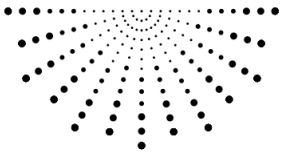

SARTORI
SYNDICATE
AVA
A TOUCH HER AND DIE DARK MAFIA ROMANCE
SHERRY BLAKE

AVA

A TOUCH HER AND DIE DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

SARTORI SYNDICATE

BOOK NINE



SHERRY BLAKE



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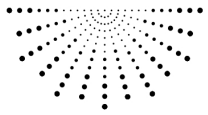
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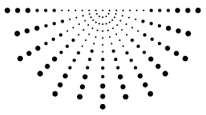
DEDICATION



For the ones who waited.

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CONTENT WARNING



This novel is intended for readers 18 years of age or older.

This book deals with mature themes including the violent death of a spouse, parental death (cancer), grief, infertility, and infidelity.

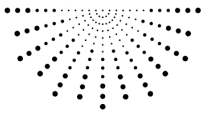
It features organized crime settings (Mafia and Bratva) and contains kidnapping, mutilation, physical assault, gun violence, threats of sexual violence, coercion into marriage, animal cruelty, and graphic scenes of torture and murder.

It also includes the long-term captivity and forced drugging of a family member, references to suicide, and a past reference to rape. Stalking, surveillance, emotional manipulation, alcohol use, and strong language are present throughout.

It also contains explicit scenes of a sexual nature, including but not limited to, possessive dynamics, sex in a vehicle, and oral sex while driving.

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CHAPTER ONE



Ava

The door to Liam's office is already ajar when I reach it.

That should have been my first warning.

I knock anyway, two quick raps against the dark wood, and push it open without waiting for an answer. The years I spent next to Riccardo taught me how to move through these spaces. Confident and unhesitant.

Like I belong, even when every instinct screams otherwise.

My gaze immediately finds Liam behind his massive desk, head thrown back against his leather chair, throat exposed.

For one absurd moment, I think he's sleeping.

Then I notice the movement beneath the desk.

Two women. Blonde. Their heads bobbing in a rhythm that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Heat floods my face so fast I feel dizzy with it. My hand flies to the door frame, steadying myself as my brain struggles to process what my eyes are seeing.

"I—" The word comes out strangled. "Excuse me."

I'm already stepping backward when Liam's head tilts lazily in my direction. His eyes find mine across the room, and something in them shifts. Sharpens.

He doesn't look embarrassed.

He looks... amused.

"Ladies." His voice is a low rumble. "We're done here."

The women casually emerge from beneath the desk. They're beautiful. All long legs and lingerie barely covered by silk robes. Neither spares me a glance as they slip past, leaving behind a cloud of perfume that makes my stomach turn.

The door clicks shut behind them.

And then it's just us.

Liam Blackwood. The man who has despised me for a decade. The man who walked out of every room I walked into, who looked through me like I was made of glass, when he bothered to look at all.

Now the full weight of his attention settles on me.

I've faced down dangerous men before. I've smiled through dinner parties where murder was discussed between courses. I've buried a husband and walked away from his empire with my head held high.

But something about Liam has always made me feel small.

Humiliation and terror collide in my chest, tangling together until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins. My palms are slick against the leather of my purse strap.

He rises from his chair, fingers working the buckle of his belt. I don't look away. I won't give him that satisfaction.

"Ava," he says. "I'd offer you my hand for a proper greeting, but I'm afraid both of them were just... occupied."

The crudeness is deliberate. Designed to shock.

"How unfortunate for me," I say. "I'll survive the disappointment."

He moves closer. The desk no longer separates us, and I become acutely aware of how much space he takes up. How much air he consumes.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

Straight to business. No pleasantries. No pretense.

Fine. I can work with that.

"I came to inform you—" I stop. Start again. Steadier this time. "From now on, I want nothing to do with the Sartoris."

The words hang between us.

Liam's expression doesn't change. He just watches me with those winter-storm eyes, and I have no idea what he's thinking. I never have.

"And you're telling me this why?" His head tilts slightly. A predator assessing prey. "Shouldn't you be having this conversation with Bruno?"

Bruno. The Don. The man who technically holds all the power in this world I'm trying to escape.

"Bruno has enough on his plate," I say carefully.

"That's not the real reason."

No. It isn't.

The truth is more complicated. Bruno and I have history. Years of it, tangled up with Riccardo and family dinners and a thousand small kindnesses that make cutting ties feel like cutting flesh. If I go to Bruno, he'll ask questions. He'll dig. He'll want to fix things, because that's who Bruno is.

And some things can't be fixed.

"I'm tired," I hear myself say. "I'm just... tired."

Of pretending. Of hiding. Of being the widow everyone watches with pity. Of jumping at shadows, sleeping with a knife under my pillow and wondering if today is the day their enemies finally catch up with me.

Of standing in rooms with men who look at me like I'm a problem to be solved or a possession to be claimed.

The hardness slips off Liam's face for half a second. His jaw loosens. His eyes warm, faintly, and then it's gone.

"Ava—"

"Don't." I hold up a hand. "Whatever you're about to say, just... don't."

I know when someone is about to offer empty comfort. I know when kindness is a prelude to something else.

I'm not interested in either.

"Goodbye, Liam." I force the words out past the tightness in my throat. Nod once. Sharp and final. "Pass along my message, or don't. I don't particularly care which."

I turn before he can respond. My heels click against the hardwood floor—steady, measured, controlled—even as my heart races like a caged bird.

I'm almost to the door when his voice stops me.

"Running won't help."

I freeze. My hand hovers over the handle.

"I'm not running," I say without turning around. "I'm leaving. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

The question hangs in the air like smoke. I don't have an answer for it. Maybe because I'm not sure there is one.

I pull open the door and step through it.

I don't look back.

I learned a long time ago that looking back only shows you what you're losing. And I've lost enough already.



Liam

She walks away from me.

That's what Ava does. Has always done. Walks away with her spine straight, her chin lifted and that maddening grace that makes every man in a room forget his own name.

I watch her move through the outer office. Watch the subtle sway of her hips beneath that cream-colored coat. The way her dark hair catches the light from the windows. Ten years, and she still moves the same way she did that first night at Celestine. Like she owns every room she enters but doesn't quite believe she belongs in any of them.

The most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

And she just looked at me like I'm a monster.

The door clicks shut and leaves me there, shirt open, a bitter film coating my throat. My jaw locks, hard enough to hurt.

Ten years ago, I walked into Celestine for a business dinner. I'd known her for weeks by then. Never made a move. Never said the thing I should have said. But that night at Celestine, I spotted her before I spotted anyone else. A dark-haired woman in a black dress, laughing at something her companion said. The kind of laugh that crinkles the corners of your eyes and makes everyone around you want to be the one who caused it.

I stopped walking. Just stopped, like an idiot, in the middle of one of the most expensive restaurants in Chicago.

Then one day, I watched her stumble into Riccardo. Watched her hands flatten against his chest, her face tilt up to his. And Riccardo was my best friend. More than that.

I reach for the phone on the desk.

"Marie."

"Yes, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Bring me something for a headache."

"Right away, sir."

I hang up and drop into the leather chair behind the desk. Pietro gave me this office three years ago, after Riccardo's funeral. A place to conduct business when the compound felt too crowded. A place to handle negotiations that required a certain atmosphere.

I've used it for other things too. The couch against the far wall has seen plenty of action. Women are easy to find when you have money, power and a face that photographs well. They come to me like moths to a flame, drawn by the danger or the accent or whatever story they've built in their heads about who I am.

I send them home in the morning with a smile, a car service, and I go back to being numb.

It works. Most of the time.

Any other day, any other interruption, I would have called those women back the moment Ava left. Finished what we started.

But Ava looked scared of me.

Not disgusted. Not judgmental. *Scared.*

Like I was someone who might hurt her.

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes until I see stars. The headache pulses behind my temples, a familiar companion. I've had them more often lately. Stress, probably. Too many threats to the family. Too many enemies circling like sharks scenting blood.

Too many sleepless nights thinking about a woman I have no right to think about.

Marie knocks and enters with a glass of water and two white pills.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No. That's all."

She leaves. I swallow the pills dry.

Ava thinks she can walk away from the family. Thinks she can shed the Sartori name like a coat she's tired of wearing. She changed her name back

to Fontana after Riccardo died. Her mother's maiden name.

Bruno might let her go. He's got enough on his plate with the Russians circling and the Irish making noise in the south. One widow, even Riccardo's widow, might not seem worth the resources.

But I won't let her go.

She was Riccardo's wife. That makes her family. That makes her mine to protect, whether she wants it or not. I stood at that altar and watched my best friend marry the woman who haunted my dreams, and I promised myself that if anything ever happened to him, I would keep her safe.

Something happened to him. A bullet at Bruno's wedding. He died in front of me. Ava's screams still ring in my ears when I remember.

I failed him that day. I won't fail her.

She can run all she wants. She can change her name and hide in her Gold Coast apartment and pretend she was never part of this world. But she'll always be Riccardo's widow. She'll always be under my protection.

And if she wants to be free of that, she'll have to look me in the eyes and tell me to my face.

Not run. Not walk away with that maddening grace.

Face me, Ava.

I reach for my phone and pull up her contact. My thumb hovers over her name for a long moment.

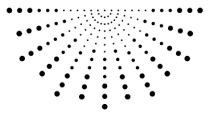
Then I set the phone down and close my eyes.

Not yet. She needs time to think she's won. To think she's free.

Then I'll remind her what family means.

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CHAPTER TWO



TWO WEEKS LATER

Ava

The smell of hay and leather still clings to my jacket when I push through the front door. Forty minutes north, and Chicago feels like another planet. The quiet of Fairhaven, the mist burning off the paddocks, Nero's warm breath against my palm. All of it fades the moment I step into my apartment.

Alfie doesn't bother lifting his head from the sofa cushion. One ear twitches in my direction. That's it. That's his version of a greeting.

"Missed you too," I say.

He yawns.

I kick off my riding boots and leave them by the door, already feeling the ache in my calves from this morning's ride. Good ache. The kind that means I pushed myself, that I felt something other than the hollow numbness that's become my default setting.

My purse lands on the entry table with a soft thud. I fish out my phone without thinking, and the screen lights up with a notification.

Missed Call: Father

One call. No voicemail. That's Franklin Ashford in a nutshell. He expects you to call back without him having to explain why. The man runs a business empire but can't be bothered to leave a thirty-second message.

Three months since I've seen them. Three months since I sat through that dinner at the Ashford townhouse, Julian making desperate small talk while Father asked pointed questions about my "plans" and Sylvia smiled that thin, patient smile she wears when she's cataloging my failures.

I miss Julian. That's the truth of it. My brother with his terrible jokes and his genuine laugh.

Father, I miss in a different way. A smaller way. The version of him that existed before Sylvia, before he stopped seeing me as his daughter and started seeing me as an asset to be deployed.

Come back to the company, Ava. You have a good head for business. We could use you on the board.

What he really means is *come back and be useful. Stop wasting yourself on whatever it is you're doing with your life now.*

I set the phone face-down on the table. I'll call back tomorrow. Or the day after. Or never.

Alfie finally deigns to look at me, his green eyes half-lidded with feline judgment.

"Don't start," I tell him.

He blinks slowly. Somehow, that feels like criticism too.

Before Riccardo, I worked. I was good at it. Strategic planning, contract negotiations, the delicate dance of making powerful men feel like they were getting what they wanted while you walked away with everything you needed. I had an office with a view and a reputation for being sharp.

Then I got married, and I stopped.

Not because Riccardo asked me to. He loved that I had my own mind, my own ambitions. But the Sartori world swallowed everything. The dinners, the events, the careful performance of being a Don's wife. The constant calculation of who to smile at, who to avoid, whose ego needed stroking and whose grudge needed managing.

It was a full-time job. Just not one that showed up on any tax return.

And somewhere in there, I realized I didn't miss it. The corporate world, the endless meetings, the way people looked at me and saw my father's name before they saw me. With Riccardo, I was just Ava. His Ava.

Now I'm no one's Ava. And I find I prefer it that way.

Money was never the problem. I have my own. More than enough to live comfortably for the rest of my life. And if I needed it, there's Riccardo's

money sitting in accounts I've barely touched. Blood money, probably. I try not to think about that.

What I want is simple. I want to ride Nero in the early morning when the ring is empty and the mist makes everything feel like a dream. I want to come home to an apartment that's mine, with a cat who doesn't ask anything of me except food and the occasional acknowledgment that he exists.

I want people to stop looking at me.

That's the thing no one tells you about being a widow. About being *that* widow—the one whose husband died violently, publicly, in a way that made the news. People used to look at me and see someone worth knowing. Smart. Funny. Good company at a dinner party.

Now they look at me and see tragedy. Or worse, opportunity.

Poor Ava.

Did you hear about Riccardo?

She must be so lonely.

The pity is suffocating. The curiosity is worse. Everyone wants to know how I'm "holding up," which really means they want details. They want to know if I've moved on, which really means they're calculating whether I'm available. So I stopped giving them the chance.

I pad through the apartment toward the bathroom, stripping off my jacket as I go.

The bathroom is all marble and soft lighting, the kind of luxury that used to feel aspirational and now just feels like camouflage. I turn on the tap and let the water run hot, steam curling toward the ceiling.

My reflection stares back at me from the mirror. Dark hair escaping its pins, cheeks flushed from the cold ride home, eyes that look more tired than thirty-four years should warrant.

I used to like my reflection. Used to see my mother in the shape of my face, in the way my mouth curves when I'm trying not to smile. Now I just see all the things I'm hiding.

The water fills the tub. I add the expensive bath oil Giulia gave me last Christmas. The one gesture from the Sartori family I've allowed myself to accept.

I sink into the heat and let my eyes close.

Nero was perfect today. Strong and steady beneath me, responding to the slightest shift in my weight. The only creature in my life who asks

nothing of me except to be present. To be honest in the most basic way—hands on reins, heels down, eyes forward.

The water laps against my shoulders. Somewhere in the apartment, Alfie knocks something off a table—I hear the thud, followed by pointed silence.

"I'm not getting up," I call out.

He's probably sitting next to whatever he broke, looking smug.

I let myself sink deeper, until the water touches my chin. Until the world narrows to warmth, steam and the steady beat of my own heart.



Liam

The ball rockets past me before I can get my racket up.

"Fifteen-love," Pietro calls out, that smug bastard grin spreading across his face.

I wipe sweat from my forehead with the back of my arm. "Lucky shot."

"Skill." He bounces another ball, ready to serve. "You're getting slow, old man."

I'm forty-four. He's thirty-nine. The age gap never mattered until he started beating me at tennis three years ago. Now it's a constant source of his amusement and my irritation.

The serve comes hard and fast to my backhand. I return it, but he's already at the net, putting it away with a volley that kicks up chalk from the line.

"Thirty-love."

"Fuck off."

Pietro laughs, and the sound echoes across the empty courts. The Lakeside Athletic Club is nearly deserted at ten in the morning on a Tuesday. Most of its members are at work. We have the place to ourselves, which is how Pietro prefers it.

Two more points and I've lost the game. Again.

"Break?" Pietro asks, already walking toward the bench where our water bottles wait.

I follow him, grateful for the pause even if I won't admit it. My lungs burn. My shirt is soaked through. Pietro barely looks winded, the prick.

This is my day off. The concept is laughable, really. I don't have days off. I have stretches of time between crises where I pretend to be a normal person. The phone in my bag could ring any moment, and I'd be back in the car, back in the thick of whatever mess needs handling. But Pietro insisted on the match.

I drop onto the bench and take a long drink of water. Pietro sits beside me, stretching his legs out, tilting his face toward the weak autumn sun.

"How's the Ava thing going?" he asks.

I keep my expression neutral. "Fine."

"Elaborate."

"She's home. She shops. She rides at some club up north." I shrug. "Same route every day. Same schedule. No variation."

Pietro turns to look at me. "That's it?"

"That's it." I take another drink, buying myself a moment. "She doesn't see anyone. Doesn't go anywhere interesting. The most exciting thing Marco's reported in two weeks is that she bought new boots."

Pietro nods slowly, processing this. I watch him from the corner of my eye, trying to read where this conversation is heading. With Pietro, you never know. The man's mind works in spirals, circling around what he actually wants to discuss until he's ready to land on it.

"She's still using the Fontana name?"

"Yes."

"And she hasn't contacted anyone in the family?"

"No." The word comes out harder than I intended. I soften my voice. "She came to see me two weeks ago. Told me she wants out. Completely."

Pietro's eyebrows rise. "And you didn't mention this because...?"

"Because it doesn't change anything. She's still Riccardo's widow. She's still family, whether she wants to be or not."

"She came to *you*." Pietro's tone carries a question I don't want to answer.

"I was available."

"Mm." He doesn't push it, but I can feel his attention sharpening. Pietro notices too much. Always has. "She seemed okay?"

"She seemed tired."

The word carries more than it should. Tired covers a lot of ground. Tired of grief. Tired of fear. Tired of being watched, protected and treated like something fragile that might shatter. I saw all of it in her face that night in my office, and I've been thinking about it ever since.

Pietro sighs, leaning back against the fence behind the bench. "I've been thinking about something."

"Dangerous habit."

He ignores the jab. "Ava should know. About Riccardo and Luna. About the boy."

My chest tightens. "Why?"

"Because it's wrong that she doesn't." Pietro runs a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the gesture. "Vittoria and Ava were close. Best friends, practically. Now Vittoria can barely look at her. She feels like she's lying every time they're in the same room."

"So Vittoria should tell her."

"Vittoria can't. She's too close to it." Pietro shakes his head. "But watching her avoid Ava, making excuses not to see her... it's eating at her."

I stare out at the empty courts, my jaw tight. "What Riccardo did with Luna had nothing to do with Ava."

"Didn't it?"

"No." The word comes out sharp. "He made his choices. She wasn't part of them."

Pietro turns to face me fully, his dark eyes steady. "They were trying for years, Liam. Years. Ava wanted a baby more than anything. Riccardo knew that. He watched her cry every month when it didn't happen, held her through the doctor's appointments, the tests, the disappointments." His voice drops. "And the whole time, he had a son with his brother's fiancée, even though he didn't know the boy existed. She needs to know."

The silence stretches. I don't have a response because there isn't one. What Riccardo did was unforgivable on multiple levels. Betraying Lorenzo. But Ava wasn't in his life back then. That doesn't mean he didn't hurt her with other women too. But I can't say that to Pietro.

I loved Riccardo like a brother. I would have died for him. I nearly did, more than once.

But some sins don't wash clean, even with death.

"She blamed herself," I say quietly. "For not being able to conceive. She thought something was wrong with her."

Pietro's expression shifts. "How do you know that?"

I shouldn't know it. I shouldn't know anything about Ava's private pain, the grief she carried quietly while playing the perfect mafia wife. But I watched her for seven years. I watched her at family dinners, at funerals, at weddings. I watched her smile when she was breaking inside.

"I heard Ava talk about it with Riccardo."

Pietro studies me for a long moment. Whatever he sees in my face, he doesn't comment on it. "Someone needs to tell her. Before she finds out some other way."

