skin.

No. I can't think of him like that. I have to leave, now, before I do something I regret even more.

Silently, I slip into my dress, pausing to glance back at Stefano's sleeping form. His chest rises and falls steadily, lips slightly parted. He looks so peaceful, the hard lines of his face softened in repose.

I want nothing more than to crawl back into his arms. But I can't. I must sneak back into my room before someone notices that I'm missing.

Stefano may have won my heart, but being caught with him could risk me my life. Or worse, could have him be taken off my service.

With trembling fingers, I twist my hair into a knot and steel myself. It's time to go.

As I creep towards the door of the main house, I cast one last longing look at the man who was my undoing. Our forbidden love can never be, but I will always remember this night and the way he made me feel alive.

Then I slip out of the garden like a shadow.

When I enter the main house, the hallway is dim and empty, shadows flickering in the pale light filtering through the windows. It's still quite early in the morning, the sun just about rising. My footsteps echo softly on the marble floor as I hurry towards the banister, clutching my shoes and purse to my chest.

I'm almost at the first step when a menacing figure steps out of the darkness from the door on my right, blocking the path. My heart leaps in terror as I stare up at Luca Conti's cruel, hawk-like features.

He's supposed to be away on business - what is he doing here?

A predatory smile spreads across his face, sending a chill down my spine.

"Leaving so soon, Isabella? But the party's just getting started."

His tone is mocking, but his eyes glitter with barely concealed lust. I shrink back instinctively, panic clawing at my insides.

The Capo has always looked at me like a prize to be claimed, a conquest to boast of. And now I'm alone, vulnerable, with no one to protect me.

Balling my hands into fists, I stare the Capo straight in the eye and summon every ounce of courage I possess.

"Get out of my way," I say coldly. "Now."

The Capo's smile widens, revealing a flash of teeth. "Make me."

He reaches for me, intent clear on his face. He places his arms around my sides and shoves me against the wall.

"Now, now," he says, his eyes taking over my messy hair, the make-up still on from last night. "Where were you?"

"None of your business," I snap. My heart hammers wildly, but I keep my expression blank. Show no fear.

The Capo's eyes flash with anger at my defiance. He grabs my arm in a bruising grip and pulls me close, his rancid breath hot on my face. "You forget yourself. I own you, little girl, and I will know every detail of your pathetic life."

I try to wrench my arm free, but his hold is like steel. Panic rises in my chest, choking me, but I push it down. Stay calm. Wait for an opening.

"There's nothing to tell," I say evenly. "Let go of me."

"Not until you learn your place." His fingers dig into my arm, and I grit my teeth against the pain. "Now tell me, where have you been? And where is Stefano?"

I glare at him, refusing to give in. He wants to break me, to crush my spirit, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"I won't answer to you," I say, my voice sharp as a knife. "You can ask him when you find him."

The Capo's face darkens with rage. His grip on my arm tightens until I gasp involuntarily. Then he smiles, slow and sinister, and leans in close.

"You will," he whispers.

The Capo releases my arm, but before I can react, he presses me back against the wall. I struggle in vain as he cages me in, one hand on either side of my head.

"Since you like playing games so much," he purrs, "why don't we have some real fun? Won't you like to be mine for a while?"

His eyes rake over me in a way that makes my skin crawl. Revulsion rises in my throat like bile as his hand slides down to cup my breast.

"Get off me!" I shout, shoving at his chest. He doesn't even budge. I try to

knee him in the groin, but he presses closer, pinning me in place.

"Now now, that's not very nice," he chides softly. "Just relax and enjoy yourself."

"Is this how you treat your guests?" I ask, through gritted teeth. "What will your mafioso say when they learn this is how you've treated an innocent woman?"

"You don't look too innocent to me," he says, giving me a lecherous smile as his eyes go toward my breasts, exposed from the haphazard way I wore my dress. "And who will ever find out?"

"I'll tell Stefano," I mutter. "If you do anything, I'll tell him, I swear."

"We'll see about that," he says, his finger now on my cleavage, going lower.

His touch burns like acid, suffocating and degrading. I beat at his arms, claw at his face, but nothing deters him. He is going to take what he wants, and there's nothing I can do to stop him.

Panic overwhelms me as his hands roam freely over my body. I can't breathe, can't think - all I feel is terror and violation. The walls seem to close in around me, darkness clouding my vision. I'm drowning, suffocating, dying.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear a familiar shout. A voice, calling out for me.

Stefano.

Stefano's cry jars me back to myself. The Capo is distracted for just a second, but it's enough.

With a yell, I bring my knee up into his groin with all the force I can muster. He grunts in pain and stumbles back, grip loosening. I duck under his arm and sprint down the hall as fast as I can.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I race to my room. I slam the door behind me and throw the lock, gasping for breath. Leaning against the door, I



strain to hear any sounds of pursuit over the rush of blood in my ears.

For several long, agonizing moments, all is silent. Then a roar of rage echoes through the hall, rattling the door against my back. I flinch away instinctively. A loud bang shakes the door in its frame, the Capo throwing his weight against the sturdy wood.

Panic and adrenaline surge through my veins. I look around frantically for something, anything to defend myself. My gaze lands on the heavy oak chair by my vanity. I grab it and wedge it under the door handle for good measure. Another bang. The chair holds, but I know it won't last long against his fury. Fear coils in my gut like a venomous snake. I'm trapped. There's no escape, and when he gets in...

I shake my head fiercely, chasing the thought away. I can't think like that. I have to stay calm and alert, be ready to fight my way out of this.

The Capo lets out a string of angry curses, pounding on the door. "You can't hide in there forever! When I get my hands on you, you'll wish you were dead!"

I steel myself, taking a defensive stance and facing the door. You picked the wrong woman to mess with today. Finally, the banging stops. An eerie silence follows. I strain my ears but can't hear anything from the other side. Has he given up and left?

I don't dare hope for it. This is just another of his games, trying to lull me into a false sense of security. He wants me to lower my guard so he can strike when I least expect it.

Well, he'll be waiting a long time. I'm not falling for his tricks.

Exhaustion starts to creep up on me, but I push it away. I have to stay alert. As much as I want nothing more than to collapse into bed and forget this nightmare, I can't rest now. Not while that monster is on the loose.

My thoughts drift to Stefano in spite of myself. Is he looking for me, wondering where I've gone? Does he have any idea of the danger I'm in? I ache to see him, to feel his arms around me and hear his soothing voice. I could use his strength and courage right now.

But I can't depend on anyone else. I'm on my own here, and it's up to me to survive this.

I've already proven that I can hold my own against the Capo once. I just have to do it again...and again, for as long as it takes. He'll have to kill me before I give in to him.

I straighten, determination burning away the fatigue. Let him come. I'm ready. All I need to do is practice all the self-defence I've learned over the years.

In this very moment, I thank my father for forcing me to take those karate lessons as a kid.

# Chapter 22

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Stefano

**M**y eyes snap open at the first light of dawn. The remnants of our picnic from last night litter the garden, but Isabella is nowhere to be seen.

Fear grips my heart as I scramble to my feet, memories of making love to her under the stars flooding my mind.

Where has she gone? If anyone finds out and reports to the Capo that she's missing...

I race into the mansion, my boots pounding against the marble floors. Icy fingers of dread clamp across my hands at the familiar sound of that quick, brisk walk I've recognized since childhood.

No. Not now. Please, not now.

I turn slowly to find the Capo standing behind me, gazing at me with eyes like twin coals. My heart leaps into my throat.

How long has he been there? What did he see? I struggle to keep my face neutral as panic and dread war within me.

One wrong move could mean death—for me or for Isabella.

The Capo's lips curve into a smile that never reaches his eyes. "Aren't you going to greet your Capo properly?"

My throat is too dry to speak. All I can do is stand frozen in place, my heart pounding. He extends his hand. I must pretend everything is okay. I step forward, bow, and kiss the back of his hand.

"Capo Conti."

The Capo's lips curve upwards, but his eyes remain cold and calculating, which is his usual way of being, so I can't tell what he's thinking. "Stefano,

my boy. How have you been?"

I swallow and force a smile, hoping it reaches my eyes. "Very well, Capo. And yourself?"

"Can't complain. And our guest? Has she been behaving herself?"

"Perfectly," I say, the lie bitter on my tongue. "She has been a model of propriety."

The Capo chuckles, a low sinister sound that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "Is that so? Then why do I get the sense there's something you're not telling me?"

My heart hammers against my ribs. He knows. Dear God, he knows everything. I struggle to find my voice as panic rises in my chest like a tide.

"I assure you, Capo, everything is as it should be."

The words sound hollow even to my own ears. I can only pray he accepts them, but I know better than to expect mercy from this man.

The Capo's eyes gleam with malice, and he takes a step closer. "Wonderful," he says, softly. "Haven't lost her, have you?"

I shake my head, petrified. My throat goes dry. I don't even dare to blink, or breathe.

But to my surprise, the Capo throws back his head and laughs. "You should see your face! I was only joking, my boy. You looked so stricken I couldn't resist."

He slaps me on the back, and I stagger under the force of the blow. "Go, enjoy the rest of your day. I just wanted to have a bit of fun at your expense."

"Th-thank you, Capo," I stammer.

"You're excused," the Capo says grandly, waving me away like a king dismissing his subject.

I don't need to be told twice.

"Thank you, Capo," I say again, and begin to climb up the banister before he changes his mind.

"Stefano," he says. I turn, and look down at him staring at me intently. "You never asked how Chicago was."

Fuck. I messed up. I'm about to open my mouth to apologize, to ask how the mission went, but he interrupts me before I can even get a sound out.

"We failed. But we'll try again. Felix Carlisi will be killed for having taken the life of one of ours. Our family always comes first."

"Yes, Capo," I mutter.

I stand there, realizing he just threatened me. If I can't stand with him, if I betray him, I might have the same fate as an enemy.

He walks away, and I release the air I've been holding in my lungs. I try to shake off my anxiety, and run up to Isabella's room, two steps at a time.



My heart is still pounding as I stride down the hall to Isabella's room.

Relief that we escaped the Capo's wrath wars with frustration at how careless we were. What were we thinking, spending the whole night together in the open? Anyone could have seen us. Anyone could have told the Capo.

I fling open the door to Isabella's room, startling her.

She jumps up from where she was sitting by the window, eyes wide.

"Stefano! What - "

"How could you just leave like that?" I demand, slamming the door behind me. My hands ball into fists. "You vanished! Do you have any idea what could have happened?"

Isabella's eyes flash. "Last night was a mistake. I needed to get back to my room."

"You could have woken me up!" I shout.

"I will not be ordered around like a child!" Isabella shouts back. "You don't own me, Stefano Nitti!"

My anger wars with the urge to crush her in my arms. How can she not see I only want to keep her safe? But she is as stubborn as she is beautiful, and will never be controlled.

I drag a hand through my hair and turn away, trying to calm myself. Shouting at her will do no good. But she must understand - our lives depend on caution. On secrecy. One misstep, and all is lost.

"We can't afford mistakes like this," I say through gritted teeth. "And I did not mean to shout," I say. "But losing you, I thought you might have run away again, or have been caught and were facing consequences by yourself - I could not bear it."

She walks over to me, calmly and rests her head against my back, her warmth seeping through my shirt. "We will be more careful. No more picnics under the stars, I swear it."

I turn and enfold her in my arms, breathing in the scent of her hair. "No more close calls," I murmur. "No more risks. Or my heart won't survive it."

Isabella tilts her face up to mine. "No more risks," she echoes.

"Stefano," Isabella says, pulling away from me, "there is something else you should know."

My heart clenches. I know that tone - it bodes ill. "What is it?"

"I encountered your Capo on my way back."

"What?" Panic rises in my chest. This is the last thing I wanted to hear. "How did he seem? Did he say anything?"



"He seemed...not himself," Isabella says slowly. "His eyes were strange. Feverish. And he grabbed my arm, hard enough to bruise."

She pushes up her sleeve to show the marks, and rage boils in my veins.

"He said...terrible things," she continues, hesitating. "About owning me. Controlling me. As if I were property, not a person. He... he tried to take me." Her eyes fill with tears, and she looks at me beseechingly. "Stefano, I do not feel safe here anymore."

I pull her close, cursing under my breath.

This changes everything. The Capo has always been reasonable, honorable. I cannot reconcile the man I have known for years with the one Isabella describes. And yet, her fear is real.

"Isabella," I say, pushing away a strand of hair. "Are you sure you haven't misunderstood the situation? I just saw the Capo and he never mentioned seeing you. If he had, he would have skinned me for allowing you out unattended. Please, think. Are you sure you weren't ... confused?"

I regret the words the minute I say them. I realize now that it sounds like I'm accusing her of being dishonest.

"Isabella," I try to say, to explain I didn't mean it the way it came out. "This is just a shock and please –"

But before I can ask her to forgive me, beg her to tell me everything, she steps back, her eyes red with anger. "Get out."

"What?"

"Get the fuck out of my room. I knew it was a mistake trusting you. I knew I shouldn't have slept with you the minute I woke up." My heart stings with the viciousness of her words. "You're no better than the rest of them. I was a fool to ever trust you."

"Isabella," my voice comes out low, and controlled. "If you'd just let me

finish. I was about to –"

"You think I'm a liar, don't you?"

"No—" but I realize her question is rhetorical. She doesn't really want to hear what I think of her. Again, she doesn't let me finish.

"You're a cruel man. You speak of honesty, and loyalty, and righteousness. Where's the righteousness in supporting a man who has assaulted an innocent woman. Get out."

"Isabella, please," I try to tell her. The man I've known my whole life is changing before my eyes. I just needed a few seconds to process her accusations. I stand by her. I'd kill for her. "I will stand by you."

But, to my shock, she grabs the vase by her night stand and throws it to the wall behind my head.

"I said, get the fuck out! You're evil, just like that Capo of yours" she screams.

Her words cut like knives, sharp and cruel. After everything I have sacrificed for her, how dare she accuse me so?

"We will not discuss this further," I say stiffly. "There is nothing more to say."

"See if I care!" Isabella hisses. "From now it's best we keep our distance."

She turns her back to me, shoulders rigid. My hands itch to reach for her, to beg her forgiveness - but my pride refuses to bend, and also, it's clear she's not willing to listen.

We stand on opposite sides of an uncrossable divide, the gulf between us widening with every bitter word. I want nothing more than to bridge the distance, to reclaim what we once had - but I no longer know the path back to her heart.

All I wanted was to keep Isabella safe. Instead, I have only succeeded in

driving her away.

"Leave," she whispers, a reminder for where she stands.

I storm out of her room without another word, my footsteps heavy on the marble floor. Anger and regret war within me, tangled threads I cannot unwind.

Isabella does not call after me. The silence that follows is more damning than any curse.

I stride down the hall, fists clenched at my sides. The mansion seems to close in around me. I need air, space, a reprieve.

The garden. I push open the doors and step out into the warm sunlight, drawing a sharp breath. The remnants of our picnic are still scattered on the grass, two wine glasses tipped on their sides, a plate of cheese and olives going stale in the heat.

Such a perfect night. Ruined, like everything else.

With a snarl, I kick one of the chairs, sending it skidding across the lawn.  
*"Accidenti!"*

When will I learn? Happiness is not meant for men like me. I am destined only for darkness, for the slow decay of the soul. Love comes swift and bright as the summer stars - and leaves us just as quickly, with naught but ashes in its wake.

I have lost everything that matters. My Capo, behaving in ways I've never seen before. The woman I'm falling in love with shutting me out.

And I? A confused wreck with no tangible sense of what's true and what's not.

This time, I fear there shall be no going back to who I used to be - with the Capo, with Isabella, or myself.

# Chapter 23

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Isabella

The amber liquid in my glass glints in the low light of my bedroom. Tequila, the last bottle in my suitcase - my father's legacy, my burden to bear. I take a burning sip, letting the harsh taste distract me from the ache in my chest.

Stefano. His name pierces my heart like a dagger. I ended it, turned my back on our potentially blossoming love, all because I couldn't accept his blind loyalty. He is a part of the mafia, and that, perhaps, I can live with. But believing in the Capo? Never.

He refuses to see the abuse rotting Capo Conti's empire from the inside out. But how can Stefano stand beside a man who wishes to ruin me, without motive?

"Lo siento, papá," I whisper. If only I had your strength.

But I am done being passive, slipping silently through the shadows of Conti's compound. I'm all alone, and I must save myself.

My hands tremble as I grab the burner phone hidden under my mattress. One number is programmed inside. Clara Herrera - the only person I can trust now.

She answers on the first ring.

"Hola?" Her voice is urgent, clipped.

"It's me."

A sharp exhale. "Isabella. Are you in danger?"

"Not yet. But I have information about Juan. Things that have come to light."

Clara is silent. Weighing my words.

"I should have called sooner," I say. "But I was afraid."

"We have little time. Tell me what you know."

"I'm being held captive. They're disguising it as protection, but I'm under watch the whole time."

"Yes," says Clara. "You had hinted so in the past."

"Well, now I'm certain. I tried to run away one night, but was captured."

"Are you alright?" she hisses, in anger and concern.

"I'm fine. But Juan hasn't called, or checked in. I don't believe he cares about my plight. We haven't talked in over three weeks."

"Very much so," she agrees.

"Wouldn't he have tried to contact me? Come visited if he hasn't heard from me? If he truly cared?"

"He would have, if he cared."

"So, what should we do?" I ask, helplessly.

"Well, we need to find out what Juan and the Capo want. If they're keeping you prisoner, there must be a reason."

"Can you find out?"

"I will, mija. But if Juan isn't looking out for you, and you're a prisoner there, you must be in danger. I supported your decision to trust Juan for he is your family, and I only just pledged allegiance to you, Isabella. But now, I'm taking charge. Do you trust me?"

"You're the only person I trust," I admit, tear coming to my eyes.

For where family and old friends turned foe, I found an ally in the darkness and for that, I will be forever grateful.

"In that case, we'll get you out of there soon. Stay strong, Isabella. I'll reach out with the plan."

I grip the phone tighter, steeling myself. "No. I'm staying. I can do more good from the inside."

Clara hesitates. "That's dangerous—"

"Let me do the right thing. Let me find out more, spy on Luca Conti," I insist.

"Please."

A long pause. "Okay. But at the first sign of trouble, I'm pulling you out."

"Gracias, Clara. I won't forget this."

As I push the phone into the pocket of my jeans, the sounds of chaos erupt outside. Gunshots and shouts pierce the night. I freeze, pulse racing.

What the hell is going on?

The sudden commotion outside my window makes my skin crawl. Something is going very, very wrong.

I creep towards the glass, peering out into the darkness. Flickering torchlight reveals figures darting through the shadows, the shouts and cracks of gunfire growing louder. I wish I could open my window and have a better look, but the window is shuttered closed.

My heart hammers against my ribs. An attack? Impossible. The compound is heavily fortified, guarded day and night. Luca's empire is impregnable.

Who is attacking him? For a brief second, I smile. As long as someone puts that man in his place...

I press closer, straining to make out the indistinct forms below. As my eyes adjust, I glimpse unfamiliar faces - hardened men wielding automatic weapons, dressed in dark clothes. Not Conti's men.

The guards bark orders, their voices taut with alarm.

"It's the Chicago mob," I hear the guards stationed outside my door scream at someone down the hallway. "We need backup."

Realization dawns. The Chicago mob. Here, in the heart of Conti's territory. Have they come for revenge? I remember overhearing some rumors about how they had Luca Conti's previous underboss killed.



Suddenly, I'm petrified.

The new underboss is Stefano.

Are they here for Stefano?

Despite my anger toward him, I pray. No, god, no.

I pray it's something more. That they're here for Luca Conti himself.

Does Stefano know about this? Is he down there now, in the midst of that chaos? Bile rises in my throat as I imagine him lying broken, bleeding onto the pitiless earth.

An image of another body bleeding out on dark soil pushes into my mind, Papa. My heart clenches.

No. I cannot think that way. Stefano is strong, a survivor. Surely he would not be taken unaware.

Gunfire cracks through the night again, nearer now. I stumble back from the window, heart lurching. I must get away, find somewhere safe to hide. But my feet remain rooted, curiosity warring with fear.

I force myself to breathe, trying to calm my racing pulse. Panic will only make me careless. As much as I crave answers, I cannot risk drawing attention to myself. Not yet.

The sounds of fighting intensify, punctuated by shouts and cries of pain. Are Conti's men holding their own, or being overrun? Useless questions - I have no way of knowing what is truly happening.

My hands curl into fists, nails biting into my palms.

With effort, I turn away from the window. I must prepare for the worst. Find supplies, a weapon to defend myself if necessary. Stay out of sight until the fighting ends, and pray I am not discovered.

My gaze falls on the door, sturdy wood banded with iron. Without another thought, I move to block it with the heavy chest of drawers, grunting with the

effort. There. At least now I will have some warning if anyone tries to break in.

Water. Food. I grab a half-empty bottle of water and a protein bar, tucking them into the pocket of my jacket. My knife, a butter knife I stole one day - where did I leave it? I scramble to retrieve it from under the bed, fingers closing around the familiar hilt.

Small comforts, but they will have to do.

I sink down against the wall, drawing deep breaths to quiet my nerves. The sounds of chaos rage on outside, but in here, all is silent. I grip my knife tightly, waiting.

I strain to hear any clues as to the source of the attack, the mob's intentions. Shouts in Italian, gunfire, the roar of engines - but nothing distinct. My imagination fills in the gaps, conjuring images of a full-scale assault, bodies littering the ground outside.

No. I must not assume the worst. Stay calm. Breathe.

An explosion rocks the compound, the blast wave rattling my door. I flinch away instinctively, knife clutched in a white-knuckled grip. What are they using, grenades? My heart pounds as acrid smoke begins to seep under the door.

Panic rises in my chest, choking me.

I am trapped, a sitting duck waiting to be burned alive or suffocated. No escape, no way out - I can't breathe. The smoke is overwhelming.

Get hold of yourself!

I stand swiftly, fighting back terror. There must be a way. I cast about desperately, searching for anything that could help.

I can't escape from the double-layered window, one of glass, followed by grill on the external side. But, I can break the glass window for fresh air.

Here goes nothing. I take a candlestick from the bedside table, and smash open the glass, the night air hitting my face in a blast of chill relief. The smoke is still heavy, and I try to keep my face toward the grilled window. At least there's some air coming my way.

The compound is a scene of chaos. Fires rage, bodies lie motionless, and gunfights have broken out everywhere.

I'm just catching my breath when I think someone sees me. I try to move away but a shot cracks the air. a bullet pierces my shoulder, tearing flesh. Agony explodes through me.

I cry out, falling to the floor. The smoke rushes closer to meet me as I fall into darkness.

# Chapter 24

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Stefano

Explosions rock the Conti compound, glass shattering and walls crumbling around me.

I can barely hear my own thoughts amidst the chaos. Through a loudspeaker, the Chicago Mobster, Felix Carlisi's voice, pierces the air.

"We're not here to cause unnecessary violence! We're defending ourselves! We are here to make it clear that we did not kill your last underboss! Stop the attack against us immediately. Do not come back to Chicago, Luca Conti. Are we clear? Do not come back to Chicago. Once our message is delivered, we'll go in peace!"

"*Porca miseria!*" Holy Shit! I curse under my breath. What has Don Conti gotten us into?

My heart hammers in my chest as I sprint through the chaotic compound, searching for Isabella. I saw the guards who were supposed to be guarding her door in action outdoors. Who is protecting her while we fight? The world blurs into streaks of color; all that matters to me is her safety.

"Isabella!" I shout, my voice hoarse from smoke and desperation. "*Dove sei?!*" (Where are you?!)

I tear through the chaos, my palms are slick with sweat, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The weight of responsibility bears down on me. For right now, I'm her only protector.

I see the Capo barreling toward me.

"Where are you going?" he shouts, pulling out a spare gun and throwing it to an associate hiding behind a bush.

"To find Isabella," I shout, trying to run past.

“Oh fuck her,” he says. I stand there, shocked. Aren’t we supposed to protect her?

“What if she gets hurt? Or worse, killed?”

“Then so be it,” he shouts back at me, without giving it a second thought.

A chill goes down my spine as I watch him get distracted by a skirmish erupting close by.

Then so be it? Why then have we been protecting Isabella with everything we have for all these months?

Suddenly, I realize, there’s more truth to Isabella’s narration of the Capo’s intentions, than his to hers.

I need to get to her, to know she’s safe. To get to the bottom of the truth.

*"Ti troverò, Isabella!"* I will find you, Isabella, I vow.

She has already lost her father, Diego Torres, and I cannot – I will not – let her suffer any more pain.

I run up the stairs to the hallway her bedroom is at. Fire engulfs me from both sides. I take a handkerchief from my pocket, place it over my nose and mouth, and move forward through any open spots I can find.

At last, I stand before Isabella's bedroom door, my heart pounding as I brace myself for what lies beyond. The stench of smoke is overwhelming, and I'm afraid. I try the door handle, but it won't budge – locked from the inside.

*"Isabella!"* I shout, my voice cracking with desperation. *"Let me in! Open the door!"*

There's no answer. Panic rises in my chest like bile, choking me.

I can't just stand here, doing nothing. I take a step back, ready to break the door down if necessary.

*"Uno... due... tre!"* I count, then throw my shoulder into the door. It shudders under the impact, but doesn't give way. I grit my teeth and try again, feeling

the pain shoot through my arm as the door finally gives in, revealing the hellish scene inside.

"Isabella!" I call out, my eyes watering from the smoke that billows around me.

The room is barely recognizable – furniture overturned, flames licking at the walls, and everything is shrouded in a thick, suffocating haze. Fear claws at my insides, threatening to consume me.

"Stefano, I'm scared here," I hear Isabella's voice in my mind, remembering her words from earlier, when she tried to trust me with the truth about Luca Conti. Why hadn't I listened to her then? Maybe I could have saved her, if I had only helped her run.

"Isabella, where are you?" I cough, forcing myself to keep moving, even as my lungs protest against the acrid air.

The smoke stings my eyes as I squint, desperately trying to make out Isabella's figure in the haze. My heart hammers in my chest, each beat a reminder of the danger we're both in. I refuse to let fear take hold of me, not when she needs me the most.

"Isabella!" I shout, my voice cracking under the strain. "Answer me, *per favore*. Please!"

No response. Only the crackling of fire and distant shouts fill the air. I grit my teeth, forcing myself to keep searching.

"Stefano..." Her voice comes as a weak whisper, barely audible through the chaos.

Relief floods me, but also a renewed sense of urgency. Where is she?

"Isabella, keep talking," I call out, following the direction of her voice. My hands reach out, desperate to find her.

"Please... help..." Her words are cut short by a cough, but that's enough for



me to locate her. My fingers brush against something soft - her hair. I crouch down, my heart racing.

"You scared me," I choke out, my relief mingled with fear.

As my eyes adjust, I see her lying on the floor, she has fallen unconscious. My blood runs cold when I notice the dark stain on her jacket - a gunshot. My hands search quickly under the jacket. shoulder, it seems to be a shoulder wound. Flames dance around us, but all I can focus on is the still form of the woman I love.

"*Ti prego,*" please, I whisper, my hands shaking as they hover over her body, unsure where to touch without causing her more pain. "Wake up."

She doesn't respond.

"Isabella, keep breathing," I urge her, my voice barely more than a whisper.

I can see the rise and fall of her chest, assuring me that she's still alive. Relief washes over me like like a tight grip was just released from around my throat. I need to get her out.

Lifting her carefully into my arms, I cradle her as if she were made of glass, terrified that any misstep could shatter her. Her body is limp in my embrace, her vibrant green eyes hidden beneath closed lids.

The gunshot wound oozes blood, a dark stain spreading through the white chiffon sleeve on her right shoulder. Despite the pressing danger, I take a moment to study her face, committing every detail to memory.

I can't lose you, I think to myself, chiding myself for all the mistakes I've made when I had the chance to stand by her.

"Stefano, what are you waiting for?" My inner voice jolts me back to reality, forcing me to focus on our escape. Flames lick at the walls around us, their heat searing my skin even as sweat beads on my brow. The smoke stings my eyes and burns my lungs, each breath feeling like I'm inhaling needles.

But none of that matters; all that matters is saving Isabella.

I carry her towards the door. Each step feels like an eternity, the fire roaring in my ears, drowning out all other sounds. I navigate through the inferno, shielding Isabella from the worst of it.

As I kick open the bedroom door, the blistering heat intensifies, and I'm met with a wall of flames. I hesitate for a fraction of a second, but there's no time to find another way out.

"*Dio*," God, I pray, my resolve unwavering. "*Proteggila*." Protect her.

With a deep breath, I run through the smoke, carrying her down the stairs, flames whipping on every side. The door I entered from is now blocked by flames. I need another way. I turn, into the dining hall, looking for another exit.

Damn it, I mutter under my breath as I race through the burning house, Isabella held protectively in my arms.

"Stefano," Isabella whispers weakly, her voice barely audible over the roar of the flames. "It hurts."

Thank god she's regaining consciousness.

"I know, sweetheart," I respond, trying to keep my voice steady despite the panic threatening to engulf me. "Just hold on, we're almost there."

As we make our way through the inferno, I'm acutely aware of the danger surrounding us. Walls crack and groan, threatening to collapse at any moment. The floor beneath us feels unsteady, as if the entire building could crumble beneath our feet.

"Stefano," she gasps again, her grip on me tightening.

"Don't worry," I tell her, forcing confidence into my voice. "I will protect you."

Suddenly, I spot a narrow passage that seems less consumed by the flames.

It's a risk, but it's the best chance we have. With every ounce of strength I possess, I kick down a partially burned door, revealing a dark, smoke-filled corridor.

"Hang on," I urge Isabella as we enter the hallway.

The fire has yet to fully consume this part of the home, giving us a brief respite from the heat. But I know it won't last long.

"I can't," she whimpers, her body trembling in my arms. "It hurts too much."

"Isabella", I say, my voice firm but gentle. "You must."

With all the energy I can muster, I begin to run, until I find the exit. As we emerge from the smoke-filled corridor, the cool night air is a welcome relief. Isabella's body still trembles in my arms, but I can see the fire reflecting in her green eyes.

"We're getting out," I tell her, trying to reassure her as we navigate through the last remnants of hazardous fire.

Finally, we reach the edge of the compound, the fire giving way to the relative safety of the open night. With one last surge of energy, I carry Isabella over the threshold and onto the cold, wet grass beyond.

"We made it," I whisper breathlessly, gently lowering her onto the ground.

The exhaustion threatens to overwhelm me, but I fight against it, knowing that our ordeal is far from over.

"Stefano", she murmurs, reaching up to touch my face. Her hand is warm and trembling, yet there's a fierce determination in her eyes. "*Grazie.*" Thank you.

"Always," I reply, my heart swelling with pride for this incredible woman.

Despite what she's been through, she's staying true to herself. Showing gratitude where she believes it must be shown.

How do I tell her that I don't deserve it?

There are so many things I must tell her. But I can't. Not if I lose her. I need

to get help. Knowing that the infirmary will be busy with the mafioso, who will always have priority here, I rush her to my one-bedroom cottage, in the corner of the compound.

She needs urgent medical care, and I'll do it myself if I have to.

# Chapter 25

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Isabella

Stefano scoops me into his strong arms, cradling me against his chest as he carries me along the winding dirt path.

“Where are you taking me?” I whisper, gazing up at his stoic face.

“To my home,” he says softly. “You need rest and care.”

I don’t protest, too weakened by pain and blood loss to argue. My head lolls against his shoulder, inhaling his woodsy scent.

We arrive at a small cottage along the boundary of the compound, sheltered by trees. He nudges the wooden door open with his boot and steps inside.

The room is cozy and sparse, filled with handmade furniture.

Stefano lays me down on the bed, propping pillows behind my back.

“Comfortable?” His dark eyes study me with concern.

I nod, settling into the soft mattress. “Thank you, Stefano.”

He presses his lips to my forehead. “Rest, Isabella. I will keep you safe.”

A tear slips down my cheek as I gaze at the ring on my finger, clinging to the fading memory of my father’s face. I wonder, had I died tonight - would he have met me in heaven? Stefano squeezes my uninjured hand, his touch both comforting and electrifying.

I close my eyes, steadied by my deep breathing and Stefano’s presence. In this place of refuge, I can finally grieve all that's happened. The dangers I've survived, dangers I never would have faced under papa's care.

A deep exhaustion washes over me, and I want to surrender to the darkness, but Stefano pulls me out of my trance. He helps me into a sitting position, propping more pillows behind my back.

“I need to clean and dress your wounds. It will hurt, but I will be as gentle as possible.”

I nod, bracing myself.

Stefano brings over a basin of water, antiseptic, and bandages. He rolls up his sleeves, revealing muscular forearms, and begins removing my jacket. I wince when he slips my injured arm out of the sleeve. My T-shirt is a bloody mess. I turn my head away as he cuts the shirt open to expose my shoulder. I grit my teeth against the sting as he cleans the bullet wound, speaking softly.

“Thank god,” he says. “It's only a surface wound. The bullet grazed you. It's not lodged in.”

Tears fill my eyes as he begins to clean the wound.

He squeezes my uninjured hand. “Cry if you need to. I am here.”

A sob escapes my lips. Stefano pulls me into his arms, mindful of my injuries, and I cling to him, weeping against his chest.

“Shh,” he murmurs, stroking my hair. “Just let me fix you up. The pain will fade away, I swear.”

His words only make me cry harder, torn between sorrow and comfort. Sorrow at how I got here. Comfort that he found me.

He pulls back and begins cleaning and dressing the wound. I try not to wince, or cry out loud, for I don't want to scare him. But it hurts like hell.

At last, to my relief, he's done. The wound is bandaged.

Stefano pulls away, his eyes searching mine. “You should rest now. I will prepare a tonic to help cleanse your lungs. All that smoke must be cleared out.”

I nod, exhaustion creeping over me. He helps me lie back against the pillows, tucking the blanket around me. He hands me a painkiller, and a glass of water.



“I will be right back. Drink this.”

He kisses my forehead and strides over to a wooden cabinet, gathering various bottles and a mortar and pestle. The rhythmic grinding of the pestle against the mortar has a soothing quality as I drift in and out of sleep.

After some time, Stefano comes to my side, helping me sit up. He offers me a cup of dark liquid.

“Drink this. It will help remove any infection and promote healing.”

I take the cup with trembling fingers and bring it to my lips. The tonic is bitter and acrid, but I force myself to swallow it in small sips under Stefano's watchful gaze. When the cup is empty, he eases me onto my back again.

“Rest now. The tonic will take effect soon.”

“Will you stay with me?” I ask softly.

“Always.” He sits on the edge of the bed, taking my hand in his.

“How do you feel?” he asks gently.

“Sore. But the pain is not as sharp.”

He nods, reaching for a bottle of pills. “Take these.” He tips out two. “They will help with the pain and prevent infection as you heal.”

I swallow the pills without protest, craving relief from the constant throb in my wounds.

Stefano helps me sit up, propping pillows behind my back. He hands me a glass of water. “You must drink. You have lost a lot of blood and need to stay hydrated.”

I take slow sips of the water, realizing how parched my throat feels. As I drink, Stefano continues to watch me closely, as if afraid I may collapse at any moment. His concern both touches and saddens me. He cares for me, but answers to my torturer.

When the glass is empty, I sigh and lean back against the pillows. A wave of

dizziness washes over me, and I close my eyes.

“Isabella?” Stefano's voice is sharp with worry. I feel his hand on my cheek, then brushing the hair back from my face.

“I am all right,” I murmur. “Just tired.”

“You must rest.” His lips brush my forehead. “I will be here if you need anything.”

Comforted by his presence and the effects of the medication, I drift into a deep, healing sleep.



I slowly become aware of a dull ache in my shoulder as I wake. For a moment, panic rises in my chest, memories of gunfire and searing pain flashing through my mind.

Then I feel a warm hand enveloping mine and open my eyes. Stefano sits beside the bed, his gaze intent on my face. The sight of him calms my racing heart, reminding me I am safe here in his care.

His thumb strokes the back of my hand. “How do you feel?”

I take a deep breath, assessing the state of my injuries. The pain is manageable now, reduced to a persistent throb. “Better, I think.”

He nods, relief evident in his eyes. “The bandages look clean. I will change them again once you have eaten.”

My stomach rumbles at the mention of food, and I realize how hungry I am.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly sunset.” Stefano stands, releasing my hand. So, 24 hours have almost gone by?

“Isn't the Capo wondering where we are?”

"The compound is severely burned. It'll take a few days to fix it. He knows where we are, and has no alternative to place you. Now, I will make you some soup and bread. Do you need help sitting up?"

Suddenly, I remember. The burner phone. Shit. Where is it? I carefully put an arm under the covers, and feel the outline of it, in my jacket pocket. Thank god.

I start to shake my head, then pause. The room tilts slightly when I move, and I pull my hand away from under the covers to my head.

"Perhaps...some assistance would be good."

"Of course." Stefano slides an arm behind my back and helps me into a sitting position, arranging the pillows to support me. "There. Is that comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you." I sink back against the pillows, suddenly exhausted from even that small effort.

Stefano brushes the hair back from my face again, his touch gentle. "Rest. I will return shortly with your meal."

He leaves, and I stare into the flickering fireplace across the room.

My mind wanders.

In Stefano's care, I have found more than just physical healing. I have found compassion, trust and a tender affection I have not known before.



When Stefano returns with a sandwich, some eggs and fruits, I can barely muster the courage to eat. But, he convinces me to give it a try.

"There is no need to exert yourself so," he says gently. "Just eat a little bit. You don't have to finish it all."

"I know." I swallow hard, searching for the words. "Stefano, I...I owe you an apology. For doubting you, for not trusting you with the truth. You have shown me nothing but kindness, and I repaid you with suspicion and anger. I am sorry."

He shakes his head. "You had no reason to trust me. I did not believe you about the Capo either, when I should have. I am the one who owes you an apology, Bella. You were right to doubt - it is in your nature to survive, as it is in mine. I understand now why you could not trust easily."

His acceptance of my apology brings tears to my eyes. I reach for his hand. "I do trust you now. You have proven yourself in ways I never expected."

"As have you." He kisses my hand softly. "We have both been betrayed in the past. But together, we are strong."

My eyes trace the lines of Stefano's face, lingering on the curve of his lips. How is it that this man can fill me with peace and longing at the same time?

"What changed?" I ask, gently. "For so long, you believed in the Capo and would fight for his honor to the death of you, I was sure of it."

"There is something I must tell you," he says quietly. "After you revealed the truth about the Capo...it shook the foundations of everything I believed. I have served him faithfully for years, never doubting his leadership. I started digging around, for I trust you too and I couldn't believe you would lie either. Some things, I realized, were happening right under my eyes but I was too close to the problem to see it. Saying we're offering you protection, then treating you as a prisoner, for one. But, I needed more proof. I started digging around. You'd be surprised at how many within the mafioso were willing to speak, to tell me things he's done. To discover the evil he is capable of..."

He shakes his head. "It has left me uncertain. I do not know how to proceed from here. I was about to come to you and apologize, but then the attack

happened."

"I understand," I say softly. "Your loyalty is a rare and admirable quality. To have that loyalty betrayed is a painful thing."

"*Si*. Painful and disorienting." His eyes meet mine. "You have given me a gift, Isabella, even if it does not seem so. The truth, however ugly, is always better than lies. I know now the kind of man the Capo really is. I will not follow blindly again."

"I'm glad for that," I say. "Though I wish the truth had come to light in another way."

"As do I." He brushes his thumb over my cheek. "You do not have to face him alone, Bella,. I will help you in any way I can. Together, we will bring him to justice for his crimes."

I lean into his touch, tears stinging my eyes. "That means more to me than I can say. I was so afraid I would be alone in this battle, like I've been for so long. Now that I hear you say it, I realize it's not you fighting for me that I seek. It's you believing in me. But, this battle is mine to fight, Stefano. You must not involve yourself in it."

Stefano's eyes soften. "You will never be alone again. I swear it."

"Thank you," I whisper. "I wonder ... could you dig in and see why the Capo is keeping me prisoner?"

He nods, ever-so-slightly.

For the first time since my father's death, I feel safe. Protected. Loved.

Stefano leans in and kisses me softly. I cling to him, pouring all of my gratitude, affection and need into that kiss.

When we part, I whisper, "Stay with me tonight. I don't want to be alone."

"I will stay as long as you wish, Bella,," he murmurs. "But you should rest. Your injuries need time to heal."

"I know. I just..." I swallow hard. "I need to feel you near me. If the nightmares come again..."

"Shh, I understand." He brushes a strand of hair from my face. "I will be here when you wake. Sleep now, and know you are safe."

Relief washes over me in a warm wave. I snuggle into the pillows, keeping my good hand clasped in Stefano's.

With his steady, reassuring presence beside me, I drift off into a deep, peaceful sleep. No shadows haunt my dreams that night.

I rest, and heal, cocooned in Stefano's warmth and the comfort of his embrace.



I wake slowly, blinking at the sunlight filtering through the curtains. For a moment, I'm disoriented, confused by my unfamiliar surroundings. Then I feel the weight of Stefano's arm draped over my waist and remember. I'm in his home. Safe within these walls, safe within his arms.

I roll over to face Stefano. He's still asleep, his chest rising and falling with deep, even breaths. Dark lashes sweep his cheekbones, and his full mouth is relaxed in sleep. He looks younger, more at peace. The harsh lines of concern and tension have faded from his face.

Unable to resist, I reach up and trace the curve of his jaw with my fingertips. Stefano's eyes flutter open at my touch. He turns his head to press a kiss to my palm, his lips curling into a sleepy smile.

"Good morning, Bella," he murmurs, his voice rough with sleep.

"Good morning." I return his smile, warmth blooming in my chest. "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a long time, with you in my arms." Stefano pulls me closer, nuzzling my neck. "You were right. I needed to stay close to reassure myself you were safe and healing."

"I'm sorry for asking you to stay. I should not have imposed—"

He presses a finger to my lips, silencing my apology. "You did not impose. I wanted to be here for you, Isabella. I wanted to... hold you in my arms again"

My heart flutters at the tenderness in Stefano's eyes.

"As I care for you," I whisper.

Our gazes meet, and in his eyes, I see a hunger and passion to match my own. We have danced around our attraction for too long. The time for resisting is over.

I lean in and kiss him, a soft press of lips. Stefano stills against me, then lets out a groan and pulls me closer, deepening the kiss. His lips move over mine in a slow, sensual rhythm, setting my body aflame.

We break apart, breathless.

"Isabella," he murmurs, cupping my face in his hands. "*Mi amor*. My love."

My heart swells at his words. "And you are mine, Stefano."

# Chapter 26

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Stefano

**A**s I pull Isabella closer, my mind reels with anger and confusion as I recall the Capo's words. What the hell did he mean when I told him I was looking for Isabella and he indicated it didn't matter if she lived or died? Isabella looks up at me, pulling me away from all these circulating thought loops, where I can't seem to make up my mind on what to do next.

"Stefano, I need a shower," she says, her voice trembling slightly. "I can't stand feeling like this anymore."

"Of course," I reply, gently.

I lead her towards the bathroom. It's not much, but I hope it's comfortable enough for her. Sometimes, I forget that this woman is a billionaire heiress, who grew up on a Hacienda. As we walk, she ahead of me, I can't help but notice the way her long, wavy hair cascades halfway down her back, a striking contrast to the dirt and grime that covers her skin.

I wince when my eyes reach the darkened blood on her clothes.

"Here," I say, handing her an oversized white shirt from a drawer. "You can wear this while I put your clothes in the wash."

"No, throw mine," she says. "I don't want to be –"

"Reminded?" I finish her sentence.

She looks at me, forlorn. I wish I could take away her pain.

"Say no more. Just leave them on the floor next to the laundry bag. You'll never see them again."

"Thank you, Stefano," she murmurs, stepping into the small bathroom and closing the door behind her.

The sound of the water turning on fills the silence, and I find myself leaning against the wall, my thoughts consumed by the events that have unfolded.

"*Por qué, Capo?*" But why? I whisper under my breath, the Spanish words slipping out naturally. "Why did you not care what happened to her when all this time, you've told me keeping her alive is all that matters?"

The sound of the running water provides a backdrop for my thoughts as I sit on the edge of the bed, my hands clenched into fists.

The Capo's betrayal weighs heavily on my mind. I thought I knew him, trusted him. But now, everything has changed. My loyalty is shaken, and I can't help but wonder about his true intentions.

For months now, I've denied Isabella freedom because I believed in the Capo when he said her life comes first, beyond her whims and fancies. But is that really the case when he admitted, in a hurried, heated moment, "so be it" if she were to die by the hands of the Chicago Unit?

Something is beginning to gnaw at me - a sudden cynicism.

As the water stops, my heart starts racing in anticipation. Isabella will emerge any moment, and I try to brace myself for the sight of her, clean and needing healing. I swallow hard, struggling to keep my focus on the situation at hand – helping ease her worries. I must not mention my own fears to her.

The bathroom door creaks open, and there she stands – wearing my oversized white shirt. The damp fabric clings to every curve of her voluptuous figure, accentuating her thin waist and long legs. Her nipples show through the material, and a fierce heat surges within me, urging me to touch her, to taste her.

"Stefano," she breathes, her green eyes meeting mine. "I feel so much better. Thank you."

"It's nothing, Isabella," I reply, trying to maintain an even tone, but the raw

intensity of her gaze makes it difficult.

I can see the remnants of grief and loss in her eyes, yet there is also something else – desire perhaps, I hope.

"Is something wrong?" she asks cautiously, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Nothing's wrong," I say quickly, forcing a smile onto my face.

"Nothing?" she whispers, in a voice I've never heard escape those luscious lips.

I shake my head, too fired up to use my words.

She walks up to me, slowly, her hips swaying. She pushes me onto the bed, gently and looks me straight in the eye.

"You never asked me."

"Asked you what?" I whisper, my body telling me where this is going before either of us have to spell it out.

"If something is wrong."

"Is something wrong, Isabella?"

"Yes, Stefano. I need to feel alive again," Isabella whispers, her breath hot against my neck.

Before I can react, she straddles me, her hips grinding against mine in a slow, sensual rhythm.

"Isabella..." I exhale, my hands instinctively finding her waist to steady her movements.

The anger and resentment we've been carrying in the past due to the Capo's actions suddenly morphs into an undeniable hunger for each other.

"Let me take control this time," she murmurs, moving her body provocatively. "*Por favor.*"

"Very well," I consent, unable to resist her pleading eyes.

As Isabella continues to rock her hips against me, I feel the heat building

inside me, a fire that threatens to consume us both. My thoughts race, trying to make sense of this sudden shift in our dynamic, but it's impossible to focus on anything other than the feel of her body pressed against mine.

"Sit back and enjoy the show, Stefano," she commands, leaning back slightly as her fingers move to the buttons of my oversized shirt she's wearing. With teasing slowness, she begins to unfasten them one by one, each movement revealing more of her voluptuous figure.

"Dear mother of god," I breathe out as she peels back the fabric to expose her full, bouncy breasts.

The sight of her like this, vulnerable yet powerful, is intoxicating. My hands itch to touch her, but she shoots me a warning glance.

"Not yet," she says with a playful smirk, continuing her tantalizing dance against me.

"You tease, Isabella," I admit, my voice thick with desire. "I can't take it anymore."

"Soon, my love" she promises, her green eyes locked onto mine as she leans in for a searing kiss. The taste of her lips and the feel of her body moving in sync with mine is overwhelming, a balm for the wounds we've both suffered.

"We do have all the time in the world," I whisper against her lips, my resolve crumbling as I reach for her, desperate to feel her skin against mine.

I reach up and cup her breasts in my hands, feeling their softness and weight. It's like a perfect mixture of silk and warmth, and I can't get enough. My thumbs brush over her nipples, now hard from arousal, causing her to gasp in pleasure. Her reaction spurs me on, and I lean down to take one into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the hardened peak.

She moans, her fingers tangling in my hair, urging me to continue.

"Stefano, carry on," she whispers, her voice filled with ecstasy as I lavish

attention on both breasts, alternating between sucking, licking, and squeezing them gently.

The taste of her skin is intoxicating, sending shivers down my spine.

"Like this?" I ask, seeking reassurance that I'm giving her pleasure.

"Yes," she replies, her voice breathy and filled with passion. "Just like that."

Her words fan the flames of my desire, even as I notice her gaze darting down towards my waist. I can see the hunger in her eyes, and without warning, she sits up and starts to unbutton my pants, pushing them down along with my boxers. My erection springs free, and she stares at it for a moment, before she dips her head.

"Isabella," I moan, the sensation of her lips and tongue on me almost too much to bear.

As she works her way up and down my length, I can feel my control slipping away, replaced by an urgency that's impossible to ignore. I reach out, gripping the sheets tightly, my knuckles turning white from the effort of holding back.

"Deeper, Bella" I manage to gasp between breaths, my voice barely audible.

She responds by increasing the intensity of her movements, pushing me closer and closer to the edge with each stroke.

Isabella's green eyes lock with mine as she continues to pleasure me, her gaze both innocent and seductive at the same time. It's a sight that sends shivers down my spine and intensifies the sensations coursing through my body. I can feel the pressure building inside me, threatening to consume me completely.

"Isabella," I gasp, my voice strained with desire and urgency. "I can't... I need..."

"Shh," she whispers, pulling away from me ever so slightly but maintaining

eye contact.

Her words are tempting, but I know I can't give in just yet. There's still so much more I want to experience with her, and I won't let this moment end prematurely. I reach down and grasp her hair, gently but firmly pulling her up to me.

"I'm in charge now, my love," I murmur against her lips as I kiss her deeply. "Unless you object."

"I don't," she breathes, her eyes dark with desire.

Releasing her hair, I guide her onto the bed, positioning her on her stomach. Her beautiful, curvaceous form is presented before me like an erotic masterpiece, and I can't help but take a moment to appreciate the sight. I place a hand on her hip, feeling the smooth warmth of her skin beneath my touch.

"Stefano..." she says, her voice husky with anticipation.

This is it – the culmination of our shared passion, the physical expression of our love for one another. I position myself behind her. With a deep breath, I push forward, entering her slowly and deliberately.

We both moan in unison as our bodies finally join together, the connection bringing a sense of completion that's both exhilarating and overwhelming.

"Isabella," I breathe, my voice shaking with emotion. "You're mine now."

"Mm-hmm," she moans, her voice dripping with seduction.

"Isabella," I groan, gripping her uninjured arm firmly behind her back as I thrust into her with passion and force.

The sight of her face down, ass up, is intoxicating, driving me on even further.

"Stefano... sí," she moans in response, her breaths coming in short gasps.

I can tell she's enjoying this just as much as me, and the knowledge sends

shivers down my spine. Does she want ... more?

Feeling bold, I reach for her hair, grabbing a fistful of her long, wavy locks and pulling them back into a makeshift ponytail. I tug on it gently, just enough to make her arch her back, further intensifying the connection between us.

"Too much?" I ask, feeling my own arousal increase at the sight of her body's reaction to my touch.

"Hardly enough," she replies breathlessly, her voice trembling with pleasure.

As I continue to hold her hair and thrust inside her, I can't help but feel a sense of ownership – a powerful and primal sensation that both frightens and excites me. Is this what love feels like? This fierce possessiveness, this overwhelming desire to claim her completely as my own?

"Isabella, you're mine," I growl, unable to contain the raw emotion coursing through me.

"I'm all yours, Stefano," she answers, her words a mixture of declaration and surrender.

It's in this moment that I realize how deeply intertwined our lives have become, how inseparable we are from one another. Despite all the danger and uncertainty surrounding us, there's one thing I know for certain: I will do whatever it takes to protect her, to keep her safe and by my side.

As Isabella's moans grow louder and her body tenses beneath me, I can feel the urgency building within us both. We're so close to the edge now, and I know it won't be long before we're over. Our breathing becomes ragged, our movements more desperate.

I clutch her hair with one hand, and grip her waist with the other, making sure that when I slam into her body, over and over again, she stays in place. I give it to her, as deep as I can.



"Yes, just like that," she breathes out, her voice suddenly reaching a fever pitch.

Isabella cries out my name as her orgasm hits her with full force, her tight walls quivering around me. As she cries out in repeated ecstasy, a sudden realization hits me – I'm not wearing a condom, and my dick is throbbing to erupt.

"Dear god!" I curse under my breath, pulling out just in time.

I cum onto her back, hot and sticky against her flushed skin. For a moment, we both lie there, panting and trembling from the intensity of our release.

I clean her, gently. And then, pull her into my arms. I can't help but be struck by the tenderness she holds, the way she looks at me with such understanding and compassion.

It's clear that she doesn't blame me for all that's happened between us, but the weight of responsibility still hangs heavy on my shoulders. How I didn't stand up for her, when I should have.

As we lay entwined in each other's arms, I can't shake the feeling that this is just the beginning of a long and treacherous journey for both of us. The Capo's true motives remain shrouded in mystery, and our lives are tangled up in a web of danger and deceit.

"Isabella," I murmur. "I will help you escape. I will find out what the Capo wants of you."

"No, Stefano," she says, furiously. "This is my battle. Don't interfere."

I smile. The Isabella I first met, the tigress, is out to play, and the way she says it tells me I shouldn't fuck up her plans by meddling.

# Chapter 27

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# Isabella

I wake to sunlight streaming through the slatted blinds. Stefano's broad shoulders are silhouetted against the window as he speaks rapid Italian into his phone. His voice is tense, worried.

I sit up slowly, the sheets pooling around my waist. My hair tumbles down my back in dark waves. Stefano glances over, pressing the phone to his chest.

"*Buongiorno, bella,*" he greets me good morning. His eyes trail down my body appreciatively before snapping back to meet my gaze. "Sleep well?"

I nod, pulling the sheet up higher. My cheeks flush under his stare.

Stefano turns back to the window, resuming his conversation. I slide from the bed, covering myself with the sheet, and pad across the cool tile floor to the bathroom.

When I return, Stefano has ended the call.

"What's going on?"

He smiles. "Major repairs. Should take about a week. You'll have to stay here with me, under my protection."

My pulse quickens. A week alone with Stefano, our attraction growing.

"A whole week?" I ask, feigning nonchalance.

Stefano's expression is guarded. "Yes. I will keep you safe, Isabella."

His vow is meant to reassure me, but unease coils in my stomach. A week is a long time for secrets to surface. For desires to be indulged. For old wounds to be torn open. For him to get himself in trouble for me.

I look away, crossing my arms over my chest. The sheet slips down my body, revealing the angry red marks Stefano's fingers left on my hips. His gaze drops, lingering on the bruises, and heat rises in his eyes.

When he looks up again, his expression is unreadable. "Get dressed. I'll make us breakfast."

"I don't have clothes," I shrug. "Remember, everything burned down?"

The next thing I know, he's pulled out his phone and is ordering some associates to go buy clothes for me. I shake my head and get back under the covers.

Stefano returns with two plates of pancakes, eggs and toast and sets them on the small table by the window.

"Eat," he says. "You need your strength."

I take a bite, and there is a burst of flavor on my tongue.

Our quiet moment is shattered when Stefano's phone rings, breaking the spell that had enveloped us. He frowns as he pulls it out of his pocket and glances at the screen. "I'm sorry, Isabella, I have to take this."

"Of course," I say, giving him a reassuring smile.

Stefano answers the call, his voice tense as he speaks in hushed tones. I can't make out the words, but the urgency in his voice disturbs me. Suddenly, his face turns ashen, his eyes widening in shock.

"Understood," he says curtly before hanging up. He stares at the phone for a

moment, his mind clearly racing.

"Stefano?" I ask tentatively, worried about what could have caused such a reaction. "Is everything alright?"

He takes a deep breath, visibly trying to regain his composure, before turning to me. "It's just... something unexpected has come up," he says hesitantly.

"Can you tell me what it is?" I press gently, concern flooding through me.

"I..." Stefano starts, his gaze dropping to our intertwined hands. "I'm not sure why, but the Capo wants to meet you," he says quietly.

"Me?" I ask, startled by the sudden turn of events. "Why?"

"I don't know," he admits, his jaw clenched. "But we need to prepare you. I'll order some fresh clothes for you." [IB1]

"Thank you," I reply, my mind racing with questions and unease.

After I change into the new clothes Stefano has provided, we step out of the cottage. Suddenly, I'm filled with dread. Has he found out about Stefano and I?

We walk in silence towards the meeting spot, a secluded hut nestled within the lush garden. The scent of flowers fills the air, soothing my senses. My heart races with every step, and I cling to Stefano's arm for support.

"Are you afraid?" he asks suddenly, his voice gentle yet concerned.

"A little," I admit, swallowing hard. "But I have to do this, right?"

"Yes," he confirms, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Just remember, I'm here for you, Isabella."

"Thank you," I whisper, feeling a surge of warmth at his unwavering support.

As we approach the hut, I steel myself for the encounter, reminding myself that I am not just Isabella Torres, I am also the daughter of Diego Torres. And he raised me to be anything but a coward.

A warm breeze brushes past us as Stefano and I reach the entrance of the hut.

The wooden door, adorned with intricate carvings, creaks open to reveal a dimly lit room.