"And you think that someone should be me?"

"I think you're already watching her." Pietro stands, picking up his racket. "I think you volunteered to put Marco on her detail without anyone asking. I think you came to me three years ago and asked to be the one keeping an eye on Riccardo's widow, and I said yes because I trusted your judgment." He looks down at me, his expression unreadable. "So what's your judgment now?"

I don't answer. I can't.

Because my judgment when it comes to Ava has never been sound.

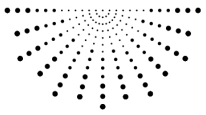
She wasn't always afraid of me. She became afraid later, and I never corrected it. I let her think I hated her because it was easier than the truth.

"She deserves to know," Pietro says. "Whatever you decide about how and when, she deserves that much."

He walks back onto the court, bouncing the ball, waiting for me to join him.

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CHAPTER THREE



Ava

Something warm and heavy presses against my stomach.

I drift up from sleep slowly, awareness seeping in like morning light through curtains. The weight shifts. A small motor starts humming.

Alfie.

My eyes flutter open to find him curled into a perfect circle on my belly, his gray fur rising and falling with each of my breaths. His eyes are closed, whiskers twitching in whatever dream cats have. Probably chasing birds. Or judging me from a higher vantage point.

"Hey, you," I murmur, my voice rough with sleep.

He doesn't acknowledge me. Classic Alfie.

My fingers find the soft spot behind his ears, and the purring intensifies. For a long moment, I just lie here, scratching gently, watching the early light paint shadows across my bedroom ceiling.

Two years. He's been mine for two years now.

The memory surfaces unbidden. Lesvos with Aria, back when things felt different. Back when I could accept kindness without it scraping against something raw inside me. Riccardo's mother was grieving a son, yet she still managed to hold me up.

Aria had insisted on the trip. *You need sun,* she'd said, her Italian accent thickening the way it always did when she worried.

She wasn't wrong. I was nine months out from burying Riccardo, and I'd been walking through my days like a ghost haunting my own life. Aria saw it. She'd always seen me, even when I tried to disappear.

We'd stayed in Molyvos first, then driven south to Petra. The village sat nestled against a massive rock formation, whitewashed houses tumbling down hillsides toward the sea. But what I remember most are the cats. Everywhere. Lounging on doorsteps, weaving between café tables, sunning themselves on ancient stone walls. More cats than people, I'd thought. A kingdom of strays who'd claimed the village as their own.

Aria had laughed at my face. *You look like you've found heaven.*

Maybe I had.

We'd wandered into a small art gallery near the harbor—one of those places that sold local paintings and handmade jewelry, with proceeds going to a foster program for the village cats. A woman with sun-weathered skin and kind eyes had explained how they trapped, neutered, and cared for the strays. How some found forever homes. How most stayed wild and loved.

I'd been admiring a watercolor of the harbor when I felt it.

That prickle at the back of my neck. The sensation of being watched.

I'd turned, and there he was. A gray tabby with enormous green eyes, sitting on a worn velvet cushion like a tiny emperor surveying his domain. He hadn't meowed or approached. He'd simply looked at me.

Looked at me.

Like he knew exactly who I was and had been waiting.

"That one doesn't like anyone," the woman had said, surprised. "He's been here eight months. Won't let anyone touch him."

But when I'd crouched down and extended my hand, he'd walked straight to me. Pressed his head against my palm. Closed his eyes.

Aria had called it fate. I'd called it two broken creatures recognizing each other.

Getting him back to the States had been a nightmare of paperwork and veterinary appointments. Worth every frustrating second.

Now he's here, purring on my stomach in a Chicago high-rise, and I'm—

I'm okay. For this single, quiet moment, I'm okay.

"Alright, your majesty." I give him one final scratch. "I need coffee more than I need oxygen right now. Move."

Alfie opens one eye. Doesn't move.

"Alfie."

A slow blink. The feline equivalent of *make me.*

I shift my hips, and he finally deigns to stand, stretching with theatrical displeasure before hopping off the bed. He shoots me a look over his shoulder—*this isn't over*—and stalks toward the door.

I swing my legs over the edge of the mattress, toes curling against the cool hardwood. The apartment is quiet. Too quiet, maybe, but I've learned to love the silence. It's better than the alternative.

Better than the constant buzz of people wanting something from me.

I pad down the hallway, Alfie weaving between my ankles in his ongoing campaign to trip me and inherit my estate. The kitchen is all clean lines and morning light, the city sprawling beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows like a painting I never asked for.

I'm three steps in when I freeze.

My hand shoots out, grabs the doorframe. Steadies me.

There's a box on my counter.

Small. White. Tied with a red ribbon.

Like a gift.

But it's not mine. I didn't put it there. I didn't order anything. I haven't had a visitor in—

How did it get inside my apartment?

The chain was on. I checked it three times last night, the way I always do. The deadbolts. The security system. All of it.

My heart pounds against my ribs. Blood rushes loud in my ears.

Someone was in here.

Someone was in here while I slept.

I should call the police. I should call building security. I should turn around and walk out and—

But my feet carry me forward.

One step. Two.

The box sits there, innocent and terrible. About the size of something that might hold jewelry.

I reach for it.

The ribbon slides free with a whisper. The lid lifts.

For one suspended heartbeat, my brain refuses to process what I'm seeing. It's pink. It's... wrong. It's—

A finger.

A human finger, pale and bloodless, resting on a bed of white cotton.

And on that finger, a ring.

A gold signet ring with an emerald stone.

Julian's ring.

The scream tears out of me.



Liam

Bruno's office is a place I spend most of my time lately.

The Don sits behind his father's old desk, the same desk his father used for thirty years, and the weight of that legacy hangs in the air between us. Almost two years in a wheelchair changed Bruno. Made him harder. Crueler. Until he got married to Antonella.

"Dmitri sends his apologies," I say, flipping through the monthly shipping reports. "He's in Germany."

Bruno snorts. "Let me guess. Vittoria dragged him to some tech conference."

"Cybersecurity seminar. Three days of presentations about encryption protocols and network vulnerabilities."

The image of Dmitri Baganov—six-foot-four of Bratva muscle—sitting in a conference room full of IT professionals while his wife takes notes makes the corner of my mouth twitch. The man would burn down half of Chicago for Vittoria without blinking, but ask him to sit through a PowerPoint presentation and he looks like someone's torturing him.

"Poor bastard," Bruno mutters, but there's something almost like warmth in his voice. Almost. "At least the shipments are running clean. Dante's route through the ports is—"

My phone vibrates.

I glance at the screen. My chest tightens.

Ava.

She's never called me.

"I need to take this." I'm already standing, already moving toward the window.

Bruno's eyebrows rise but he says nothing.

I answer. "Ava."

The sound that comes through the line stops my heart.

She's crying.

"—and there was a box and I didn't put it there and the finger, Liam, oh God, it's his ring, it's Julian's ring, someone cut off his—"

"Ava." I keep my voice steady even as my blood turns to ice. "Slow down. Take a breath."

"I can't—I can't breathe—there's a *finger* in my kitchen—"

"Listen to me." I grip the phone tighter. "Are you alone? Is anyone in the apartment with you?"

A sob tears through the line.

Bruno is watching me now, the reports forgotten. His eyes flick over me, measuring.

"There's no one," she says, and her voice has shifted. Still shaking, but underneath the fear I hear something else. Steel. "I already searched. I went through every goddamn room holding the gun and knife I keep because of your *fucking* world. There's no one here except me and a severed finger that belongs to my brother."

"Don't touch anything else. I'm coming to you now."

"Liam—"

"Lock the door and don't open it for anyone who isn't me. Understand?"

A pause. Then, quietly: "I understand."

I hang up.

Bruno is already on his feet. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Someone left a package in Ava's apartment." I'm moving toward the door, my mind running through scenarios, threats, entry points. "A finger. Her brother's. They got past her security system without triggering anything."

Bruno's expression hardens. "That's impossible. Vittoria designed that system herself."

"Apparently not impossible enough." I pull up my contacts, thumb hovering over Dante's name. "I need Dante and Luca outside her building. Now. And someone needs to check on Marco."

"You think Marco's compromised?"

"I think if he's not answering his phone in the next thirty seconds, we have a bigger problem than a severed finger."

Bruno reaches for his own phone. "I'll handle it. Go."

I'm already gone.

The elevator takes too long. I take the stairs instead, my footsteps echoing in the concrete stairwell as I dial Dante's number. He picks up on the second ring.

"Blackwood. What's—"

"Ava's building. I need you there in ten minutes."

A pause. I hear movement on his end, the rustle of fabric, keys jangling. "What happened?"

"Someone got into her apartment. I'm heading there now, but I want backup in place before I arrive."

"We're moving."

I hang up and push through the lobby doors into the gray Chicago morning. My car is parked in the reserved spot. I'm behind the wheel and pulling into traffic before I let myself think about what I heard in Ava's voice.

Fear. Real fear.

I run a red light. Then another.

My phone buzzes. Text from Bruno: *Marco's not answering. Sending team to his position.*

Fuck.

I press harder on the accelerator.



Ava

The marble tile is cold through my silk robe. I don't remember sitting down, but here I am. Back pressed against the door, knees pulled to my chest, the box three feet away on the kitchen island where I left it.

My brother's finger, severed and placed on my kitchen counter like some kind of gift.

I can't stop shaking.

Alfie winds between my ankles, his small body warm against my frozen skin. He meows—confused, probably, by why I'm on the floor instead of feeding him breakfast. I reach down and pull him into my lap, burying my face in his gray fur.

"It's okay," I whisper. "It's okay."

It's not okay. Nothing about this is okay.

The box had no note. No demand. No instructions. Just the finger and Julian's ring, the emerald signet our grandfather left him, the one he never takes off. Whoever did this wanted me to know they have him. Wanted me to sit here, terrified, with no idea what they want or how to get him back.

Usually these things happen for money. Ransom. A price tag attached to a body part, proof of life traded for wire transfers. Clean transactions, even when they're soaked in blood.

But there's no number. No account. No deadline.

Just silence.

My mind keeps circling back to the same question. *How did they get in?*

I locked the door last night. I *always* lock the door. Three deadbolts, the chain, the security system Vittoria installed herself. I remember checking each one before bed, the way I do every night without fail.

But the chain was undone.

Someone was already here. In my apartment. While I slept.

The thought sends ice through my veins. They were *here*. Moving through my space, breathing my air, standing over my bed while I—

A sound escapes my throat.

Who would do this? Why Julian?

If this were about the Sartoris, they would have taken me. I'm Riccardo's widow. I'm the obvious target. Taking Julian makes no sense unless...

Unless this isn't about the Sartoris at all.

Unless this is about my father. His company. His money. His enemies.

But Franklin has enemies in boardrooms, not back alleys. He destroys people with lawsuits and hostile takeovers, not severed fingers in white boxes. This level of violence, this *message*, belongs to a different world.

The knock makes me jump so hard Alfie yowls and scrambles from my lap.

"Ava." Liam's voice, low and urgent through the door. "Open the door."

I don't move. Can't move. My body has turned to stone against the marble.

"Ava. Open the goddamn door."

"No."

The word comes out hoarse. Barely audible. But he hears it.

"What do you mean, *no*?" His fist hits the door harder. The wood shudders against my spine. "Ava, open the fucking door. Now."

"I said no."

I hear him exhale. Sharp. Frustrated. The sound of a man who isn't used to being denied.

"This isn't a negotiation. Someone breached your security. Someone was inside your apartment. I need to—"

"They were here while I slept." The words tumble out before I can stop them. "The chain was undone this morning. I locked it. I *know* I locked it. They were inside, Liam. They were *inside* while I was sleeping."

Silence.

Then his voice drops. Lower. Dangerous in a different way.

"Ava. Open the door."

"What if they come again?"

"They won't."

"You don't know that."

"Dante and Luca are clearing the building floor by floor. If anyone's here, they'll find them. But I need to get to you. I need to see that you're—" He stops. Starts again. "Open the door."

I press my palms flat against the cold tile. My hands won't stop trembling.

"I don't know who did this," I say. "There was no note. No demand. Just... just his finger. Just the ring. I don't know what they want. I don't know if this is about money or if someone's trying to hurt me because of Riccardo or if—"

"Ava." His voice cuts through my spiral. Steady. Certain. "None of that matters right now. What matters is getting you somewhere safe. But I can't do that through a door."

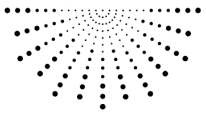
"I'm not safe anywhere." The truth of it settles into my bones. "They got into my apartment. Past Vittoria's system. Past everything. If they can do that here, they can do it anywhere."

Another knock. Softer this time. Almost gentle.

"You're right," he says. "They can. Which is why you need someone watching your back who knows how to stop them."

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CHAPTER FOUR



Liam

I've been sitting against Ava's door for twenty minutes , my back pressed to the wood, listening to the silence on the other side.

My phone buzzes. Dante.

Marco's dead. Single shot to the head. Professional.

I close my eyes. Marco was good. Twenty years in the business, never made a mistake. Someone got close enough to put a bullet in his brain while he sat in his car outside this building, and he never saw it coming.

Whoever did this knows exactly what they're doing.

I type back: *Hold position. No one in or out.*

Understood. Luca's got six men on the exits. How long?

As long as it takes.

Ten more minutes. That's what I'll give her. Ten more minutes of this silence, and then I'm coming through whether she likes it or not.

Then her voice comes through the door, muffled but clear enough.

"It must be really hard for you."

I don't move. Don't respond.

"Being forced to babysit me." A pause. "Since you always wanted me out of your sight."

The words hit me like a fist to the chest. I close my eyes, and for a moment I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't form a single fucking word to defend myself.

Because she's right, isn't she? That's exactly what it looked like. Every room I walked out of. Every conversation I cut short. Every time I put distance between us because being close to her was a special kind of torture I couldn't afford.

Christ.

"What did I do?"

Her voice is smaller now. Quieter. The question of a woman who's spent years wondering.

"Back then. What did I do that made you despise me so much?"

I press my palm flat against the door.

"Ava." My voice comes out rough. "If you don't open this door in eight minutes, I'm going to knock it down."

Silence.

Then a laugh. Bitter and hollow and nothing like the sound I've imagined a thousand times.

"That's funny," she says. "How you always avoid saying what you want to say."

I don't respond. Can't.

"I don't like you either, you know." Her voice is harder now. Sharper. "For ten years, you treated me like shit. No reason. No explanation. Just cold looks, turned backs and making me feel like I was something dirty on the bottom of your shoe."

Every word lands like a blade between my ribs.

"The best thing for you to do right now is leave this building." A pause. "That's it. That's all I want from you. Just go."

I've given her time. I've respected that she's in shock, that she found her brother's finger in a box on her kitchen counter, that her world just shattered into pieces she doesn't know how to put back together.

But now?

Now I'm fucking furious.

Not at her. Never at her. At myself. At every choice I made that led her to believe I despised her when the truth is so much worse.

I push to my feet.

"I'm opening this door now."

"Liam—"

"Now, Ava."

I step back. Calculate the angle. The lock is good, but the frame is standard residential. One solid kick and it'll give. Two at most.

I draw my foot back.

The chain rattles.

I freeze.

The deadbolts click one after another. Then the handle turns, the door swings open, and Ava is standing in front of me.

The woman I've secretly loved for ten years.

Her dark hair escaping from its pins. Her face is pale, her eyes red-rimmed, and there's a tremor in her hands that she's trying desperately to hide.

She looks devastated.

She looks terrified.

And she's looking at me like I'm just another threat in a day full of them.

"Happy now?" she asks.

I step forward. She steps back. I keep moving until I'm inside the apartment, my eyes already scanning the space. Kitchen to the left. Living room straight ahead. Hallway to the bedrooms on the right.

"Where's the box?"

"Kitchen." Her voice is flat. "I didn't touch it after... after I saw what was inside."

I move past her, and she flinches when my arm brushes hers. The contact sends electricity up my spine, but I push it down. Lock it away. There's work to do.

The box sits on her marble counter. White cardboard. Red ribbon. Elegant, almost. Like a gift from a high-end boutique.

I pull on gloves from my pocket and lift the lid.

Julian's finger sits on a bed of white cotton. The signet ring catches the light. Emerald and gold. I've seen it on his hand at family dinners, at Bruno's wedding, at Riccardo's funeral.

No note. No demands. Just a message written in flesh and bone.

We can reach anyone.

"is the police are coming and I need to make calls," I say without turning around. "Vittoria needs to see your security footage. Bruno needs to know about Marco."

"Marco?" Her voice wavers. "What about Marco?"

I turn to face her. She's standing in the doorway of her own kitchen, arms wrapped around herself like she's trying to hold herself together.

"He's dead. Shot in his car outside your building."

The color drains from her face. "Oh God."

"Whoever did this is professional. They knew your security, knew your routine, knew exactly how to get in and out without triggering any alarms."

She sways slightly. I'm across the room before I realize I've moved, my hand catching her elbow to steady her.

She jerks away from my touch like I've burned her.

"Don't."

The refusal lands hard between us.

"Ava—"

"Don't touch me." Her voice shakes. "You don't get to touch me. You don't get to act like you care about what happens to me. Not after everything."

I let my hand fall to my side. "I'm not leaving."

"I didn't ask you to stay."

"Doesn't matter." I hold her gaze. "I'm not leaving."

Anger crosses her eyes, then fear.

"Why?" she demands. "Why do you care? You've spent ten years making it crystal clear that you can barely stand to be in the same room as me. So why are you here now? Why does it matter?"

Because I love you.

Because I've loved you since the moment I saw you, no matter how hard I've tried to kill the feeling.

"Because you're family," I say instead. "And family doesn't get to walk away."

Looking for werewolf or billionaire novels?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and browse the stories.

Her laugh is hollow. "I'm not your family, Liam. I'm Riccardo's widow. That's all I've ever been to any of you."

The words cut deeper than she knows.

I take a step closer. She doesn't back away this time.

"You're wrong," I tell her quietly. "But we don't have time to argue about it now. Someone put your brother's finger in a box and left it on your counter. Someone killed Marco to send a message. And until I know who and why, you're not leaving my sight."

Her chin lifts. That stubborn defiance I've watched from across a hundred rooms.

"And if I refuse?"

I hold her gaze.

"Then I'll carry you out of here myself."



Ava

"Where am I supposed to go?"

Liam's jaw tightens. "The compound."

Of course. Where else would the Sartori family stash me?

I close my eyes. The compound means that bedroom. The one with the four-poster bed where Riccardo held me through nightmares. The bathroom where I took pregnancy tests month after month, year after year, each one a fresh wound. The closet that still holds his suits because no one asked me what to do with them, and I couldn't bring myself to decide.

I open my eyes.

Liam watches me with that unreadable expression. Waiting. Patient as stone.

"Wait here." I turn toward the hallway. "I need to pack."

"Five minutes."

"I need longer than five minutes."

"You have ten."

Usually I'd push back just to watch his jaw tick, but Julian's finger sits in a box ten feet away, and I can't muster the energy for spite. My brother needs me and I don't even know how to help him.

My bedroom feels foreign now. Invaded. Someone stood here while I slept. Someone watched me breathe, studied the rise and fall of my chest, decided to leave me alive for reasons I don't understand.