Shadows dance on the walls, giving the space an eerie atmosphere. The Capo has not yet come into view, but I know he's waiting inside.

"Isabella," Stefano murmurs, his grip tightening around my hand, "I don't like this. I should be there with you."

"Stefano, we've talked about this," I reply, glancing up at him. His jaw is set, eyes dark with concern. I understand his worry, but I need to face the Capo alone. "If you're with me, it might raise suspicions about your loyalty. You have to trust me."

He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair. "I do trust you, Isabella. It's the Capo I'm unsure about right now – just when it comes to you. What if he tries hurting you? I still remember how I stood by when he slapped ..." he chokes on his words.

He takes a deep breath as he looks away, perturbed by the memories from the night I tried to run away.

"Then I'll scream," I say, trying to lighten the mood with a small smile. "And you'll come running, right?"

"Of course." He manages a half-smile in return, but the worry remains etched across his handsome face. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I will," I promise, squeezing his hand one last time before releasing it. My pulse races as I take a deep breath and step into the hut.

"Good luck," Stefano whispers as the door closes behind me.



As I step further into the dimly-lit room, my heart pounds in my chest. The door shuts behind me with a soft click, and I'm suddenly aware of how alone I am. Despite Stefano's assurances, I can't help but worry about his overprotective nature. If he were to discover my spying efforts, would he act recklessly in an attempt to protect me? All he wants to do is be there for me, but little does he know his efforts to do so are only isolating me further because he's not the kind of man to just lend an ear. He's the kind to take on my problems, and that's something I can never live with. I contemplate this as I take slow, measured steps deeper into the hut.

"Isabella Torres," the Capo's voice echoes through the space, shivers running down my spine. He emerges from the shadows, his cold gaze meeting mine.

"Capo," I acknowledge, trying to keep my voice steady. My hands clench into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms. He watches me intently, like a predator sizing up its prey.

"Sit," he commands, gesturing to a chair across from him.

I comply, taking a seat as gracefully as I can manage given the circumstances. All I can think about is Stefano, waiting outside, and the secret I must keep from him. "What did you want to discuss?" I ask, forcing my voice to remain calm and collected.

The Capo remains silent for a moment, studying me. I can almost feel the weight of his scrutiny. "You're a very interesting woman, Isabella," he finally says. "Your father was a great man, and I believe you have the potential to follow in his footsteps."

"Thank you, Capo," I reply, unsure of what else to say. My thoughts race, wondering if he suspects anything. I must be careful not to reveal any hint of my true intentions.

"We got off on the wrong foot, didn't we, Isabella?" he asks. His voice

lingers on my name. He almost sings it, Isabellaaaa... like a stalker hunting prey in the woods.

"Perhaps," I try to be noncommittal.

"However unhappy you've been here, it was all for you," he continues, raising a finger, "you will need guidance. And protection."

"Protection?" I repeat, my eyes narrowing. "From whom?"

"There are many who would seek to take advantage of your family's legacy, Isabella," the Capo replies cryptically. "But worry not – I will keep you safe. You mustn't fear me."

"Gracias, Capo," I say, swallowing the lump in my throat. What I truly want to do is tell him to fuck off. He offers me a thin smile, and I can't help but feel a shiver run down my spine. I know I must tread carefully around him, and ensure Stefano doesn't put himself in danger.

The Capo leans in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Isabella, I have important news regarding your father's killers."

I stiffen, my breath catching in my throat. "What do you mean?"

"New information has surfaced," he explains, his eyes locked on mine. "I must go to Mexico immediately. They believe they've found the ones responsible for Diego's death."

Could this be true? Or is it just another ploy by the Capo to manipulate me further into his grasp?

"Mexico?" I repeat, my voice barely audible. "Who did it? Does Juan know?"

"Yes, Isabella," he confirms, his tone solemn. "Patience. All will be revealed in time. I will leave tonight. And I expect you to continue being good during my absence. Stay by Stefano's side."

"Of course, Capo," I reply, trying to hide the uncertainty that threatens to



choke me. As much as I want justice for my father, something about the Capo's words doesn't sit right with me.

Why now, after all this time, is he talking to me with near kindness? Why is he going to deal with the murderers? Why am I not being taken along? Where is Juan in all of this?

"What about Juan?" I ask. "Will he be there in Mexico, with you? Please, tell me who did this."

"I can't reveal anything until I'm back. I need to verify everything once I am on site. Remember," he says, a warning underlying his words, "keep your wits about you, and trust no one. Not even Stefano."

My blood runs cold at the mention of Stefano's name. What could the Capo possibly know about our budding relationship?

"Gracias for informing me, Capo," I say, masking my unease with a tight smile. "I wish you luck in Mexico."

"Go now," he dismisses me with a wave of his hand. "We will speak again soon."

I rise from my seat, nodding once before turning to leave. As the door opens and I step back out into the sunlight, I see Stefano waiting for me. His eyes are filled with concern, but I can't help but feel a pang of guilt. I must continue with my mission, even if it means keeping secrets from the man who has become so dear to me.

"Isabella?" Stefano calls out, and I turn to find him approaching me with evident anxiety on his handsome face. "Everything all right?" He wraps an arm around my shoulders protectively. I don't respond.

"What did the Capo tell you?"

"Nothing of importance," I lie, unwilling to reveal the truth just yet. "He's going to Mexico for a while."

"Mexico?" he repeats with concern.

"*Si*, Stefano," I assure him, my heart clenching at the thought of keeping secrets from the man I've grown to care for so deeply.

"Why?" he asks.

"I don't know," I shrug my shoulders.

"Alright," he says, linking his arm through mine.

We make our way back to Stefano's cottage, the Capo's words still hanging heavily in the air between us. The door shuts softly behind us, blocking out the world and its threats, if only for a moment. Stefano's eyes meet mine.

"Isabella," he says gently, his voice like velvet, "you know you can tell me anything, right?"

I hesitate, debating whether to confide in him about the Capo's news. But some inner voice urges me to caution, insisting that I keep my thoughts to myself for now.

I fear if I tell him, Stefano might follow the Capo to Mexico to hunt down my father's killers himself. I need to protect him, like he's vowed to protect me.

"It's nothing, really," I say, forcing a smile onto my lips. "He was just reminding me to be good."

Stefano searches my face, but seems to accept my explanation. "Alright," he sighs, running a hand through his dark hair. "But I want you to know, you can always talk to me. I'm here for you."

"Thank you, Stefano," I murmur, touched by his unwavering support. As he leaves the room, presumably to give me some space, I take advantage of the opportunity to make a call.

I quickly move to the bathroom and pull out the burner phone from where I hid it under a stack of towels before showering.

"Hello?" Clara answers after several rings, her voice a welcome balm to my

frayed nerves.

"Clara, it's Isabella," I whisper urgently, glancing at the closed door just to be sure Stefano isn't within earshot. "I need your help."

"Of course," she replies without hesitation. "What do you need?"

"Can you ask your Illuminati girls to keep an eye on Luca Conti's activities in Mexico? And keep track of how many times and why Juan and he are meeting. I need to know the nature and extent of their relationship," I explain briefly about the Capo's unexpected departure to go deal with my father's killers and my suspicions surrounding his true intentions.

If he really cared to do this for me, he would have allowed me to decide how to serve justice.

Clara agrees, promising to gather as much information as possible and keep me updated. With the call ended, I let out a deep breath, feeling the tiniest sliver of control returning to my grasp.

I quickly move back to the bedroom and as I stand in the quiet cottage, I can't help but ponder the complexities of the world we're tangled in – and just how far I'm willing to go to protect those I love.

# Chapter 28

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# Stefano

**I** sabella slinks into the room, quietly, in nothing but her bra and a pair of shorts. My throat goes dry at the sight of her.

"Stefano, please take me out tonight. I'm going mad cooped up in this place." Her green eyes plead with me.

I run a hand over my face, torn between my duty to the Capo and my desire to give Isabella what she wants. The Capo's been acting strange lately, his orders convoluted and paranoid. But he'd have my head if I disobeyed him.

Yet, look at all those times I followed orders obediently. And now, I'm still not in the loop on why he makes me do what he does.

Fuck it. One night out couldn't hurt. Isabella's been through hell since her father died and even more since she came here. She deserves this small joy and I am no longer in a position to deny her that, like I have so erroneously done in the past.

"Fine," I say gruffly. "But we have to make sure no one finds out. I'll have to sneak you out."

Isabella squeals and throws her arms around me. Her soft, warm body presses against mine, igniting a surge of affection within me. I inhale her sweet floral scent, my hands sliding down to grip her waist.

She pulls back, a coy smile playing on her lips. "Thank you, Stefano. You won't regret this."

My groin tightens at the promise in her voice. Tonight will be torture, being so paranoid of our adventures being discovered. But if it makes her happy, I'll endure the sweet agony and find a way so it doesn't fall on her. Her joy is worth my suffering.

"Go get dressed. Wear something ... comfortable. You might have to hide out in the boot of my car, or sneak out through a crack in the boundary wall. I'm not sure how, but getting out of here could get a little risky," I caress her cheek, my thumb tracing the curve of her smile.

Isabella kisses my palm before slipping out the door, her hips swaying to and fro.

I take a steadying breath and prepare to deceive the guards. For Isabella, I'd move heaven and earth. Her happiness is all that matters now. The Capo and his schemes be damned.



Isabella emerges from her room dressed in a seductive red dress that clings to her curves. Her hair tumbles over her shoulders in voluminous curls, and her lips are painted a sinful shade of crimson.

My breath hitches at the sight of her. She's always been beautiful, but tonight she's radiant, looking like an old-school Hollywood actress. The kind men would slobber over as she walked by.

"How do I look?" She spins, giving me a glimpse of her long, toned legs.

"Ravishing," I murmur, heat pooling in my groin. I ache to peel that dress off her body and explore every inch of her sun-kissed skin.

Isabella smiles, clearly pleased with my reaction. She saunters over and loops her arm through mine. "Shall we go?"

I nod, my throat tight. It'll be torture not being able to act on my desire.

We make our way outside, where my SUV is waiting. Isabella slides into the passenger seat, her skirt riding up to reveal a hint of lace stocking garters.

"Isabella," I remind her.

"Oh right, sorry," she murmurs, going to sit at the back seat of my SUV.

We're almost at the gates. My heart pounds as I slow the SUV, preparing to have Isabella hide. This is madness. If we're caught, the Capo will have my head.

But when I glance at Isabella, desire and determination etched into her beautiful face, I know this is a risk worth taking.

"It's time," I say, my voice rough with longing.

Isabella nods and jumps over the backseat, slipping under the blanket I hand her, concealing herself in the boot just as the guards step out of their booth.

My mouth goes dry as the guards approach, their hands resting on their holsters. "State your business," the taller one demands.

I force a casual tone. "Just going into town on a supply run ordered by the Capo."

The guards exchange a glance, suspicion etched into their features. My heart hammers against my ribs. Have they noticed the extra weight in the boot? The way the SUV seems lower to the ground? I'm just being paranoid.

"And the girl?" The guard's eyes narrow. "Where is she?"

Shit. I grip the steering wheel to hide the tremor in my hands. Now is not the

time to lose my nerve. "Locked up and secure in the cottage also as per the Capo's orders to me, his underboss. Your underboss. Do you question his authority? Or mine?"

The guards shift on their feet, a flicker of uncertainty passing over their faces. To question or disobey an order from the Capo would be fatal.

After a tense moment, the guards step aside. "Apologies, Signore. We did not mean to question the Capo's orders."

I give a curt nod, barely daring to breathe as I drive through the gates and onto the open road. We've done it. We've won our freedom, if only for tonight.

Once out of sight of the compound, I pull over and Isabella throws aside the blanket, climbing over the backseat and then to the front. I crush her in my arms. "We did it," I whisper, kissing her with unrestrained passion. She takes my hand and slides it up her dress. "That's for later," she teases, giving my lower lip a nibble.

Our lips barely part before I begin accelerating the car, eager to put distance between us and the compound. The SUV roars to life and we speed off into the night, the windows down and the warm breeze caressing our faces.

Isabella tips her head back, a joyful laugh spilling from her lips. The sound is more beautiful than any symphony, more precious than gold. I would move heaven and earth to make her laugh like that every day.

"You did it," she says, slipping her hand into mine. Her skin is soft and warm, our fingers locking together as if they were made to be entwined. "You got us out."

"I told you I would." I bring her hand to my lips, kissing each knuckle in turn.

"I would do anything for you, Isabella. Anything at all."

She smiles then, a soft and secret smile that makes my heart clench. "As I



would for you, Stefano." Her eyes meet mine, gleaming emerald in the dim light. "Tonight, there are no Capos. No compounds. No rules. It's just you and me."

"You and me," I echo, squeezing her hand. The rest of the world fades away, leaving only Isabella. She is all that matters. She is all that has ever mattered. I step on the gas even further, speeding through the night as a fierce joy rises within me. Tonight Isabella will be mine, and nothing will keep us apart.

The surge of lust coursing through my veins is almost painful in its intensity.

Once we're on the road, Isabella rests her hand on my thigh, her fingers stroking my inner muscles. "Thank you again for taking me out tonight." Her voice is husky, laced with promise. "I'll make it worth your while."

My cock strains against my zipper at her implication. The anticipation of being alone with Isabella, of finally indulging in my desire ... she'll make me beg for it, I know. But, I shake my head.

"Isabella," I mumble. "However enchanting that sounds, I need you to know that I expect nothing in return for tonight. I just want you to have a good time."

"Please don't be so boring, Stefano," she huffs. "Just play along, okay? It's what I want."

I nod and keep driving, eager to get this night started.



We find a lively nightclub, pulsing with music and writhing bodies. I lead Isabella onto the dance floor, pulling her into my arms. Our bodies move as one, sinuous and sensual, fueled by the heady beat of the music.

Isabella's hands roam over my chest, her touch like fire. I grasp her waist, clutching her to me as we sway together. The heat between us is almost unbearable, our desire as thick and cloying as the smoke in the air.

"I could dance with you forever," Isabella whispers, her breath hot against my ear.

*"E io con te,"* I murmur. *And I with you.*

I crush my mouth to hers, no longer able to resist. The kiss is hungry and deep, filled with a passion that consumes us both.

We break apart, panting. I notice people looking at us. Men, vying for Isabella. Women, aching for how I just kissed her. Little do they know, I have eyes only for the woman in my arms.

Isabella's eyes are dark with longing, reflecting the depths of my own need. I ache to have her, to lose myself in her soft and willing flesh. The music fades away, the crowd disappearing behind a haze of desire. There is only Isabella. Only us, and the burning need that threatens to engulf us whole.

"Take me away from here," Isabella says, her voice ragged. I nod, unable to speak, and lead her from the club into the cool night air. We stumble into the alley behind, coming together in a tangle of searching hands and seeking mouths. The world tilts on its axis, beginning and ending in this single, perfect moment.

Isabella is mine, and I am forever lost.



I pull Isabella into the dimly-lit bathroom behind the club, unable to wait a moment longer. My need for her is a raging inferno, threatening to consume me whole.

"*Dios, te deseo,*" I groan against her mouth. *God, I desire you.*

Isabella whimpers softly in response, her hands tangling in my hair. I lift her onto the edge of the sink, settling between her thighs. The heat of her seeps through our clothes, scalding me.

I tear my mouth from hers, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along the length of her throat. Her pulse flutters wildly beneath my lips, matching the frantic rhythm of my heart.

"Stefano," she gasps, arching into me. The sound of my name on her lips is my undoing.

I yank her dress up and over her head, discarding it on the floor. The garters come off, her lace bra and panties quickly follow. Except for the lace stockings, Isabella is laid bare before me, flushed and wanting.

She is a breath-taking sight.

Hands shaking, I reach for the buckle of my belt, cursing as I struggle to free myself of my clothes. Isabella laughs softly, the sound edged with desire, and pushes my hands away.

"*Déjame,*" she says. *Let me.*

Isabella undresses me with slow, deliberate movements, her gaze never leaving mine. I clench my jaw against the pleasure threatening to overwhelm me as her hands skim across my heated flesh.

When at last I stand, as bare as she, Isabella wraps her legs around my waist and pulls me close. The feel of her soft skin against mine is exquisite torture.

"Please," she whispers, her eyes pleading. "I need you, Stefano."

I can deny her nothing.

With a groan, I thrust into her tight, welcoming heat. Isabella cries out, her nails raking my back. I still for a moment, struggling for control, before beginning to move within her.

The pleasure is blinding, all-consuming. There is no world outside of this room, no reality but Isabella. I lose myself in her completely as we move together, climbing ever higher, chasing a release that threatens to shatter me. Isabella stiffens in my arms, her inner walls clenching around me. "Stefano!" she cries, trembling, as her climax washes over her.

The sound of my name on her lips threatens to make me cum. But, I refrain. I pull out of Isabella, ignoring her whimper of protest, and turn her around to face the mirror. Her eyes widen as she takes in the sight of her flushed, naked body.

"Look at yourself," I growl, gripping her hips. "See how beautiful you are when you're being properly fucked."

Without warning, I thrust into her, burying myself to the hilt. Isabella cries out, her hands scrabbling for balance on the smooth countertop.

We watch each other in the mirror as I pound into her, hard and fast. Isabella's eyes are glazed with pleasure, her full lips parted as she pants for breath. She is the most erotic thing I have ever seen.

The sight of Isabella orgasming for me pushes me to the edge again. Her pussy pulsates against me, tightens around my shaft in short, quick bursts. Her breasts dance as her body trembles and it's a sight to behold. "Oh, Isabella," I moan. "I can't carry on. Condom..."

Isabella reaches behind her and grabs my hips. She holds me in place, and pulls herself off my cock. The next thing I know, she turns around to face me. I can see that perfect arch of her back, that tight, sculpted ass reflecting in the mirror, and I am a man possessed.

Isabella slides down my body, trailing kisses over my chest and abdomen before taking me in her mouth. I groan at the sight of her on her knees before me, giving herself over to pleasuring me so completely.

I bury my hands in her hair, struggling not to thrust into the sweet heat of her mouth. Isabella seems to sense how close I am, hollowing her cheeks as she sucks me hard.

The pressure builds to an unbearable level until I can hold back no more. With a shout, I climax, spilling my warm, thick seed down Isabella's eager throat. She takes it all, only releasing me once I have been wrung dry.

Isabella wipes her mouth on my thigh, a satisfied smile curving her swollen lips. I stroke her hair, filled with a deep contentment I have never known before this woman came into my life.

"Now, let's go back home and do this again, shall we?"

"Fuck," I groan. I grab her dress and pass it to her. Never before in my life have I gotten dressed as quick as I have just now.

# Chapter 29

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# Isabella

I'm dreaming about last night. I kick off the covers, sweat racing down my back as memories of Stefano's hands all over my body distort reality. I arch my back, in my sleep, and dizzying sensations curl between my legs. I'm on my knees ... his hands through my hair, his cock ...

My eyes snap open to the buzzing of my phone. Fear spikes through me. If Stefano finds out I've been hiding a phone all along, there's no knowing what he'll do.

I reach over to my bedside table drawer and fumble to silence it, blood pounding in my ears. I quickly sit up and look around. Stefano isn't in the room, thank god.

This was a close call. It could have ended quite badly for me. I remind myself to never keep the phone on anything but silent.

I creep from the bed and peer out the door. No sign of him. I dart back into the room and lock it, heart racing. I can always say I was taking a shower or something if he tries to enter.

A missed call glares up at me. Clara. My fingers shake as I dial her back. She answers on the first ring.

"Isabella!" Her voice is urgent, excited. My stomach knots.

"What is it?" I whisper. "What did you find?"

She takes a breath. "We tracked Conti from the moment he landed at the airport. He met Juan at a party last night."

My breath catches. Conti and Juan together at a party? Not that unusual.

"They know each other better than you think they do," she continues. "Conti bragged about executing the men involved in your father's murder."

The words hit me like a blow. "He should have left those men for me to deal with," ice filters through my voice, and rage through my blood. "Who were they and how did you find all this out?"

"Straight to business, I see." Excitement edges her voice. "So, we had our girls infiltrate the party as high-end escorts. They cozied right up to Conti and Juan."

My pulse jumps. "And?"

"We picked up some interesting intel. They were chatting about how the men they strung up worked for your father."

"What?" I gasp. "Who were they?"

"We haven't identified them yet. But Conti was bragging about sending a message, taking care of a problem. Sounded like a power play."

I nod slowly, my anger simmering. "Anything on how my father was involved in this?"

Clara pauses. "No, nothing solid yet. But Isabella, the way that Conti and Juan interacted at this party... it changes things. Whatever they're involved in, it goes deep."

"So dig deep," I command.



"We did," I can hear her smile on the other end.

"We began with Juan last night. It's easier to access him than Don Conti. Our girl, Shay, gave him a lap dance, got him all riled up. The guys were cheering him on, telling him to take her home."

I snort. "Let me guess, he did?"

Clara laughs. "Of course. Men are so easy. Anyway, Shay went back to his place, worked her magic with her little sleeping pills."

My stomach knots. "And?"

"While lover was snoring, she hacked his phone. Jackpot." Clara pauses. "Isa, we believe that the men executed weren't actually responsible for your father's murder. Juan and Conti had them killed to cover up something else, and we're thinking it helped them kill two birds with one stone. As long as people believe your father's murderers are now dead, there would be no more reason for the police to keep on investigating."

"What are you saying?" I gasp.

"I'm saying Juan and Conti are hiding a secret and they know who is responsible for killing your father and they're trying to protect the murderer."

Rage coils through me, white-hot. "Proof?"

"Shay found messages planning to make sure the secret never comes out. And others since then, talking about 'loose ends.' Juan's been following up anything that could expose them and making it disappear. Watching how close Conti and he were at the party last night, instinct tells me Conti's running the show from behind the scenes."

My nails dig into my palms. "Expose what?"

"Not sure yet. But we're getting close. I'll keep you updated."

I take a shaky breath. "Good work. Stay on them."

"We will. Be careful, Isa. I'm sending all the evidence we downloaded from Juan's phone to yours. There's an encrypted email on your home screen. Use it and make sure the device never lands in the wrong hands."

Clara ends the call.

The screen glows in the dim room, curtains still closed, as I open the encrypted files. News articles, police reports, photos - all the intel Clara's Illuminati hackers have gathered so far.

My eyes scan for connections, anything linking Conti and Juan to suspicious activity.

I click through photos from the party, zooming in on faces. Conti's sharp features are unmistakable. And there's Juan, grinning as he leans toward a woman. His arm snakes around her waist.

My stomach twists. He's having the time of his life, while leaving me to rot here.

I open the communication logs Clara sent over. Cryptic messages about a meeting, an exchange, eliminating a problem. Coded language, but the implication is clear.

My breath catches as I land on a thread titled "D.T." My father's initials.

Juan: It needs to be done. The men are becoming a liability.

Unknown: I'll take care of it. Clean and quick.

Juan: You better. Or the secret will be out. NO LOOSE ENDS!!!

The messages end there. Bile rises in my throat.

I will find out why and who they killed. I will uncover whatever Juan and Conti are hiding, at all costs. For you, Papá.

I take a deep breath to steady myself, scrolling through more files. Bank statements, travel records, encrypted emails. Pieces of the puzzle, but no clear picture yet.



I get off the bed to go take a long shower. I need more time to think, without letting Stefano know something is bothering me.

Clara's words run through my head. My cousin Juan and Conti are involved in something far deeper than their common goal of protecting me. This makes sense, given how Juan hasn't been bothered by the conditions under which I'm being kept.

The messages Juan shared, with unknown people, to protect a secret seem downright sinister. The secret can't be that they murdered my father's killers for if it was that, they wouldn't openly brag about it.

What secrets are they keeping?

I feel so useless and helpless here. I wish I was back in Jalisco, helping Clara, at the helm of all there is to discover.

For now, however, the most helpful thing I can do is to focus on my mission and not allow anything to derail it.

Just then there's a knock at the door.

"Isa...?" I hear Stefano's soft voice, checking in on me.

"Good morning," I shout back, chirpily. I turn off the water and grab a towel. Stefano can never know for he is now already suspicious of his Capo and if I give him a reason, any reason, I fear he'd erupt and in a fit of rage, do something to confront Capo Conti, which could hinder my plans to spy from the inside.

And so, I put on a smile, saunter over to the door, push it open and lean against the frame, in nothing but my towel.

"Miss me?" I ask lightly, curling a strand of hair around my finger. He eyes me for a moment before reaching over and pulling me close.

"Always," he murmurs into my hair.

My conscience is trying to assert itself. I hate lying to Stefano. But what other choice do I have if I wish to continue while ensuring both he and I remain safe?

# Chapter 30

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# Stefano

The warm sun filters through the curtains, bathing the room in a gentle golden glow. Isabella's soft breaths fill the air as her green eyes dance with mischief.

She's wrapped in my arms, her wavy hair cascading halfway down her back, and I can't help but think how nice it is to spend time alone with her like this – no Capo, no mob politics, no danger. Just us.

"Stefano," she whispers, her lips brushing against my chest. "I never thought we'd have moments like this."

"Neither did I," I admit, tightening my hold on her. With every curve of her body pressed against mine, I realize I'm dreading the day the Capo returns and casts his shadow over our lives once more.

"Promise me something," she says, her voice barely audible. "No matter what happens, never let go of me."

"I promise," I reply without hesitation.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes on the bedside table. The call I've been dreading. The Capo. I sigh and reluctantly pull away from Isabella, reaching

for the device.

"Stefano," the Capo's voice booms on the other end. "I need you to take care of business in Chicago. Felix Carlisi has gotten away long enough for the murder of our underboss and the recent war he brought to our door. It is time to settle the score. You know what I expect."

I clench my jaw, sensing Isabella's worried gaze on me. Of course, the moment of peace couldn't last. It never does.

"Understood, Capo," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'll leave immediately."

"Good," he replies, hanging up without another word.

With a heavy heart, I turn to Isabella, her eyes wide with concern. "I have to go to Chicago," I tell her. "Take care of Felix Carlisi."

"What?" she asks. "Why can't someone else do it?"

"Because, Isa. I'm the underboss. The Capo has entrusted the important tasks to me."

She looks away from me, into the distance. "What about me?" she asks.

"What will I do here without you?"

"You'll come with me," I declare, without second thought. The Capo hasn't clarified what I am to do with her, so I can bend the rules a little.

Her eyes widen, and she hesitates for just a moment before responding. "Are you sure? I don't want to be a burden or get you in trouble."

"Never," I assure her. "I can't trust anyone here to keep you safe, not in the way you deserve. I refuse to let you be locked up in a room again. And I... I want you with me."

"Alright," she agrees quietly, and quickly gets up to pack her things as I do mine.

We make our way to the private airstrip, where a sleek jet awaits us. Once

we're settled in the plush leather seats, Isabella leans over and places her hand on my thigh. "You've been quiet since we left the compound," she says softly.

"Sorry, just thinking," I admit.

"About what?"

"Everything," I confess with a sigh. "This mission, the Capo, you..."

"Talk to me, Stefano," she urges, her voice gentle yet insistent.

"Okay," I start, taking a deep breath. "The Capo wants Felix Carlisi dead for the murder of our underboss and for the war he brought down on us. But I can't help but wonder if there's more to it than that."

"Like what?" Isabella asks, her curiosity piqued.

"I don't know," I admit. "It just feels... off. There's something else at play here, I'm sure of it."

"Maybe we'll find out once we're in Chicago," she suggests, trying to reassure me. Her fingers trace light circles on my thigh, sending shivers down my spine.

"Maybe," I agree, though my gut tells me that whatever we find in Chicago might only complicate things further.

"Stefano," she says, her voice sultry as she leans in closer. "No matter what happens, we'll face it together, okay?"

"Okay," I nod. I want to lean over and kiss her, but I can't with the crew watching over us. I gently remove her hand and gesture at the airhostess. Isabella nods, steps away from me, and goes and lies down in the cozy chair at the back of the plane.





As our private jet descends, I gaze out the window at the Chicago skyline, my heart heavy with the weight of the task ahead. Isabella's soft voice breaks through my thoughts as she walks over to where I am and takes the seat next to me.

"Stefano," she says, turning to face me in her seat. "I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about what you said and before we do anything, I think we should hear Felix's side of the story."

Her suggestion makes sense, but going against the Capo's orders is inviting the devil to dine with you. Still, I can't ignore the nagging feeling that something isn't right about this hit.

"During the war," she continues, "Felix sent a message to Capo Conti. He said he was here only to declare his innocence and asked the Capo to stop attacking his people in Chicago. The war was in retaliation to what the Capo started, Carlisi claimed."

"I remember," I admit, recalling the meeting afterward, once the attack was over, where the Capo had dismissed Felix's plea as a desperate lie. "But the Capo didn't believe him."