My hands shake as I pull a suitcase from the closet.

Focus. Pack. Move.

I grab clothes without looking at them. Jeans, sweaters, something that might be a dress. Underwear shoved into a side pocket. My riding boots because Nero is the only thing keeping me sane lately, and I refuse to abandon that small peace.

The bathroom takes longer.

I stare at my skincare products lined up on the counter. The vitamin C serum, the retinol, the hyaluronic acid, the moisturizer. Riccardo used to tease me about my "potions." Said I didn't need them. Said I was beautiful without trying.

For over a year after he died, I didn't touch any of it. Couldn't see the point. Some mornings I barely managed to brush my teeth before crawling back into bed with the curtains drawn.

But in the past few months I've found something in those fifteen minutes. Standing at this counter, smoothing serum into my skin, watching my reflection slowly come back to life. It's not vanity. It's ritual. It's proof that I'm still here, still trying, still worth the effort.

I pack all of it. Every bottle, every tube, every overpriced cream. If I'm going back to that house full of ghosts, I'm taking my armor with me.

The living room stops me cold.

Liam kneels on my rug, one hand extended toward Alfie. My cat—my antisocial, people-hating, trust-no-one cat—rubs his gray head against Liam's scarred knuckles. A purr rumbles through the quiet apartment.

I forget how to breathe.

Alfie doesn't let people touch him. Not the vet without sedation. Not Aria, who tried for an entire weekend in Greece. Not even me for the first three weeks after I brought him home. He's a creature built from suspicion and sharp edges, and I loved him immediately for it because I understood.

But there he is. Eyes half-closed. Purring. Pressing his cheek into the palm of a man who kills people for a living.

Liam's expression hasn't changed but his touch is gentle. Careful. Like Alfie is precious and breakable.

Something twists in my chest. I shove it down.

"He doesn't do that," I say.

Liam glances up. His hand stills on Alfie's fur. "Do what?"

"Let people touch him."

A pause. Liam looks back at the cat, then withdraws his hand slowly. Alfie chirps in protest and headbutts his knee.

"Seems fine to me," Liam says.

I grab Alfie's travel carrier from the hall closet. "Can I call my father?"

"Bruno already contacted him."

I freeze with the carrier in my hands. "What?"

"Your father knows about Julian." Liam rises to his feet in one fluid motion. "He's been in touch with law enforcement."

The carrier drops. I catch it before it hits the floor, but barely.

"The police?" My voice cracks. "He called the *police*?"

"That's what civilians do, Ava."

I press both hands against my temples. The pressure doesn't help. Nothing helps.

"They'll get him killed." The words tumble out, panic sharpening each one. "Whoever took Julian—if they wanted money, there would have been a note. Instructions. Something. But there was nothing. Just—just his *finger*, Liam. Just proof that they have him and they're willing to hurt him."

"I know."

"Police involvement escalates these situations. Everyone knows that. It's in every movie, every—" I stop. Laugh, and it sounds wrong. Broken. "God, I sound insane."

"You sound like someone in shock." Liam steps closer. "Which you are."

I back up until my shoulders hit the wall. "Don't."

He stops. Waits.

"Don't be kind to me." My throat burns. "I can't—I don't know how to —" I gesture between us, helpless. "You've hated me for ten years. You can't just *stop* because something terrible happened."

Liam's expression doesn't flicker. "I never hated you."

"You couldn't stand to be in the same room as me."

"That's not the same thing."

"Then what *is* it?" The question tears out of me, raw and desperate. "What did I do? What could I possibly have done to make you treat me like I was invisible? Like looking at me caused you physical pain?"

Neither of us speaks. Alfie meows, breaking the stalemate.

Liam's jaw works. Once. Twice. Then he turns away, reaching down to scoop Alfie into his arms with an ease that shouldn't be possible.

"We need to go," he says. "Car's waiting."

I want to scream. I want to grab his shoulders and shake him until the truth falls out. I want to understand why this man looks at me like I'm the last person on earth he wants to see.

But we have more important things to deal with at the moment.

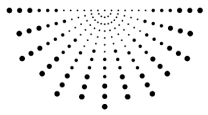
I pick up the carrier. Hold it open.

Liam deposits Alfie inside with surprising gentleness. The cat settles immediately, still purring.

"Traitor," I mutter at him.

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CHAPTER FIVE



Liam

The compound's living room feels smaller today. Maybe it's the tension filling every corner, thick enough to choke on. Bruno sits in an old armchair. Lorenzo stands by the window, arms crossed, watching the grounds. Nico hasn't stopped checking his phone since we arrived, his fingers tapping against the screen in that restless way of his.

And Ava.

She sits on the edge of the sofa, spine straight, hands folded in her lap. The picture of composure. But I've spent ten years studying this woman from across rooms, and I can see the cracks. The slight tremor in her fingers. The way she keeps her gaze fixed on a point just past Bruno's shoulder instead of meeting his eyes.

"I don't want to stay here," she says.

The words land like a grenade in the silence.

Bruno's mouth flattens. "Ava—"

"If they wanted to hurt me, they had their chance." Her voice is steady. Too steady. "Someone was in my apartment while I slept. They could have done anything. Instead, they left a box and walked away."

She's right.

The thought has been gnawing at me since we found Marco's body.

They wanted her scared. They didn't want her dead.

"That doesn't mean you're safe," Bruno says.

"I'm not safe anywhere." Ava finally looks at him. "The compound has the best security in Chicago, and someone still breached Vittoria's system to reach my apartment."

Lorenzo turns from the window. "She has a point."

"She's not going anywhere alone," Bruno snaps.

"I'm not suggesting alone." Ava's hands tighten in her lap. "My father's house. He's already involved the police. FBI, probably, knowing him. If I'm there, I'm another layer of protection for Julian when they find him. And the cops will be watching."

I thought she was packing to stay here. The bag in the car, the quick efficiency of her movements—I assumed she'd accepted this.

But I can't blame her for not wanting to.

This house holds too much.

"Franklin Ashford's security is corporate," Nico says without looking up from his phone. "Cameras and panic buttons. Not equipped for this level of threat."

"Which is why she'll need someone with her." The words come out before I can stop them. "If she's going to her father's house, she needs a man there. At minimum."

Ava's head turns toward me. Those dark eyes, sharp as broken glass.

She rolls them.

Actually rolls them, like I've said something tedious instead of reasonable. Like her brother's finger isn't sitting in an evidence bag somewhere and her bodyguard isn't lying in the morgue.

She doesn't look scared.

I know her well enough to recognize what I'm seeing. This isn't bravery. It's surrender. The quiet acceptance of someone who's stopped fighting the current because drowning seems easier than swimming.

A hot, ugly thing coils behind my sternum.

"Luca and Fabio are still in Chicago," Bruno says, rubbing his temple. "We can use them for rotation."

"No."

Everyone looks at me.

I clear my throat. "I'll stay with her. Most of the time. Luca and Fabio can rotate in when I need rest."

Bruno nods immediately. "Done."

Ava stares at me.

The weight of her gaze is physical. I can feel it pressing against my skin, searching for an explanation. A reason I'd volunteer when she believes I hate her.

I don't have one.

Not one I can give her, anyway.

"You don't have to do this," she says quietly.

"I know."

"Ava," Bruno says. "Liam is the best we have. If he says he'll protect you, he will. With his life, if necessary."

"I don't want anyone dying for me."

"Too bad," I say. "That's the job."

She holds my gaze, something working behind her dark eyes. Then she blinks, looks off, and the room resets.

"Fine." She stands, smoothing her hands over her thighs. The gesture is automatic, a remnant of the polished hostess she used to be. "I'll call my father. Let him know I'm coming."



Ava

The Ashford estate looks like a crime scene.

Which, I suppose, it is.

Police cruisers line the circular driveway, their lights off but their presence screaming. Unmarked sedans cluster near the fountain—FBI, probably, given how my father operates. He never does anything quietly. Not business deals, not charity galas, not even family emergencies.

The fact that he's made this into a spectacle should comfort me. It means he's taking Julian's kidnapping seriously, throwing every resource at the problem.

Instead, it terrifies me.

Because Franklin Ashford doesn't panic. He calculates. He strategizes. He treats everything like a hostile takeover waiting to be won.

If he's letting this many people onto his property, letting this many eyes see that this has rattled the great Franklin Ashford, things are worse than I thought.

Liam parks behind a black SUV I don't recognize. The engine dies, and silence fills the car. Through the windshield, I count at least eight vehicles. Eight. For a man who once refused to call an ambulance when I broke my arm at twelve because he didn't want the neighbors talking.

"Ready?" Liam's voice pulls me out of the spiral.

No. Absolutely not.

"Yes." I reach for the door handle, then pause. "Take Alfie to the second bedroom on the first floor. The one with the blue wallpaper. He'll be calmer there—it's quiet, away from the main areas."

I don't look at Liam as I give the instructions. My eyes stay fixed on the house, on the warm light spilling from windows I haven't looked through in months.

"You can wait there until I come find you. I need to speak with my father alone first."

The silence stretches a beat too long.

I finally turn to find Liam watching me with an expression I can't read. Then his head tilts to one side, and the corner of his mouth curves up.

"Missed bossing people around, have we?"

I blink.

Once.

Twice.

Heat crawls up my neck before I can stop it. The words tangle somewhere between my brain and my tongue, caught in the sudden, mortifying realization that I just gave Liam Blackwood—head of Sartori security, a man who has commanded soldiers and coordinated operations across three continents—orders.

My lips part to apologize.

But Liam is already out of the car.

The door shuts behind him with a soft click. Through the window, I watch him round the vehicle, moving with that fluid, purposeful stride that makes him look like he's always exactly where he means to be. He opens the back door, and I hear him murmur something to Alfie.

My traitorous cat doesn't make a single sound of protest.

I sit there for another moment, pulse still racing from embarrassment I have no business feeling. Liam works for the Sartoris. Technically, in this situation, he's here to protect me. Giving him directions isn't bossy. It's practical.

So why does my face still feel warm?

I shake it off. Julian. Focus on Julian.

The afternoon air hits my skin as I step out of the car, carrying the bite of early autumn. Leaves crunch under my heels as I walk toward the house—the house I grew up in, the house I fled at twenty-two and never quite came back to.

The Ashford estate isn't as large as the Sartori compound, but it tries harder. Georgian columns. Manicured hedges. A fountain that my father had imported from Italy because he wanted people to know he could afford to import fountains from Italy.

Everything here is designed to impress. To intimidate.

I used to find it beautiful.

Now it just looks cold.

The front door looms ahead, and my feet slow without permission. Behind me, I hear Liam's footsteps on the gravel, then the creak of what must be a side entrance opening. He's following my instructions. Of course he is—despite the smirk, despite the comment, he's a professional.

I take a breath.

Then another.

Then I climb the steps and knock.

The door swings open before my knuckles finish the third rap, and suddenly I'm wrapped in soft arms and the familiar scent of my entire childhood.

"Oh, my sweet girl." Margaret's voice cracks on the words. "Oh, Ava."

I sink into the embrace without thinking. Margaret has worked for my family for thirty-two years. She was here when my mother disappeared. She was here when Sylvia arrived, all sharp smiles and sharper comments. She was here for every scraped knee, every nightmare, every teenage heartbreak that I couldn't tell anyone else about.

"Margaret." My voice comes out smaller than I want it to. "I'm okay. I'm here."

"You're not okay." She pulls back just enough to cup my face in her weathered hands, brown eyes searching mine with the same fierce concern she's shown me since I was seven years old. "None of us are okay. That poor boy—"

Her voice breaks.

"Where's Sylvia?" I ask.

"In her room. Headache." Margaret's tone goes flat on that last word. "She's been having a lot of those since the news came."

Of course she has. My stepmother has always had a talent for convenient ailments when things get difficult.

"I need to see my father."

"I know you do." Margaret squeezes my arm once, then releases me. "He's expecting you."

I start down the hallway. The walls are lined with family portraits. There's one of my mother near the study door. I make myself look at it as I pass.

She's smiling in the photograph. Young. Happy.

She disappeared when I was ten.

I've spent twenty-four years wondering if she left because she wanted to, or if something else happened. My father never talks about it. Sylvia acts like Oriana Fontana never existed.

And now Julian is gone too.

I stop in front of the study door. Voices filter through the wood. My father's clipped baritone, several others I don't recognize. Official tones. Careful words.

My hand hovers over the handle.



Liam

The cat settles onto the center of Ava's bed like he owns the place. Gray fur contrasts on white silk. He kneads the duvet twice, circles, and curls into a

perfect ball.

"There you go, mate," I murmur, scratching behind his ears one last time.

He purrs. The sound fills the quiet room. A space that feels too staged. Like a hotel suite nobody's actually meant to live in.

I straighten up, scanning the windows out of habit. Good sightlines. Decent escape routes. The lock on the balcony door is shit, though. I'll need to fix that before nightfall.

I'm about to turn and leave when a voice cuts through the silence.

"Why is there a cat in my house?"

I turn.

A woman stands in the doorway. Late forties. Dark hair styled. Her forehead doesn't move when she frowns. She wears a cream silk blouse and pearls at two in the afternoon while her stepson is missing.

Sylvia Ashford.

I've never spoken to her. Not once. I've seen her at a few events over the years, always hovering near Franklin like an accessory. I've heard enough about her around the compound and from Riccardo.

But we've never exchanged a single word.

Until now.

"The cat belongs to Ava," I say.

Sylvia's gaze sweeps over me, assessing and dismissing.

"She brought her dog too, I assume?" Sylvia's lip curls slightly. "Wonderful. As if this house doesn't have enough chaos without animals running about."

I tilt my head. "Dogs sometimes bite. To death, even." I let the words hang there. "So you might want to watch your mouth."

Sylvia's eyes widen. Then narrow. Color rises in her cheeks but not from embarrassment. She's angry. Women like her don't feel embarrassment. They feel outrage. Indignation. How *dare* the help talk back.

"Excuse me?" Her voice goes sharp. "How *dare* you speak to me like that? Do you have any idea who I am? Who my husband is?"

"I know exactly who you are, Mrs. Ashford."

I take a step toward her. Not threatening. Just enough to make the space between us feel smaller. Tighter.

"I also know exactly who you *aren't*."

Her chin lifts. "I could have you thrown out of this house in five minutes."

"You could try."

Another step. She doesn't retreat, but her fingers tighten on the doorframe.

"You're probably used to saying whatever you like," I continue. "Probably used to everyone shutting up and taking it. Nodding along. Yes, Mrs. Ashford. Of course, Mrs. Ashford. Whatever you say, Mrs. Ashford."

I stop about two feet from her. Close enough to see the tiny lines around her eyes that the Botox couldn't quite erase.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not most people."

Sylvia's mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

No sound comes out.

"Now." I gesture toward the hallway behind her. "Get the hell out of here."

For a long moment, she doesn't move. Just stares at me, probably already planning how she'll spin this to Franklin. Poor Sylvia, harassed by that *brute* the Sartoris sent.

She turns on her heels and walks away without another word. The click of her shoes echoes down the corridor, sharp and precise.

I watch until she disappears around the corner. Then I let out a slow breath.

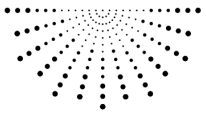
Sylvia Ashford is exactly the type of human I despise. Born rich or married into it, doesn't matter which. Same result. Same entitlement. Same assumption that money buys obedience, that wealth equals worth, that everyone beneath her station exists solely to serve her comfort.

I've met dozens of women like her over the years. Society wives. Trophy girlfriends. The polished, poisonous type who smile at charity galas while destroying anyone who threatens their position.

Focus, I tell myself. *Protect Ava. Find Julian. Everything else is noise.*

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CHAPTER SIX



Ava

My father stands behind his desk, and for a moment, neither of us moves. Three months since I've seen him. It might as well be three years.

"Ava," he says, and then he's crossing the threshold, pulling me into his arms with a force that steals my breath.

I stiffen at first. We're not huggers, the Ashfords. We're handshakes and air kisses, polite distance maintained like a family heirloom. But his arms tighten around me, and I feel the tremor running through him.

So I hold on.

My father was never a bad dad. He was just absent. Present in body, gone in spirit. A man who confused providing with parenting, who showed love through trust funds and opportunities rather than words or touch. I used to resent him for it. Then I lost Riccardo, and I understood.

Grief doesn't just take the person you love. It takes pieces of you too.

I remember him before my mother disappeared. Laughing at breakfast. Chasing me through the garden while she watched from the terrace, her dark hair catching the sunlight. He was *happy* then. We all were. And when she vanished—when the search parties came up empty and the police stopped looking and the whispers started—he vanished too.

Not physically. He was still there, sitting at the head of the dinner table, signing my permission slips, writing checks for my education. But the man who laughed? The man who chased me through gardens?

Gone.

I understand now. God, do I understand.

He pulls back, his hands gripping my shoulders as his eyes scan my face. "You're alright? They didn't—"

"I'm fine. The finger was Julian's. His ring."

He goes rigid. "I know."

Over his shoulder, I count the bodies in the room. Four people. His lawyer, Gerald, stands near the window. Two men in dark suits occupy the leather chairs facing the desk, their posture screaming federal agent. And in the corner, leaning against the bookshelf like he belongs there...

A man I've never seen before.

He's watching me. Not the room, not my father. *Me*. His smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"Mrs. Sartori," one of the agents says, rising. "We'll need to speak with you later. About the package, your relationship with your brother, anyone who might have—"

"Of course." I keep my voice steady. Composed. I know how to handle law enforcement. "I'll make myself available."

They exchange a look I can't read, then nod to my father and file out. Gerald follows, murmuring something about making calls.

The door clicks shut.

The stranger doesn't leave.

"Ava." My father's hand finds the small of my back, guiding me forward. "I'd like you to meet someone. Nolan Pierce."

The man pushes off the bookshelf and approaches. Late forties, maybe older. Well-kept in that aggressive way, like he's fighting time with expensive trainers and careful grooming.

"Mrs. Sartori." He takes my hand, raising it to his lips. "I've heard so much about you."

His mouth is dry against my knuckles. Papery. Wrong.

Every instinct I have screams to yank my hand back, to wipe it on my dress, to put the entire room between us. I've spent a decade around dangerous men. Riccardo's world was full of them. I learned to read them the way other women read fashion magazines.

This one sets my teeth on edge.

But I'm Franklin Ashford's daughter before I'm anyone else, so I let my hand linger for exactly the appropriate amount of time before withdrawing it. "Mr. Pierce. I don't believe we've met."

"Nolan is a business associate," my father says. The words sound rehearsed. "He's been... helpful. With the situation."

Helpful how? What business? Why is he here?

But I know better than to ask those questions with an audience.

"Father." I turn to face him fully. "I'd like to speak with you. Alone."

Nolan Pierce's expression shifts. Annoyance first. Then his eyes drop over me, slow, and my skin crawls.

My father nods. "Nolan. Give us a moment."

Pierce's smile stretches wider, all surface and no warmth. "Of course. Mrs. Sartori, I look forward to getting to know you better."

He says it like a promise. Or a threat.

The door closes behind him, and my father's composure crumbles.

He makes it to his desk before his legs give out. Sinks into the leather chair like a man twice his age. And then his hands come up, covering his eyes, and his shoulders begin to shake.

"Papa..."

The word slips out before I can stop it. I haven't called him that since I was a kid. Since my mother disappeared and he became a stranger in my life.

A sound tears from his chest. Raw. Broken. The kind of sound I made alone in my apartment after Riccardo's funeral, when there was no one left to perform for.

He's *crying*.

Franklin Ashford, who built a fortune on an iron will and an inability to show weakness.

Crying.

And I can't—

I *can't*—

The tears hit before I can stop them. They always do. I've never been able to watch someone cry without crying myself, some broken empathy that turns other people's grief into my own. But this is worse. This is my father falling apart, and this is the realization crashing over me like a wave—

We can't fix this.

The FBI is here. The lawyers are here. My father has money and power and connections that span continents. And none of it matters. None of it will bring Julian home. None of it will undo whatever is happening to him right now, wherever he is, with whoever took him.

Our hands are tied.

I cross to the desk and sink to my knees beside his chair, reaching for his arm. "Papa. Papa, look at me."

He does. Red-rimmed eyes, wet cheeks. "They took my boy, Ava. They took my *boy*."

"I know." My voice breaks. "I know."

"I don't know what they want. There's been no demand. No call. Nothing. Just—" His voice cracks. "Just his *finger* in a box, and I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to *fix this*."

I wrap my arms around him, and for the first time, my father holds me like I'm the only thing keeping him from drowning.

We stay like that, crying together, while somewhere out there, Julian waits for someone to save him.

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And I hate that I don't know how.



The storm passes eventually.

Not all at once. Pain doesn't work like that. It recedes in waves, each one a little smaller than the last, until my father's shoulders stop shaking

and his breathing evens out. I stay kneeling beside his chair, my hand on his arm, waiting.

Dad pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his face. The gesture is so familiar it makes my chest ache. He did the same thing at my mother's memorial service, twenty-four years ago. I remember thinking he looked like a stranger with wet cheeks.

"I'm sorry." His voice is rough. "You shouldn't have to see me like this."

"Dad." I squeeze his arm. "Julian is my brother. You don't have to apologize for loving him."

He nods, but I can see him rebuilding the walls. Brick by brick. Franklin Ashford doesn't stay vulnerable for long. The world taught him that lesson decades ago, and Sylvia reinforced it daily.

I push myself up from the floor and settle into the chair across from his desk. My knees protest. Apparently kneeling on hardwood in my thirties is different from what it was in my twenties.

"I don't think this has anything to do with the Sartoris," I say.

My father's expression shifts. Not quite a grimace, but close. The muscle in his jaw tightens the way it always does when that name comes up.

I know that look. I've seen it a hundred times over the past decade. At my wedding, at family dinners, at Riccardo's funeral. Sylvia has spent years dripping poison into my father's ear about the family I married into. *Criminals. Monsters. They'll get her killed.*

And okay. I understand it. They *are* mafia. The Sartoris have blood on their hands, bodies in their past and a legacy built on things that would make a federal prosecutor weep with joy.

But they also made me feel like I belonged somewhere.

For seven years, I had Sunday dinners where Giulia forced third helpings onto my plate. I had Vittoria teaching me to swear in Italian when the men weren't listening. I had a family that would burn down the world for each other—and somehow, impossibly, they included me in that circle.

Love doesn't care if a family runs legitimate businesses or something darker. Care doesn't check credentials. The Sartoris loved me like I was theirs, and I would have done anything for them.

I still would.

"You're right," my father says finally. He sounds exhausted. "This isn't about them. It's about me."

"Do you know who?"

"No." He shakes his head. "That's what's driving me insane. Someone took my son, sent you his—" His voice breaks. He swallows hard. "They sent proof they have him. But no demands. No ransom. No contact at all."

"They want you afraid."

"They've succeeded."

I lean forward. "Bruno has assigned protection for me. Liam Blackwood will be staying here, and two other men will rotate with him for rest periods."

My father nods slowly. "Good. That's good. Nolan has men on the property as well. He's been incredibly helpful through all this."

"Who is he, exactly?"

"A business partner," my father says. "We started working together about six months ago on a development project. A golf club—one of those exclusive membership places. He needed someone who could put a name on it, lend it credibility. I had the connections. He had the capital."

"And now he has men protecting your property."

My father meets my gaze. "Ava."

"I'm not accusing anyone of anything." I keep my voice even. "I'm just asking. Is Nolan Pierce in the same business as the Sartoris?"

A long pause.

"If he is," my father says carefully, "he's not the same kind. He doesn't operate the way they do. More entrepreneurial."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have." Franklin spreads his hands. "I don't ask questions I don't want answered. As long as my business stays clean, what he does with his own affairs is none of my concern."

I stare at him.

This is my father in a nutshell. The man who built an empire by knowing exactly which rocks not to turn over. He's not naive. He chooses ignorance like other people choose wine pairings.

"Dad, if Nolan is connected to whoever took Julian—"

"He's not." The words come sharp and fast. "He's been helping from the moment we got the news. His men are providing additional security. He's using his contacts to gather intelligence. Why would he do that if he was involved?"

To stay close. To control the information. To watch us panic.

I keep those thoughts to myself. My father is already stretched thin, and accusing his business partner isn't going to help anyone right now.

"Okay," I say instead. "I just want to understand who's in the house."

"People who want to help." My father's voice softens. "I know you have reasons to be suspicious, sweetheart. After everything with Riccardo, after the way you've been living these past ten years. But not everyone is a threat."

Someone breached Vittoria's security system. Someone left a box on my kitchen counter while I slept. Someone cut off my brother's finger and sent it to me.

Everyone is a threat until proven otherwise.

But I nod, because arguing won't bring Julian home faster.

"I should let you rest," I say, standing.

"Ava." My father rises too, and for a moment he looks every one of his sixty-three years. "I'm glad you're here. I know this house holds difficult memories for you, but having you close helps."

I cross to him and let him pull me into another embrace.

"We'll find him," I say against his shoulder. "Julian is smart. He'll survive until we do."

My father doesn't answer. His arms just tighten around me.

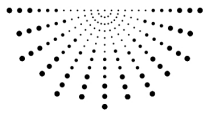
When I finally pull away and head for the door, I'm already calculating. Nolan Pierce and his men. Liam and the Sartori guards. FBI agents crawling over the property. Sylvia lurking somewhere with her convenient headaches.

My brother is missing, and I'm surrounded by people whose motives I can't read.

I need to find Liam.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



Liam

The door clicks shut behind her, and I watch Ava lean against it for a moment, eyes closed. She looks smaller in this room than she did in her apartment. More fragile. Like the house itself is pressing down on her.

I stay seated in the armchair near the window. Alfie has claimed the center of the bed.

Ava opens her eyes and catches me watching. Her expression wavers between afraid and glad.

"Do you know a man named Nolan Pierce?"

The question catches me off guard. I turn it over in my mind, sorting through files and faces. Pierce. American. Hungry in a way that makes men dangerous.

I nod slowly. "He's trying to enter our circle."

"The Sartoris?"

"Not specifically. Our world." I lean forward, elbows on my knees. "Why?"

Ava moves away from the door, her arms wrapped around herself. She stops at the foot of the bed, one hand reaching out to touch Alfie's fur. The cat doesn't stir.

"My father has business with him. Some golf club development project." She pauses, and I see the calculation behind her eyes. The suspicion. "Something about him feels wrong."

"Wrong how?"

"The way he looked at me. The way he talked." She shakes her head. "Like he already knew things about me he shouldn't know."

I file that away. Pierce has always struck me as the type who does his homework.

"You think he's connected to Julian's kidnapping."

It's not a question. I can see the theory forming in her mind, pieces clicking together the way they do when you're desperate for an answer.

"What if someone from another crime family wants to use Julian because of Nolan?" She turns to face me fully. "What if this is about Pierce's business dealings, and Julian got caught in the middle?"

I shake my head. "Doesn't track."

"Why not?"

"If they wanted Pierce, they would've hurt Pierce. Or his family." I hold her gaze, keeping my voice steady. "Whoever has Julian wants to harm the Ashfords. Not Pierce. Not anyone else."

The words land hard. I watch her absorb them, watch the brief hope drain from her face. She wanted me to tell her this was about someone else. Anyone else. That her brother wasn't specifically targeted because of who he is to her.

"So this is personal," she says quietly.

"It's always personal."

Ava nods, and for a moment she looks exactly like she did at Riccardo's funeral. That same hollow acceptance. That same weight settling onto her shoulders.

She moves to the window, keeping her distance from me. The late afternoon light catches the side of her face, and I force myself to look away. Focus on the room.

"The FBI wants to talk to me later," she says. "About the package."

I don't respond. There's nothing to say. The FBI will ask their questions, Ava will answer them, and none of it will find Julian any faster. Law enforcement moves like molasses in situations like this. Too many protocols. Too much paperwork. By the time they act, it's usually too late.

The silence stretches between us. Ava turns from the window, and I can feel her studying me. Trying to read something in my face that I've spent years learning to hide.

"Do you want something to eat? Or drink?"

"No."

The word comes out sharper than I intended. Ava's mouth tightens.

"Fine." She moves toward the door. "I'll ask Margaret to prepare a guest room for you. There's one down the hall that—"

"I'm not leaving this room."

She stops. Turns. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Liam, you can't possibly expect to sleep in here."

"I don't expect to sleep at all."

Her chin comes up before her eyes do. The pride first, annoyance second, both aimed at me.

"That's ridiculous. You can't stay awake indefinitely."

"I've done it before."

"This isn't a war zone."

"Isn't it?" I stand, and I see her tense. See that instinctive step backward that she tries to hide. "Someone got past Vittoria's security system. Someone killed Marco. Someone left your brother's finger on your kitchen counter while you slept." I take a step toward her, then stop. "Until I know who and why, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"You can guard me from the hallway."

"No."

"From the room next door."

"No."

"Liam—"

"The answer is no, Ava." I keep my voice level. Controlled. "You can argue with me all night if you want. Won't change anything."

She stares at me, and I can see her weighing her options. Calculating whether she can force me to leave. Whether it's worth the fight.

"This is insane," she says finally. "We've barely spoken in ten years, and now you want to—what? Watch me sleep?"

"I want to keep you alive."

"Why?"

I could give her the easy answer. You're family. You're Riccardo's widow. Bruno's orders.

But she's looking at me like she'll know if I lie.

"Because I promised myself," I say. "After Riccardo."

Something shifts in her expression. Softens, just slightly.

"You weren't responsible for what happened to Riccardo."

"Wasn't I?"

She opens her mouth to argue, then closes it. We both know there's nothing she can say that will change how I see that day. The moment I should have been faster. Should have seen it coming.

"I can't stop you from staying," she says quietly. "But I need to change. And shower. And I'd prefer not to have an audience."

"Bathroom's through there." I nod toward the door on the far wall. "Take your time. I'll be here when you're done."

She studies me in silence. Then she crosses to her suitcase, pulls out clothes, a small bag, and disappears into the bathroom.

The lock clicks behind her.

I settle back into the armchair and wait.



Ava

The stairs creak beneath my feet as I descend, each step bringing me closer to voices drifting up from the living room.

Liam follows three paces behind, close enough that I feel his presence like heat at my back. I've showered, changed into fresh clothes, and somehow managed to make myself look like a functioning human being.

Small victories.

My father stands near the fireplace with Nolan Pierce, both men turning as I enter. Nolan's gaze slides past me to Liam, and he offers a single nod of acknowledgment.

"There you are." My father crosses the room, his hand finding my elbow. "The FBI will be back within the hour. They want to speak with you about the package, then Sylvia."

The mention of her name makes my stomach clench.

"I haven't seen Sylvia yet," I say, keeping my voice neutral.

"She's been resting. This has been difficult for her as well."

Of course it has.

Margaret appears in the doorway, her apron slightly askew, flour dusting one sleeve. She must have been stress-baking. It's what she does when the world falls apart. Fills the kitchen with bread and cookies.

"Miss Ava, can I get you something to eat? You look pale."

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry, Margaret."

She points a flour-covered finger at me, her expression brooking no argument. "You will eat later whether you want to or not. I'll bring a tray to your room if I have to."

Despite everything, I manage something close to a smile. "Yes, ma'am."

I move toward the sofa, desperate to sit before my legs give out, when the click of heels announces her arrival.

Sylvia sweeps into the room like she's making an entrance at a charity gala. Her blonde hair is immaculate, her makeup flawless, her cream cashmere sweater probably costs a fortune. She looks like a woman who has never suffered a day in her life.

"Ava, darling!" She rushes toward me, arms outstretched. "Oh, my poor girl. I've been so worried about you."

She pulls me into an embrace before I can step back. Her floral perfume fills my nose. I force my arms to lift, to return the hug, because my father is watching and I'm too exhausted to fight this particular battle today.

"Mm-hmm." I make a noncommittal sound against her shoulder.

"When I heard what happened at your apartment..." She pulls back, holding me at arm's length, her eyes scanning my face with practiced concern. "That poor security guard. And that horrible package. You must be devastated."

"Mm."

She waits for more. I don't give it to her.

After an awkward moment, Sylvia releases me, her smile tightening at the edges. "Well. We're all here now. That's what matters. Family supporting family."

I sink onto the sofa, my legs finally giving in to gravity.

Sylvia entered my life two years after my mother disappeared. She was working at my father's first company—something in marketing or public relations, I never cared enough to remember which. They met at a company function. Six months later, she moved into this house. Eight months after that, they married.

For the first two or three years, I tried. I really did. I was twelve years old and desperate for someone to fill the void my mother left behind. But I didn't want *another* mother. I wanted *my* mother. And Sylvia tried so hard to take that role—the bedtime stories, the shopping trips, the attempts to braid my hair the way Mom used to. Every gesture felt like an erasure rather than a comfort.

If she had just been... I don't know. A friend. A stepmother who understood her place. Someone who didn't try to replace the irreplaceable. Maybe I could have liked her.

But Sylvia doesn't do subtle. She doesn't do boundaries. And somewhere along the way, I realized she had a talent for making my father do whatever she deemed best for *the family*. Her version of the family, anyway.

The irony is, Sylvia didn't like me either. I'm certain she felt relieved when I left for college. Julian hated her too. We used to whisper about it in his room, plotting ways to expose her for the manipulative creature she was.

Every time we tried to talk to our father about it, he said the same thing. *Sylvia loves you both so much. It's not fair to behave this way toward someone who only wants to be part of our family.*

Eventually, we stopped trying.

I glance at Liam, who has positioned himself near the doorway—far enough to give the illusion of privacy, close enough to reach me in seconds if needed. His expression reveals nothing, but I catch the way his gaze tracks Sylvia's movements. Assessing. Cataloging.

He said he met her earlier. Something happened. I don't know what, but the tension between them is thick enough to cut.

Sylvia perches on the armchair across from me, crossing her ankles in that finishing-school way of hers. "The FBI agents were very thorough this morning. I told them everything I could, of course, though I'm afraid I wasn't much help. Julian and I..." She sighs delicately. "Well, you know how he is. We weren't close."

Because he saw through you from day one.

"They'll want to speak with me shortly," I say. "And then with you again, apparently."

"Yes, your father mentioned." She smooths an invisible wrinkle from her sweater. "I've already given my statement, but I suppose they need to be thorough."

Nolan Pierce clears his throat, drawing attention back to himself. "Mrs. Ashford, if you'd prefer privacy during the interviews, I can arrange for—"

"That won't be necessary." Sylvia's smile doesn't reach her eyes. "We have nothing to hide."

The way she says it makes my skin crawl.

My father moves to stand behind Sylvia's chair, his hand resting on her shoulder. A united front. The perfect couple weathering a storm.



Liam

I want to take his eyes out.

Nolan Pierce hasn't stopped staring at Ava since we walked into this room. His gaze tracks her like she's prey, lingering on the curve of her neck, the way her dress skims her hips.

Ava has the kind of beauty that steals glances. I've watched men stumble over their words around her for a decade. I've watched them look twice, three times, unable to help themselves. I understand the impulse better than I'd ever admit.

But this isn't a glance.

This is inventory. Assessment. Possession before he's earned the right to possess anything.

Pierce shifts in his chair, angling his body toward Ava even as Franklin speaks about FBI protocols. His attention never wavers from her face. When she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, his lips curve into something that might pass for a smile if you didn't know better.

I know better.

My fingers itch for the knife strapped to my ankle. One clean motion. Across the room before anyone registers movement. The blade pressed to the soft tissue beneath his eye socket.

Look at her again. I dare you.

Instead, I pull out my phone.

The text to Dante is brief. *Need full background on Nolan Pierce. American. Claims golf club development with Franklin Ashford. Dig deep.*

Dante Castellani responds within seconds. *On it. How deep?*

Graves deep.

Understood.

Dante was Lorenzo's right hand. His consigliere and enforcer wrapped into one lethal package. The man moves through shadows like he was born there, which he might as well have been. Several months ago, it came out that he was a Sartori brother too. Giuseppe Sartori had raped Dante's mother. Learning that changed nothing. Dante was already part of the family.

If there's dirt on Nolan Pierce, Dante will find it. And if he can't find it, he'll create the circumstances to make dirt appear.

Pierce laughs at something Franklin says, but his eyes slide back to Ava. She's standing near the window now, arms crossed over her chest, spine straight as a blade. She feels him watching. I can tell by the way her shoulders have gone rigid, the slight turn of her body away from his line of sight.

She's uncomfortable.

Good. She should be. Her instincts are sound.

"Liam."

Ava's voice cuts through the fog of murder fantasies. I look up from my phone to find her watching me with those sharp dark eyes.

"Everything alright?" she asks.

"Fine." I pocket the phone. "Just coordinating with the team."

Pierce rises from his chair, smoothing his jacket with manicured hands. "You're the Sartori security man, aren't you? Blackwood?"

"I am."

He crosses toward me, extending his hand. The gesture forces me to either shake or insult him in front of Franklin.

I take his hand. Squeeze harder than necessary.

Pierce's smile doesn't waver, but I catch the flicker of pain in his eyes. Good.

"I've heard impressive things about you," he says. "The Sartoris don't trust just anyone with their family."

"No. They don't."

"Ava's lucky to have such dedicated protection." His gaze drifts to her again, and my jaw tightens until the muscle aches. "Especially now, with everything happening."

Stop looking at her.

"She's not lucky," I say flatly. "She's family."

Pierce's eyebrows rise a fraction. "Of course. Riccardo's widow. Such a tragedy, what happened to him."

The way he says Riccardo's name makes my blood run cold. This man didn't know Riccardo. Has no right to speak of him.

"The FBI should arrive shortly," Franklin interrupts, steering the conversation back to safer waters. "Nolan, perhaps we should give Ava some space to prepare."

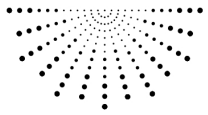
"Certainly." Pierce inclines his head toward Ava. "Mrs. Sartori. If there's anything I can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask. I have resources at my disposal."

Ava's expression remains perfectly neutral. "Thank you, Mr. Pierce. I'll keep that in mind."