"Maybe not," Isabella agrees. "But shouldn't we find out for ourselves? If Felix truly is innocent, killing him will set the mafia families on a path of war for sure. What if we have it in our power to avoid that?"

Her words ring true, and I know she's right. We need to tread carefully, gather information, and make an informed decision before setting off a chain-reaction that cannot be halted.

"Alright," I concede. "We'll collect all the intel we can before making any moves."

"Thank you," she smiles, relief washing over her face.

Our plane touches down in Chicago, and we disembark into the bustling city.

As we check into our hotel, I can't help but feel like danger lurks around every corner. I'm probably on high alert because I have Isabella with me. Keeping her safe is more important than any mission on hand and whatever happens, I can't allow her to be in danger. In our room, we freshen up and prepare for the night ahead.

A knock on the hotel room door interrupts our brief moment of respite. I glance at Isabella, who nods in agreement as I make my way to the door. My contact on the ground, a reliable man named Vincenzo, stands before me, clutching a small package wrapped in brown paper.

"Stefano," he says, his voice low and urgent. "I've got what you need."

"Thanks, Vincenzo," I reply, taking the package from him. He leans in closer, his eyes scanning the hallway for any potential eavesdroppers.

"Word on the street is that Felix Carlisi is having dinner at the Plaza Hotel, just a few blocks from here," Vincenzo whispers, his breath hot against my ear.

"Just be careful, Stefano."

With that, Vincenzo disappears down the hallway, leaving Isabella and me to digest this information and come up with a game plan. I unwrap the package, revealing a sleek pistol, fitted with a silencer – a necessity in a mission like this. Isabella watches me with concern as I check the weapon before slipping it into the waistband of my pants, hidden beneath my jacket.

"Let's go," I say, trying to project confidence despite the unease gnawing at my insides.

This is the first time I'm preparing to deliver a kiss of death to a man I can't call guilty for certain.

The streets of Chicago are alive with activity as Isabella and I make our way toward the Plaza Hotel. The city pulses with a vibrant energy that both

invigorates and terrifies me. We blend into the crowd, just another couple out for an evening stroll, yet our purpose is far more sinister.

"Stefano," Isabella murmurs, her hand gripping my arm as we approach the hotel. "Remember what we talked about – listen to Felix first."

"I know," I reply, my gut twisting with anxiety. "I won't do anything rash."

As we round a corner, I spot them – Felix Carlisi and to my shock, Rosalie Battaglia, standing together on the sidewalk, their laughter filling the air. But it's the child between them, a young girl with a striking resemblance to both Felix and Rosalie, that truly catches me off guard.

"Look," I whisper to Isabella, gesturing toward the trio. Her eyes widen in shock, mirroring my own feelings.

"Is that...?" she begins, but I cut her off.

"Seems so."

We watch as the child tugs on Felix's sleeve, her voice full of excitement.

"Daddy, can you lift me up?"

"Of course, princess," he replies, his voice warm and tender as he hoists the girl into the air, eliciting peals of laughter from her and a smile from Rosalie.

"Stefano," Isabella says softly, her face reflecting lingering pain. "What are we going to do now? He's with his daughter ... he has a daughter."

I stare at the scene before me, my heart heavy with the weight of our mission. How can I kill a man in front of his daughter? And with Rosalie by his side, there must be more to this story than we know.

"Let's wait," I decide, my voice barely audible above the noise of the city.

"We need to find out more before we act."

"Agreed," Isabella whispers, squeezing my hand for support. Together, we stand in the shadows, watching and waiting for our chance to uncover the truth.



The sun dips below the horizon, casting long shadows across the streets of Chicago. I can't shake the image of Felix with his daughter, laughing in the fading light. It gnaws at me, urging me to dig deeper before pulling the trigger.

I never even knew he had a daughter.

"Stefano," Isabella murmurs, her breath warm against my ear. "There's that woman he was with. She's alone."

"Rosalie," I whisper.

Isabella jerks her head at me. "You know her?" she asks.

I simply nod. I follow her gaze and spot Rosalie leaning against a lamppost, scrolling through her phone, oblivious to our presence. This is our chance. Exchanging a determined glance with Isabella, we approach her cautiously, ready for anything.

"Rosalie Battaglia," I say, my voice low but firm.

She looks up, startled, her eyes darting from me to Isabella as she recognizes me. Her expression hardens, but she doesn't back down.

"Stefano Nitti," she replies coolly. "What brings you to Chicago?"

"To be frank," I say, my heart pounding in my chest, "I'm here to kill Felix Carlisi."

Her eyes widen, but she remains composed. "Why?" she asks, her voice steady despite the gravity of my confession.

"Revenge for our underboss and the war he brought upon us," I explain, watching her closely for any sign of deception. "But seeing you with him... it complicates things."

"Does it?" she challenges, raising an eyebrow. "You think I'm some sort of damsel in distress? That I need saving from Felix?"

"No," I admit, remembering the stories I've heard about her - how different she is from her own father, Fronzo Battaglia, the now deceased don of the New York Unit. I've heard rumors of his daughter, Rosalie. How she's smart, cunning, kind. In contrast to her evil father. If there's someone who may help me uncover the truth, it's Rosalie. "But I believe you're a just and fair woman. And that makes me question what I know about Felix."

"Then ask me," she says, her gaze locked with mine, unflinching.

"Are you involved with him?" I ask, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

"More than you can imagine," she replies cryptically. "But that's not what you really want to know, is it?"

I hesitate for a moment, then take a deep breath before asking the question that's been eating at me since I saw them together. "Is that child his?"

"Yes," Rosalie confirms without hesitation, her eyes never leaving mine.

"She's our daughter."

The weight of her words sinks in, and I feel Isabella's hand tighten around mine as we both process this new information. If Rosalie stands by Felix and they share a child, can he truly be the monster we've been led to believe? Would he jeopardize everything, an empire and family, to start a war with Don Conti?

"Stefano," Isabella whispers, her voice laced with concern. "What do we do now?"

"Give us a reason not to kill him," I tell Rosalie, my voice wavering, betraying the uncertainty within me.

"Then listen," she says, her expression resolute. "Because there's more to this story than you've been led to believe."

Before I can press Rosalie for more information, the sound of footsteps echoes from behind us. My heart pounds in my chest as Felix Carlisi himself appears at the entrance of the alley, his eyes locked on me with a mixture of surprise and suspicion.

"Stefano Nitti," he says calmly, taking in the situation before him. "I never thought I'd see your face on the day you came to kill me."

Words catch in my throat, and I can't find any response. I glance at Isabella, who looks just as shocked as I am by his calm demeanor in the face of danger.

"Listen," Felix continues, stepping forward and raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I understand why you're here, but you need to know the truth. I didn't kill your underboss."

"Then why are we hearing otherwise?" I ask, my voice strained. A part of me wants to believe him, but doubt lingers in the corners of my mind. "Why did Capo Conti send me here?"

"Because someone wants you to think I'm guilty," Felix replies, his voice steady and sincere. "But I am gathering evidence that proves my innocence."

"Show us," I demand, my grip tightening on the gun hidden in my jacket. If he's lying, I won't hesitate to pull the trigger.

Felix shakes his head. "I don't want to blame an innocent man just to be relieved of a bullet with my name on it. I don't have concrete evidence as yet, so I will not point fingers. But, if you must kill me still, kill me."

"Felix," Rosalie gasps, reaching for his hand.

"Rosalie told me you two have a daughter," I say, still struggling to wrap my head around the concept. "Are you... are you married?"

Felix glances at Rosalie, who nods in confirmation. "Yes," he says softly, his gaze shifting back to me. "We are."

"How?" I gasp. "Wasn't her father your enemy?"

"He was. But I love her, and I was ready to die for her."

Rosalie smiles at her husband's words, and I begin to realize the true integrity in Felix's statement. This is not a man who holds on to unjust notions. His enmity with her father never stopped him from loving the man's daughter. In our world, that's unheard of.

I look into Felix's eyes, searching for any hint of deception. But all I see is the truth: a man desperate to clear his name and protect his family.

"Give me the evidence," I hold my palm out towards him. "If it proves your innocence, I'll bring it back to Capo Conti. But if I find out you're lying..." I leave the threat unspoken. "You have two weeks. In the meantime, disappear from Chicago. Take your family and go underground. I will have to tell my boss I never found you. That the people who claimed to have sighted you were mistaken."

Felix nods, and Rosalie sighs with relief. "Thank you," says Felix, grabbing his wife's hand and running indoors to collect their daughter, who patiently sat in the lobby, under the watchful eye of her nanny.

As I pocket the evidence, I can't help but feel the growing weight of responsibility. The lines between who's right and who's wrong have blurred, and I'm left questioning not only the sanity of my mission, but my own as well.

# Chapter 31

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# Isabella

The cool Chicago breeze brushes against my face, carrying with it the scents of the city as Stefano and I walk hand in hand back to our hotel. The memory of his decision to spare an innocent man lingers in my mind, and it's one I can't forget.

"Stefano," I say, when we enter the elevator of the hotel to go up to our floor. "I'm proud of you for sparing Felix Carlisi's life."

He shrugs, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his perfect lips. "It was nothing, Isabella. Delivering the kiss of death is never an option in the face of innocence. Of course, he is yet to prove it ... but what is a few more weeks to be certain of a decision this final?"

The way he says this is so endearing, so ingrained in who he is as a person. A white rose in a garden red with spilt blood. Before I can stop myself, the words slip from my mouth: "This is why I love you."

I gasp and take a step back at the realization of what I just admitted out loud. To him, and to myself. Our eyes meet, and I see surprise and tenderness in his dark depths.

"Isabella," he mutters, inching closer. "I love you too."

The next thing I know, our lips are against one another's. The elevator dings open and he lifts me up and carries me to our room.

Stefano closes the door behind us, wrapping his strong arms around my waist. Our lips collide, a passionate dance of hunger and need. His hands roam my body, exploring every curve and contour. He lifts me effortlessly, setting me on the edge of the bed as he kisses down my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

"Isabella," he murmurs huskily, his breath hot against my skin, "tell me what you want."

"Take me, Stefano," I plead, my voice thick with desire. "Make me yours."

Without hesitation, he strips away our clothes, revealing our naked bodies. I take in the sight of him – tall, chiseled, and devastatingly handsome. My body aches with anticipation.

As he positions himself between my legs, he reaches for a condom, sliding it onto his throbbing erection. Then, with a single, smooth thrust, he fills me completely. I gasp, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensation.

We move together, our bodies syncing in a passionate rhythm. Stefano shifts us through various positions, each one bringing new heights of pleasure. From behind, he takes me, gripping my hips tightly as he drives himself deeper into me. Then, turning me onto my back, he lifts my legs over his shoulders, his powerful strokes leaving me breathless.

"Stefano," I whisper, my voice trembling with passion. "I'm so close..."

"Let go, Isabella," he urges, his own breathing ragged. "Come for me."

And with that, we both reach our climax, a tidal wave of ecstasy washing over us. As Stefano's body tenses, I feel him release inside the condom.



Afterwards, lying in Stefano's arms, I can't help but feel a deep blanket of security. The room is dark, illuminated only by the faint glow of the moonlight spilling through the window. His strong arms encircle me, our sweat-slicked bodies pressed together as we listen to each other's steady breaths.

"Isabella," Stefano murmurs sleepily, his voice a soothing balm to my racing thoughts. "You know I'd do anything for you, right?"

"Of course," I reply, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest. "And I'd do the same for you."

Except tell you the truth, the demon in my head screams out loud.

Just as I'm being sucked in by feelings of guilt, his lips press against my forehead. I close my eyes, allowing myself to sink into the comforting cocoon of his embrace, to forget my betrayal. He falls asleep but I stay up, chasing my scattered thoughts into a corner, to try and make sense of how I feel.

How could I tell him I love him when he doesn't even know the full extent of who I am and what I'm doing?

How can I betray him like this?

A shrill sound pierces the silence, jolting me awake.

The landline. Who could be calling at this hour?

My hand trembles as I lift the receiver, pressing it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Isabella," a voice on the other end says, urgency lacing every syllable. "I need to speak with you."

"Who is this?" I ask, my voice barely more than a whisper. "And how do you know where to find me?"

"Meet me in the lobby," the voice continues, ignoring my question. "It's me, Rosalie Battaglia. Please, it's important."

"Wait—" I begin, but the line goes dead, leaving me confused and anxious. Shouldn't Rosalie be with her husband and daughter, running for her life until Felix finds the evidence he needs to prove his innocence?

Why is Rosalie Battaglia risking her life to come speak with me, when Don Conti wants the skin off her husband's neck?

And most importantly, I try to rack my mind, how does she know who I am? Stefano never introduced me to Felix or Rosalie.

I glance over at Stefano, to see if his breathing is still steady, and I make up my mind. I'll go to the lobby, find out what she wants, and then return to the safety of our room.

Slipping out of bed, I wrap myself in a robe, taking care not to disturb Stefano. With one last lingering look at him, I step into the dimly lit hallway, my pulse racing with every tentative footstep.

As I move closer to the lobby, my thoughts spiral, fear and uncertainty twisting together like an ever-tightening knot in my chest. What could be so important that Rosalie would risk everything for this clandestine meeting?

Finally, I reach the edge of the lobby, pausing for a moment to steady my nerves. I can see Rosalie waiting for me, her eyes darting around like she expects ghosts to materialize from the dark corners.

"Isabella," she whispers as I approach, her voice barely audible. "Thank you for coming. And thank god you came alone."

"Rosalie, what's going on?" I demand.

"Please, sit down," she says, gesturing to a nearby sofa. "I have something

important to tell you."

I take the seat, and grasp my hands in my lap.

"Isabella," Rosalie begins, her voice hushed. "I know this is dangerous, but I couldn't keep this from you any longer."

"Tell me," I whisper, desperate for answers. "Please, tell me everything. Starting with how you know who I am."

Rosalie sighs, and looks me right in the eye. "Why," she mutters. "You're a spitting image of your father, Diego Torres. Anyone who's met the man would know who you are. What I want to know is what you're doing with Don Conti's men when you should be here in Chicago, with us."

"What?" I sputter, clutching my chest. "You knew my father?"

"Oh sweetheart," says Rosalie, with an affection that draws me in, stops me from overthinking. "Uncle Diego and we were good friends. We were so sorry to hear about his passing. We wanted to come for the funeral, you know, but just then this whole mess with Don Conti started. The wild accusations of us having his ex-underboss killed. We couldn't leave. We had to protect our territory, our people; protect the truth."

"So," I say, still unable to grasp her meaning. "You knew my father."

"He was the most wonderful man. Now, I must know. What are you doing with Conti? I wanted to ask you that, when I saw you tonight, standing next to Stefano Nitti. But I couldn't for I didn't know if I could trust Nitti. Your safety was of my utmost concern."

"We can trust him," I say, instantly. "He's good."

"He's fair," Rosalie corrects me. "But that's all I will say of him. I can't trust Conti or a single man in his organization which begs me to question, can I trust you? Do you work for Conti?"

"No," I gasp. "Never. My father was murdered and I believed I would be in

danger if I stayed back in Mexico. The murderers might come back for me. My cousin sent me to America and said we have friends here. Don Conti would protect me. He was close with my father. I've been in his protection ever since."

Rosalie's face goes ashen white. "Isabella," she whispers, a dreadful expression of horror on her face. "Your father hated Luca Conti. Whoever told you Conti was your friend?"

In this very instant, I should panic and run; beg for aid. Instead, a strange sense of relief washes over me. All those months of doubt, of knowing Conti has no interest in protecting me, are validated.

I give Rosalie a smile and whisper. "I knew it."

Rosalie shakes her head, too shocked to ask for more information. And I? While validated, I've seen far too much to just trust anyone who wanders into my life.

"Rosalie, how do I know I can trust you?"

She gazes at me intently, her eyes searching mine for any hint of doubt. "Isabella, I know it's hard to let your guard down, but I promise you, I'm on your side."

"How do I know?"

"For I was once in your shoes too."

Rosalie takes a deep breath and begins to share her story. A tale of loneliness and escape, of the crushing weight of family expectations and the desire to break free from the chains that bound her.

As I listen intently, I can't help but see parallels between our lives – two women struggling to find their place in a world filled with lies and betrayal. Her story resonates deep within my soul, stirring emotions I've long kept buried.

"My father, when I refused to marry a corrupt, power-hungry man of his choosing, chased after me when I escaped. I had to take a different name, a different identity. I was all alone in the world, betrayed often by people who I thought I could trust. That was, until I met Felix." She smiles.

"You see, Isabella. Felix was the one person I thought I could never trust, for he was my father's sworn enemy. But when seeming friends turned foe, and seeming foe turned lover, I realized that I would never be able to understand whom to place my faith and trust in, until I learn to trust myself. So there, instead of asking me how you can trust me, Isabella, do you trust yourself?"

I sit there, stunned, forced to look within. As Rosalie's kind eyes search my face for my answer, I am compelled to trust her. From the little time I've spent with her, I've assessed two things.

Rosalie Battaglia Carlisi and her husband are not cowards. They stood right in front of their assassin and declared their innocence. Second, when Rosalie should have run, she came to talk to me.

Instead of hiding, she reached out to a woman she believed needed help, the way she did, once upon a time.

"I trust you," I declare firmly, looking her straight in the eye. "And myself."

"Good," she claps her hand twice. She extends a hand to me. "Come with me, please. I will do everything to protect Diego Torres's daughter. My husband and I, we'll introduce you to your father's friends. We'll get you back to Mexico. Together we'll unravel whatever secrets you're trying to unravel by yourself."

For a brief second, I'm tempted to just run with her. They're powerful people. They can get me a new passport, a flight back, an army.

But my father's face comes to mind, and with that Luca Conti's and Juan's. Those two betrayed me. Juan betrayed my father.

I want revenge, and I want it doled out by my hands.

For now, my plan is working. Staying close to Conti's affairs has helped me uncover things he wishes would remained hidden. Given that, I can't run now.

"Rosalie," I mutter. "Thank you, truly. For coming here, for telling me all you know, for offering me help. I cannot express how much that means to me. Knowing my father was not involved with a criminal like Conti as my cousin would have me believe. Your words have lifted a stone from my heart."

"But I'm not leaving. I'm trusting myself to learn what I need to learn. There's a woman, Clara, in Mexico, who is loyal to me. She may reach out to you if I need aid."

Rosalie looks disappointed, but nods her head. "All the best, Isabella," she hugs me, and on a parting note she adds, "remember, the Carlisi family and I are loyal to you. Any hint of trouble, reach out, okay?"

"You stay safe too. Hide, until this mess is over. Conti doesn't forget easily." She nods and turns on her heels, surveying the lobby before rushing out and entering the car parked right outside.

I, on the other hand, wonder if I've just made the biggest mistake of my life by not taking her up on her offer to rescue me.



I walk back to my room, the weight of uncertainty dragging slow my steps. Darkness envelops the room as I slip back in, careful not to disturb Stefano's slumber.

"Trust yourself first," Rosalie's words a haunting echo in my mind.

I pick up the burner phone and go to the bathroom. I call Clara.



"Hello?" A voice answers, its tone laced with impatience.

"It's Isabella Torres," I say, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I need your help."

"We've been waiting for your call," she replies, a hint of amusement creeping through. "What do you want us to do?"

"Find out everything you can about my father's connections. For some reason, we trusted Juan when he said Conti was loyal to my father. I need you to discover who was truly loyal to my father, with a special focus on Felix Carlisi and Rosalie Battaglia," I recite my tale to Clara, urgency evident in my words. "I need to know who I can trust."

"Understood," she says. "If I learn we can trust the couple, do I have the green light to make them our allies on ground in America on your behalf."

"You do, Clara."

She cuts the call.

I go back to bed, and slide in next to Stefano. I stare at him, through the shadows in the dark. My heart wrenches. How long can I keep pretending, keep another secret from Stefano?



Dawn's first light creeps into the room, casting long shadows on the walls.

"Good morning," Stefano murmurs, his eyes fluttering open. He reaches out for me, but I pull away before he can touch me, feeling a pang of guilt as I do so.

"Morning," I reply, my voice strained. "I need to get ready."

If I am to betray Luca Conti soon, or seek revenge, I can't let Stefano get near again. One wrong step and my plan can blow up in my face. He could do

something reckless to try and help me, or he could let something slip by error to one of Conti's men.

What kind of a relationship am I building, based on lies and secrets?

In that very moment, I make a decision. This thing with Stefano has to be called off. At least until I can be honest with the man. I have to do this for him ... for us if I want us to have a real fighting chance somewhere in the future.

Because I know Stefano Nitti well enough to recognize he might forgive me hurting him right now, in pursuit of truth. But not if I carry on like nothing is wrong now, only for him to learn the truth later.

If I continue the way we are, I could risk ruining my mission and will lose Stefano.

Stefano studies my face with obvious concern. "Everything alright?"

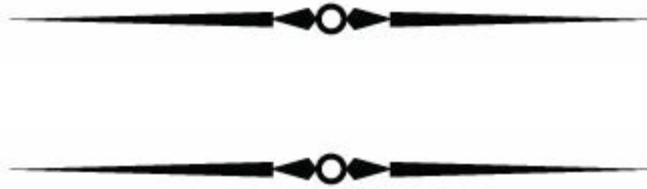
"Of course," I lie, forcing a smile onto my lips. "Just tired, that's all. Let's just go back to New York. I'm done with Chicago."

What I want to say, but don't as yet, is I'm done with you too. I can only make this clear once I'm back in New York because I don't want to be stuck in a long conversation on our flight back.

# Chapter 32

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# Stefano



The car pulls up outside the compound, tires screeching on the pavement. Isabella grabs her bag without looking at me and jumps out before I can even open the door for her.

I follow, a knot of tension twisting in my gut. She told me she loved me just last night, but everything feels different now. Off.

She hasn't given me more than one-word answers since we woke up this morning, and she's tried to stay as far away from me as possible. In the taxi to the airport in Chicago, she had her airpods on and she pretended to be asleep during the flight here.

And now, in the taxi? She was silently staring out of the window the whole time.

Isabella strides ahead, her heels clicking sharply against the paved pathway to my cottage. I jog to catch up, reaching for her arm. "Isabella, wait."

She jerks away. "I think the Capo is back." Her voice is flat, emotionless.

"We need to talk about this." I gesture between us. "Is something wrong? Did I do something that scared you off? Has something happened between us that I don't know about?"

"There is no us." She looks away, a strand of inky black hair falling across her cheek. "Last night was a mistake. I shouldn't have said what I said."

The knot in my stomach tightens, throbbing with anger and disappointment.

"I don't believe – What we shared – it meant something."

"It didn't mean anything." Her green eyes are shards of glass, cold and sharp.

"I got caught up in the moment, but we want different things, Stefano. We're from two different worlds."

I shake my head, grasping for words that might break through the wall she's erected between us. But she's already walking away, her heels echoing down the empty pathway.

I stand alone, my hands curled into fists. She's wrong. What we have can't be dismissed so easily.

This is only the beginning.



I pace the floor of my office, unable to focus. Isabella's words play on a loop in my mind.

*"It didn't mean anything.*

*We want different things.*

*We're from two different worlds."*

Bullshit. She felt the connection between us too, I know she did. There's no way to fake that kind of passion. That kind of fire.

My hands clench at my sides. I should never have let her walk away like that. I should have fought for her, made her see reason. Instead, I just stood there on the sidewalk, stunned into silence as she retreated down the path and into my cottage.

And I? I stationed guards outside her door and ran toward the mafioso to see if they needed me for something.

Coward.

I slam a fist into the wall, pain exploding across my knuckles. Anger wars with desperation inside me, tangled up so tightly I can't tell them apart.

How could she do this? How could she make me care for her, make me believe we were building something real together, only to rip it all away?

I think of the softness in her eyes when she looked at me, the sweetness of her kiss, the warmth of her body curled against mine.

It couldn't have all been lies, for if those were lies, then someone better hand her a fucking Oscar. There's something on her mind she's not telling me.

My chest aches as if my heart has been carved out while still beating. I never should have trusted her. I should have known better than to fall for a woman like Isabella Torres.

But even now, all I want is to see her again. To touch her, hold her, make her take back the hateful words she threw at me. I want to lose myself in her embrace again.

I slam my fist into the wall once more, welcoming the pain. Anything to distract from the torment inside. From the truth I don't want to face.

I'm in love with her. And there's not a damn thing I can do about it.



When I get home in the early afternoon for a quick bite, I find Isabella in her room, curled up on the window seat with a book. Like nothing has changed. Like she didn't rip my heart out just hours ago.

Anger flares hot inside me and I stride across the room, pulling the book out of her hands. "We're not done talking about this. Why have you been acting so cold and distant since this morning? Last night you told me you loved me – in the elevator – and now you can't even tell me what changed?"

She jerks away from my touch, green eyes flashing. "Because there's nothing to say."

"You can't just do this, Isabella. You can't make me care about you and then push me away."

"I never asked you to care," she spits.

The words hit me like a slap and I step back, stunned. She's right, she never asked for my heart. She never promised me hers. I was a fool to assume otherwise.

"Just leave me alone, Stefano," she says wearily. "Go back to your life and forget about me."

I stare at her, this woman who has turned my world upside down. And I know then, with a certainty that steals my breath, that I will never be able to forget her.

She has my heart, whether she wants it or not. And I'm not giving up on her. Not yet.

"I won't give up on you," I say softly.

Her eyes flash. "I'm not something for you to win."

"Maybe not." I reach out, brushing her cheek gently with my fingers. "But you're something I'm willing to fight for." [Ma1] [Ma2]



I try to lose myself in the daily operations of the compound, the renovating and restructuring after the attack, but my mind keeps drifting to Isabella.

Luca notices my distraction and pulls me aside, concern etched into his brow.

"You seem...off, Stefano. Spit it out."

I open my mouth to reassure him but the words refuse to come. How can I possibly tell him the truth?

"It's nothing," I say tightly. "Just...thinking of how upset Don Conti will be when he finds out I didn't carry out the mission."

"There's something more you're not saying," Luca studies me with knowing eyes, seeing far more than I wish to reveal. But he is my oldest friend, my confidant in all matters - there are no secrets between us.

Well, almost none.

With a heavy sigh, I unburden my heart to him - about some girl I met in Chicago at a bar. I can never tell him it's Isabella Torres, our Don's prized possession. The fictionalized tale pours from my lips before I can stop it, the ache made fresh again in the telling.

I know I'm lying to my mentor, but perhaps telling him will lessen the pain and draw his suspicions far away from me and Isabella.

Luca listens without judgment, as he always has. When I fall silent, he grips my shoulder in a show of solidarity.

"You care for this woman deeply," he says gently. "Anyone can see that, Stefano. The question is, does she return your affections?"



I shake my head. "I do not know. At first...at first I thought she did. But now..." I trail off.

"Now you are unsure," Luca finishes for me. His gaze turns calculating, weighing the situation with care.

"Pursuing a relationship with her would be dangerous, my friend," he says at last. "You are the underboss of New York's most powerful crime family. Getting involved with a civilian, particularly one not from this world..." He leaves the implication hanging heavily in the air between us.

"I know," I admit. "But when I'm with her, I can almost forget who I am. Who we both are. It feels like more than just desire, Luca. Like maybe..."

"Destiny?" His lips quirk into a wry smile. "You have always been a romantic, Stefano. But we live in a world that has no place for romance. Tread carefully here - your heart is not the only thing at stake." He fixes me with a scrutinizing stare.

His advice, though sound, provides little comfort for my situation. The path before me is shrouded in shadows. All I can do is grope blindly forward, and pray I do not stumble.



After the day's work is done, I make a decision. I cannot function the way I've gone about things today. Isabella has been on my mind, all the freaking time. I'm going to walk back in there and gently ask her to tell me what's wrong.

I don't believe she just flipped her switch. There's something more to her sudden change in mood.

As I jog back, my phone rings. Luca Conti wants to see me.

# Chapter 33

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# Isabella

**M**y heart aches as the weight of my emotions threatens to overwhelm me. Stefano, with his chiseled jawline and dark, mysterious eyes, has captured my heart in a way I never thought possible. The thought of spending time with him this evening, after the stunt I pulled to push him away, haunts me.

For the first time since I've come to New York, I pray the Capo pulls me out of Stefano's cottage, and puts me back in the main house, renovations be damned.

As I sit in Stefano's cottage on the compound, the guards outside making their presence known, my phone vibrates with an incoming call. The screen displays Clara's name, and I answer hesitantly, unsure of what news she might bring.

"Isabella," her voice trembles.

"Clara, what is it?" My heart races in anticipation.

"There is something you need to know. Your father... he discovered gold under his land before he died. And Juan... he betrayed you. But we don't have

much time. You need to get out of there."