This motherfucker wants desperately to end up in pieces.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



Ava

The two FBI agents don't bother hiding their displeasure when Liam settles into the armchair by the window.

Agent Morrison, the older one with salt-and-pepper hair and a permanently pinched expression, pauses mid-step. His eyes dart between Liam and me, jaw tightening.

"Mrs. Sartori, we'd prefer to conduct this interview privately."

I don't correct him on the name. Everyone has called me by that name today. It's okay, I guess. I haven't announced that I don't want to use it anymore. And there's no point doing it right now.

"Mr. Blackwood stays."

Agent Bale, younger and clearly the junior partner, shifts his weight. "Given the sensitive nature of—"

"He stays." I fold my hands in my lap, keeping my spine straight, my face pleasant. The same posture I perfected at countless Sartori dinners when dangerous men discussed dangerous things and I was expected to smile through it all. "Unless there's a legal requirement that says otherwise?"

Morrison's nostrils flare. He knows there isn't. He also knows exactly why he wants Liam out of this room. The FBI has spent years trying to

build cases against the Sartoris. Having their head of security witness this interview must feel like inviting a fox to guard the henhouse.

They sit across from me on the matching settee, pulling out notepads and recording devices with practiced efficiency. I answer their questions about the package. The white box. Julian's finger.

My voice stays steady throughout.

When I finish, they don't stand. Don't gather their things.

More questions coming, then.

"Mrs. Sartori," Morrison begins, leaning forward slightly. "We need to ask about your connection to the Sartori family."

There it is.

I let my back relax against the chair, crossing one ankle over the other. The picture of calm curiosity. "Why do you believe my brother's kidnapping has anything to do with them?"

Morrison exchanges a glance with Bale. "You were married to Riccardo Sartori for seven years. You lived on their compound. You attended family functions, traveled with them, were seen regularly at their businesses and—"

"I was a wife." I keep my tone light, almost bored. "I attended dinners and charity events. I smiled at the appropriate moments. That's what wives do."

"And now?" Bale presses. "You still maintain contact with the family?"

"My late husband's relatives occasionally check on me. Is that suspicious?"

"You called Liam Blackwood when you found the package," Morrison says. "Not 911. Not your father. Him."

I tilt my head slightly. "Mr. Blackwood handles security for the family I married into. When someone bypassed a sophisticated alarm system to leave a body part in my kitchen, calling a security expert seemed logical."

"A security expert who happens to be—"

"A man very good at his job." I let a hint of steel enter my voice. Just a hint.

Morrison's jaw works. Bale scribbles something on his notepad.

"Mrs. Sartori, if the Sartoris are involved in your brother's disappearance—"

"They're not."

"How can you be certain?"

"The Sartoris have resources, Agent Morrison. Connections. Business interests alongside whatever you imagine they're involved in. They don't need to harm a twenty-five-year-old trust fund heir to make a point."

"Then who do you think—"

"I don't know." My composure cracks, just for a moment, and I let them see it. The fear underneath. The desperate, clawing terror I've been stuffing down since I opened that box. "That's your job to figure out. Your job is to find my brother alive. Not to use his kidnapping as an excuse to dig through my dead husband's family's business."

Silence stretches between us.

Morrison's pen taps against his notepad. Once. Twice. He's weighing his options, deciding whether to push harder. I watch him calculate the risks. Wealthy family, lawyers on speed dial, media attention if he mishandles this.

"We'll be in touch," he finally says, standing. Bale follows suit. "If you think of anything else..."

"You'll be the first to know."

They leave their cards on the side table. I don't move to take them.

The door clicks shut behind them, and I exhale. My shoulders drop. The mask I've been holding in place for the last hour dissolves, leaving nothing but exhaustion and raw, buzzing nerves.

"You handled them well."

I'd almost forgotten Liam was there. He sits exactly where he settled when the interview began, one ankle crossed over his knee, looking for all the world like a man casually observing a tennis match rather than a federal interrogation.

"Practice." I press my fingers to my temples, rubbing small circles. "Seven years of dinners with men who asked questions they already knew the answers to. Men who wanted to see if I'd crack."

"Did you?"

"Never." I drop my hands, meeting his eyes across the room. "But I never had to defend a family that wasn't mine to protect."

His expression flickers, too quick for me to name.

"You didn't have to do that," he says quietly. "Protect them."

"Yes, I did." I push to my feet, suddenly needing to move, to shake off the lingering tension coiled in my muscles. "I was Riccardo's wife.

Whatever else that meant or didn't mean—whatever they think of me now—I was family. You don't give the FBI ammunition against family."

Liam watches me pace to the window and back. "That's surprisingly loyal for someone who asked to leave."

"Leaving and betraying are different things." I stop in front of his chair, looking down at him. "I don't want to be part of their world anymore. That doesn't mean I want to see them destroyed."

He holds my gaze. Whatever's working behind those gray eyes, I'm too tired to chase it.

"What do you need?" he asks.

The question is so simple. So direct.

I almost laugh. What do I need? I need my brother safe. I need answers. I need to know why Liam suddenly looks at me like I'm something other than an obligation.

What comes out of my mouth is simpler.

"Alcohol." I turn away from him, heading toward the door.



Liam

Back in her bedroom, Ava holds out the second glass of whiskey again.

"Last chance," she says. "It's good stuff. My father keeps the expensive things locked away, but I know where the key is."

"No."

She shrugs, that elegant lift of shoulders I've memorized without meaning to. "Suit yourself."

She keeps both glasses. Drinks from one, then the other, alternating like she can't decide which hand she wants to use. The amber liquid catches the lamplight as she tips her head back.

She's drinking too much. More than I've ever seen her drink in all the years I watched from a distance, from doorways, from the shadows where I kept myself. Ava was always careful. Controlled. One glass of wine at

dinner, nursed through three courses. A champagne flute held but barely touched at parties.

This isn't careful.

This is a woman trying to drown something.

I stand from the armchair and cross the room. My hands close around both glasses before she can react.

"That's enough."

Her eyes meet mine. Red-rimmed now, bloodshot from exhaustion and tears she won't let fall. She's been holding herself together with wire and will since I found her on her kitchen floor this morning, and the wire is fraying.

"I wasn't finished," she says.

"Yes, you were."

For a moment I think she'll fight me. Her fingers tighten on the glasses. Her chin comes up.

Then she lets go.

The glasses come away in my hands. She doesn't move. Neither do I.

We stand there, close enough that I can smell the whiskey on her breath mixing with whatever soap she used in the shower. The ends of her hair are curling slightly against the silk of her robe. She changed while I waited in the armchair, came out in this ivory thing that covers her from throat to ankle and still manages to make my chest tight.

"Do you remember the first night we met?"

The question hits me like a fist.

Do I remember?

I want to tell her that it's the most real thing I remember in my life. That the sound of her laugh made me forget how to breathe. That when the day that Riccardo introduced her as his future wife came, something in my chest cracked clean in half and never healed right.

I want to tell her I've been carrying that night like a stone in my pocket for ten years.

But I don't.

I just nod.

"You weren't cruel to me that night." Her voice is soft. Wondering. Like she's trying to solve a puzzle that's been bothering her for years. "You were almost kind. You smiled at me. Asked about my work. And then—" She

stops. Swallows. "Then you never spoke to me again. Not really. Not like that."

My jaw tightens. The muscle jumps, and I know she sees it because her eyes track the movement.

"You need to sleep," I say.

She laughs. Not the real laugh I heard ten years ago, the one that rewired my brain. This one is hollow. Tired. "Sleep won't come tonight, Liam. Trust me." She gestures vaguely toward the door. "You can leave. Get some rest. I'll be fine."

She won't be fine. She's shaking, and she doesn't even notice. Small tremors running through her hands, her shoulders, the line of her jaw.

I set the glasses down on the table by the minibar. The crystal makes a soft sound on the wood.

When I turn back, she's still standing there. Watching me with those dark eyes that see too much, that have always seen too much. That's why I had to stay away from her. Because Ava reads people the way other people read books, and I couldn't let her read the truth written all over me.

I reach out.

My fingers brush her cheek. Tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. The curl is soft against my knuckle. Her skin is warm, and I've wanted to touch her for years. It's nothing like I imagined.

It's worse.

It's everything.

"I won't leave," I say.

Her breath catches. Her eyes drop to my fingers, still hovering near her face. Then back up to meet mine.

Recognition moves through her expression, and I watch the question surface behind it.

Then she steps back.

Fast. Sharp. Like I burned her.

Fuck.

She puts three feet between us in a single movement, her back nearly hitting the bedpost. Her hand comes up to her chest, pressing against the silk of her robe like she's trying to hold her heart inside her body.

"I'm sorry," she says quickly. "I didn't mean—I'm not—"

"Ava."

"It's been a long day, and I'm not thinking clearly, and you probably think I'm—"

"*Ava.*"

She stops. Her chest rises and falls too fast.

I don't move. Don't step toward her. Don't do a single fucking thing that might make her more afraid than she already is. I just stand there with my hands at my sides, showing her I'm not a threat.

Even though I am.

Even though I'm the biggest threat in this room, and she doesn't even know it.

"I shouldn't have touched you," I say. The words feel like glass in my throat. "It won't happen again."

She stares at me. The red in her eyes has deepened, and her lower lip trembles once before she bites down on it.

"Why did you?" she whispers.

Because I love you.

Because I've always loved you.

Because you were his, and he was my brother, and I buried it so deep I thought it was dead, but it wasn't. It was just waiting.

I don't say any of that.

"Get some sleep," I say instead. "I'll be in the chair."

I turn away from her. Walk to the armchair. Sit down.

Behind me, I hear her breathing slow. Hear the soft rustle of fabric as she moves toward the bed. Hear the covers pull back, then settle.

The lamp clicks off.

In the darkness, her voice comes one more time.

"Liam?"

"Yeah."

A pause. Long enough that I think she's changed her mind about whatever she was going to say.

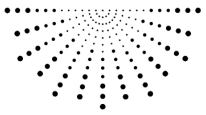
"Thank you for not leaving."

I close my eyes.

"Go to sleep, Ava."

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CHAPTER NINE



Ava

Voices pull me from darkness.

My eyes fly open to find Liam's face inches from mine, his body hovering over me on the bed, one hand pressed against my shoulder.

"What—" My voice comes out thick with sleep. The whiskey. Apparently it worked after all.

"Car on the property." Liam's already moving off me, his gun materializing in his hand like it grew there. "House is awake. Stay behind me."

I'm on my feet before I fully register that I'm standing, my body responding to the urgency in his voice.

Liam reaches the door first, checking the hallway before gesturing me forward. His movements are precise, controlled. A man who's done this a thousand times.

I step into the corridor, and that's when I hear it.

Julian's voice.

My brother's voice, filtering up from downstairs. Alive. Speaking.

I run.

"Ava—" Liam's warning fades behind me as I fly down the stairs, nearly tripping on the last step, my hand catching the banister hard enough to sting.

The living room lights are blazing. My father stands with his back to the fireplace, his face a mask I can't read. Sylvia hovers by the doorway in a silk robe, her expression carefully concerned.

And Julian.

Julian sits on the sofa, looking smaller than I've ever seen him. Pale. Exhausted. But alive.

"Julian!" His name tears from my throat.

I cross the room and drop to my knees in front of him, my arms wrapping around his shoulders before I can think. He's solid. Warm. Real. Not a severed finger in a white box. Not a body in a morgue. My baby brother, breathing against my shoulder.

"Hey." His voice is steady. Too steady. "I'm okay. Everything's okay."

I pull back to look at him properly. Dark circles bruise the skin beneath his eyes. A cut mars his temple, angry and red against his pale skin. And his hand—

His left hand is wrapped in white bandages, thick enough to obscure whatever remains beneath.

"Julian." I take his injured hand gently between both of mine. "What happened?"

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't cry. Just watches me with those dark eyes that look like mine.

"I was driving home from Sarah's place." His voice stays flat, recounting facts like a news report. "Stopped at a red light on Maple. Someone got in the back seat. Gun to my head. Told me to turn off the car."

My stomach turns to ice. I want to hold him tighter. Want to shield him from what he's already survived.

"Next thing I remember is getting hit." Julian touches the back of his head with his good hand. "When I woke up, I had something over my eyes. Couldn't see anything. Couldn't hear much either—wherever they kept me, it was quiet. Muffled."

"Did they say anything?" My father's voice cuts through. He's moved closer, his face gray in the harsh light. "Did they tell you what they wanted?"

Julian shakes his head slowly. "No one talked to me. Food came through a slot in the door. Water. That's it. I never saw faces, never heard names."

"Your finger." The words scrape out of me. I can't stop staring at the bandage. "Julian, your finger—"

"They did it while I was blindfolded." He says it like he's describing a paper cut. Like the horror of it hasn't fully landed yet. "Felt a pinch. Pressure. Then pain. A lot of pain. Someone bandaged it after. Professional, I think. They didn't want me to bleed out."

Professional. Someone cut off my brother's finger and bandaged it professionally.

I'm going to be sick.

"How did you get away?" I ask, still holding his bandaged hand.

Julian doesn't answer right away. Instead, his gaze shifts past me, toward the doorway.

I turn to follow his look.

Nolan Pierce stands at the edge of the room, hands in his pockets, watching the scene with an expression I can't quite name. Satisfaction, maybe.

"He brought me back." Julian's voice is quiet. "Mr. Pierce found me."

The words don't make sense at first. Nolan Pierce.

He found Julian.

I rise slowly, turning to face Nolan fully. "What happened? How did you find him?"

Nolan opens his mouth to respond, but my father steps forward, his hand landing heavy on my shoulder.

"We're going to have this conversation in my office." His voice carries that tone I remember from childhood. The one that meant no arguments. "Not here."

I glance around the room. Margaret hovers near the kitchen doorway, her face pinched with worry. Sylvia remains by the stairs, her expression carefully blank. Two of the household staff linger in the hallway, pretending not to listen.

Whatever happened, my father doesn't want witnesses.

He doesn't want Sylvia to hear.

That realization settles cold in my chest.

I nod.

Julian pushes himself up from the sofa, swaying slightly before steadying. "I need to take a bath. I can come later." He looks at our father, then at me. "Start without me. I know enough already."

The flatness in his voice makes my heart clench. My baby brother, who used to laugh at everything, who found joy in the smallest things. Now he speaks like someone who's learned that joy can be carved away with a knife.

"Julian—"

"I'm fine, Ava." He cuts me off gently. "Really. I just need... I need to feel clean."

I understand that. After Riccardo died, I spent hours in the bath. Days. Trying to wash away something that lived under my skin.

Julian walks past me toward the stairs, moving carefully like his body hurts in places he's not showing. Margaret reaches for him as he passes, her weathered hand touching his arm briefly. He pauses, lets her comfort him for a heartbeat, then continues up.

My father is already moving toward his office.

I follow.

Liam falls into step beside me, his presence steady and solid. I'd almost forgotten he was there, watching from the shadows of the stairwell. But of course he was watching.

We're halfway down the hall when Nolan's voice stops us.

"It would be best if no one else were in that room." His words are smooth, reasonable. His eyes are fixed on Liam. "This is family business."

I turn. "Liam is my bodyguard. He needs to know what we're dealing with."

Nolan's expression hardens. Just a flicker, quickly controlled. "Of course. I understand the value of good security." His gaze slides to me, and that smile returns. The one that makes me want to step back. "I'll do whatever you want, Ava."

The way he says my name. Like he's tasting it.

I don't like it.

But I can't deny the facts in front of me. Julian is home. Julian is alive. And Nolan Pierce is apparently the reason for both.

If he saved my brother, I owe him.

The thought sits bitter on my tongue.

I nod once, sharply, and turn toward my father's office without another word.

My father takes his position behind his desk. Not sitting. Standing. His hands grip the back of his chair like he needs the anchor.

I choose one of the chairs facing him. Liam positions himself near the door.

Nolan enters last, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

He settles into the chair beside the bookshelf to my left, casual and contained.

The silence stretches.

"Tell me," I say. "Tell me everything."

Nolan exchanges a look with my father. Something passes between them. An agreement reached before I entered the room.



Liam

"Julian and I have been spending quite a bit of time together lately," Pierce begins, his voice smooth as aged scotch. "We go to the same gym. Started talking, became friends." He spreads his hands, palms up, like he's offering them a gift. "Lucky coincidence, really."

Ava's shoulders tighten. She doesn't trust him. Good. Neither do I.

"Three days before they took him," Pierce continues, "I left my gym bag in Julian's car. Strangest thing." A small laugh escapes him, self-deprecating and utterly rehearsed. "I don't forget things. Ask anyone who works for me. I'm meticulous. But somehow, that day, I walked off without it."

Franklin leans forward. "And this is relevant because...?"

"Because I keep a tracker in that bag." Pierce's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Insurance, you might call it. In my line of work, there's always a risk that someone might want to... remove me from the equation. My team has protocols. If I go missing, they follow the signal."

The pieces click into place in my head. Too neatly. Too conveniently. A gym bag forgotten at precisely the right moment. A tracker that just happened to be inside. Either Pierce is the luckiest bastard on the planet, or this was orchestrated from the start.

My money's on the latter.

"Wait." Ava steps forward, her voice sharp. "If you had a tracker in Julian's car, why didn't you tell the FBI? They've been running in circles."

Pierce turns to her, and there it is again. That hungry look that makes my jaw clench. He studies her face like she's a painting he's considering purchasing.

"You know better than I do, Mrs. Sartori." The name drips from his tongue, deliberate. "The FBI isn't built for my world. Their procedures, their warrants, their red tape—by the time they'd finished their paperwork, Julian might have lost more than a finger."

Ava flinches at the reminder. I resist the urge to put myself between her and Pierce's gaze.

"So what exactly did you do?" Franklin asks, his voice tight with something that might be gratitude or might be suspicion. Hard to tell with the old man.

Pierce settles deeper into his chair. "I followed the tracker signal. Led us to Julian's car—abandoned near a warehouse district on the South Side." He pauses, letting the silence build. "Tony Willson's territory."

My blood goes cold.

Tony Willson. Small-time American crew trying to climb the ladder. Ruthless but sloppy. The kind of man who leaves bodies where they can be found because he thinks it sends a message. I've had dealings with his people before. Nothing direct, but enough to know he's dangerous in the way cornered rats are dangerous. Desperate. Unpredictable.

"I know the name," I say, keeping my voice flat.

Pierce's attention slides to me for the first time since we entered the room. "I thought you might. Willson's been making noise lately. Trying to expand into territory that doesn't belong to him." He shrugs, casual as discussing the weather. "Once we located the warehouse, I sent my people in."

"A hit," Ava says. Not a question.

"A rescue operation." Pierce's smile is razor-thin. "Semantics, really. The important thing is that Julian is home, safe, and mostly intact."

Franklin exhales heavily, rubbing his temples. "How many of his men?"

"Enough that he'll think twice before pulling something like this again." Pierce rises from his chair, buttoning his jacket with practiced ease. "I've taken the liberty of posting additional security around your property, Franklin. My people will coordinate with Mr. Blackwood's team." He glances at me. "Assuming that's acceptable."

It's not a question, and we both know it. Pierce is staking his claim—on this house, on this family, on Ava. Every word out of his mouth is a move on a chessboard I can't quite see.

"I'll need to verify your intel," I say. "Willson's warehouse locations. The details of the extraction. Names of your operatives involved."

Pierce's expression doesn't change. "Of course. I'll have my people send everything to you by morning." He turns to Franklin. "You should get some rest. The worst is over."

Franklin nods, looking older than I've ever seen him. "Thank you, Nolan. I don't know how we'll ever repay you."

"No repayment necessary." Pierce moves toward the door, pausing beside Ava. Too close. His hand rises, and for a moment I think he's going to touch her face. "I'm just glad I could help bring your brother home."

Ava doesn't flinch, but her shoulders go rigid. "Thank you for what you did for Julian."

The words are polite. Empty. She's giving him nothing, and from the tightening around his mouth, Pierce notices.

"We should talk soon," he says, low enough that Franklin might not hear. "Just the two of us. There's much I'd like to discuss."

"I'm sure there is." Ava's voice is ice wrapped in silk.

Pierce leaves without another word, his footsteps echoing down the hallway. The moment the front door closes, Ava turns to me.

"You don't believe him."

Statement, not question. She reads me better than she should.

"I believe Julian is home," I say carefully. "The rest of it—the gym bag, the tracker, the convenient rescue—that I need to verify."

Franklin rises from his desk, suddenly looking every one of his years. "What are you suggesting, Blackwood? That Pierce orchestrated my son's kidnapping?"

"I'm suggesting that coincidences like this don't exist in our world." I meet the old man's eyes. "Someone took Julian. Then Pierce just happens to

have a tracker in the right place at the right time? Just happens to know exactly which warehouse to hit?"

"You're paranoid. Nolan saved Julian's life," he says.

"Maybe." I push off the wall. "Or maybe he created a problem so he could be the one to solve it."

Ava's eyes find mine, and in them I see the same calculation running through my head. Pierce wants something. He's positioned himself as the hero, the savior, the man Franklin owes an unpayable debt.

And he keeps looking at Ava like she's the prize.

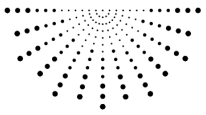
"I need to make some calls," I say. "Confirm Willson's involvement. Verify Pierce's story."

Franklin waves a hand. "Do what you need to do. But Nolan Pierce has been a friend to this family."

For now, I think. *Until he decides to collect.*

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CHAPTER TEN



Liam

As I make my way toward Bruno's office, exhaustion starts pulling at my bones like lead weights.

I left Fabio with Ava twenty minutes ago. She'd finally fallen asleep, curled on her side with one hand tucked beneath her cheek. The sight of her at rest loosened something in my chest I hadn't realized was wound so tight.

But I can't rest yet. Not until I know what we're dealing with.

Bruno's office door stands ajar. I push it open without knocking.

Bruno sits behind his massive desk. Dante occupies one of the leather chairs across from him, legs crossed at the ankle, looking like he's been here for hours.

"Blackwood." Bruno gestures to the empty chair beside Dante. "Sit. You look like shit."

"Charming as always." I lower myself into the seat, my muscles protesting the sudden stillness after hours of constant vigilance. "What do we know?"

Bruno exchanges a glance with Dante before folding his hands on the desk.

"Everything we can verify in Pierce's story checks out," Bruno says. "Willson's men are dead. Word's already spreading through our circles."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. "That fast?"

"Pierce doesn't do subtle." Dante's voice carries that flat, observational quality I've come to recognize. The man misses nothing, says little, and means everything he does say. "He wanted people to know. Made sure the bodies were found quickly. Clean kills, professional execution. A message."

"Willson?"

"Gone." Bruno drums his fingers once against the desk. "Apparently he's had cash flow problems for months. Gambling debts, bad investments, the usual spiral. The kidnapping was supposed to be his way out."

"Then why wait?" The question's been nagging at me since Pierce spun his convenient tale. "If Willson needed money that badly, why didn't he make the ransom demand immediately? He had Julian for two days."

"Best guess?" Dante uncrosses his ankles, shifts in his chair. "He knew Ashford would go to the cops. Franklin's not our world. A man like that calls the FBI before he calls anyone else."

"Which he did."

"Which he did." Dante nods. "Willson probably wanted to wait for the heat to die down. Let the feds spin their wheels for a few days, then make contact through channels that couldn't be traced. Professional approach."

"Professional approach that got all his men killed and sent him running." I scrub a hand over my face, feeling the rasp of stubble against my palm. "Convenient timing for Pierce to play the hero."

Bruno's eyes sharpen. "You still think he's involved?"

"I think the timing stinks. I think a man doesn't just happen to leave a tracker in someone's car three days before they get snatched."

"I dug into Pierce," Dante says. "Deep. Took me most of the night."

"And?"

"Ordinary family. Middle-class upbringing in Ohio, nothing remarkable. He was smart, though—smart enough to get into a good school on scholarships, smarter still to figure out that the real education happens outside the classroom." Dante pulls a folded paper from his jacket pocket but doesn't open it. "He made connections. Wealthy kids, old money families, the kind of people who don't notice a scholarship student unless he makes himself useful."

"Let me guess. He made himself very useful."

"Extremely." A ghost of a smile crosses Dante's face. "Started small. Introduced people who needed things to people who had things. Took a

finder's fee. Invested the profits in legitimate businesses with his wealthy friends. By thirty, he had enough capital to start playing in bigger pools."

"The underworld."

"Eventually." Dante unfolds the paper, scans it as if refreshing his memory. "The money in our world is limitless if you know how to access it. Pierce figured that out. He built his own security operation—staffed it with made men from families that owed him favors or needed his connections. Smart play. Gave him muscle without getting his own hands dirty."

Bruno cuts in. "He walks a line. One foot in the legitimate world—as far as we can verify, he's never killed anyone himself. His businesses pass every audit, every investigation."

"And the other foot?"

"Deep in our world." Bruno's gaze hardens. "He knows people. Moves money. Provides services that require discretion. But he's careful. So fucking careful that there's nothing concrete to pin on him."

I process this, turning the information over like a puzzle piece that doesn't quite fit the picture I've been building. "What about his connection to Julian?"

"They met at the gym six months ago." Dante tucks the paper back into his jacket. "Started working out together, grabbing drinks afterward. Julian's young, friendly, doesn't see threats where he should. Pierce probably seemed like a successful older guy worth knowing."

"Did Pierce approach him, or the other way around?"

"Does it matter?" Bruno asks. "Either way, they've been friendly for months. Julian's probably mentioned him to Franklin multiple times, always positive. There's nothing—and I mean nothing—that suggests Pierce had anything but good intentions toward him."

The words land like stones in my gut. I wanted something. Some proof that my instincts about Pierce weren't just paranoia born from watching him eye Ava like she was a prize to be won.

"Your suspicions are valid," Bruno says, reading my expression with uncomfortable accuracy. "I share them. But suspicions aren't evidence, and right now, Pierce is the man who brought Julian home alive. That buys him goodwill we can't ignore."

"And if he orchestrated the whole thing?"

"Then we'll find out. Eventually." Bruno's voice carries the cold patience of a man who's learned to play long games. "But until we have

proof, we treat him as an ally. A useful one."

I nod slowly, hating the logic even as I accept it. If Willson fled the country, that confirms he was behind the kidnapping. His men are dead, his operation dismantled, his debt to whoever he owed presumably unpaid. The story holds together.

It holds together too well.

"Get some sleep, Blackwood." Bruno's tone softens by a fraction. "You've been running on fumes. Fabio has Ava covered, and you're no good to anyone if you collapse."

I push to my feet, my body protesting every movement. "I want updates. Anything new on Pierce, anything on Willson's whereabouts, anything that doesn't fit. I want to know."

"You'll know," Bruno says.

I leave without another word.



Second chances or enemies to lovers?

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Ava

I follow my father into the living room after breakfast, my stomach tight with words I've been rehearsing since I woke up. Julian is safe. The immediate crisis has passed. There's no reason for me to stay in this house that holds more ghosts than memories.

"Father, I need to talk to you."

He turns from the window, morning light catching the silver at his temples. "Of course, sweetheart. What is it?"

"I want to go back to my apartment."

His expression shifts, the softness hardening into something I recognize from boardroom negotiations. "Absolutely not. Not until we find Tony Willson."

"I have bodyguards. Liam won't let anything—"

"Ava." His voice cuts through my protest. "You can go wherever you want during the day. Shopping, riding, whatever you need. But you're staying in this house until that man is found."

I knew he would insist. Some part of me expected exactly this response, yet hearing it still makes my chest constrict. I exhale slowly, letting my shoulders drop.

"I don't like being here."

The words land harder than I intended. My father's face changes—not anger, but something worse. Hurt. The kind that seeps in through cracks you forgot existed.

"Was I such a bad father all these years?"

The question catches me off guard. I close the distance between us, stopping just short of touching him. "You weren't bad. You just..." I search for words that won't wound deeper. "You never really lived after she left."

His jaw works silently. Then he moves to the sofa and sits heavily, the leather creaking under his weight. He pats the cushion beside him.

I sit.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The grandfather clock in the corner marks time with steady, indifferent ticks.

"After they took Julian," my father begins, his voice rougher than before, "I couldn't stop thinking about your mother."

I knew he would, but hearing him talk about it makes it real. The feeling was the same for me.

"Not that I ever really stopped." He lets out a breath that sounds like it's been trapped in his chest for decades. "But those days when we had no demands, no contact, no ransom, I kept thinking that if no one asked for money, it meant something went wrong. That she died."

The comparison hits me sideways. Julian's kidnapping and my mother's disappearance, separated by twenty-four years but suddenly occupying the same space in his mind.

"Why does it matter now?" The question comes out sharper than I mean it to. "Twenty-four years have passed. Whether she's alive or dead, it's the

same, isn't it? Either way, she's gone."

My father shakes his head slowly. "You can call me selfish."

"I didn't say—"

"You can." He looks at me, and I see something I've rarely witnessed in Franklin Ashford. Raw vulnerability. "Knowing that she didn't love us, that she *chose* to leave, that's haunted me for years, Ava. Every single year."

I don't know what to say.

"I'd prefer her being dead," my father continues, his voice cracking on the words. "God help me, but I would. Because at least then it wasn't a choice. At least then she didn't look at us and decide we weren't worth staying for."

A tear escapes down his cheek. Just one, tracking through the lines that age and grief have carved into his face.

"Oriana was the love of my life." He says it like a confession, like a wound that never healed. "She still is. She always will be."

Something breaks open in my chest.

I reach for him, pulling him into an embrace that feels foreign and necessary all at once. His shoulders shake under my arms, and I hold tighter, trying to anchor us both against the tide of this.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

I don't know what I'm apologizing for. For not understanding sooner. For judging his distance as indifference.

He pulls back after a long moment, wiping his face with the back of his hand. The gesture is so human, so unlike the composed businessman I've known my whole life, that fresh tears prick my own eyes.

"I should have been better," he says. "To you. To Julian. I know I wasn't—"

"You tried to provide what you could."

"Not hard enough." He shakes his head. "Sylvia was supposed to fill the gap. I thought if I gave you a mother figure, it would make up for Oriana being gone. But Sylvia isn't..." He trails off, and I wonder what he stopped himself from saying.

"She isn't warm," I finish for him.

"No." He meets my eyes. "She isn't. I'm sorry for that too."

We sit in silence, the weight of old hurts and new understanding settling between us. Outside, I hear a car door slam—probably one of the security team changing shifts.

"I'll stay," I say finally. "Until they find Willson. But after that..."

"After that, we'll talk." My father reaches over and squeezes my hand. "I don't want to lose you again, Ava. I know I pushed you away for years. I know I made this house feel like somewhere you had to escape from. But you're my daughter. My firstborn. And I..." His voice catches. "I can't bury another person I love."

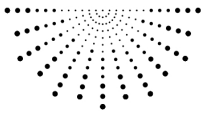
The words knock the air out of me.

"You won't," I tell him, though I have no right to make that promise. "You won't lose me."

He nods, not quite believing but wanting to. I understand that feeling intimately.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



Ava

The morning air bites through my coat as Fabio holds the car door open. I slide into the backseat, and he closes it before rounding to the driver's side.

Chicago traffic crawls past us, gray buildings against a grayer sky. I watch the city blur through tinted windows and try to remember the last time I felt this tired.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

Fabio's eyes find mine in the rearview mirror. "Of course."

"Why are you in Chicago? I thought you lived in Sicily."

He navigates around a delivery truck before answering. "Things in this family change from one month to another. Luca comes and goes. So do I." His shoulder lifts in a shrug. "Now, until everything settles or something else entirely happens, I stay here."

Something else entirely. The words hang between us, loaded with possibilities I don't want to examine too closely. In this world, *something else* usually means blood.

"I see."

The city gives way to suburbs, then to the winding roads that lead north toward Fairhaven. Trees line the route, their bare branches reaching toward

the pale sky like fingers.

My mind drifts back to those months after Riccardo's funeral. The compound had become unbearable. Aria had found me one morning sitting in the garden where Riccardo used to read, and she'd simply said, *Come with me*.

We flew to Sicily that same week. Valentino's house sat on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean, surrounded by lemon groves and olive trees. The air smelled like salt and rosemary. I spent my days walking the grounds, eating meals Aria insisted on preparing herself, and sleeping without dreams for the first time in months.

Luca and Fabio had been assigned to watch over us.

"I'm sorry," I say now, watching Fabio's profile as he drives. "For making you babysit me again."

His laugh catches me off guard. Warm and genuine, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "I prefer this to whatever else my job requires."

I understand that. I understand it more than I should. There's a reason men like Fabio and Luca exist in this world, and it has nothing to do with driving women to riding lessons.

"Sicily was different," I say, more to myself than to him.

"It was."

"I didn't really need guards there."

"No." He meets my eyes in the mirror again. "But you needed to feel safe. That's not the same thing."

The observation lands somewhere in my chest, precise and unexpected. I look away, focusing on the passing landscape as we turn onto the long drive that leads to Fairhaven.

The club appears through the trees. White fences, pristine paddocks, a main building that looks more like a manor house than a stable. Money that doesn't need to announce itself. My kind of place, once upon a time. Now it's just the only place I can breathe.

Fabio pulls into the parking area and cuts the engine. He turns to face me, one arm resting on the back of his seat.

"By the time you finish your lesson, Liam will come to pick you up."

I say nothing.

The words settle over me like a weight. Liam. Of course. Because apparently I can't have two hours of peace without—

"Ava?"

"Fine." The word comes out sharper than I intend. "That's fine."

Fabio studies me for a moment, and I wonder how much he sees. These men, they're trained to notice everything. Every micro-expression, every tell. It's exhausting being around people who read you like a book you never wanted to write.

"Have a good ride," he says finally.

I grab my bag and step out into the crisp air.

Fabio climbs out and follows me toward the stables.

Last night.

I haven't had time to think about it until now. But now, in this quiet moment, the memory surfaces.

Liam's hand reaching toward me. His fingers brushing my hair back from my face. The gentleness of it. So at odds with everything I know about him, everything I've experienced from him over ten years of cold silences and colder exits.

I wasn't scared of his touch.

That's what unsettles me.

I should have been.

But last night, his touch didn't frighten me.

It made me want to lean into it.

For one fraction of a second, before my brain caught up with my body, I wanted more. I wanted his hand to stay, to cup my face, to—

I stepped back so fast I nearly stumbled.

The fear that flooded me wasn't fear of Liam. It was fear of myself. Of what that wanting meant after three years of feeling nothing. Of what it said about me that the first man to stir something in my chest is the one who has treated me like a ghost for a decade. Especially because he was my dead husband's best friend.

I start walking toward the stables, my boots crunching on gravel.

Why did he even do that?

The question has no answer. Or rather, it has too many possible answers, and none of them make sense. Pity? Exhaustion lowering his guard? Some misplaced sense of duty to Riccardo's memory?

Nero's stall comes into view, and I push the thoughts away. Later. I'll deal with this later, or never, or whenever I figure out how to exist in the same space as Liam Blackwood without my skin feeling too tight.

"Hey, beautiful," I murmur, reaching up to stroke Nero's dark face. He nickers softly, pressing his nose into my palm. "Miss me?"

He looks at me with those calm, knowing eyes, and for a moment I can pretend the world outside these fences doesn't exist.

No kidnapped brothers. No mysterious businessmen. No bodyguards with gentle hands.

Just me, Nero and the endless sky.

I grab his halter and lead him toward the ring, trying not to think about the fact that in two hours, Liam will be waiting.



Liam

I pull up to Fairhaven and spot Fabio leaning against his car near the main stable entrance.

I park beside him and step out into the early afternoon sun. Somewhere in the distance, I hear the rhythmic thud of hooves on packed dirt.

"Everything okay?" I ask, coming to stand next to him.

Fabio nods once. "She's been here the last two hours. Hasn't come off that horse once."

I follow his gaze to the outdoor arena. Ava is there, mounted on a massive black horse moving in perfect circles.

"Alright." I turn back to Fabio. "You can leave. Tomorrow Luca will rotate in for the morning shift."

Fabio pushes off the car. "And until then?"

"Go live your miserable life."

The corner of his mouth twitches. For Fabio, that's practically a belly laugh. "I plan on having sex all day long, actually."

I snort. "With who? Your hand doesn't count."

"Fuck off, Blackwood." But there's warmth in it.

"Get out of here before I change my mind about the rotation."

Fabio laughs and climbs into his car. I watch him pull away, then turn my attention back to the arena.

Now I can stand here and watch her.

Ava guides the horse through another series of movements. Her body moves with the horse like they share the same breath. The sun catches the curve of her neck, the graceful line of her arms, the way her thighs grip the horse's sides.

I shift my weight. Look away. Look back.

She slows it to a walk, then stops entirely. For a moment she just sits there, one hand resting on the horse's neck, her head bowed. From here I can't see her face, but I don't need to. I know what exhaustion looks like when someone's been carrying too much for too long.

Then she dismounts in one fluid motion and starts walking toward me.

Every step she takes costs me another inch of air.

She's wearing tight black leggings that cling to every curve, tall riding boots, and a fitted jacket. Her hair is pulled back under a riding helmet she removes as she walks, shaking out dark waves.

My cock stirs. Hardens.

I clench my jaw and will my body to behave.

But my body doesn't care about history, loyalty or the promises I made to a dead man.

She gets closer. I can see the flush on her cheeks now, the sheen of sweat on her skin. Her chest rises and falls from exertion. A strand of hair sticks to her temple. She looks like she's been working hard, pushing herself, trying to outrun something she can't escape.

She looks fucking beautiful.

She stops in front of me. My hands itch to reach out and touch.

"Can you wait until I get some water?" she asks. Her voice is slightly breathless. "Then we can leave."

I nod. Don't trust myself to speak.

She turns.

And I lose it.

I can't take my fucking eyes off her. The leggings hug her ass like they were painted on. Every step she takes, every shift of her hips, every goddamn movement draws my gaze like a magnet. I watch the way the fabric stretches across her curves, the way her thighs flex as she walks, the

way her body moves with that unconscious grace that's always driven me mad.