I grip the phone tightly, "Clara, what do you mean? Gold? Juan?" I can feel blackness crushing in on me, glad I'm already sitting. "Clara, please, I don't understand. What do you mean I need to get out of here?" I beg, my voice barely a whisper.

"Your father, during site inspection for digging water wells, discovered gold on his land. Yes, gold. Your multi-billion empire could be worth dozens of billions. Juan knew about this. One of the mining company employees let it slip up as casual gossip, but really wanted to make a quick buck and took advantage of that piece of information."

My mind still cannot comprehend what she's telling me. "Clara, how did you discover this?"

"Folks who owe Illuminati favors," she replies. "Isabella, Juan had your father killed out of greed."

Her words feel like a knife in my chest. Didn't Juan know how much Papa loved him? How could he have my father killed! The thought that my own cousin could deceive my father, his own uncle, so deeply floods me with anger and disbelief.

My body starts shaking from uncontrollable rage and shock. I struggle to hold back tears and my voice cracks as I ask, "and Conti?"

Clara's voice has softened but she still speaks with urgency, "Juan wanted the gold for himself. He made a deal with Don Conti to kill you once the papers for the gold were in order. You see, Juan wanted a double murder that day he had Diego killed. But when everyone at the funeral pledged loyalty to you, Juan realized he wouldn't be able to get rid of you so easily without being discovered. Juan also knew that if you died, he'd get the land by power of the will since he's next of kin. And so, he made a deal with the devil. Conti

wanted in for the gold, but first wanted the gold verified. On this trip to Mexico, he saw that the gold exists. He then got rid of the three men who discovered the gold for your father and now, having signed the agreement with Juan, he's returned to New York to kill you, Isabella. You need to get out of there, right now!"

I stand, with shaking hands I randomly pick a few items I can't live without. A photo of Papa. His sweatshirt. Confusion, fear and cold fury course through my veins. "Juan... my own cousin, he did this?" I choke on the words, unable to comprehend the extent of his treachery.

"Yes, Isabella. I'm so sorry." Her voice is thick with emotion, but it does nothing to quell the anger building within me.

"Clara," I say, my tone hardening as I swallow down tears. "I want him dead. I want Juan to pay for what he's done. Can you help me?"

"Isabella, are you sure about this? You know there's no going back." The concern in Clara's voice only serves to fuel my determination.

"I have never been more certain of anything in my life. He killed my father and planned to kill me. He doesn't deserve to live." My words are ice-cold, like the resolve that has taken hold of my heart.

"Alright, Isabella. I'll contact my hacker girls. Leave it to us. We'll make sure he pays for his betrayal."

"Thank you, Clara."

"Isabella," she replies, her tone filled with determination, "Now listen to me very carefully. I investigated and discovered you were right. The Carlisis were good friends with your father. My father told me so himself. We planned your escape. The Carlisis are sending help. Just stay put and be ready to move when they arrive."

"Thank you." My mouth is dry, my hands clammy, but somehow I manage to

swallow my fear and focus on the task at hand. "I'm still at Stefano's cottage."  
"We know."

I look out the window, scanning the compound for any sign of my rescuers. Time seems to crawl, each second a painful reminder of how vulnerable I am. Then, as if appearing out of thin air, I see several men dressed in black approach the guards stationed outside my cottage.

"Clara, they're here," I whisper, my heart racing.

"Good," she replies. "Wait for their signal, then make your move."

My fingers grip the edges of the window sill, knuckles white as I watch the scene unfold before me. The men sent by the Carlisis move with lethal precision, eliminating the guards in mere moments. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for their lives lost, but I know this is my only chance.

As the last guard falls lifeless to the ground, one of the men in black looks up at my window and gestures for me to come down. This is it – my opportunity to break free from this nightmare.

"Clara, they've taken care of the guards. I'm going."

"Be safe, Isabella. We'll be waiting for you on the other side."

"Thank you, Clara. For everything."

I end the call and quickly sling the bag over my shoulder. My legs feel like jelly as I descend the stairs, but I force myself to keep moving. The door creaks open, revealing the moonlit path to freedom.

"Miss Torres," one of the men in black whispers, "we need to move quickly. There isn't much time."

"Right." My voice is barely audible, trying to make my feet move as fast as they can without making a sound.

As we race through the darkness, I can't help but think about Stefano, about how much I've lost and how much more I'm about to lose.

I never even left him a note.

When will I see him again?

Will he worry about me?

"Stay close," one of the men instructs, his eyes never leaving the path ahead.

The men move deftly, guiding me through the shadows toward the compound's perimeter. Their movements are fluid, their faces expressionless, but I can sense their urgency, and it only adds to my own.

Then, in the boundary wall, is a single, gaping hole. We slither out through it and I see the car the men point me to.

The world around me is a blur as I sprint toward the distant glimmer of a parked car. My heart hammers in my chest, and my lungs burn from the exertion, but I refuse to slow down. This is my chance for freedom, and I can't afford to waste it.

As I approach the vehicle, the passenger door swings open, revealing Felix and Rosalie, their faces etched with concern. Their presence brings an unexpected warmth to my frigid heart, and I can't help but feel grateful for the allies I've found in them.

"Get in!" Felix urges, his voice strained with urgency.

I dive into the backseat, and Rosalie immediately wraps her arms around me, offering a comforting embrace that I didn't know I needed until now.

"Thank you," I whisper, my heart pounding in my chest. "Both of you... I don't know what I would have done without your help."

"Isabella," Rosalie murmurs, her warm breath fanning across my cheek.

"You're not alone anymore. We're here for you, and we'll do everything we can to keep you safe."

Felix nods solemnly from the driver's seat, his eyes meeting mine through the rearview mirror. "We won't let anything happen to you, Isabella. You have

our word. Your friend Clara told us the truth, about what happened to Diego and we swear, we will seek revenge for our dear friend."

For some reason, I begin to sob. These are the warmest, kindest words I've heard from anyone's mouth since Papa passed. For I know that Felix Carlisi means what he says, unlike the people I've been trusting so far.

Had it not been for Clara, and now, Felix and Rosalie, I would be dead in a gutter somewhere. My once lonely heart is now surrounded by an army of protectors. I know if Papa's watching over me right now, he's not worried.

As the car roars to life, I sink back against the seat, letting the adrenaline slowly ebb from my body. For the first time in months, I allow myself to hope – hope that there might be a way out of this nightmare, hope that justice will be served, and hope that there's still a chance for the life I once knew to be reclaimed.

But as we speed away from the compound, my thoughts inevitably drift to Stefano. What will become of him? Can he ever forgive me for pushing him away? For leaving without telling him?



The night sky stretches above us, an inky black canvas scattered with tiny, twinkling stars. I stare out the window of the car, watching as the landscape blurs into a dark, indistinguishable mass. For a moment, I forget the danger we've just left behind and the vengeance that drives me forward.

"Isabella," Felix says softly from the driver's seat, glancing at me through the rearview mirror. His eyes are filled with concern, and I realize I've been clenching my fists so tightly that my knuckles have turned white.



"Sorry," I mumble, forcing myself to relax my grip. "I'm just... overwhelmed, I guess."

Rosalie reaches over and gently squeezes my hand. "Of course you are. We can't even begin to imagine what you've been through."

"Thank you both for being here," I say, the words catching in my throat. "I don't know what I would do without you right now."

"Hey, we're family," Rosalie reminds me, her voice warm and comforting. "We'll always be there for one another."

I nod, feeling a lump form in my throat. It's been so long since I've allowed myself to be vulnerable, to let down my guard and lean on someone else. But Felix and Rosalie's unwavering support gives me the strength to do just that, if only for a brief moment.

"We'll make Juan pay for what he's done, right?"

"Absolutely," Felix replies, his tone fierce and determined. "He won't get away with it."

"Count on it," Rosalie adds, squeezing my hand once more.

As the car speeds down the empty highway, my thoughts turn to my father, the man whose love and guidance shaped me into who I am today. His murder at the hands of Juan, the very person he considered a son, is a betrayal that cuts deeper than any wound.

I close my eyes, allowing the fury to engulf me like a storm.

"Juan won't know what hit him," I vow, my voice low and steady. "He'll pay for everything he's done, and then some."

"Damn right he will," Rosalie agrees, her own anger evident in the fire that flickers behind her eyes. "And we won't forget about Don Conti either."

And just then, out of the blue, it hits me.

I sit up and wipe away my tears. "Wait," I whisper. Felix looks at me through

the rearview mirror.

"What is it, Rosalie?" he asks.

"You said you were coming for my father's funeral, when Don Conti falsely accused you of murdering his ex-underboss and declared war on you?" I ask Rosalie.

She nods, looking confused.

"What if," I whisper, and Felix catches on to my drift. He cuts me out, his face ashen-white.

"What if it was a ploy to keep us from meeting you at the funeral and letting you know you had allies in America?"

I nod.

"That bastard," Felix whispers my thoughts. "I had evidence Don Conti was behind his own ex-underboss's murder, but I couldn't understand why. I couldn't believe it to be true for what Don would do that to his own men? This is exactly why I asked Stefano Nitti to get more time, to find better evidence, for I couldn't identify a motive for Conti to murder his own right-hand man. And now, everything makes sense. He's even more cunning than we thought. They've been planning this for goodness knows how long."

"Which means taking Conti down will be harder than we thought," Rosalie bemoaned. "It's clear he's been two steps ahead of us the whole time."

# Chapter 34

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# Stefano

I step into the Capo's office and I'm immediately struck by the heavy scent of cigar smoke swirling through the dimly lit room.

"Stefano, have a seat," he says, gesturing to the chair across the grand oak desk he sits at. I do as I'm told, and anxiously wait to know why I was called here.

Has he learned I let Felix Carlisi go?

"Isabella's father's murderers," the Capo begins, his voice measured, "we found them, and they've been dealt with." He pauses, watching my reaction closely. "I want you to bring Isabella to me. She deserves to hear the news."

I can barely register what I'm hearing. "So, she's free to go now?"

The Capo nods, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "Yes, Stefano. She is no longer in danger."

The weight of all the sleepless nights melts right off me. Isabella is safe – that's all that matters.

"Thank you, Capo," I say, my voice filled with relief and gratitude. "I'll go get her right away."

"See that you do," he replies, leaning back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. "And tell her... I'm sorry for what she's been through."

As I stand up and turn to leave the room, my mind races with thoughts of Isabella. She'll finally be free of this nightmare, and we can start rebuilding our lives together. Maybe once she regains semblance to normalcy, things between us too, can heal.

"Stefano," the Capo calls out just as I'm about to exit the office. I glance back at him, my hand resting on the doorknob.

"You did good work, son."

I bow my head, ever-so-slightly. There's something that happens within me when he calls me son. No matter how angry I've been at him, the word itself replenishes my soul, makes me feel like I belong.

I hurry through the grounds of his grand estate. My emotions are waves, crashing into one another – relief and guilt – relief for Isabella's newfound safety, and guilt for ever doubting the Capo's intentions.

"Stupid," I mutter to myself, my steps quickening. I regret not trusting him from the beginning. I should have given him the benefit of the doubt, after everything he's done for me, for us, for his *familia*.

Perhaps when he said it doesn't matter if Isabella dies, he was just overwhelmed in the moment, looking out for his mafioso. There was a war on, after all and what is it that Don Conti always says? When at war, let all blood spill but the family's.

And of course, Isabella isn't his family. We protected her, but she wasn't a part of us. He was always looking out for us, and I let my fears cloud my judgment.

I burst through the heavy doors of the cottage.

"Isabella!" I call out as I enter. "Isabella, it's me! It's Stefano!"

There's no answer. She's still upset with me, about us. That's fine, things can be mended later but I can't wait to see her face when she learns she's safe. Her father's killers have been given the kiss of death. I run up the stairs, two at a time.

"Isabella, please," I plead as I pound on her door. "We need to talk. The Capo – he's found the men who killed your father. They're dead, Isabella. You're safe now."

No response.

"Please let me in," I say softly, my words barely audible above the sound of my own heartbeat. "Let me make amends. Let me be there for you, like I should have been from the start."

And with that, I turn the knob, ready to fight for the love we both deserve.

The door creaks open, and my heart drops like a stone. The silence is deafening, the emptiness of the room looming before me.

"Isabella?" I call out, stepping inside with caution. My voice echoes back at me, mocking my hope that she'd be here.

As I move deeper through the room, I notice some of her things missing. Premonition is a strong guide to intuition and I run to the window. I spot something through the window – a glint of a metal rod in the bushes outside.

What's that doing there? My stomach churns with dread, and I sprint down and out the door, leaving it open behind me.

"Isabella!" I shout again, desperate for her to answer, to tell me she's alright.

But the only response I receive is the sight of the bodyguards, crumpled and lifeless among the foliage. Blood pools around their still forms, and bile rises in my throat.

"Shit," I whisper, staggering backward. "No, no, no."

Panic grips me like a vice, constricting my chest and stealing my breath.

Isabella is missing, and these men – the Capo's trusted protectors, Isabella's bodyguards – are dead. My skin prickles with fear, and my mind races with possibilities.

"Think, Stefano, think," I mutter, forcing myself to calm down. "She could be anywhere. She could be..."

I can't bring myself to say the words out loud. But the thought of Isabella hurt – or worse – drives me to action. I pull out my phone, my fingers shake as I dial the Capo's number.

"Capo," I blurt out the moment he answers. "Isabella's gone. The bodyguards are dead."

"Dammit," the Capo curses, his voice laced with anger and concern. "Stay there, Stefano. I'll send more men to help you search."

"Capo, what if—" I try to say, but he cuts me off.

"Don't think like that," he snaps. "We'll find her. I promise."

The line goes dead, and I'm left standing in the doorway, crushed by the weight of my guilt and fear. If I had just trusted the Capo from the start, would we be in this mess? Would Isabella still be safe?

"Forgive me, Isabella," I whisper into the silence, my voice shaking. "I swear I will find you. No matter what it takes."

And as I wait for the Capo's men to arrive, I cling to that promise, hoping against hope that it's not too late to save the woman I love.



I pace the living room, my heart pounding in my chest. The Capo's men are on their way, but every second that ticks by feels like a lifetime. I can't just stand here doing nothing. Isabella could be out there, scared and alone.

"Isabella!" I shout as I burst out the front door, desperation driving me forward. My eyes dart around the surrounding area, searching for any sign of her – a discarded item, a broken branch, anything that might lead me to her. The wind whispers through the trees, carrying my plea away into the night. There's no response, only silence.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, my frustration mounting. "Where are you, Isabella?"

I sprint down the path, scanning the ground for footprints or any other clue that might indicate where she went. My mind races with possibilities – was she taken? Did she leave willingly? Why would she go without telling me? Suddenly, an idea strikes me. The cottage has CCTV cameras – maybe they caught something that can help me find Isabella. It's a long shot, but it's all I've got.

"Please let there be something," I pray as I race back inside the cottage, pulling up the security footage on my laptop.

I scan through the footage, my heart hammering in my chest as I search for any sign of Isabella or her abductors. Every minute that passes feels like an eternity, and with each passing second, my hope begins to wane.

"Come on," I hiss at the screen, desperation gnawing at me. "Show me something, anything..."

I fast-forward through the CCTV footage, my fingers trembling over the laptop's touchpad. Every second counts.

"Come on," I mutter under my breath, sweat beading on my forehead. "Where are you?"

The footage from earlier this evening catches my eye – there she is, exiting the cottage, standing behind the cottage. A sigh of relief escapes me, but it's



short-lived as I see two menacing figures approaching her. Felix Carlisi's men.

My heart sinks like a stone, and I replay the scene, hoping I'm mistaken. But there's no denying it – they're taking her away and she's leaving, willingly.

I rewind, and there are the gunshots, killing our men.

At the hands of Carlisi's guys.

"Isabella, what have you done?" I whisper, my voice filled with disbelief and despair. The sense of betrayal cuts deep, stinging like a thousand knives. Was she working against us all this time? Using me, using the Capo, to further her own agenda?

And Felix Carlisi? I spared him his life and in exchange, he took some of ours?

"Damn it, Isabella," I curse, slamming my fist against the wall. The pain radiating through my hand is nothing compared to the ache in my heart. Anger and fear simmers within me, threatening to boil over.

But now's not the time for rage or self-pity. I need to find Isabella, confront her, and uncover the truth – whatever it may be.

She betrayed me, and so did Felix Carlisi.

Now I wonder, why did she let me turn her against my Capo? Against the man who raised me as his own? Against the man who went out of his way to avenge her father's killers?

Reality merges with memories, and I am no longer able to trust how I'm seeing things. The door opens to my cottage.

"Stefano, what's going on?" a voice calls out, and I turn to see Mario, one of the Capo's men, approaching me swiftly.

"Isabella," I say through gritted teeth. "She's gone. She also got our men killed," I add.

"Damn," Mario looks shocked. Still, he pulls out his walky-talky, barking instructions to retrieve and identify the bodies and secure the perimeter.

"Well, what do you want us to do," he mutters, running a hand through his hair.

I clench my fists, weighing my options. "Help me find her," I tell him, my voice hoarse with emotion. "We have to know if she's really working with Carlisi or not."

"Are you sure? You're risking a lot for someone who might've betrayed us." His eyes search mine, gauging my resolve.

"Damn it, I need to know!" I shout, frustration bubbling over. "I can't let her go without knowing the truth."

Mario nods, understanding. "Alright, let's start looking then. We'll split up and cover more ground."

"Thank you," I mumble, appreciating his support despite the uncertainty that plagues me.

As we part ways, I replay the memories of Isabella and me together – her laughter, her touch, the way she looked into my eyes with such intensity. Was it all a lie? Did she ever truly feel anything for me, or was I just a pawn in her game?

And whatever could her game be?

# Chapter 35

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# Isabella

The sterile scent of bleach and polished wood fills my nostrils as I pace the hardwood floors of Felix Carlisi's NYC hideout. I'm waiting for Clara to pick up my call, since the last thing I told her was I want Juan dealt with.

"Isabella," Clara's voice crackles through the phone, her tone urgent. "I was just about to call you. They got Juan."

My breath catches in my throat. So they did what I asked. Resignation overwhelms me. A man, my cousin, just died at my hands and I need to know how. "What happened?"

"An assassin from The Illuminati, posing as a call girl. They had sex... she rode him until he was almost there, and then..." Clara hesitates, her voice barely above a whisper. "She placed a rose between his lips while she rode him, slit his throat out of nowhere just as he was about to cum. He climaxed while he choked to death, the blood splattered all over her body." "An assassin from The Illuminati, posing as a call girl. She got him naked, bound and gagged under pretense of some kinky sex." Clara hesitates, her voice barely

above a whisper. "She placed a rose between his lips, told him *'Isabella won't be attending your funeral'* then slit his throat and watched him choke to death."

A shudder runs down my spine, but not from disgust; it's from a thrill that terrifies me. Anger, betrayal, and relief intertwine, forming a sick satisfaction at Juan's gruesome end. He can no longer harm me or anyone else.

While I should be repulsed by these details, they satisfy me. I begin to fear who I'm turning into, but after what Juan did to my father ...

"Clara, are you sure?" My voice trembles, the weight of the news sinking in.

"Positive. The assassin showered, cleaned up all the blood, covered his body, and left a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door before slipping away. The Illuminati doesn't mess around."

"Thank you for telling me, Clara." My fingers grip the phone so tight it feels like it'll shatter.

"You deserved to know, you called for this. Stay safe with the Carlisis." She hangs up, leaving me alone with the knowledge that my cousin is dead.

I press a hand against my chest, trying to steady my erratic heartbeat. I should be horrified. Instead, I'm filled with an unsettling excitement that gnaws at me, making me question myself – am I truly safe from the same darkness that claimed Juan?

"Isabella? Are you okay?" Felix's voice calls from the doorway, as he notices my erratic breathing.

"Juan is dead," I say, my voice wavering. "Killed by an assassin."

"Good riddance," Felix mutters, and I can't help but agree. But still, there's that nagging question rising deep within me. What does this mean for me, and for those I love?

I try to justify it by reminding myself of the fact that I hurt Juan like he hurt

my father.

But then, my thoughts drift to Stefano, and the love we once shared. He never hurt me, so why did I keep all those secrets from him, running away without a note even? A part of me still yearns for him despite the lies and betrayal that have come between us, due to the things I've done. The lies I've spewed. Am I slowly becoming evil, with regard for nothing but seeking my revenge? "Isabella?" Felix repeats, his gaze searching my face. "You look like you're about to collapse."

"Sorry," I say, forcing a weak smile. "It's just... hearing about Juan's death. The details, they..." I trail off, unable to find the right words to express how I feel. "They didn't scare me."

"Listen," Felix says gently, placing a hand on my shoulder. "You've been through so much lately. When in doubt, remember, he was dangerous, and dangerous people must be dealt with, often in ways unfathomable to most. That is how you keep the peace."

I nod slowly, knowing he's right.

"Come now. Let's have breakfast."

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries fills the air as I sit down at the breakfast table with Felix and Rosalie. For a moment, it almost feels like a normal morning – or as normal as life can be in hiding. Their daughter, who is staying over with a trusted friend in Chicago calls.

Once they end the call, Felix gets down to business.

"Alright, let's go over what we know so far," Felix flips open his laptop.

"Juan was working with the Capo to murder my father, and they had struck some kind of deal," I begin, my voice steady despite the anger that still threatens to bubble over. "But we need to find out the exact terms."

Rosalie nods, her eyes narrowing in determination. "If we can prove their

involvement, it will give us leverage against the Capo."

"Exactly," Felix agrees. He pulls up a series of documents on his laptop, evidence collected from various sources – hacked emails, covert recordings, and insider tips. It's a tangled web of corruption, but together, we're determined to make sense of it all.

"Here's something interesting," Felix says, pointing to a spreadsheet on his screen. "It looks like the Capo was promised 70% of the extracted gold, while Juan would receive the tequila production, land, and 30% of the gold."

"Greedy bastards," I mutter, clenching my fists. How many lives were destroyed for their twisted ambitions?

"Once we reveal the truth, we can tell the world how Diego Torres died. No one will trust Don Conti once we're done. This'll hit him where it hurts the most, diffusing his network of trusted allies."

I nod, but my mind drifts to Stefano. A part of me wonders if he too will suffer when Don Conti's world crumbles apart. If only there's a way to protect him.

The sound of the door creaking open startles me out of my deep thoughts. I glance over at Felix and Rosalie, who seem just as alarmed. Two of Felix's men enter the safe house, their faces tense.

"Boss, we've got some news," one of the men says, looking directly at Felix. "The Capo is still searching for Isabella, even after everything that's come to light."

I feel a shiver running down my spine. Why would the Capo continue to hunt me down? What could he possibly want from me now?

"Are you sure?" Felix asks his men, his voice tight with concern.

"Positive," the other man confirms. "We intercepted some of his communications. It looks like he's not giving up anytime soon."

"Isabella," Felix says, pulling me from my thoughts. "We'll figure this out, okay? Don't worry about the Capo. We'll keep you safe."

My emotions rage within and I need to know if –

"Isabella, you're quiet," Felix observes, his gaze filled with understanding.

"What's on your mind?"

"Stefano," I confess, barely above a whisper. "Is he looking for me too?"

"Si," the associate nods. "He's with Don Conti and Nitti is running his own unit to find you."

The room feels suffocating, as if the air has been replaced by thick smoke. My hands tremble in my lap, and my breath comes in shallow gasps. I try to focus on the sound of rain tapping against the windows, but it does nothing to ease the storm brewing inside me.

"How could he?" I wonder out loud. After all this time together, I thought he'd let me escape, find my peace. But now, he's shaking hands with my kidnapper and father's murderer once again, like there never was anything between us.

"Isabella?" Rosalie's voice breaks through my thoughts. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure," I reply, forcing my eyes to meet hers.

"Look, I understand that you're afraid of Stefano now," she begins cautiously.

"But have you ever considered what the Capo might have told him? What if he's been manipulated into thinking he needs to find you for some reason?"

I hadn't considered that possibility. A flicker of hope ignites within me, but I quickly douse it with a surge of doubt. "What if Stefano just pretended to care about me while working with the Capo?"

"Isabella, I've heard about Stefano Nitti in our circles for a long time. He's always been loyal, but he is also fair and just. He bought my husband time to



fight for his life, something I can never forget. And from everything you've told me while living with us these last few days, I genuinely believe he loves you." Rosalie reaches out to take my hand, her grip firm and reassuring. "You have to ask yourself: do you truly think Stefano would betray you like that?" My heart aches at her words, torn between wanting to trust Stefano and fearing the consequences if I'm wrong. The love we once shared feels like a distant memory, tainted by uncertainty.

"Maybe he doesn't even realize he's being used," I whisper, voicing the possibility aloud. "But how can I be sure? How can I risk everything on someone who might not even remember who I am?"

Rosalie releases my hand, her expression softening. "You can't, Isabella. You have to protect yourself first and foremost. But just know that if there's even a chance Stefano is still on your side, it's worth looking into."

"Isabella," Felix says softly, his eyes meeting mine. "I know this is difficult, but you're strong. You will get through this."

"Thank you," I reply, my voice wavering only slightly. "I just... I have to keep reminding myself why I'm doing this, what I have to sacrifice to survive."

As if losing my father wasn't bad enough, I feel sheer rage at the realization that I might have just lost Stefano too.

Don Conti has taken far too much from me, and I will let him take another thing from me. I will get my revenge, however dark it might be.

# Chapter 36

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# Stefano

I've had my men looking for Isabella everywhere. During the day, I feel sheer anger toward her. She left without even saying goodbye. Why did she tell me she loved me, to only stab me in the back? Where has she gone? Why did she go with Felix Carlisi?

Whatever is going on in that head of hers and why didn't she trust me enough to ever speak to me about it?

The nights are the worst. At night, I reach over to what used to be her side of the bed, pretending I'm in conversation with her. I tell her I'll forgive her. I beg her to let me find her, just so I can ask her what I need to do to get closure.

My phone vibrates, and I snatch it up without hesitation; anything to get my mind off Isabella. The Capo's voice is cold and sharp.

"Stefano, there's been a development," he says without preamble.

"Sir?"

"Isabella Torres. I've uncovered something troubling about her involvement in Diego's murder. She's not what she seems."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to speak. "What do you mean, sir?"

"It's not pleasant, I fear. I've obtained a paper trail implicating Isabella in paying the men who killed her father. It appears she wanted access to his empire sooner than time intended." His voice drips with disdain, and I can almost see the sneer on his face. "Her coming to America under the pretense of seeking protection? A clever ruse to divert suspicion."

The words hit me like a tidal wave – cold, unforgiving, and relentless. I struggle to process the information, and my mind races to make sense of it all. Isabella, the woman I've come to care for deeply, accused of orchestrating her own father's demise?

"Are you certain, sir?" I ask hesitantly, unwilling to accept the possibility.

"Without a doubt. I'd stake my reputation on it." The Capo's confidence is unsettling. He's not one to make baseless accusations or act on a whim. This must be serious.

"Give me a moment to process this, sir." I close my eyes, trying to push away the image of Isabella's face as it morphs from innocence to something darker, more sinister. But I can't – not entirely.

"I was shocked too, after everything we've done for her," the Capo says, his voice almost gentle now. "But remember, Stefano... Loyalty above all else."

The weight of the Capo's words crushes my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I lower the phone from my ear, staring blankly at the wall, as a hurricane of emotions swirls within me. Shock, disbelief, and a sense of betrayal all jockey for dominance in my mind.

"Stefano?" The Capo's voice snaps me back to reality. I quickly put the phone back on. "I understand this is difficult, but you know what must be done."

"Capo," I manage to choke out, "are you suggesting that I...?"

"Eliminate both Isabella and Felix Carlisi," he says unflinchingly, his tone

cold and resolute. "You have the resources, the skills, and most importantly – my trust. Assemble a team. Do it discreetly and efficiently."

My heart thuds heavily in my chest, a sickening feeling curdles in my stomach. I've been loyal to the Capo for years, but I struggle with the thought of carrying out this order against the woman I love.

"Capo," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, "is there any chance of a mistake? That someone else manipulated the evidence to frame her?"

"Unlikely," he replies curtly. "But if you find substantial proof to the contrary, I will reconsider my decision. Until then, however, you are to proceed as instructed."

The line goes dead.

I sink into a nearby chair, gripping the armrests to steady my trembling hands. My thoughts race, desperately seeking a way out of this nightmare.

Images of Isabella flash through my mind – her green eyes sparkling with mischief, her laughter ringing like a bird's call of freedom, the warmth of her touch as she reaches for my hand.

"Damn it," I whisper, slamming my fist against the armrest. The pain barely registers.