My cock is fully hard now. Pressing against my trousers. Demanding attention I refuse to give it.

She turns suddenly—too fast for me to look away.

"Do you want some too?"

The question hangs in the air between us. Her eyes flick down to where mine were just focused, then back up to my face. Heat creeps up my neck. I've been caught staring at her ass like a fucking teenager, and we both know it.

I drag my gaze to her face. But it's too late. The damage is done.

Surprise crosses her face, and behind it something I'd like too much if I let myself name it. My pulse jumps.

She doesn't wait for my answer.

She just turns and keeps walking.

I watch her go. Can't help it. Can't stop myself. She disappears through the stable door, and I'm left standing here with a hard-on.

Fuck.

I run a hand over my face and try to get myself under control. This isn't me. I don't lose my composure. I don't let attraction compromise my judgment. I've spent my entire adult life maintaining discipline, keeping my emotions locked down, staying focused on the job.

I adjust myself discreetly and force my breathing to slow. When she comes back out, I'll be the professional I've always been. Cold. Distant. Controlled.

She caught me looking. Fine. It doesn't have to mean anything. Men look at beautiful women. It's biology. It doesn't change the fact that she's under my protection, that touching her would be a betrayal of everything I stand for.

I repeat this to myself.

It doesn't help.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

I pull it out and glance at the screen. Jessica.

I turn away from the stable entrance and face the car, putting distance between myself and wherever Ava is inside.

"Hey, you." Jessica's voice comes through low and breathy. That purr she uses when she wants something. "I've been thinking about you all day.

Are we meeting tonight?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "No."

A pause. "No? Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why?" The purr sharpens into something closer to a whine. "You said you'd call. I've been waiting, Liam. I cleared my whole evening."

I stare at the gravel beneath my feet. Jessica is uncomplicated. She knows what I am, what I do, and she doesn't ask questions. She's beautiful, willing, and she never expects more than I can give. Three months of casual arrangements. No strings. No promises. No feelings.

Right now, the thought of touching her does nothing for me.

"I appreciate the offer," I say, keeping my voice flat. "Believe me, I understand the need to be fucked right now. But I'm busy."

"Busy." She repeats the word like it's a foreign language. "You're always busy, but you always make time. What's different?"

Everything.

I don't say that. Instead I say, "Work."

"Work," she echoes. "That's it? That's all I get?"

"That's all there is."

Another pause. I hear her breathing on the other end, the soft rustle of fabric. She's probably in bed. Probably wearing something designed to make a man stupid.

"Fine," she says, her voice cooling. "When, then? Tomorrow? Next week? I can be patient, Liam. You know I can."

I close my eyes.

"Probably never," I say.

Silence.

"What?"

"You heard me, Jessica."

"Liam—"

"I have to go." I pull the phone from my ear.

"Wait—"

I hang up.

For a moment I just stand there, phone in hand, staring at the black screen. I should feel something. Guilt, maybe. Jessica didn't deserve that. She's a decent woman who wanted nothing more than what I was willing to give. But I can't muster anything except relief that the conversation is over.

I slip the phone back into my pocket and turn around.

Ava is standing ten feet away.

Water bottle in hand. Face unreadable.

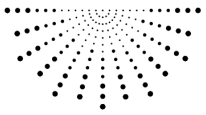
Fuck.

"I can use another bodyguard," she says. Her voice is steady, but something flickers in her eyes. "You should go to Jessica."

I stare at her. She stares back. Neither of us moves.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



Ava

I stride through the front door. Liam's footsteps echo behind me. Steady, measured, infuriating. Everything about him is infuriating right now.

My skin burns where his hand touched my face last night. My cheeks flush from the memory of his eyes on my body at the stables. And my blood boils from overhearing that phone call.

I appreciate the offer. Believe me, I understand the need to be fucked right now. But I'm busy.

I don't know why I'm angry. There's no logical reason for it. Liam Blackwood can sleep with whoever he wants. He can have a dozen women waiting in his bed. It's none of my business. We're nothing to each other. Less than nothing.

But logic doesn't stop the heat crawling up my neck. It doesn't stop my hands from curling into fists at my sides.

"Ava."

Sylvia's voice cuts through the foyer. I stop walking. My eyes close for a brief second, and I pull in a breath before turning around.

She stands in the archway to the living room, perfectly composed in cream cashmere. Not a hair out of place. Her smile doesn't reach her eyes, but it never does.

"What is it, Sylvia?"

"Someone sent you flowers." She gestures behind her with a manicured hand. "They arrived an hour ago. Quite the arrangement."

I walk past her into the living room, and my breath catches.

The bouquet sits on the side table near the window. White roses—dozens of them—arranged in a crystal vase. They're beautiful. Elegant.

I move toward them, reaching out to touch a petal—

"Don't."

Liam's voice is sharp. His hand closes around my wrist before I can make contact.

I spin to face him, yanking my arm back. "Excuse me?"

"Don't touch them. We don’t know who sent them and if it’s a trap."

"I'll do whatever I want." I step toward the flowers again. "They're flowers, Liam. Not a bomb."

His hand shoots out. Fingers wrap around my upper arm, and he pulls hard.

I stumble backward, crashing into his chest. The impact steals my breath. His body is solid, unyielding. I can feel his heartbeat against my shoulder blade. Steady when mine races out of control.

His other hand grips my hip, holding me in place.

"I'm going to check them first." His mouth is close to my ear. His breath ghosts across my neck. "Stay still."

I twist in his grip, tilting my head back to glare at him. Our faces are inches apart. His gray eyes bore into mine.

"Let go of me."

His jaw tightens. The muscle there ticks once, twice. Then his hands release me, and I stumble forward, putting distance between us.

My skin tingles where he touched me. My heart pounds against my ribs.

I turn toward Sylvia, and the expression on her face makes my stomach drop.

She's watching us like we're entertainment. Like we're actors in a play she's been waiting to see. Her lips curve slow, and there's nothing soft in it.

"My, my," she murmurs. "That was quite the display."

I say nothing. There's nothing to say.

Liam moves past me toward the flowers. His movements are precise, clinical. He examines the vase first, running his hands along the crystal

base. Then the stems, the petals, the arrangement itself. He checks underneath the table, behind the vase, inside the greenery.

I watch his shoulders tense as he reaches into the roses and pulls out a small envelope.

He opens it. Reads whatever's inside. His jaw clenches so hard I can see the muscles bunch beneath his skin.

Then he holds the card out to me without a word.

I take it.

Ava,

I hope these brighten your day. I know the past days have been difficult, but please know you have friends who want to support you through this challenging time.

I would be honored if you would join me for dinner tomorrow evening. Your father has already given his blessing.

Nolan Pierce

I read it twice. Three times. The words don't change.

Your father has already given his blessing.

What blessing? Blessing for what?

"What does it say?"

Sylvia's voice is too casual. Too curious. I fold the card and slip it into my pocket.

"Nothing important."

"Flowers that extravagant are never nothing." She tilts her head, studying me like I'm a puzzle she's trying to solve. "Nolan Pierce is quite taken with you. A woman could do worse."

Of course she read the name.

"A woman could also do better." I keep my voice flat. "If you'll excuse me, I need to change."

I move toward the stairs, but Liam keeps pace beside me, a wall of heat at my shoulder—too close, too solid, too much.

We climb in silence. The anger still simmers in my chest, but now it's mixed with something else. Confusion. Unease.

Pierce sent me flowers. Pierce invited me to dinner. Pierce got my father's blessing for... what, exactly?

I reach my bedroom door and pause with my hand on the knob.

"Say it," I tell Liam without turning around.

"Say what?"

"Whatever you're thinking. Whatever made your jaw clench when you read that card. Just say it."

Silence stretches between us. I can feel him behind me, close enough to touch. Close enough to feel the tension radiating off his body.

"Pierce wants something from you." His voice is low. Controlled. "And your father is helping him get it."

I turn to face him.

"What do you think he wants?"

Liam doesn't answer. He doesn't have to.

I think of Pierce's hand on mine when we first met. The way his gaze lingered too long. The way he positioned himself as Julian's savior, as my father's ally, as someone I should trust.

The way the flowers arrived the moment I left the house.

He's watching me. Tracking me. Waiting.

"I'm not going to dinner with him," I say.

"Good."

I push open my bedroom door and step inside, but I pause at the threshold.

"Liam?"

"Yes?"

"Next time you want to manhandle me, ask first."

I close the door before he can respond.



Liam

The door clicks shut with a finality that makes me want to put my fist through it.

I stare at the wood grain for a second too long, my jaw tight enough to crack. Whatever just happened in the hallway, I don't understand it. One moment she's asking me to voice my concerns, the next she's shutting the door in my face like I'm the enemy.

"Whatever you did, you really pissed her off."

Julian's voice yanks me back. He's leaning against the wall at the end of the corridor, arms crossed, one eyebrow raised. The bandage on his left hand is fresh. They have a doctor coming today. He looks better than yesterday. Still exhausted, but the color has returned to his face.

"If I were you, I'd be very, very careful," he continues, pushing off the wall and walking toward me. "Ava can be mean when she wants to. Trust me. I've been on the receiving end enough times to know."

I don't tell him I know her well enough to recognize when she's pissed off.

What I don't understand is *why*.

She's been cold since the phone call with Jessica. My mind keeps circling back to that moment.

The thought that forms is dangerous.

Ava can't be jealous.

If she was jealous, that would mean she wants me. And that doesn't make any fucking sense. Until she showed up at my office last week demanding to cut ties with the family, we hadn't had a real conversation in years.

No.

She must be angry about something else. Pierce, maybe. The flowers. The fact that her father apparently gave that bastard permission to pursue her like she's some prize to be won.

That has to be it.

"Your sister always this friendly?" I ask, keeping my voice flat.

Julian laughs. It's a tired sound, but genuine. "Only with people she's trying to figure out. You've probably confused her, which is impressive. Ava doesn't get confused easily."

I file that away. "Good to know."

Julian studies me for a moment. There's something sharp behind those dark eyes—sharper than I expected from a twenty-five-year-old who just had his finger cut off. He's assessing me the same way I assessed him yesterday. The kid's got instincts.

"So," I say, shifting the subject. "Pierce."

Julian's expression flickers. "What about him?"

"He sent your sister flowers. Asked her to dinner. Said he has your father's blessing."

The confusion that crosses Julian's face is immediate and unmistakable. His brow furrows, his mouth opens slightly, then closes again. He didn't know.

I was right.

"Nolan asked Ava to dinner?" Julian repeats slowly, like he's testing the words. "When?"

"The flowers arrived today."

"That's..." Julian runs his good hand through his hair, agitation clear in every movement. "That doesn't make sense. Nolan's been helping Dad with security stuff. Business contacts. I didn't know he was interested in Ava."

"Seems like everyone knew except you."

Julian's mouth flattens. "My father has a habit of leaving me out of conversations he thinks I'm too young to handle. Which is bullshit, but that's a separate issue." He pauses, his eyes narrowing. "You think there's something wrong with Nolan."

It's not a question.

"I think the timing of your rescue was convenient," I say carefully. "I think a man who builds relationships with wealthy families and happens to have a tracker in your car three days before you're kidnapped deserves scrutiny."

Julian's expression shifts. Something closes off behind his eyes, a protective wall sliding into place. I recognize the look. I've worn it myself.

"Nolan and I are friends," he says slowly. "Or that's what I thought until now."

"Thought?"

Julian exhales, his shoulders dropping. "Look, the facts are the facts. Nolan showed up. His men killed the guys who took me. I saw the bodies. That part was real." He holds up his bandaged hand, a grim reminder. "This is real. Whatever else is going on, he got me out of there."

"How long have you known him?" I ask even though I already know the answer.

"Less than a year. We met at the gym. He was friendly. Charming. The kind of guy who remembers your coffee order and asks about your day." Julian's mouth twists. "I liked him. I thought he was genuine."

"And now?"

Julian doesn't answer immediately. He stares at the floor, his good hand flexing at his side. When he looks up, his eyes are harder than they were a

moment ago.

"After what happened to me," he says quietly, "I don't know if I can trust anyone anymore. Anyone except the Sartoris."

I file that away.

Julian Ashford, twenty-five years old, recently traumatized, and his instinct is to trust the family his sister married into rather than the man who rescued him. That's useful information. If things escalate with Pierce—and my gut tells me they will—I might need Julian on my side.

"There's a chance," I say, keeping my voice neutral, "that Pierce just likes your sister. That the dinner invitation is exactly what it looks like."

Julian laughs. It's a sharp, humorless sound that echoes in the empty corridor.

"I don't doubt that for a second," he says. "There wasn't a single friend of mine who didn't want to sleep with my sister. Prep school, college, business school—didn't matter. The second they met Ava, they forgot I existed." He shakes his head, something bitter flickering across his face. "She never noticed. Or maybe she did and just didn't care. Either way, I got used to it."

I don't answer.

I can't answer.

Because if I open my mouth right now, something dangerous might come out.

"If you need anything from me," Julian says, "I'm available. Whatever you're trying to figure out about Nolan, whatever you think is going on. I want to know. Ava's my sister. If someone's playing games with her, I want in."

"Noted."

Julian nods once. Then he turns and walks down the corridor, his footsteps fading as he disappears around the corner.

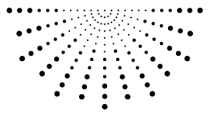
I stand there without moving.

I'll give her space until dinner. Let her calm down.

But when the sun goes down and this family gathers around that table, I'll be there.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Ava

I open the door half an hour after my father's text about dinner.

Liam stands exactly where I left him. Back against the wall, arms crossed, feet planted like he's rooted to the hardwood. He hasn't moved an inch.

"You didn't grab a chair or something?" I ask.

"I'm fine."

Of course he is. This man has probably spent entire nights standing watch in places where sitting meant dying. A few hours outside my childhood bedroom is nothing. A vacation, probably.

"We're having dinner." I smooth down the front of the soft cream silk blouse I changed into after my ride. "You can rest if you want. Go for a walk. Go... wherever you need to go."

I keep my voice light. Casual. Because I've had time to think, and I've sorted myself out.

Liam is a single man who likes having fun. I should have known that from the first day when I walked into his office and found him with two women on their knees. That's who he is. That's fine. That's *cool*, actually.

He probably has women in his life who don't care that there are others. Women who understand the arrangement, who take what he offers and don't

ask for more. Sophisticated women who can separate physical pleasure from emotional attachment.

I could never do that. Not that I want to. But for reasons I don't understand, my mind keeps going there.

The jealousy I felt around Riccardo was irrational, consuming. Every woman who looked at him made something possessive twist in my chest. I understood the glances. Riccardo had dark eyes that could make you forget your own name, a smile that promised things he had no intention of delivering. I understood why women stared.

I hated it anyway.

I hated the way their eyes would linger on his hands, his mouth, the breadth of his shoulders. I hated the way they'd find excuses to touch his arm during conversations at parties. I hated that I couldn't stop myself from cataloging every single one of them, from measuring myself against women I'd never speak to again.

Riccardo found it amusing. *You're adorable when you're jealous, tesoro.*

I wasn't adorable. I was exhausted. Loving someone that intensely, that possessively, is exhausting.

So yes. Liam can have his phone calls and his Jessicas and whatever else he does when he's not standing guard outside my door. It's none of my business. I've cleared my head. I'm fine.

"I'll be in the dining room," Liam says. "I can eat after you finish."

I sigh. "Okay."

I start walking toward the stairs, hyper-aware of his footsteps behind me.

I reach the top of the stairs and pause, one hand on the banister.

The front door opens.

Nolan Pierce steps inside like he owns the place, shaking rain from his coat as Margaret hurries to take it from him. He says something to her and she laughs politely.

Then he looks up.

His eyes find me immediately. Like he knew exactly where I'd be.

He smiles.

Oh god.

My father didn't warn me. Didn't mention that *dinner together* meant Pierce would be joining us. Didn't think I might want to know that the man

who sent me flowers and requested my company and apparently has *his blessing* would be sitting across from me tonight.

Thanks for that, Dad.

Pierce is handsome. I can admit that objectively. Strong jaw, a nice haircut. He wears his suit like armor, every line precise, every detail calculated to impress. The smile he's giving me now probably works on most women.

The feeling that he's a snake hasn't left me. If anything, it's gotten stronger. The way he looks at me like I'm already his, like we're just waiting for the paperwork.

I can do casual. In theory. Like Liam.

Not with Pierce, though.

"Ava." His voice carries up the stairs, warm and pleased. "You look lovely."

I force a smile. It probably looks more like a grimace. "Mr. Pierce. I didn't realize you'd be joining us."

"Nolan, please." He starts up the stairs toward me, and I have to resist the urge to step back. "Your father was kind enough to extend the invitation. I hope you don't mind."

I mind. I mind very much.

"Of course not," I say, because what else can I say? *Get out of my father's house, you snake?*

He reaches the landing and stops one step below me, which puts us at eye level. Too close. His cologne doesn't reach me until I'm close enough to touch him. Cedar, smoke. I like how he smells. I don't like him being this close, though.

"I wanted to apologize," he says. "For the flowers. If they made you uncomfortable."

"They didn't."

"Your father mentioned you might not be ready for dinner invitations." His smile turns rueful, self-deprecating. "I should have been more patient. It's just... when I see something I want, I find it difficult to wait."

Something. Not someone. *Something.*

I keep my expression pleasant. Neutral. The mask I perfected at a hundred Sartori dinners. "I appreciate your understanding."

Behind me, I feel Liam's presence like a physical weight. He hasn't said a word, hasn't moved, but I know he's watching. Listening. Taking notes.

Pierce's gaze flicks past my shoulder, acknowledging Liam with a slight tightening around his mouth. He doesn't like having an audience. Interesting.

"Shall we?" Pierce gestures toward the stairs. "I believe dinner is almost ready."

I nod and start down, keeping my pace measured. Pierce falls into step beside me, too close, his hand hovering near the small of my back without quite touching. Liam follows three steps behind, silent as a shadow.

In the dining room, my father and Sylvia are already seated. Dad smiles when he sees me, genuine warmth in his eyes that I'm still getting used to after years of distance. Sylvia's smile is thinner.

Julian isn't here yet.

Pierce pulls out my chair before Liam can move, and I sit because making a scene would be worse than accepting the small courtesy. Pierce takes the seat beside me.

Of course he does.

Liam positions himself against the wall near the doorway, hands clasped in front of him, face blank. Our eyes meet for half a second.

I look away first.



Liam

Usually these dinners bore me senseless.

Tonight I'm anything but bored.

I stand against the wall, arms crossed, thinking of every method I know to make a man suffer. Pierce has given me an hour to work through my repertoire, and I'm barely scratching the surface.

Waterboarding. Too quick.

Fingernails. Satisfying, but lacks creativity.

That thing Valentino showed me in Sicily with the fishing wire and the car battery. Now *that* has potential.

Pierce's voice drones on, filling every corner of the dining room like smoke from a cheap cigar. The man hasn't stopped talking since the soup course. Franklin nods along, playing the gracious host. Sylvia picks at her salad with the enthusiasm of someone counting down minutes until she can excuse herself. Julian stares at his plate, shoulders rigid.

And Ava.