I don't know if I can go through with it – taking the life of the woman who has come to mean so much to me, who haunts my dreams and turns my days without her presence into a living nightmare.

But I also can't ignore the possibility that she may have betrayed us all. And that 'loyalty above all else' is the only way to keep it from happening again.

With a heavy heart, I rise to my feet and begin the grim task of assembling a team to eliminate Felix Carlisi. His two weeks are up as is, he kidnapped my woman, and I'm not sure if the Capo is right, but I swear Isabella would never kill her own father.

Right?

Unless someone put her up to it.

And maybe that someone is Felix Carlisi.

The tension in my chest tightens as I pick up the phone again. My heart races, torn between love and loyalty, and I struggle to find the words that could save Isabella's life. He picks up.

"Capo, please," I plead into the phone, gripping it tightly in my hand. "I know Isabella; she's not capable of this betrayal. There must be a mistake."

"Stefano," the Capo's voice is firm, unyielding. "You are my most trusted soldier, but even you can be blinded."

I grit my teeth, frustration boiling inside me. I need to make him see reason, but how? I rack my brain, searching for any shred of evidence that could exonerate Isabella.

"Her father was everything to her," I insist, my voice cracking with emotion. "She wouldn't have killed him for power or greed. She came to America because she needed protection, not to escape suspicion!"

"Stefano, we have proof," the Capo replies, his tone unwavering. "Isabella might have fooled us all, but the evidence speaks for itself. You know what needs to be done."

My hand trembles as I clutch the phone, pain and anger coursing through me. I glance at a photo of Isabella on my desk, vivacious, green eyes smile back at me, and it feels like my heart is being ripped apart. Such an impossible choice!

"Capo, give me time," I beg, my voice barely above a whisper. "Let me investigate further, let me talk to her. There must be another explanation. What if Felix Carlisi put her up to it?"

"Do as you're told, or I'll kill her myself." The line goes dead.

I tried saving her, but that's backfired in my face.

I slump against the wall, the weight of my decision pressing down on me. Time is running out, and with it, any hope of saving Isabella. And yet, despite the overwhelming odds, I can't help but cling to the belief that she's innocent – that together, we can find a way to overcome this nightmare.

But if I'm wrong, and Isabella truly is guilty... Will I have the strength to do what's necessary? Or will my love for her destroy everything I've fought so hard to protect? Impossible to know that now. Only once I've found her, and discover the truth, will I know what I must do next.

# Chapter 37

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# Isabella

I jolt awake, gasping for air, my heart pounding in my chest. The nightmare was far too real – I stood over Juan and Conti's lifeless bodies, blood on my hands, laughing maniacally.

Sweat clings to my body as I shudder, feeling the darkness that's seeping into my soul. I can't let this continue. It was petrifying, the amount I seemed to enjoy watching their demise in my dream.

The next morning, I find Felix sitting alone in the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee. He looks up at me. I take a deep breath and sit down across from him. "Felix," I begin, keeping my voice down. "I've made a decision." He leans forward, giving me his full attention. "I want to spare Conti's life and find some peace."

"Are you sure?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Juan was the one who killed my father," I explain, my voice growing stronger with conviction. "He deserved what happened to him. But Conti... I don't want any more blood on my hands. I need peace now."

Felix tilts his head, trying to understand where I'm coming from. "Isabella," he says. "There are many ways to deal with him."

"But why should we?" I ask, louder than I needed to. "He fell for Juan's tricks. Juan orchestrated everything. Conti's only folly is greed. If he's willing to stop looking for me and to forget about my empire and the gold, then I see no reason as to why we shouldn't move forward. Do you?"

Felix nods slowly, taking in my words. "Alright, Isabella. If that's what you want, we'll go to Don Conti's compound and ask him to stop looking for you."

"Thank you, Felix," I say, feeling relief wash over me. This feels right, like something the old Isabella would do. [Ma1]



"Stay safe, you two," says Rosalie, giving us both quick hugs. Felix nods and he and I enter his bullet proof Hummer. An entire convoy with us in the middle. We're taking his men along, just to be safe.

We drive up to Don Conti's compound, the fortress-like structure looming ominously over the surrounding open space. The gates open slowly, allowing our convoy of cars to enter. Felix's mafioso surround us as we make our way towards the entrance, their faces telling us they're ready to attack.

As soon as we step out of the car, Conti's men appear from seemingly every corner, weapons drawn and pointed at us. I feel my heart race, and I force myself to remain calm, reminding myself that I'm here for peace, not bloodshed.

"Isabella Torres," one of the men calls out, his voice filled with disdain. "You have quite the nerve showing your face here."

"Enough!" Don Conti's commanding voice booms from behind the group of armed men. They part to reveal him, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, his salt-and-pepper hair slicked back. He signals for his men to lower their arms, but the air remains thick with suspicion. "Escort our guests to my office."

Felix and I exchange glances before following Don Conti, flanked by both his and Felix's men. With every step, I can feel the weight of their distrust and animosity. It's as if they're all waiting for one wrong move that will send everything spiraling into chaos.

Yet, even in the midst of all this danger, I only have eyes for one person. Stefano Nitti. I look everywhere, but his face is missing from the crowd.

Where is he? I need to find him alone and tell him the truth. Beg for forgiveness, pray for a chance at reconciliation.

We enter Conti's office and I send a silent prayer that he might accept our offer of peace. If Conti were to accept my proposal and make peace with me, then there would be no reason for Stefano to not give me another chance.

Inside his office, Don Conti takes a seat behind his desk, gesturing for us to sit down across from him. The room is dimly lit, casting eerie shadows on the walls, and I can't help but think of my nightmare.

Once this is done, I can close the door on the past and move on.

"I must admit, Isabella," Don Conti says, his voice deceptively smooth, "I didn't expect to see you here, especially after what happened to Juan and how you ran after everything I did for you. So, tell me, what does bring you to my doorstep today?"

"Peace, Don Conti," I reply, my voice steady despite the fear clawing at my insides. "I've come to ask you to stop looking for me."

"Is that so?" He raises an eyebrow, his gaze never leaving mine.

"Juan was the one who killed my father," I explain, feeling my resolve

strengthen. "He paid for his crimes. But you, Don Conti... I want no more blood on my hands. I just want this all to end."

For a moment, silence fills the room, punctuated only by the ticking of an ornate clock on the wall. Then, Don Conti leans back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Very well, Isabella," he says finally, although his eyes betray a lingering wariness. "Let us discuss the terms of this arrangement you seek."

"It's not an arrangement. It's peace I'm here for."

"Peace," Don Conti repeats, his lips curling into a sinister smile. "That's an interesting word coming from you, Isabella."

My heart skips a beat at the sudden shift in his demeanor; I knew this wouldn't be easy, but that look in his eyes makes my skin crawl with an uneasy feeling.

"Tell me, Isabella," he continues, his voice dripping with malice, "do you really think I would just let you walk away? After everything you did?"

"Juan is dead because he killed my father," I insist, trying to keep my voice steady, "not you. We can put an end to this violence."

"Ah, but you see," Don Conti says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the desk, "there's still the matter of the gold. And now, with Juan out of the picture, your lands are up for grabs as well. No, my dear, I'm afraid I can't let you go that easily."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I feel a cold dread settling over me. I glance over at Felix, whose jaw is clenched tight, his eyes narrowed in anger.

"Then what do you want?" I ask, fighting to keep desperation out of my voice.

"Simple," Don Conti replies, smirking. "I want both of you dead."

Before any of us can react, he pulls a gun from beneath the desk, aims it at my head, I try to shield myself and in the middle of all that, he fires a shot straight into my abdomen. The pain is immediate and searing, as if someone has set my insides on fire. I gasp, clutching at the wound, my vision dimming around the edges.

"Isabella!" Felix shouts, lunging towards me as chaos erupts around us. Conti's men and Felix's mafioso clash, a cacophony of gunfire and shouts filling the room.

"Stay down!" Felix orders, shielding me with his body as he returns fire. I can barely think through the pain, but I know I have to do something, anything to help us escape this nightmare.

My hands, slick with blood, fumble for a moment before finding a fallen gun on the floor. I grip it tightly, trying to steady my aim despite the agony tearing through me.

"Isabella, no!" Felix yells, but I don't listen for my eyes are on Conti, who is once again aiming at me and Felix. He's about to pull the trigger when I ...

I pull the trigger, my aim unsteady but somehow true. The bullet finds its mark and Don Conti staggers back, his face a mask of shock before he crumples to the ground. Dead.

It's done. It's over. And yet, all I can feel is the cold numbness of dread, the realization that I've just taken another life. Just like in my nightmare.

"Isabella!" Felix shouts again, reaching me just as I let go of the gun, my hands trembling. I killed him. I killed a man, just like in my nightmare. But this isn't a dream – it's real, and I can't take it back.

"Stay with me, Isabella," Felix pleads, his hands applying pressure on my wound, trying to stem the flow of blood. The pain intensifies, but I force myself to focus on his voice. "You're going to be okay."

I want to believe him, but we're trapped in a whirlwind of violence, and men fighting for their lives. I can't see any way out.

"Bring the car up front!" Felix yells at one of his men over the din. "We need to get her out of here!"

"Can we make it?" I ask, struggling to keep my voice steady. The taste of copper fills my mouth, bile rising in my throat. Felix looks at me with determination in his eyes.

"We have to try."

The world swims before me, darkness creeping in from the edges of my vision. Panic wells up inside me, the weight of what I've done pressing down on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I've crossed a line that can't be uncrossed – and now, it feels like everything is falling apart around me.

"Stay with me, Isabella," Felix repeats, his voice strained but reassuring. "Just stay with me."

"Okay," I whisper, my voice barely audible, my breaths getting shallower and shallower. "I'll stay with you." I have to believe I'll survive this.

As Felix pulls up my legs so he can lift me into his arms, my gaze shifts from the ensuing war around us to the entrance of Conti's office. There, amidst the turmoil, stands Stefano – his dark eyes locked on mine, expression unreadable.

"Stefano," I whisper, barely able to form the word. My heart clenches at the sight of him, a mixture of relief and terror coursing through me.

He's here at last. I can finally share the truth with him.

"Keep pressure on the wound," Felix instructs me urgently, keeping a watchful eye on Stefano. I press my hand against my abdomen, trying to stem the relentless flow of blood. The pain is unbearable, but as Stefano draws closer...

# Chapter 38

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# Stefano

The Capo's body slams to the ground, blood spilling from his chest.

The world presses in around me, my eyes darting to the origin of the gunshot – Isabella, lying on the ground with Felix behind her, gun raised, smoke still swirling from the barrel.

No, it can't be. She... she just killed him? I've defended her time and time again, loved her with every breath in my body. And now? She's murdered the man who was like a father to me. The only man who ever called me 'son'.

"Isabella!" The word rips from my throat as I run toward the Capo, raw and unbidden. I take his head in my lap. Shock courses through my veins, freezing me in place.

Green eyes flicker up to meet mine, the anger in them only adding fuel to the fire raging inside me.

"Stefano... I..." Her voice trembles, but I don't want to hear anything else. It was her. All this time, the Capo tried to warn me, protect me even. He told me she'd killed Diego, her own father... I refused to believe him. Now, the truth is staring me in the face.



"Isabella, how could you?" Rage boils over, spilling out into every word. "He never hurt you! He tried to protect you, and you... you killed him? For what?!"

Her lips part, but no sound escapes. She just stares at me, tears brimming in those emerald eyes that once held so much love for me. But now, I see them differently. Those eyes belong to a greedy, cold-blooded killer.

"Stefano, please," she whispers. "You don't understand."

"Understand?" I snarl. "What's there to understand, Isabella? You took a life, a life I cared about more than you'll ever know."

"Stefano..." Her voice cracks, and I see the desperation in her eyes. But it's too late. She's made her choice, and now she has to live with the consequences. And I have to live with the knowledge that I opened my heart to a murderer.

The chilling realization hits me like a bullet - she is capable of murder.

"Is it true?" I demand, my voice hoarse from the whirlwind of emotions. "Did you kill your father too?"

Her eyes widen in disbelief and Felix flicks his neck toward her, his face one of confusion, but she doesn't answer. She won't even look at me. It's all the confirmation I need.

"Stefano, no," she finally manages, her voice a mere whisper. But her words hold no weight, and I can't trust them anymore.

Before I can say anything else, Felix rushes over to her side, his face etched with concern. As he lifts her into his arms, I notice the blood staining her clothes, seeping into the fabric like a dark secret.

My mind races, attempting to piece together the puzzle. Was she shot during the altercation? Did the Capo manage to fire back before he died?

"Who did this to you?" I ask, my voice betraying the tiniest hint of worry

despite the anger still simmering inside me.

"Stefano...it doesn't matter," she murmurs, her gaze locked on the crimson stain spreading across her side. "I'm fine."

"Fine?" I scoff. "You're bleeding, Isabella. Who shot you?"

"None of your business," she says, her tone turning icy. That familiar stubbornness rears its head, and I can't help but wonder if it was what led her down this path in the first place.

"Isabella, please," I plead, my voice cracking under the weight of our shattered past. "Tell me who did this."

"Leave it be, Stefano," Felix interjects, his arms cradling her gently. "We need to get her out of here."

"Fine," I spit out, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

"Stefano, listen," she says, turning her head toward me. "Please let me explain. The Capo truly isn't who you think he was. You must know the truth."

Just then, from the corner of my eye, I see Fernando, my friend, getting shot and falling to the ground. Even the slightest sympathy I felt at seeing Isabella's blood-soaked shirt now dwindles away.

She caused this, by getting together with Felix Carlisi. She and Carlisi's men came in here, and now they're killing my family.

No. I'm done with patience.

"You bastard," I say, walking up to Felix Carlisi. "You've all caused enough damage. Stop this madness. The Capo is dead, and your men are still murdering in broad daylight. Have you no shame?"

Felix hangs his head, as though in embarrassment, but I see right through it. He's not embarrassed. He's just playing me, like he's done in the past. Right

now, I want nothing more than to rip his heart out of his chest, to kill him here and now.

But I can't, for I have no one to take orders from and I want this chaos to end, not carry on.

"Get out," I tell Felix. "Take your men and leave. You got what you wanted, whatever it was. Leave now."

Felix nods and takes a step back, Isabella still in his arms. She's gasping for air, in pain, but I don't look at her. I can't look at her because if I do, I'll spit in her face.

"Stefano, wait," she says, as I turn my back to draw my men together. "Please listen," she chokes on air. "I need to tell you the truth."

The truth? This woman is nothing but lies.

"Get out," I spit, without turning back to face them, my voice shaking with fury. "Leave this place and don't ever come back. If I see you again, Isabella... I swear to god, it will be your last day on this earth."

"Stefano," she rasps. "I...I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I spit out, my voice shaking with fury. "You think 'sorry' is enough?"

"Please," she whispers, reaching out to touch my shoulder. "I need you."

The old desire, to hold her and protect her like always, whispers to my heart, but no - she doesn't deserve it. Not after what she's done.

"Run, Isabella," I turn to face her and hiss, clenching my fists so tightly that my nails dig into my palms. "Run and never come back. If I ever see you again, I swear I'll kill you myself."

A choked sob escapes her lips, and for a moment, I see the girl I fell in love with. The vulnerable, passionate woman who once held my world together.

She shakes her head and I pull out my gun to warn her. Her eyes flick to it

and then, her gaze hardens, and I know that part of her is gone forever.

"Fine," she says, her voice barely audible. "If that's what you want, Stefano."

Felix shifts his hold on her, cradling her more securely, and I can't help but notice how carefully he treats her. Did he ever love her too? Or is this just another one of their twisted games?

I watch as Felix carries her out of the room, her body limp in his arms.

As they disappear from view, I'm left with the bitter taste of betrayal and the chaos of my thoughts reflected in the chaos and destruction around me.

How could she do this? And why? The questions swirl around me like ravens, but one thing is clear - I can't trust Isabella anymore. She holds a deadly secret, which she never trusted to share with me. There's no coming back from that.



Isabella, Felix and his men leave the compound. The compound, just this morning a bustling hub of activity, now lies silent and empty. The Capo's death signals the end of this bloody war, but the reprieve is shortsighted, we've lost the person who held us together.

Blood stains my hands. The stench of gunpowder fills the air. Capo's lifeless eyes stare up at me, a final plea for understanding.

"Stefano," someone calls out. I snap back to reality. The room buzzes with urgent whispers and tense energy. "Whoever did this must be punished."

The men look around themselves, nodding furiously. "We saw her. That Isabella Torres. She killed the Capo. We must seek our revenge," Leo pumps his fists into the air.

Seek our revenge? What would that gain? Another round of bullets with our names on it. I need to shut this madness out.

"Get him out of here!" I bark, bringing back our focus from revenge to what's at hand, pointing at the Capo's body. They move quickly, obeying without question. My heart races, anger boiling beneath the surface. I follow the body outside.

"Is it over?" I ask myself, my breath forming white clouds in the frigid air. My heart is heavy with the knowledge of what I've lost - not just the Capo, but belief in the very idea that a man like me could fall in love.

"Stefano." A quiet voice comes from behind me, startling me out of my thoughts. I turn to see one of Capo's most trusted men, his eyes full of sorrow and determination. "Don Nitti," he says, addressing me with a title I never expected to bear.

The world begins spinning around me, as the full realization of what just happened hits me. With Don Conti dead, as underboss, I must take his position. Fuck, Isabella. Look what you've gone and done. In pursuit of your desires, you bound me to a chair I never wanted.

The man still stares at me, head bowed. If I must do this, as Capo, I'll do it differently. I'll take a kinder approach and prevent the bloodshed Don Conti's decisions made.

"Call me Stefano," I reply, unwilling to accept my new position just yet. I can't deny that my life has changed irrevocably, but I cling to the hope that some part of my past remains.

"Don Nitti," the man shakes his head respectfully. "We must discuss our next steps."

"Tomorrow," I say, my voice firm. "Tonight, we bury our Capo. We honor his memory and the sacrifices he made for us all."

"Of course," the man agrees, and together we walk towards the makeshift grave that has been prepared for the Capo.

As we lay him to rest, my mind races with questions and doubts.

"Goodbye, old friend," I whisper as the dirt falls on the Capo's grave, the sound echoing through the darkness. "I promise I will make things right."

With each shovelful of earth, I bury not only the man who was like a father to me but also the last remnants of the life I once knew. Tomorrow, I will take on the mantle of leadership and make difficult decisions, but tonight, I allow myself to grieve.

"Is this really what you wanted, Stefano?" I ask myself one final time, seeking answers in the cold, dark night. But there are no answers here, only the knowledge that my world has been forever changed.

"Perhaps it's not what I wanted," I admit, the truth settling heavy and unyielding in my chest. "But it's what I must do now."

# Chapter 39

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# Isabella

I gasp for breath in the backseat of Felix's car, as blinding, relentless pain sears through my abdomen. Blood stains my hands as I clutch at the makeshift bandage, trying to stem the flow.

"Stay with me, Isabella," Felix pleads, gripping my hand tightly as his driver speeds through the streets. His eyes flicker between the road and me, reflecting his worry at the traffic. "You're going to be okay."

"Is it... bad?" I wince, my vision swimming. The city lights blur together, streaks of color in the darkness.

"Focus on your breathing," he says, avoiding my question. "We're almost at the hospital."

The pain intensifies, threatening to pull me under. I fight to stay conscious, but blackness creeps at the edges of my vision. Snippets of conversation drift in and out of my awareness.

"Gunshot wound... critical condition... immediate surgery..."

"Stefano..." My voice is weak, barely a whisper. He isn't here, and I can't help but wonder what his last words to me were before all of this happened.



Felix's grip feels warm on my cold hand. "Don't think about him right now. Just focus on staying alive, Isabella."

But it's hard not to think of Stefano. With every heartbeat that feels like it might be my last, I imagine his strong arms around me, waking up next to him, smiling at each other over breakfast pancakes, tackling each other with paintbrushes. I reach out to the warmth of his embrace.

"Isabella? Stay with me!" Felix's voice sounds distant, muffled by the fog of pain that clouds my mind. I struggle to keep my eyes open, but the darkness beckons, promising relief.

"Sorry, Felix..." I manage to say before slipping into unconsciousness once more.

The sterile smell of the emergency room assaults my senses as they wheel me in, the bright lights above glaring and disorienting. I force myself to focus on the flurry of activity around me, the doctors and nurses rushing to my side with urgency.

"Isabella Torres, gunshot wound on the abdomen," one of them says, her voice firm but commanding. Rosalia's face flashes right in front of me – her warm smile and soft touch. She's here, she's holding my hand as they wheel me in.

"I'm going to have to leave you here, Isabella," she whispers. "Thank god Felix called me. I'm here, right outside, if you need anything." She lets go of my hand.

"Call Stefano," I beg, trying to reach for her hand again. "Call him..."

"Mrs. Carlisi, you have to leave. You have to leave now," someone guides Rosalie out.

No... she needs to call Stef–

"Blood pressure's dropping," another doctor mutters, his tone tense as he

reads the monitor. "We need to get her into surgery now."

"Stefano..." I whisper again, desperate to remember what he said before all this chaos began. His beautiful face, the one I've held in my hands so many times, haunts the edges of my consciousness, but his words remain elusive.

They lift me onto another bed, strapping me down as the machines beep and whir around me. The surgeon appears, his face unreadable behind the mask as he nods to his team.

"Isabella Torres, gunshot wound to the abdomen," he says, glancing at my chart before looking back at me. "We're going to do our best, but you need to fight, too."

"Administering anesthesia now," the anesthesiologist announces, and I feel a cold sensation in my arm as the medicine begins to take effect. The room starts to blur and spin.

Once more I search for strength in the memory of Stefano. Suddenly, a memory arrives. His anger, flaring. *'If I ever see you again, I swear I'll kill you myself'* An unbearable ache floods my being.

Worse than the gunshot wound, worse than having my father die in my arms, worse than seeing the news of my mother's death on the news when I was just eight years old.

Only a single cry echoes through my mind: Stefano.

"Remember to breathe, Isabella," the nurse reminds me one last time before the darkness claims me completely.



Lost in the depths of darkness, I find myself in a dimly lit room, the air heavy with desire. My eyes search for him, knowing who must be waiting for me

there. And then, like a magnet drawn to its match, my gaze locks with Stefano's dark eyes – intense, full of longing.

"Isabella," he breathes, his voice a sultry whisper that sends shivers down my spine. He moves closer, his tall, powerful frame commanding my attention as every inch of my body yearns for his touch.

"Stefano," I gasp, reaching out to him. My fingers graze his jawline, and the electricity between us sets my skin ablaze. He leans into my touch, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them again to meet mine – a silent plea.

"Please," I murmur, unable to resist the fire that burns within me. "I need you."

With a growl of pure passion, Stefano gathers me up into his strong arms, pressing his lips to mine with a fervor that leaves me breathless. Our bodies meld together as he sheds off my clothes. He kisses my neck and gives it a little nip, before fondling my breasts.

"Isabella," Stefano groans, his grip on me tightening. "You're everything I've ever wanted, and more."

"I love you," I admit, the words tumbling from my lips without hesitation. It's the truth – a truth I've been too afraid to face until now. But wrapped in Stefano's embrace, I feel invincible, alive.

"Ti amo, Isabella," he whispers back, sealing our promise with another soul-searing kiss.

The ecstasy of our connection overwhelms me, and I cling to Stefano as if he's the anchor keeping me from drowning. He pushes me against the wall, spreads open my legs, lifts me against himself, inching into me.

I can feel his cock fill me, and I want it deeper, harder. We move together, lost in our passion, and for once, it feels like everything will be okay.

"Isabella." The voice is distant, barely a whisper in my ear. "Isabella, can you hear me?"

The cold air of the hospital room brushes against my skin, and I shiver involuntarily. My eyes flutter open, the harsh fluorescent light overhead blinding me for a moment.

I'm fully conscious now, the haze of anesthesia and dreams slowly dissipating. My hand instinctively reaches out for Stefano, but finds only empty space.

His words echo in my head, like a haunting melody: "I never want to see you again."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over. That was only just a dream. How did we end up like this? We were once so deeply in love, and now... Now, he's gone, and I'm here – broken, alone, and unsure of what comes next.

"Isabella?" My eyelids flutter as I try to focus on the doctor finding a kind but somber expression. Rosalie follows closely behind him, her eyes filled with concern. "How are you feeling?"

"Where is Stefano?" I ask instead, my voice cracking as the tears spill down my cheeks.

Rosalie approaches hesitantly, pulling a chair closer to my bedside. She takes my hand gently, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "He's not here, Isabella," she says softly, avoiding my gaze.

"Your surgery was successful," the doctor interjects, trying to offer some comfort. "You're going to be okay, but it's important that you rest and allow your body to heal."

"Without Stefano..." I trail off, the pain in my heart overwhelming any physical discomfort. "What's the point?"

"Isabella," Rosalie pleads, her grip on my hand tightening. "You can't give up. You're strong, and I know you'll get through this."

"Strong?" I scoff bitterly, turning away from them both. "I don't feel strong. I feel...empty."

"Maybe you don't feel strong," Rosalie concedes, her voice cracking with emotion. "But you have people who care about you, Isabella. You're not alone."

I let out a hollow laugh. Tears stream down my cheeks, wetting the sterile white sheets as Rosalie's hand squeezes mine. The doctor shifts uncomfortably, a sympathetic, forced smile on his face. He doesn't even know who Stefano is and I can only imagine how I must sound. Like a raging lunatic.

"Isabella, there's something else we need to discuss," Rosalie says, her voice choked with emotion. My eyes snap to hers, searching for answers.

"Tell me," I demand, feeling my heart rate quicken in anticipation.

"During the surgery, we discovered that... the bullet struck your uterus," she hesitates, tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Isabella, but this means you won't be able to conceive."

My vision blurs as shock courses through me. A future I had once imagined – one filled with children and laughter – shatters before my eyes. Defeated, I slump back against the hospital bed, unable to comprehend the implications of what she just said.

"Isabella, there are other options," the doctor interjects gently, attempting to offer some solace. "Once your healing is well on its way, you can discuss these with your doctor. Many couples have successfully built families this way."

"Family?" I spit out, anger boiling within me. "What family? Stefano doesn't

want me, and now I can't even bring a child into this world?"

"Isa, please," Rosalie pleads, her grip on my hand tightening. "You still have a chance at happiness. It may not be the way you imagined, but—"

"Get out!" I scream, yanking my hand away from her grasp, my chest heaving with rage. "Both of you, get out! Leave me alone!"

The doctor and Rosalie exchange pained glances before reluctantly leaving the room, closing the door behind them with a soft click. As I lie here, my body wracked with sobs, I feel the full weight of the devastation that has befallen me.

Alone in the sterile hospital room, I clutch the thin sheets to my chest, tears streaming down my face as a torrent of emotions overwhelm me. My heart feels like it's been ripped apart.

I cradle my wounded abdomen as if trying to hold together the shattered pieces of my life. A sharp, searing pain courses through me, both physical and emotional, making it difficult to breathe.

"Isa, please...you still have a chance at happiness..." Rosalie's words reverberate in my mind, but they offer no comfort. All I can think about is the family I'll never have – the children who will never call me 'mama.'

"None of this makes sense," I sob, my voice cracking under the weight of my despair. "Why did this have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" First Papa, then Juan's betrayal, imprisonment, Stefano...too much. All of this is just too much.

As exhaustion overtakes me, I bury my face in the pillow and cry until there are no more tears left to shed. Sleep finally claims me, dragging me down into its cold embrace.

In my dreams, I wander through a desolate landscape where shadows of my shattered hopes loom over me like dark clouds. I reach out, desperate to grasp

onto something – anything – that might anchor me to a happier reality, but my fingers come up empty.

"Stefano!" I call out, my voice echoing in the void. "Please, come back to me!"

But he doesn't appear, leaving me lost and alone in the darkness. The emptiness gnaws at my soul, threatening to consume me.

"Papa, where are you?" I plead, my voice barely a whisper. "Why won't you save me from this pain?"

# Chapter 40

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# Stefano

I wake up drenched in sweat, heart pounding in my chest. Her image lingers in my mind – Isabella. Her long, wavy hair halfway down her back, those hypnotic green eyes, and that damned voluptuous figure.

"Get a hold of yourself, Stefano," I mutter under my breath. The dream had been too real, leaving me with a mix of desire and frustration. I can't keep living like this. I need to focus on my duties as a mob boss, not some forbidden infatuation.

In my waking hours, I vow to never think of her. What good would it bring, anyway?

Dragging myself out of bed, I get dressed and head downstairs. I've moved into the main house now, but refuse to use the Capo's old chambers. As per my orders, that room is closed to all, including me. It remains a monument in his memory.

My associates are already waiting for me in the main room. I need to show them I'm still in control, even if inside I'm a mess.

"Alright, let's get down to business," I announce, clapping my hands together.

"Nico, any updates on our new shipment?"

"Everything's on schedule, boss," Nico replies, his voice steady. "It'll be here by the end of the week."

"Good," I nod, trying to immerse myself in the details of our operation. I need the distraction. We discuss plans for distribution and protection, and I make sure every member of my crew understands their role.

It helps, but only a little. Every now and then, her face flashes before my eyes, and I have to force myself to concentrate.

"Boss, we've got an issue with one of our suppliers," says Marco, cutting into my thoughts. "He's asking for more money."

"Then deal with it," I snap, irritated by the interruption. "You know what to do."

"Of course, Stefano," he replies, hastily retreating from my anger.

As the day goes on, I try to keep my mind occupied with the countless tasks that come with being a mob boss. I oversee deals and collections, negotiate with suppliers, and settle disputes among my crew.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't escape the feeling that something is missing – or rather, someone.

"Damn it, Isabella," I mutter under my breath, my hands clenched into fists.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?"

But she won't, not as long as she remains an unresolved issue in my life. And I know deep down that I need to do something about it. What that something is, however, still eludes me.



The sun dips below the horizon, casting an orange glow across the city skyline. I lean against my office window, staring out at the world, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness inside me.

"Stefano," a voice interrupts my thoughts. I turn to see a group of mafioso entering my office, their faces set in grim determination. "We need to talk about Isabella Torres."

"Isabella?" The mention of her name sends a jolt through me. "What about her?"

"Her never making herself present here isn't enough," says one of them, a burly man with a thick beard and narrow eyes. "She's still a threat to our organization. We demand justice."

"Justice?" I scoff. "You mean you want vengeance."

"Call it what you will," another mafioso interjects, his fingers drumming impatiently on the back of a nearby chair. "But we can't let her get away with what she's done, killing our Capo. She needs to die."

"Enough!" I roar, slamming my fist on my desk. "This is not about justice. This is about your petty need for revenge!"

"But Stefano—" one of them tries to argue.

"Silence!" My heart pounds in my chest as my anger boils over. "Do you think I don't know what happened? Do you think I don't understand the pain and loss that you feel? But this... This will only lead us down a path of destruction. Killing Isabella won't bring back those we've lost. It won't heal the wounds that have been inflicted."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" the burly man asks, his voice barely concealing his frustration. "Just let her walk away?"

"Listen to yourselves!" I exclaim, pacing back and forth, my mind racing with a thousand conflicting thoughts. "You're blinded by hatred and the need

for revenge. You're no better than those who seek to destroy us!"

"Stefano, we—" one of them starts, but I cut him off.

"Enough!" I repeat, my voice cold and unforgiving. "I will not let you tear this organization apart with your selfish desires. Isabella is not our enemy. She's a pawn in a larger game that we cannot afford to lose sight of."

My words hang heavy in the air as they exchange uneasy glances, their desire for bloodshed momentarily quelled by my outburst. But I know it won't be long before the whispers start again, before their hunger for vengeance returns.

"Get out," I order, my eyes never leaving theirs. "All of you."

They comply without another word, shuffling out of my office, but just before they leave, one of the men whispers to me, "Boss, there's talk of mutiny if you don't act. Just thought you should know."

I stand, shocked and slam the desk in front of me. "Who said what?"



The air is thick with the scent of sweat and cheap cologne as I stride into the dimly lit bar within the compound, our daily watering hole, my eyes scanning the room for the mafioso who dared to defy me.

"Stefano!" someone calls out, raising their glass in my direction. I ignore them, my gaze finally resting on the man I've come for: Antonio, a low-level soldier whose ambitions far outweigh his abilities.

"Antonio," I say, my voice cold and measured as I approach him. He turns to face me, his eyes widening with fear as he realizes why I'm here.

"Boss," he stammers, attempting a smile that comes out more like a grimace.

"What can I do for you?"

"Shut up and listen," I snap, leaning in close so that only he can hear what I'm about to say. The noise of the bar fades away as I focus on my words, each one carefully chosen to cut deep.

"I know you've been talking about Isabella behind my back, calling me weak and fueling fear within the compound."

His face pales at my accusation, but he tries to deny it nonetheless. "I don't know what you're talking about, Stefano. I swear—"

"Enough!" I roar, slamming my fist down on the table, causing glasses to rattle and the people around us to fall silent. "You think I don't have ears everywhere? That your pathetic whispers would go unnoticed?"

"Stefano, please," he begs, tears forming in his eyes. "I didn't mean any harm. I just—"

"Your intentions don't matter," I interrupt, my voice dripping with contempt. "You've disrespected me and insulted the memory of our Don Conti who trusted me to replace him."

The room is deathly quiet now, all eyes on us as I tower over Antonio, my rage barely contained. I can feel their fear, their anticipation of what's to come. And it only fuels me further.

"From this moment on," I begin, my voice low and dangerous, taking his finger and twisting it slowly, "you will never speak her name again. You will cease your petty attempts at revenge and focus on what truly matters: our organization and its future."

"Y-yes, Stefano," he stammers, his face a mixture of pain and fear. "I understand."

"Good." I straighten up, my eyes never leaving his. "Because if I ever hear that you've defied me again, I won't hesitate to make an example out of you."

And believe me when I say that it won't be quick or painless. I might even cut out your tongue," I say, shoving him against the wall. He stumbles and falls.

"Understood, boss," he mumbles, looking up at me from the floor, the fight gone out of him.

As I turn away and walk towards the exit, I can feel their curious eyes on me. Let them stare. Let them talk. Because with each whisper, with each sidelong glance, they'll remember who holds the power in this world.

And as the door slams shut behind me, I can't help but think of Isabella once more, wondering if she'll ever truly escape the ghosts of her past... or if she'll forever haunt mine.



The room is silent when I enter the warehouse the next morning. I can see the unease in the eyes of my associates as they gather around a long table, documents and money scattered about. They glance at each other nervously, their conversations halting when they notice my approach.

"Alright," I say, clapping my hands together and forcing a smile. "What's on the agenda for today?"

"Uh, we have a shipment coming in tonight," one of the men says, shuffling papers before him. "But there's been some... complications."

"Complications?" My voice is sharp, anger always bubbling beneath the surface. "Explain."

"Th-the port authorities are cracking down," he stammers. "They're demanding higher bribes, and if we don't pay up, they're threatening to seize our goods."

"Then pay them," I snap, slamming my fist onto the table, causing everyone to jump. "Do whatever it takes to get that shipment in. We can't afford any more delays. Why the fuck are you all so damn incompetent? Do I have to spoon feed you everything?"

"No, boss. W...we'll do it."

"Good," I say, with an edge to my voice. "For if you are incompetent, just know that I can't fire you. It's the mafia, and there's only one way you get to leave..." my threat hangs in the air. I let it.

I walk out of the warehouse, leaving the door open behind me.

"Stefano," a voice calls out, causing me to pause. It's Leo, one of my oldest friends and most trusted associate. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure," I say, forcing a smile, though my chest tightens with anxiety[Ma1] .

"Look," he says, searching my face for any sign of emotion. "I know how much Isabella meant to you, but this... this isn't you. You're letting your emotions control you, and it's affecting everything – our business, our relationships."

"Isabella meant nothing," I say.

"You can lie all you want. But I've seen you, Stefano. It's time you stop lying to yourself."

I nod, slowly. "But I don't know what to do."

"Stefano, I know you're struggling right now," he begins cautiously. "But your actions have consequences, not just for you, but for all of us. People are scared – and not just the ones who cross you. You're isolating yourself, and it's only making things worse."

"Is that your way of telling me I've become a monster?" I snap, already knowing the answer.

"Perhaps, the way you threaten people, the way you attack those who defy

you, it's not a good look," he says, his voice steady despite my outburst.

"But I also believe there's still some part of the man I once knew inside you – the one who cared about people, who wanted to make a difference. It's not too late, Stefano. You can still find your way back."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I don't let it show.

"Maybe you're right," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "But first, I need answers from Isabella. Then, maybe, I can find a way to move forward."

"Let's hope so," Leo replies, clapping me on the back as I rise from my seat.

"Find a way to let her go," he suggests, placing a hand on my shoulder. "If not for yourself, then for all of us who rely on you, for our familia."

I nod, knowing he's right. Somehow, I need to find a balance between the man I've become and the man I once was – for the sake of my organization and my own sanity. But first, I need answers. And the only person who can provide them is Isabella herself.



I pace up and down my room, wondering if I'm about to make a mistake. While I know I should trust la familia, no matter what, I can't. There's only a few I can trust with a matter this secretive.

A knock on my door. "Come in."

"Salvatore," I greet the nervous man standing before me. "I need you to take care of something for me."

"Of course, boss," he replies, barely meeting my gaze. "What do you need?"

"Find out where Isabella is," I say, my voice cold and commanding. "And bring her to me unharmed."

"Y-Yes, boss," he stammers.



"No one must find out. If I hear a single soul knowing about this hunt, I will have your neck for it."

"*Si, boss.*"

Why can't I just forget about Isabella? I ask myself, clenching my fists until my knuckles turn white. Why does she still haunt me after all this time? Maybe because I've become a monster, and it's all because of her. And she is the only one who can put that monster to rest.

I know that the last words I said to her were that I'd kill her if I see her again, but if I see her again, all I'm going to ask for is answers.

And then I can go back to never seeing her again.

# Chapter 41

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# Isabella

**I**t's been three weeks since I was discharged from the hospital. Each day, the pain from the wound heals, and the pain in my heart grows. I always believed people say things in anger, but never really mean it.

I hoped it would have been the same with Stefano when he told me he'd kill me if he saw me.

But I hear he's the Don of the New York Unit now, and he still hasn't called me or made an attempt to see me, which tells me in no uncertain terms that he meant what he said.

I've gone and lost the love of my life, and that kind of pain is one that'll surpass even a hundred bullet wounds.

I sip my wine, trying to get drunk enough to sleep. Without the pills and alcohol, it's difficult to sleep nowadays. The door creaks open and Felix steps in, looking worried.

"Isabella, there's something you need to know," he says, his voice tight with urgency.

I set down my glass and look up at him, searching for answers. "What is it, Felix?"

"Stefano... he's looking for you. And not just him, the New York mafioso – they want revenge for Don Conti's death."

My breath catches in my throat, and my heart feels like it's being squeezed in a vice. Stefano, the man I loved more than anything, is now a threat to my life.

Memories of our last moments together play like a broken record in my mind – his dark eyes filled with anger, his chiseled jaw clenched as he spat out his final words to me.

"Stay away from me, Isabella. If I ever see you again, I won't hesitate to kill you."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Fear coils in my stomach, and I struggle to breathe through the pain of betrayal. He promised to love and protect me, but now he hunts me like prey.

"Are you sure about this, Felix?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Positive. My sources are reliable. You're not safe here anymore. We must leave as soon as possible for Chicago where my mafioso will protect you."

I nod, my mind racing with thoughts of self-preservation. How could Stefano do this to me? After all we had been through together, was it all just a lie?

Fear for my life overpowers the lingering affection I once felt for him, and I know I must face the cold, hard truth – Stefano Nitti is now my enemy.

"Thank you, Felix," I say, my voice faltering with emotion. "You've always been loyal to me, and I appreciate it more than you know. But we're not leaving until I have my plan in place. No more running."



I stare at my reflection in the mirror, green eyes hollow with the weight of betrayal. The memories of Stefano and I together flood my mind, leaving me breathless and questioning what our love really meant.

"Isabella, are you sure about this?" Rosalie asks, her concern evident as she watches me carefully. She hasn't left watch over me since I left the hospital.

"Yes," I reply, my voice firm despite the knot forming in my throat.

My fingers tremble as they grip the edge of the vanity. The image of Stefano's face, once a symbol of love and safety, now haunts me. The tender moments we shared seem like an illusion, a cruel lie that cuts deeper than any blade.

"Then let's focus on your empire," Felix suggests, his determination offering a lifeline amidst the turbulent sea of my emotions.

"Right," I agree, swallowing hard. "The tequila business and the gold mines are my future, not Stefano."

As I say the words, a newfound fire ignites within me. I watch my reflection morph into a powerful businesswoman, ready to conquer the world and create a legacy of her own. My heart still aches, but I've lost enough just to gain back my empire.

I won't go lose that too. I can't do that to Papa.

"Let's make some calls," I say, turning away from the mirror with purpose.

"We have work to do."

We huddle together, phones, laptops and printers working overtime. Discussions with lawyers, accountants, marketing strategists, union reps, all arrangements made to strengthen my businesses and ensure their success.

"Thank you, both of you," I tell Felix and Rosalie, my gratitude genuine. Their loyalty overwhelms me. "Without your support, I don't know where I'd

be."

"Always, Isabella," Rosalie says softly, her hand on my arm. "We're here for you, no matter what."

"Let's move forward," Felix adds, his voice strong and steady. "Together, we'll build your empire and leave the past behind."

"Alright then. First, we must secure safe passage back to Mexico," I reply, outlining my plan. "We'll need protection, as I'm sure Stefano's men will be watching, and other enemies my father might have had, and once word about the gold gets out, we'd have to watch our backs from all four corners."

Felix nods, his dark eyes serious. "I know some people who can help with that. They've got experience dealing with situations like this."

"Good, we'll need their expertise." I pause, taking a deep breath. "Once we're back in Mexico, I want to hit the ground running. We'll need to assess the current state of the tequila company and the gold mines, and then work on expansion."

"Understood," Rosalie says, her fingers tapping away at a notepad. "We'll make sure everything is in place when we get there."

"Thank you," I whisper, grateful for their unwavering support. In this moment, they are my rock – the foundation upon which I will rebuild my life. While it's unfathomable to many, the fact that they've entrusted their daughter's care to their loyal friends just to help me get back on my feet is not lost on me.

"Felix, Rosalie," I almost whisper. "Please know that while I pray that it will never be necessary, if, in the future, there ever is a situation where I can be of aid, I will drop my life and be there."

Rosalie simply squeezes my hand and wipes away a tear while Felix nods. There are no more words to be said between us.



The next morning, I'm in the kitchen, sipping coffee. "Isabella," Rosalie calls out softly, not wanting to intrude on my thoughts. "We've got everything arranged for our departure tomorrow. You'd be leaving on our private jet. The Mexican ambassador has sent over your new passport, since the old one burnt during the attack at the compound."

Rosalie's kindness settles over me like a warm blanket, easing some of the chill that has settled in my bones since learning the truth about Stefano's new position of power. I trust her implicitly, knowing they have no ulterior motives, only genuine affection and loyalty.

"Thank you," I say again, my voice barely more than a whisper. But she hears me, and understands.

"Alright, let's get packing and then some rest," Rosalie suggests, standing up from her seat. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

"Wait," said Felix, who had entered the room while we were talking. We simply hadn't noticed his presence. "There's still a matter of allies and protection to be discussed."

"Let's do this," I reply, my voice steady and unwavering.

Together with Rosalie, we gather around the dining table, where maps of Mexico and various documents are spread out. Our mission today is clear: secure loyal protection for my journey back to my homeland.

"Alright, Isabella," Felix begins. "We've identified several potential allies who have both the resources and the motivation to protect you."

"Good," I say, scanning the names on the list. "But remember, they must be trustworthy. I can't afford any more betrayals." My heart clenches at the

thought of Stefano, but I push the pain aside. He is the past; my future lies elsewhere.

"Absolutely," Rosalie adds, her hand resting reassuringly on my shoulder.

"We'll make sure of it."

"Isabella," Felix interjects, his voice urgent. "This one, Captain Rafael Mendoza. He has a reputation for being fiercely loyal to those who earn his respect. His connections run deep in Mexico, and he commands a small, but well-trained private security force."

"Sounds promising," I say, studying Rafael's profile. There's something about his eyes that speaks to me – a spark of determination and unwavering loyalty.

"Let's set up a meeting with him."

"Consider it done," Rosalie replies, already dialing a number on her phone.

As we finalize our plans, I feel the power within me grow stronger. No longer am I the naïve young woman who believed in fairy-tale romances. *You are Isabella Torres, a force to be reckoned with. And tomorrow, all of Jalisco will know of your return and bow at your feet.*

I am my father's daughter, reborn from the ashes.



# Chapter 42

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# Stefano

"**S**hit, I need the money." My fingertips tremble as I glance at the door to the Capo's room.

I turn the knob and push open the heavy oak door. My heart pounds, urging me to hurry. This is the first time I've been in here since he died, and I really wish it could have been avoided.

Everything in here reminds me of him, and thinking of him reminds me of the fact that with him gone, I now have no one else to look over me. This was, after all, the man who picked me off the streets. Gave me a home.

"Sorry Capo," I whisper, to the empty room. But I have no choice. We need to give advance payments for some shipments, and the keys to the safe are somewhere in this room. I just need to find them.

I rush to the desk, rifling through the drawers. Papers crinkle under my hands—useless documents and old bank statements. No keys.

A glint of gold catches my eye under the desk. I drop to my knees, grasping a heavy brass keyring. Bingo. As I stand, a sheet of parchment falls from the

desk, drifting to the floor. I grab it out of habit to put it back. Accidentally, my eyes scan the page.

My breath hitches. This is no ordinary contract.

It's a will. Diego Torres' will.

How did the Capo get his hands on this and why? My mind races.

There must be more. I begin digging, through the drawers, under his bed, his desk. Nothing. Then, I remember his old tricks.

"Never keep something precious where people might find it. Keep them looking," he told me once.

I head over to the small library in the corner of his room and begin pulling out book after book, ruffling through the pages. Over three dozen books later, papers begin to whisk toward the ground.

I bend to the floor, my heart racing, for I'm not sure I want to discover what I'm about to.

There lies a contract, partially hidden beneath a stack of papers. I slide the document from beneath the rest, my eyes scanning the words.

"Damn it!" I can't believe what I'm reading. The implications... the lies... This changes everything.

I clutch the contract tightly, the paper crinkling under my grasp. This is Juan's will – I've stumbled onto a web of deceit and betrayal spun around Isabella.

"Everything goes to Capo Conti..." I read aloud, my voice barely a whisper.

"Including Isabella's land and the gold that might lie beneath it, should anything happen to me."

Why the hell does Juan even have a will, declaring something to give that's not even his to begin with? And what gold are they talking about.

"What have they done?" My hands tremble as anger courses through my veins. I can't stand here doing nothing. I need to uncover the truth.

I keep looking through the bookshelf, my hands tracing on top of and under every shelf, feeling in every corner. Then, I discover a small lever, hidden from view, revealing a makeshift shelf. I open it, and put my hand inside the tiny nook, pulling out a folder.

I go to sit on the Capo's bed, and begin looking through it all. There was gold discovered under Diego Torres's land. Juan had a hit on Torres. It's a paper trail that depicts a sinister plot involving Isabella, Juan, and the Capo. My blood runs cold as I piece together the details.

The Capo made a deal with Juan, for the gold under the land. And all this while, I thought he was protecting Isabella.

"Isabella..." I mutter under my breath, horrified. The Capo had planned to kill her after all and stage her release, framing her death as an accident. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

"Damn him," I mutter, gritting my teeth. The weight of the realization settles heavily on my shoulders: I've been nothing more than a pawn in his twisted game, and Isabella was just a toy to be discarded.

What would the Capo have done? Killed her, made her disappear, all the while allowing me to believe he tried protecting her?

"Is this really happening?" I question myself, feeling my pulse quicken as the gravity of the situation sinks in. "Everything I believed in, everything I fought for...it was all a lie."

I cast the papers aside, and lower my face into my hands. For the first time in a long time, I cry.

Isabella tried telling me that day, why she killed the Capo. I was so hot-blooded and angry, that I told her I'd kill her if I saw her again. What did she do to deserve my wrath?

And why, oh why, did I take my loyalty to the Capo so far, that I never even

saw who he was up close?



I burst out of the compound, as fast as I can, and order for the car to come around to the curb. I need to find Isabella, tell her I know everything and beg for forgiveness.

Damn it, I love that woman and I allowed anger and insecurity to destroy the truth. I'm a wreck right now, barking instructions, barely registering a word anyone says to me.

"Sir," a soldier comes to me. "The driver will take ten minutes."

"Give me your car," I snap at an associate who just drove in. I take his keys, get into the driver's seat and begin driving ... to nowhere.

Isabella. Where are you? I've cut her out of my life to the extent that I don't even know how to find her. But, I'm desperate and at this point, I'll resort to begging.

There's only one reasonable man who'd still hear me out, after all the mistakes I've made. Felix answers on the second ring.

"It's Stefano. I need your help."

"What is it?" His voice is wary. I don't blame him.

"The Capo planned to kill Isabella. I found proof that he meant to stage her death as an accident to inherit her land. Juan had left the land to the Capo if anything were to happen to Juan."

A sharp intake of breath. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I have to find her, I... Felix, I love her and I fucked up. Do you know where she is?"

Silence. Then, “My cautious side tells me this could be a ploy from your end, but my instinct tells me you won't harm her. She was headed to the private airport, last I heard. Probably catching a flight out of the country.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “When was this?”

“Not longer than an hour ago. Stefano, what are you planning to do? She’s on her way back to Mexico.”

I glance at my watch. It takes less than thirty minutes to get there.

“I’m going after her. I have to get her back.”

“Stefano?”

"Yeah?"

"You've finally manned up."

“There's too much at stake not to.” My hand tightens around the phone. “I already owe you more than I can repay, but if she says she's done with me, if I don’t manage to see her today ... just talk to her for me please.”

“You have my word.” A heavy pause. “Godspeed, Stefano.”

The line goes dead.

I toss my phone onto the passenger seat and gun the engine to life.

The airport is still a thirty-minute drive away.

I have no time to waste.

# Chapter 43

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# Isabella

The automatic doors slide open as I step towards them, heart racing with excitement. Goodbye America. Mexico, I'm coming home to you. I stop for a brief moment, to savor this, freedom that I have yearned for way too long.

But the cost of this freedom is heavy - it's the loss of innocence, the loss of true love and the loss of a family of my own. What I have wanted for so long, to return to my homeland, just doesn't taste as sweet as I thought it would.

I close my eyes, and picture his face. One last time, on American soil. I move to take a step forward.

But just then, I hear my name. That voice, the one I've been dreaming of every night. No. This isn't real. This can't be true. I shake of the hallucination, about to take a step forward, when I hear it again.

"Isabella, please. Don't enter that airport!"

Oh, this is real. Stefano is here.

Fear spikes through me. I whirl around, fists clenched, ready to strike. Is he here to kill me, like he said he would?



Stefano runs toward me, panic etching lines in his handsome face. His car is abandoned in the middle of the road behind him, door gaping open.

His hands reach for me, trembling. “Isabella, wait—please—”

I freeze in place, heart pounding. What is this? What game is he playing now? What the hell is he doing here?

He stops in front of me, chest heaving. “I was wrong. I was so wrong about you.” His dark eyes meet mine, tormented. “Forgive me. I should have listened to you when you tried talking to me.”

I take a step back, but he stops me, instinctively grabs my arm.

“Isabella, wait.”

His eyes are wild, pupils huge in the dim light of the terminal. “I had to stop you. I couldn’t let you get on that plane.”

I try to wrench my arm from his grip. “Let go of me!”

“Not until you hear me out.” His voice cracks. “I made a mistake. The biggest mistake of my life.”

My heart stutters. I stare at him, searching his face. What is he saying?

“Choosing my loyalty to the Capo over you. I was blind. I should have trusted you. I’m so sorry, Isabella.”

I stand very still. A lump forms in my throat. After all this time, after everything ... does he finally see the truth? Whatever does this mean for us?

“I love you,” he says roughly. “Only you. And I won’t let anyone hurt you. I know about the setup. I know what Juan did, I know the Capo and Juan were behind what happened to your father. I learned they wanted you dead too. All this, happening right in front of me, and I played for the wrong team. I don’t know how I let them do those things to you and get away with it but—”

I have to cut him off here. “You didn’t let them do those things to me, Stefano,” I whisper, giving him a small dose of kindness. I reach up, cupping

his cheek with my palm, for it feels completely and utterly unnatural for me to see him suffering right in front of me and not offer him solace.

“I never let you see the truth. I sheltered you from it.”

“Why?” he questions, pained.

“Because, Stefano, I needed to fight for myself. I had to discover the full truth for myself. Had I involved you, you would have ruined your relationship with the Capo, a man who meant so much to you. I needed you to see the world through your own lens and not anyone else’s for if you were made to see it through mine, I feared you’d resent me.”

“Oh Isa,” says Stefano, inching closer. “I won’t let it happen again. I made a mistake once, but not again. I should have protected you from the Capo. You should have told me the truth from the very beginning.”

My breath leaves me in a rush. “We both made mistakes,” I mutter. “If I could go back and change things, I would. I would have told you my suspicions, my fears. That’s what you do, don’t you, with the people you love?”

A tear slips down my cheek as I look into his eyes—and see the love and fierceness I’ve craved for so long.

“Forgive me,” he whispers. “Please. I need you to forgive me.”

I reach up and touch his face. “You foolish man. Did you really think I didn’t love you because you were loyal to the man who helped you build your life? That’s why I fell for you in the first place. If you could show me half the loyalty you showed Conti, I’d be the luckiest woman alive.”

“You’re the only one who was ever loyal to me,” he whispers. “The only one I should have trusted. The only one I love. Forgive me, Isabella. Forgive me for not seeing the truth. And you? I give you my heart, my life, my soul, my loyalty”

My traitorous heart leaps. I place my hands over his, keeping them in place. Tears fill my eyes. After everything ... could this be real?

“Prove it,” I whisper.

A fierce light enters his eyes. He pulls me close, wrapping me in his arms—and then his mouth descends on mine, hot and hungry, stealing my breath.

This is no lie. This is truth. This is everything I’ve ever wanted.

A sob escapes him. Then his mouth is on mine again, and I’m kissing him back with everything in me.

We’re both breathless when we break apart. I smile up at him, cupping his cheek.

“Just love me as much as you loved him,” I say softly. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“More,” he vows, and kisses me again. “So much more.”



Just then, a man comes running towards me. “Miss Torres. Your flight must leave now. There are other planes in line for take-off.”

Stefano looks around us, worried. “Oh Isabella. You must go. Your empire, your people. They must be waiting.”

“Shh,” I whisper, placing a finger on Stefano’s lips. I turn to the attendant. “Tell the flight it’s not taking off today.”

“Isa, no!” Stefano protests. “You’ve given up too much already. Not your empire too.”

“One night won’t kill anyone, Stefano. Mexico will still be the same tomorrow,” I whisper, inching my face closer to his. “God. How I’ve missed you.”

# Chapter 44

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# Stefano

"I sa, I can't believe you didn't get on that flight!" I exclaim, my entire nervous system overwhelmed with joy. I came here to get my girl, and now she's all mine.

Just as the words leave my mouth, a cacophony of honks explodes around us. My car, door still open, sits abandoned in the middle of the road, causing chaos.

We share a laugh in the midst of the commotion, our hands instinctively intertwining as we run back to the car. I help her into the passenger seat, taking note of how her wavy hair brushes against her face, her green eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Thanks for causing this scene, Stefano," she teases once we're inside. With a grin, I slide into the driver's seat, starting the engine and pulling away from the mess we've created.

"Anything for you, Bella. For you, I'd make the earth stop spinning if I could" I say playfully, feeling an incredible sense of happiness knowing we're together again.

"Please don't, that would cause mass destruction," she rolls her eyes.

We trade lighthearted jabs about our rocky journey towards being reunited, laughter filling the car.

"Maybe next time you should just kidnap me," Isabella suggests, arching an eyebrow. "It would save us both some trouble."

"Ah, the classic Torres approach," I joke. "Noted for next time."

She laughs, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and I'm reminded of why I fell for her in the first place. Our playful banter continues – two souls, once torn apart, finding solace in each other. After the hell we've faced together, we can use a good laugh or two.

As we drive through the bustling streets of New York, the realization dawns on me that we have no plan – no destination in mind. My grip tightens on the steering wheel as I turn to Isabella. "We can't go back to the compound. Not yet," I say, my voice laced with concern. "The mafioso doesn't know you're innocent."

"Agreed," she replies, her face sobering. "But where do we go? Felix's is out. They've been so hospitable, but I can't impose in their safe house again. It's far too small."

I rack my brain for a place of safety, somewhere that offers luxury and comfort while we figure out our next move. A smile spreads across my face as the perfect location comes to mind.

"Leave it to me, Bella. Just trust me, okay?" I ask, glancing at her.

"Of course," she says without hesitation, placing her hand on mine.

The city lights blur by as we make our way to one of the most exclusive hotels in New York. I pull up to the entrance, and Isabella's eyes widen as she takes in the opulent façade.

"Stefano, this is..." She trails off, clearly stunned.

"Nothing but the best for us, Bella," I reply, squeezing her hand. "I can call you Bella, can't I?"

She looks at me and smiles. "I'd like that. Bella," she tastes her new endearing nickname on her tongue. A name from me, just for her.

I give the car to a valet and we enter the hotel, our laughter filling the grandiose lobby. The marble floors, crystal chandeliers, and gold accents all scream luxury. Isabella's hand feels warm and electric in mine, our excitement palpable as we make our way to the front desk.

"Welcome to The Regal," the receptionist greets us, her eyes darting between us, no doubt sensing our giddy energy. "How may I assist you?"

"One night in the presidential suite, please," I declare with confidence, not wanting anything less for my Bella.

"Of course, sir. That will be \$8,000 for the night," she replies, barely batting an eye at the exorbitant price.

"Put it on this," I say as I slide my platinum credit card across the counter.

"Enjoy your stay, Mr. Nitti," the receptionist says, handing us the room key.

"Thank you," I reply with a smile, leading Isabella toward the elevators.

Once inside the presidential suite, we're struck by its opulence – floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the city skyline, plush furnishings, and an inviting king-sized bed. It's perfect.

"Stefano, this is incredible," Isabella breathes, her eyes sparkling with joy.

"We really have been slumming it running helter-skelter all these months, haven't we? God, I've missed this lifestyle."

"From now on, things are only looking up my love" I say, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead before picking up the phone to order champagne and food. "Room service? We'd like a bottle of your finest champagne, some caviar, oysters and tuna tartares please."

"Your order will be delivered shortly, sir," the voice on the other end confirms before I hang up.

"Come, let's enjoy the view while we wait," I suggest, guiding Isabella to the large windows overlooking the city.

"Stunning," she whispers, not just referring to the view, but also to the night itself – our unexpected reunion, our close escape from a destiny without each other, and now, this romantic evening. I couldn't agree more.

"Tonight, we forget about everything else, Isabella," I say softly, my eyes locked with hers, full of emotion. "Tonight, it's just you and me. You have no idea how much I've missed you."

"Really?" she asks, her eyes sparkling. "Do tell."

"I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I was nearing death –"

"Oh stop it," she laughs, noticing my over dramatization and gives me a gentle whack on my shoulder. "You look far too healthy for me to know you didn't give up your meals."

"True," I say, nodding ferociously. "I did comfort eat a lot."

She gives me a tiny smile, then sighs. The current is changing.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I missed you too," she says.

There is no need for more words between us. We both know the hell we went through. And so, as we wait for the champagne and food to arrive, we stand side by side, hand in hand, gazing out at the city that never sleeps.

The doorbell rings, and I open it to find a hotel employee carrying a tray with our champagne and appetizers. "Thank you," I say, taking the tray and tipping him generously.

"Enjoy your evening, sir," he replies with a smile before leaving us alone once more.



I set the tray down on the coffee table and pour two glasses of champagne, handing one to Isabella. "To new beginnings and a bright future," I toast, our glasses clinking together.

"Salute," she whispers, her eyes shining with excitement as we both take a sip of the crisp, bubbling liquid. She sets her glass down and takes a deep breath. "Stefano, I have big plans for my empire, for our empire," she says, determination etched onto her beautiful face. "I want to reclaim what was taken from me and grow it into something even greater."

"Isabella, I believe in you, and I'll be by your side every step of the way," I tell her sincerely, my heart swelling with pride and love for this incredible woman.

"Thank you, Stefano," she says, her voice thick with emotion. "What about you? What do you envision for our future?"

"Change," I say firmly, my eyes locked onto hers. "I want to run the mafia with an iron fist, but also with kindness. We can't keep doing things the old way – it's time to show that power doesn't always have to come with cruelty and the iron fist will be dealt on those who revert to their old ways."

Isabella gives me a knowing smile and whispers, "I'm so proud of you. I know that of all the people in the world, you're the one who can actually do it." Her words fill me with confidence and hope, especially after the way I allowed my emotions to run high recently.

"Isabella," I exclaim, suddenly overcome with emotion. "Marry me. Be by my side while we build this empire together. There's no one else I'd rather have by my side, no one else with the wit and intelligence I'd need to get me through this!"

She stares at me, her eyes wide with surprise and happiness. "Yes, Stefano! Yes, I will marry you!" she exclaims, throwing her arms around me. I twirl

her around in glee, laughing as I do. At last, I set her down.

"Isabella," I whisper into her ear, my voice shaky with emotion. "We're going to do great things together. I promise. And we're going to have lots of babies and pass down our legacy, making ours a story to tell for generations to come!"

Isabella's expression suddenly shifts, and I can tell something is weighing on her mind. She takes a deep breath, her green eyes filled with sadness.

"Stefano, there's something you should know," she begins hesitantly. "I... I can't have children and the truth is, given that I can't and you want them, perhaps we shouldn't talk about getting married."

My heart drops in my chest, and I feel an icy shock run through me. "What?" I manage to choke out, trying to understand.

"During the attack in Don Conti's office, I was shot," she explains, tears welling up in her eyes. "Don Conti shot me and the bullet damaged my uterus, and the doctors said it's impossible for me to conceive."

I reach for her hand, squeezing it tightly as I try to process this revelation. My dreams of having a large family with Isabella momentarily crumble before my eyes, but then I realize that our love is stronger than any setback we may face.

"Isabella," I say firmly, looking into her eyes with determination. "It doesn't matter if we can't have children naturally. We can adopt, or maybe we don't even need kids. What truly matters is that we're together. There's nothing worse than not being with each other. We'll make a happy life, at each other's side."

Her eyes shine with gratitude and relief, and I can see the weight lifting from her shoulders. "Thank you, Stefano," she whispers, her voice quivering with emotion. "You don't know how much that means to me."

"Of course, my love," I respond tenderly. "Now, let me ask you again, properly. Isabella Torres, will you marry me and stand by my side as we build a new empire? An empire of love, loyalty, and understanding?"

A radiant smile spreads across her face, chasing away the shadows of doubt and fear. "Yes, Stefano. Yes, a thousand times over. I will marry you, and we will face whatever life throws at us together."

"Darling, you've just made me the happiest man on earth," and I bend down. The warmth of her lips presses against mine, and a fire ignites within me, growing with each second. We break away for a moment, our gazes lock, and the intensity of our desires comes crashing in on us. "I've dreamt about kissing you almost every night."

"Oh, you're telling me," her face breaks into a naughty smile.

"Follow me," I whisper, taking her hand in mine and leading her to the luxurious bed that dominates the presidential suite. Gently, I begin to undress her, peeling away the layers of clothes that separate us until she stands before me, vulnerable yet powerful in her naked beauty. For a brief moment, I stand there, admiring her figure in the moonlight.

I let out a low whistle and lean in, pressing my lips against hers once more, allowing our tongues to dance together in a passionate tango. My hands roam over her body, tracing the curves of her waist and hips, reveling in the softness of her skin. Slowly, I kiss my way down her neck, travelling across her collarbone and onto the swell of her breasts.

Isabella's breath hitches and she tries to cover the surgical scar that mars her otherwise perfect abdomen. Her insecurity breaks my heart, and I gently brush her hand away. "No, my love," I tell her, gazing deeply into her emerald eyes. "Your scars are beautiful. They tell the story of what you've survived."

Touched by my words, Isabella relaxes as I continue my journey downwards, kissing the outline of her wound with tender reverence. Once she relaxes, I go lower, leaving a wet trail from my tongue down to her pelvis. I part her legs, gently, my fingers caressing the insides of her thighs.

My heart races as I focus on pleasuring Isabella, my fingers gently parting the delicate folds of her pussy. Her soft scent intoxicates me, and I can't help but run the tip of my tongue along her slit, teasing her before diving in with fervor.

"Stefano," she moans, her hands gripping the sheets tightly as I pleasure her. Each lick and suck sends a shiver down her spine, and I can feel her body quaking with anticipation. I focus on her clit, circling it with my tongue, feeling her grow wetter and more desperate with each pass.

"Please," she gasps, her voice strained with desire. "Don't stop."

Her urgency fuels my passion, and I quicken my pace, determined to bring her to the peak of ecstasy. As her moans grow louder and more frenzied, I know she's close to release.

I put in a finger, while my tongue still laps her up. I thrust the finger in her and draw circles around her inner walls, her moans getting louder and louder. I feel her legs quiver, and with my free hand, hold her right thigh down on the bed. Her back arches as she yells, "Oh fuck, oh fuck Stefano, I'm going to cum. Just like that, yeah baby –" With one final, expert flick of my tongue, she cries out in pleasure, her body convulsing as the intensity of her orgasm washes over her.

I lift my head, watching her catch her breath, reveling in the satisfaction of having brought her such intense pleasure. But Isabella isn't done yet; her eyes lock onto mine, filled with a mischievous glint that makes my heart race even faster.

Before I know it, she's pushing me back onto the bed, straddling my hips and pinning me beneath her. She leans down, her lips brushing against my ear as she whispers, "Now it's my turn to make you feel good."

She kisses down my chest, my abdomen, stopping just above my throbbing erection. My whole body tightens in anticipation, and when she finally wraps her lips around me, I can't help but groan with pleasure.

She takes me deep into her mouth, her tongue swirling and teasing, driving me wild with each tantalizing movement. Her eyes never leave mine, igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume us both.

Isabella's skillful mouth brings me closer and closer to the edge of release. My breaths become ragged, my fingers gripping the sheets as I struggle to hold back from giving in to the pleasure she's offering.

But just when I'm on the verge of surrendering to the intense sensations, she pulls away, leaving me aching for more.

"Patience," she teases, her lips curving into a wicked smile.

My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath, my body trembling with need. Isabella slides up along my torso, her own desire evident in her flushed cheeks and the lust-filled glint in her eyes.

"Tell me what you want, Stefano," she whispers against my lips, her voice seductive and demanding.

"Take me, Isabella," I beg, unable to resist her any longer. "I need you."

A triumphant grin spreads across her face, and she positions herself above me, guiding my throbbing erection to her entrance. I can feel the heat radiating from her core, and with one smooth motion, she sinks down onto me, eliciting a gasp from us both.

My cock deep in her, Isabella starts to ride me, her movements both slow and deliberate. My hands roam over her body, caressing her breasts, then trailing

down to grip her ass. The softness of her skin beneath my fingertips sends shivers down my spine.

"Stefano," she moans, biting her lip as she leans in closer. Our eyes lock, and I can see the passion burning within her.

"Isabella, you're incredible," I breathe out, lost in the moment.

She shifts position, turning around to face away from me, giving me a stunning view of her back arching gracefully into a reverse cowgirl. The perfect curve of her ass is tantalizing, urging me to continue exploring her body.

Unable to resist, I smack her ass lightly and she lets out a sultry moan that only serves to heighten my arousal. "Stefano, don't stop," she urges, her voice breathless with desire.

As much as I crave this connection, I need more, and I lift her off me gently.

"Get on all fours, Isabella," I command, and she complies without hesitation.

Positioned behind her, I enter her once more, this time thrusting in a steady rhythm as I take her doggy style. I reach forward, grabbing her breasts, feeling the weight of them in my hands.

Her soft moans fill the room, mingling with the sound of our bodies colliding as we give ourselves fully to each other, hard and damn fucking fast.

As I continue to thrust into her, I reach up and wrap my fingers around a handful of her silky hair. Gently tugging it back, I create an even more enticing arch in her back, causing her to gasp with pleasure.

"Stefano," she moans, "I'm so close."

"Let go, Isabella. Cum for me, amore mio," *my love*, I encourage her, my voice thick with desire.

Her pussy tightens around my cock in swift bursts, and as her entire body trembles, her ass bouncing right in front of me, I can no longer hold back. I

fill her, my cum dripping down between her legs.

She lies down, with me on top of her, as we catch our breaths, my cock still in her. I can feel the remnants of her orgasm washing over her. Our bodies part as I pull away, both still trembling as our bodies ride out the aftershocks of our passion.

I press a gentle kiss to the back of her neck, savoring the intimacy of the moment. As we lie there, we know that this is just the beginning of our journey – one filled with love.

"Isabella," I whisper, my heart overflowing with emotion, "my future wife."

"Husband."

"I love you."

# Epilogue

## Isabella

The white-washed walls of the Hacienda glow under the Jalisco sun, its red-tiled roof glinting. Palm trees line the winding cobblestone path to a large wooden door, covered in a fresh coat of a bright blue paint.

My heart races as I step through the entrance into a courtyard filled with bougainvillea and birdsong. This is it. After everything Stefano and I have endured, all the loss and heartbreak, today I will finally be his wife.

We will continue our lives as we have the past year. Basing our life in New York, with me visiting one week a month to check on the tequila production and gold mines.

Clara helps keep things running smooth here, while I'm making connections in New York through which I sell all the mined gold.

While New York is base, Jalisco is home, which is why we're getting married here.

The guests turn as one, a sea of smiling faces. Men in sharp suits, women in colorful dresses, all here to celebrate our union. I search the crowd and find Stefano at the front, dark eyes meeting mine.



His smile is radiant, full of promise. My chest tightens with longing. How did I get so lucky?

“Isabella.” A gruff voice at my side. Don Gianni steps forward, kissing my cheek. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you for coming,” I say, squeezing his arm. After my return to Mexico, Don Gianni’s support meant everything. Felix connected us.

Other members of New York’s Five Families approach, hugging me and offering congratulations. “You’re one of us now,” says Tommy Marconi, eyes gleaming. With my husband as Don of the largest mob in New York, our ties are unbreakable.

Behind them are figures from Mexico’s most powerful cartels. Men who once opposed my family now pledge their loyalty. “You have our respect,” says the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, “and our allegiance.”

I nod, throat tight with emotion. This is my father’s legacy, his dream for our family realized at last. If only he could be here to see it.

The crowd parts, and Felix strides forward, gaze locked on mine. “Are you ready for this life sentence?” He extends his hand with a roguish smile and gives me a wink.

“I’ve been ready my whole life.” I place my hand in his, and together we walk toward the altar. Toward my future with Stefano.



The hacienda is decked out in extravagant decorations of roses, lilies and orchids in shades of red, pink and white. Golden candelabras line the aisle I walk down, flames flickering in the evening breeze.

A mariachi band plays a lively tune as guests mill around the courtyard, dancing and clinking glasses of champagne.

An excited flutter stirs in my chest at the sight of Stefano waiting for me at the altar, dark eyes smoldering. Clara walks on my other side and squeezes my arm, whispering, “Your father would be so proud of you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. How I wish he was here to walk me down the aisle, to see the woman I’ve become. “I know,” I say softly. “He wanted this, for our families to be united.”

“And now his dream has come true.” Clara kisses my cheek, then takes her place at the front of the aisle.

The mariachi band stops playing. All eyes turn to me as I step forward alone, clutching a bouquet of red roses. For a moment the old grief threatens to overwhelm me, but then I meet Stefano’s gaze. His smile is radiant, full of promise, chasing away the shadows. He is my future now.

I stride down the aisle, heartbeat quickening with each step as I near the man I love. The man I’m going to marry.

When I reach him, Stefano extends his hand. I place mine in his, and together we turn to face the priest.

“Dearly beloved,” the priest begins, “we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Isabella Torres and Stefano Nitti...”

His voice fades into the background as I gaze into Stefano’s eyes. After so many months of struggle and sacrifice, we’ve finally made it to this moment. Stefano squeezes my hand, his smile deepening. I know he’s thinking the same thing I am—that we’ve triumphed over everyone who ever doubted us or tried to tear us apart.

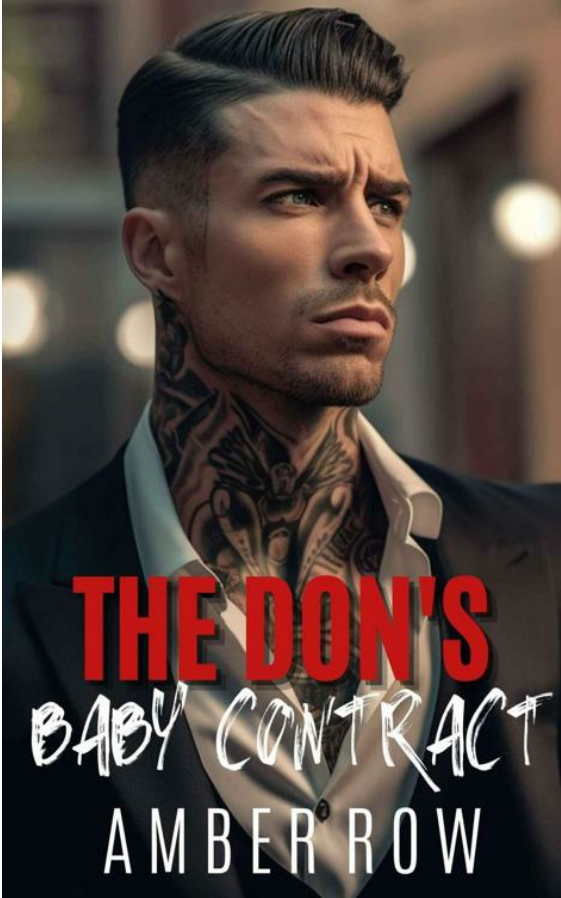
The priest clears his throat, and Stefano winks at me before turning his attention back to the ceremony. I do the same, but my gaze keeps drifting to

Stefano's profile, taking in the strong jaw and aquiline nose I know so well. After what seems like both an eternity and no time at all, the priest says, "Stefano, do you take Isabella to be your lawfully wedded wife?" "I do," Stefano says promptly. The priest turns to me. "Isabella, do you take Stefano to be your lawfully wedded husband?" "I do." The words slip out easily, a vow I've been ready to make for a long time. "Then by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Stefano, you may kiss your bride." Stefano doesn't hesitate. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me deeply while our friends and family cheer all around us. When we break apart, breathless, Stefano whispers, "Ready to take on the world with me, Mrs. Nitti?" "Always, Mr. Nitti," I whisper back, and together we stride down the aisle and out into the bright sunshine.

**The End**

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**The Don's Baby Contract**



**THE DON'S**  
BABY CONTRACT  
AMBER ROW

## Tap Picture

**I betrayed him and yet he still saved me.**

**Now I owe him more than I can afford to pay.**

Nico Allotini is not someone you mess with.

His chiseled body was touched by the divine, but he's no angel.

With more power than I ever dreamed,

He's no longer the gentle lover I betrayed four years ago.

He's the brutal mafia boss, nicknamed "The Undertaker,"  
with a reputation for taking what he's owed.

But then he saves me from certain death,

I owe him more than I can afford to pay.

Until he offers me a contract.

A dangerous, sinful contract.

One that will make me his and only his.

He needs an heir and wants to possess me in ways I shouldn't consider.

**But if it protects my family, how can I refuse?**

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# Sneak Peek

## The Don's Baby Contract

# Sybil

It's not fair that we can't blame the dead since this really is my sister's fault.

I squirm again in the pitch-blackness, but it's futile. There's no movement to be had, shoved back here between the spare tire and who knows what else. It smells horrible, and I try not to think about how many corpses this mobster has probably toted around in this trunk. Instead, I steady my breathing and squeeze my eyes shut.

The bindings on my wrists hurt, and my mouth is gagged. They did all this to keep me from being "problematic,"—but I doubt anyone noticed them grab me in the empty parking lot of my workplace. It's not like I could easily fight off two armed mobsters twice my size.

I'm pretty sure they're going to kill me.

*Damn you, Angela.*

My twin was the one who got involved with the Gatto family in the first place. She was always the one to get mixed up with bad things, and I was the one who got her out.

At least, until four years ago. When Angela's bad choices finally caught up to her.

Then it was just me, twinless and drowning in the mess she had left behind. And now that I'm about to bite the dust, our family will be left basically defenseless. I fight my tears and mentally curse at Angela more because that's easier than admitting that I wish she was still here with me.

Well, maybe not *here*, here. I just miss my twin.

Just as I'm imagining all the different ways these dangerous men might kill me, the car breaks hard, and I hear honking. I gasp when I sense the car swerving and careening—and then my stomach flies into my throat at a sudden impact. The sound is deafening, but the crash must have happened at the front of the car because I'm uninjured.

For a moment, I'm breathless and terrified in the dark, claustrophobic cold of the trunk. Did they swerve to avoid an animal or something? What if they're both dead? Oh my God, I'm going to freeze in the back of this car. Or starve to death. I feel bad for whoever finds this wreck and the three corpses.

Then I hear muffled voices. There's a shout, sounds of scuffling, more yelling, and then the unmistakable sound of a gun firing. My heart takes off, almost painful in my chest. Whoever is firing at these guys is probably also involved in the mafia. Which means—

*Click.* The trunk opens.

I flinch against the bright light that flashes in my face. My eyes can't adjust for a moment, but when they do, I freeze.

The man glowering down at me is all foreboding muscle and fury, blood smeared on his fists and down one side of his gorgeous, severe face. His eyes narrow at the sight of me, and he swears.

Now I wish the impact did kill me.

Because I know my rescuer...and he's probably going to finish the job.

Two other men step up beside him to peer into the trunk. His lackeys, I'm sure. One is almost my rescuer's height but is clearly younger. The other is massive, with a face that's obviously been used as a punching bag one too many times over the years. I feel like a tied-up animal about to be butchered under the eyes of these mobsters.

But mostly under *his* eyes. I remember his gaze too well, and I feel heat



everywhere in my face when he growls down at me.

*The Undertaker*. I've heard that's what they call him now. With a glare like that, I'm absolutely sure it's fitting. Nico Attolini is a hundred times more frightening than he was the first time we met. Back then, he showed up as a white knight with questionable connections.

There's nothing questionable about him now. He looks like what he is: the infamously violent underboss of the all-powerful Attolini crime empire. He looks like death itself.

Just another thing that's not fair, because death shouldn't have a face this gorgeous.

"Just a girl?" the giant lackey asks, confused.

"Get her out."

I shiver at the sound of Nico's voice. It's blistering and icy all at once. It's not a tone I've ever heard anyone manage before, but there's no arguing with the intrinsic authority of it.

I flinch but keep myself from fighting as the big one lifts me out of the trunk and deposits me none too gently on my feet. I want to cower, fight back, or just cry, but before I do anything, I need to survey my surroundings. Then maybe I can run.

The car crashed pretty far off the road, surrounded by trees. One of the Gatto mobsters who took me is dead, lying in the fallen leaves beside the car. The other one, Pascal, is kneeling with a broken, bloodied face nearby. He's the one who kept whispering nasty things in my ear as they gagged and bound me—about what they would do to me, to my mom, to Krista, and my brother. Another of Nico's men stands beside him, gun against his temple to keep him quiet.

I have no idea what road we're by or how far we are from New York City, but

it can't be too far. If I got away, I could find my way back walking eventually. Hell, I'd take my chances hitchhiking. Anything is better than leaving my fate up to the man now towering over me with dark, merciless turquoise eyes.

It's just a matter of waiting for the right time to run.

"She's really hot," the younger mobster shrugs. "Maybe they were just going to—"

Nico gives him a look that shuts him up. Then he turns from me and stops in front of Pascal. The bloodied man winces when Nico squats until they're at face level. Then it's my turn to wince when he reaches out and twists the man's already-broken nose.

Pascal screeches and swears colorfully, rearing back. Nico is calm, unbothered by the blood he wipes onto Pascal's shoulder.

"You were unwise to involve her. Where did Mad Blood go?"

Pascal spits to the side and leers up at me. "Like seeing her again, Undertaker? We've kept her nice and unsullied for you. But the boss has a problem. He's tired of the stalemates and handshakes. He's ready to move. You kill me, and we'll punish this pretty little bitch's family again by—"

Nico moves fast, and I gasp and turn away before his fist connects with Pascal's face again. I hear it though—the sickly crunches and meaty thuds of the beating and the mobster's pathetic shouts and whimpers. Nico's voice is so quiet, I can barely hear it, and I don't doubt he's right in Pascal's face.

"He's not the only one tired of stalemates. But his problem? He's afraid of getting his hands dirty doing something about it." Pascal yelps sharply, and I can only imagine why. "See, I'm not. Last chance. Where were you taking her, and where the fuck is Mad Blood?"

I don't want to see any of this. I need to get away before he turns that

petrifying fury on me again. I glance at his lackeys, who are paying more attention to their boss's terrifying display of violence than they are to me. I check over my shoulder. I can just see the road from here. If I back up a little, I won't be in their peripheral vision anymore....

I take a step back silently. Then another. I've seen too many movies not to check for anything that might crack under my boots before setting my foot down. Over and over, I creep back until I know they can't see me anymore. Then I pick up speed, backing away.

Pascal has croaked out a few things, but Nico must be crushing his throat or something because I can't understand him. The Undertaker hisses something else, but by now, I'm far enough away that I don't have to hear his viciousness.

Until another gunshot rings out. I'm out of time.

Heart clamoring in my chest, I turn completely and race to the road. Cars pass by in flashes, stirring dead leaves in the cold autumn air. I look around quickly, getting my bearings. It's dark, and I doubt the cars blurring past can even see that I'm gagged and tied like this. There are no toll booths, just an endless stretch of road and trees. On one side of the road nearby, two cars are parked.

I almost run to them before realizing that Nico and his men had to drive here, too.

And they didn't leave their rides alone. Another mobster steps out of the driver's side of one parked vehicle. His eyes drift to me and narrow. But even lightheaded with adrenaline and fear like this, I could get away. I could flag down someone else. I could—

Strong arms clamp around me, pulling me away from the road's edge. I let out a muffled scream, kicking and flailing. It's useless.

Then warm breath brushes against my ear. Nico's words are quiet but still biting.

"Stop fighting, *monella*. You'll cause a scene, and you don't want to drag other civilians into this. *Omertà*, remember?"

*Omertà*. He told me about it four years ago. Their code for "humble silence" in the face of questioning and the rule that keeps unfortunate civilians from going to the authorities. I laughed when he explained it back then, saying it's ludicrous for them to expect people to just shut up and let them do whatever they want. I said it was bullshit.

But now, I get it. I go still, no longer hoping any of the cars passing will notice something is up. I want them to go along with their lives, blissfully unaware. I don't want them to meet Nico and get hurt because of me.

And that just makes me hate him more. Four years ago, I never would have thought he would prey on my fear and morals like this. I can still remember how it felt to laugh and reach out to fix his hair. How warm his presence was. He'd seemed like a walking paradox then—the soft-hearted mobster. The gentleman enforcer.

He's still a paradox. I can sense his impatience as he walks me over to his waiting pals and their rides, but something about his movements is patient, too. He's an unreadable medley of hot and cold.

*He's going to kill me.*

"Brave, this one," the driver notes.

"Should've grabbed her the moment you saw her, Giovanni," the massive lackey huffs.

"It's not my job to clean up after you and Ace," Giovanni says indignantly.

"Your *job*," Nico snaps, quieting them all. He's directly behind me, and when I step forward to get away from his warmth, he moves forward to press

against me again, gripping my arm tighter. "Was to tail Mad Blood. Tell me what the fuck went wrong."

They exchange glances. The younger one, "Ace," clears his throat.

"I thought that was Mad Blood...."

His voice fizzles out as Nico wipes the blood off his chin, exasperated but controlled. "That was his brother. They looked alike."

I shiver at his use of past tense and look away when his glare shifts to me. I know what he's thinking. I looked just like Angela. Maybe I wouldn't be in this mess if they hadn't taken such a liking to tormenting my wayward twin.

No. I can't keep blaming her. This is my fault. I let my heart get involved and paid the price. And I'm about to pay again.

I just need to ensure my family doesn't pay any more for my involvement. What Pascal said about punishing them has replayed in my head over and over.

"Why her?" Ace asks, eyeing me again. The way he tips his head reminds me of a puppy.

"Didn't realize she was even still alive," the big guy chuckles. "Maybe that's what they were about to remedy, huh? This isn't a bad place to take care of things."

"*Vaffanculo*, Percy," Nico growls, and I jump when his fingers graze my wrists. He's untying me. I'm still processing that when the gag is undone, and finally, I can spit out the taste of it.

Nico's hands go to my hips, turning me to face him. Looking up at him like this, battling the urge to step back and the urge to step closer all at the same time, I remind myself not to notice that four years have only made him more handsome. I should pay attention to the blood smeared on his face, not the fact that his opalescent eyes are burning into mine.

Just another paradox. He's the same, but not. He has a new name now—a new reputation I'm about to experience the hard way.

"Well?" I finally manage, glowering with all the force I have left. I'm frightened for my family and on the verge of tears, but that doesn't mean I'll let him see it. "Go ahead. Keep your promise. Kill me."

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