Ava sits beside Pierce with her spine straight and her face arranged in that perfect mask she wears so well. The one that makes her look like a porcelain doll. Beautiful, untouchable, and totally empty.

"So, Ava," Pierce says, leaning closer to her than any man has a right to lean. "I heard you studied at Cambridge. What drew you to England?"

Ava's fingers tighten around her wine glass. Barely visible. I notice.

"The weather," she says flatly. "I'm quite fond of rain."

Pierce laughs like she's told the funniest joke he's ever heard. "She's charming. Franklin, you didn't tell me your daughter was so charming."

Franklin beams. "Ava's always been quick-witted."

I imagine Pierce's tongue nailed to the table. That would shut him up.

"And after Cambridge?" Pierce presses. "You went straight into the family business?"

"For a time." Ava sets down her glass. "What about you, Nolan? Where did you study?"

Smooth. She deflects like breathing.

Pierce doesn't seem to notice he's being handled. "Ohio State. Nothing as prestigious as Cambridge, I'm afraid. I had to work my way up the hard way."

"How inspiring." Ava's tone could freeze vodka.

I bite back something that might be a smile. Might be.

Pierce launches into a monologue about his humble beginnings, his entrepreneurial spirit, his vision for the future. I tune out the words and focus on his body language instead. The way he angles his chair toward Ava. The way his eyes never leave her face. The way he gestures with his hands, always finding excuses to move farther into her space.

He looks at her like she's already his.

Like she's a painting he's already bought and just hasn't hung on his wall yet.

I flex my fingers once, then force them still.

Pliers. Blowtorch. That medieval device Bruno keeps in the basement that nobody talks about.

"And what do you do for fun, Ava?" Pierce asks, cutting into his steak with surgical precision. "Besides riding, I mean. I know about Fairhaven."

Of course he does. Because he's been watching her.

"I read," Ava says. "I travel when I can. Nothing exciting."

"I find that hard to believe." Pierce's smile shows too many teeth. "A woman like you must have passions. Desires. Things that keep you up at night."

Julian's fork clatters against his plate.

"Jesus Christ," he mutters. "Can we have *one* dinner without the interrogation? If you two want to interview each other, get a podcast."

Pierce laughs, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "My apologies. I get carried away when I'm interested in something. Or someone."

He looks at Ava when he says it. Doesn't even try to hide it.

I imagine his eyes in a jar on my desk.

"I'd love to continue getting to know you after dinner," Pierce says, his voice dropping to something he probably thinks is intimate. "Perhaps a walk in the garden? Just the two of us?"

Every muscle in my body locks.

Ava pauses. Her mask doesn't crack, but I see the calculation behind her eyes.

She said she doesn't trust him.

"I'd love to," she says.

What the *fuck*.

My teeth clench so hard I feel the pressure in my skull. I could crack them one by one right now. Grind them to powder. The pain would be welcome. The pain would give me something to focus on besides the image of Ava alone in a dark garden with a man who wants to fuck her and use her.

Ava knows this. She *knows* this. So why the hell is she agreeing to be alone with him?

Pierce is practically glowing. "Wonderful. I look forward to it."

Franklin raises his wine glass. "To new friendships."

Sylvia echoes the toast with all the warmth of a glacier.

Julian catches my eye across the room. His expression says what I'm thinking. *What is she doing?*

I don't know. But I'm going to find out.

The rest of dinner passes in a blur of Pierce's voice and my increasingly creative murder fantasies. When the plates are finally cleared and Franklin suggests after-dinner drinks in the study, Pierce declines.

"I promised Ava that walk," he says, standing and offering her his hand. "I'm a man of my word."

Ava rises without taking his hand. "Liam will accompany us, of course."

Pierce's smile tightens. "I'm not sure that's necessary. The grounds are secure."

"Nevertheless." Ava meets his eyes with that blank, polite expression that gives nothing away. "My father insisted on protection. I wouldn't want to worry him."

Pierce looks at me. I look back.

Try me. Give me one reason.

"Of course," Pierce says smoothly. "The more the merrier."

Ava slips on a cardigan. Pierce places his hand on the small of her back as they walk toward the garden doors.

I follow three steps behind, close enough to intervene, far enough to observe.

The garden stretches out before us, moonlit and manicured. Pierce guides Ava down a stone path lined with roses, their perfume thick in the night air.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he says. "Though not as beautiful as present company."

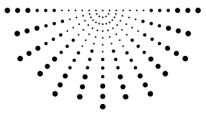
Ava makes a noncommittal sound.

I imagine his hand in a meat grinder.

This is going to be a long fucking night.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Ava

The idea crystallized somewhere between the second course and Nolan's third attempt to brush his fingers against mine while reaching for the salt.

Get closer to the enemy. Learn what he wants. Use it.

Riccardo's voice, steady and calm, echoing from a thousand dinner conversations where he'd explained the game to me. Back then, I'd been a student. Now I'm playing for real.

It's dangerous. I know it's dangerous. But I won't agree to anything outside these walls. Liam will be watching. And if I'm lucky, Nolan will reveal exactly what he's after.

The garden path stretches before us, moonlight silvering the hedges. Nolan walks close enough that his sleeve brushes my arm with every step. Behind us, Liam's footsteps are nearly silent, but I feel him there.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Nolan pulls a cigarette case from his jacket pocket. Silver. Everything about him screams *look at what I have*.

"Not really."

He lights the cigarette, the flame briefly illuminating the sharp angles of his face. Smoke curls upward into the night air.

"Tell me something, Ava." He exhales slowly. "How is life after losing a husband?"

The question lands like a stone in still water. I should deflect. Should offer some polished nothing and change the subject. That's what I've done for three years whenever anyone asks.

Maybe it's the dark, or the garden, or how ridiculous this whole thing is. I talk.

"Quiet," I say. "Life after is quiet."

Nolan tilts his head, waiting.

"People think grief is loud. Crying, screaming, that kind of thing." I keep my voice even. Detached. Like I'm describing someone else's life. "Sometimes it is. But mostly it's just... silence. You wake up and the other side of the bed is empty. You cook dinner for one. You stop mid-sentence because you forgot there's no one there to hear you."

"That sounds lonely."

"It is."

I don't know why I'm telling him this. Maybe because it costs me nothing—these aren't my real feelings, just the surface ones. The ones I'd tell a therapist if I ever bothered to see one. The deep stuff, the ugly stuff, the nights I lay awake wondering if Riccardo ever truly loved me or if I was just another possession—those stay locked away.

"Three years is a long time to be alone," Nolan says.

"Is it?"

"For a woman like you? Yes." He takes another drag of his cigarette. "Beautiful. Intelligent. From a good family. You should have men lining up."

"Maybe I don't want men lining up."

"What do you want, then?"

To find out what you really want. To protect my brother.

"Peace," I say instead. "I want peace."

Nolan stops walking.

I stop too, turning to face him. The moonlight catches the predatory gleam in his eyes. Behind us, Liam's footsteps halt.

"Peace." Nolan repeats the word like he's tasting it. "That's a modest goal for a woman who married into the Sartori family."

Before I can respond, he reaches for my hand. His fingers close around mine and he lifts my knuckles to his lips.

The kiss is soft.

Every muscle in my body screams at me to hit him. To use this very hand to crack him across the jaw, watch the shock bloom in his eyes, feel the satisfying sting against my palm.

I stay calm.

"I know we've only known each other a few days." Nolan's thumb traces across my knuckles. His eyes never leave mine. "But I can't stop thinking about you, Ava."

My skin crawls where he's touching me. I keep my expression neutral.

"That's very flattering," I say.

"It's not flattery. It's truth." He still hasn't released my hand. "You walked into that office and I knew. Some things you just *know*."

I pull my hand back. Slowly. Not a rejection—a boundary.

"I need time."

Nolan's smile doesn't waver. If anything, it widens. "Of course."

"I'm not saying no," I add, hating myself for the words even as I speak them. "I'm saying... not yet. Julian just came home. My father needs me here. There's a lot happening."

"I understand completely." Nolan drops his cigarette and crushes it beneath his heel. "Take all the time you need. I'm a patient man."

He smiles when he says it. I don't buy a word.

"We should head back." I glance toward the house, its windows glowing warm in the darkness. "It's getting cold."

"Whatever you want."

He offers his arm. I don't take it, but I fall into step beside him as we walk back toward the house. Liam materializes at my other side, close enough that I can feel the heat of him even through my cardigan.

"That was a lovely walk," Nolan says as we reach the back terrace. "I hope we can do it again soon."

"Perhaps."

He takes my hand again and squeezes. "Goodnight, Ava. Sweet dreams."

I watch him disappear into the house.

The moment the door closes behind him, I exhale. Long and slow. Like I've been holding my breath for the past twenty minutes.

"What the hell was that?"

Liam's voice is low. Controlled. But there's something underneath it—something that sounds almost like anger.

"That," I say, keeping my own voice steady, "was me getting information."

"By letting him paw at you?"

"By letting him *think* there's a chance." I turn to face Liam fully. In the moonlight, his jaw looks carved from granite. The muscle there ticks rhythmically. "He wants something from my family. From me. I need to know what."

"And your plan is to play the interested one?"



Liam

Ava stares at me without answering.

The silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating. Her eyes hold mine for one long moment and then she turns on her heel and walks toward the house.

I follow. Of course I fucking follow.

The image of Pierce's lips on her hand plays on repeat in my skull, and each time it loops, that dark and ugly thing that lives inside me twists tighter in my chest.

She reaches the stairs just as Sylvia descends from the upper landing. The older woman pauses, her gaze sliding between Ava and me with that calculating interest I've come to despise.

"Nolan is really into you," Sylvia says, her voice carrying that particular brand of warmth that never reaches her eyes.

Ava's shoulders tense almost imperceptibly. "I have a headache right now. Not really in the mood to talk about it."

Sylvia nods slowly, her smile never wavering. "Of course. I understand completely." Her attention shifts to me. "Goodnight to you both."

She continues past us, and I resist the urge to watch her go. My focus remains locked on Ava's back as she climbs the stairs.

We arrive at her door.

She doesn't look at me. Doesn't acknowledge my presence at all. Just reaches for the handle, opens the door, and says, "Night."

The door closes in my face.

I see red—actual fucking red at the edges of my vision—and before I can think better of it, my hand is on the door. I push it open, step inside, and shove it closed behind me.

Ava spins around, her eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

I move toward her. She backs up until she hits the wall, and I keep coming, not stopping until I'm close enough to see the pulse jumping in her throat. Close enough to smell her perfume. Coffee and vanilla with a dark sweetness under it.

She has to tilt her head back to look at me. The height difference forces her chin up, exposing the line of her neck. Her lips part slightly.

Christ. That makes this harder.

"I asked you something," I say, my voice rough even to my own ears.

Ava's surprise fades. A small smile curves her mouth.

"Last time I checked, your job was to be my bodyguard." Her voice is steady, controlled. The aristocratic mask firmly in place. "I already told you. I have a plan to get closer to Nolan. To find out what he wants."

"And that plan involves letting anyone who wants to put their hands on you? Anyone who wants to touch you?"

Her face floods with color. Pink climbing her cheeks, spreading down her neck.

"Get out."

"Answer the fucking question."

Ava's eyes flash with fury. The pink in her cheeks deepens to red, and her fingers press into her palms.

"How dare you." Her voice shakes. "What right do you have to ask me questions like that?"

I don't move. Don't back away. My blood is still running hot, and the words keep coming before I can stop them.

"Ava—"

"No." She cuts me off, jabbing a finger toward my chest. "You don't get to do this. You don't have any right to question who touches me or why.

And even if you did have that right once—" She laughs, but there's no humor in it. Just bitter, broken edges. "You lost it. Years ago."

I hold myself rigid. "I never—"

"You hate me, Liam." She spits the words like they taste foul in her mouth. "You've made that crystal clear for a decade. So back off. Leave me alone."

The accusation lands like a punch to the gut.

Hate her.

Christ. If only it were that simple.

"It was never hate," I say, the words scraping past my throat before I can swallow them back. "That was never the problem between us."

Ava goes still. Whatever moves through her, she buries it fast. When she laughs again, the sound has an edge.

"Enlighten me then." She spreads her arms wide, a mocking gesture. "Please. Because from where I stood, it looked exactly like hate."

She takes a step toward me, and I force myself not to retreat. Not to show how much her proximity affects me.

"You were Riccardo's best man at our wedding," she continues, her voice rising. "You stood right there beside him when I walked down the aisle. And in seven years—seven years, Liam—you never once bothered to talk to me beyond 'hello' and 'goodbye.'"

Each word hits its mark. I feel them land, one after another, like bullets I can't dodge.

"Every time we had to have a conversation, it was obvious you didn't want to be there. You'd look anywhere but at me. Answer in single syllables. Leave the room the second you could." Her voice cracks, just slightly, before she steadies it again. "So don't stand there and tell me it wasn't hate. I'm not stupid."

The silence that follows is deafening.

I should walk away. Should apologize and leave and never speak of this again. That's what I've done. Kept my distance. Built walls. Buried everything so deep I almost convinced myself it wasn't there.

But tonight, watching him touch her and watching her permit it, the last of my restraint burns off.

"Did it ever cross your mind," I say slowly, "that I couldn't look at you without being in pain?"

Ava blinks.

The anger drains from her face, replaced by confusion.

"What?" The word comes out barely above a whisper.

I shouldn't have said it. Shouldn't have let even that much slip past my defenses. But it's out now, hanging in the air between us like smoke.

She stares at me. Her lips part, but no sound comes out.

"What does that mean?" she asks finally. Her voice is smaller now. Uncertain.

It means I've been in love with you since the moment I saw you.

It means watching you marry my best friend nearly destroyed me.

It means every time I walked out of a room, it was because staying would have broken something I couldn't afford to lose.

The words burn in my chest, demanding release. But I've already said too much. Already cracked open a door that should have stayed locked.

I step back.

The distance between us grows—one foot, then two. The cool air rushes in to fill the space where heat had been building.

"Forget it." I raise both hands, palms out. A gesture of surrender. Of retreat. "I apologize."

Ava's brow furrows. "Liam—"

"Get some sleep." I turn toward the door, my legs moving on autopilot. "I'll be in the hallway if you need anything."

"Wait."

I don't wait. Can't.

My hand closes around the door handle. I pull it open and step through, letting it click shut behind me.

The hallway is empty. Silent. I lean back against the wall beside her door and close my eyes.

Fuck.

I couldn't look at you without being in pain.

What the fuck was I thinking?

She's going to have questions now. Questions I can't answer. Not without destroying the memory of a man she loved. Not without revealing that her husband's best friend wanted her from the very beginning.

Down the hall, a door opens. Footsteps approach.

I straighten, schooling my features into something neutral.

Julian rounds the corner, dressed in pajamas and looking half-asleep. He pauses when he sees me.

"Everything okay?" he asks, rubbing his eyes. "I heard voices."

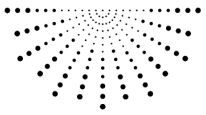
"Fine." The word comes out flat. Controlled. "Your sister's going to bed. You should too."

Julian studies me for a moment longer than necessary. Then he nods slowly.

"Right. Okay," he says before walking past me.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Ava

Fourteen days have passed since Liam said those words and walked out of my bedroom without explaining a single thing.

Nero's hooves strike the arena sand in a steady rhythm as I post to his trot, my body moving on autopilot while my mind circles back to that night. Again. Always.

What does that even mean?

I've turned the sentence over in my head so many times the words have lost their shape. Pain. He said *pain*. Like I'd done something to hurt him. Like my existence caused him suffering.

But that doesn't track with the decade of cold shoulders and empty rooms. If I hurt him, wouldn't anger make more sense? Wouldn't hatred?

Nero snorts and tosses his head, sensing my distraction. I force myself to focus, squeezing my calves against his sides and asking for a collected canter. He responds beautifully, his powerful body rocking beneath me in that three-beat gait that usually empties my mind of everything except the connection between horse and rider.

Not today.

Today my thoughts keep drifting backward. Ten years backward, to a version of myself I barely recognize anymore.

I was twenty-four and drowning in my father's company.

Not literally drowning. I was good at my job, competent in ways that surprised people who expected the boss's daughter to coast on nepotism. But the politics exhausted me. The constant awareness that every conversation carried subtext. The knowledge that half my colleagues resented me and the other half wanted something from me.

The after-work outings were supposed to help. Team building, Franklin called them. Breaks from the pressure that brought everyone together.

They brought everyone together, all right. Just not with me.

I'd stand at the edge of groups, nursing my drink, watching people laugh at inside jokes I wasn't part of. The boss's daughter. Always present, never quite belonging.

Lucy was the exception.

She was a junior analyst with terrible taste in men and an inability to filter her thoughts before they left her mouth. She treated me like a person instead of an extension of Franklin Ashford, and for that alone I loved her.

"Ava." Lucy grabbed my arm one night, her third martini making her grip sloppy. "That man is staring at you again."

I followed her gaze across the bar to a tall figure in a dark suit. Liam Blackwood. Head of security for Giuseppe Sartori, who owned Celestine. One of Lucy's friends from university had introduced us a few weeks earlier, and since then he'd been... present. At the same bars. The same restaurants.

"He's working," I said. "He's always working."

"He's working on *you*." Lucy leaned closer, her breath sweet with vermouth. "He looks at you like he wants to consume you."

I laughed. Actually laughed, the sound bright and dismissive in the crowded room.

"You're drunk."

"I'm observant." She poked my shoulder. "And you're oblivious. That man tracks you across every room like you're the only thing worth looking at."

I glanced back at Liam. He was talking to someone now, his face angled away, his posture relaxed in a way that suggested complete control.

"You're imagining things," I told Lucy.

She wasn't imagining things. I suspect that now.

But back then? Back then I had a blind spot the size of Lake Michigan when it came to men and their intentions. I could read a boardroom, negotiate a contract, identify a liar in three sentences flat. Put me in front of a man who might be interested and my brain simply refused to compute.

Is he flirting or just being polite? I'd wonder, and the wondering would paralyze me into assuming polite. Always polite. Safer that way.

So when Liam asked if I wanted another drink, I thought he was being professional.

When he remembered how I took my coffee, I thought he had a good memory.

When his eyes tracked me across crowded rooms, I thought—

I didn't think. That was the problem. I didn't let myself think about Liam Blackwood at all, because thinking about him felt dangerous in ways I couldn't name.

And then Riccardo happened.

It was a Thursday night. I remember because Thursdays were when Celestine hosted live jazz, and the music drifted through the restaurant like smoke.

I was heading to the restroom, weaving between tables, when I walked directly into a wall of fabric and warm muscle.

Crashed into him, really. My heel caught on something and I stumbled forward, my palms flattening against his chest to catch myself.

"I'm so sorry," I started, looking up.

And stopped.

Dark eyes. Italian nose. A mouth that curved into something between amusement and appreciation as he steadied me with hands that felt like they belonged on my waist.

"Don't be." His voice was rich, accented, certain. "Best thing that's happened all evening."

I fell in love instantly.

Not the slow, sensible kind of love that builds over shared interests and careful conversations. The lightning-strike kind. The kind that rewrites your whole nervous system in a single breath.

Later, Riccardo told me the same thing happened to him. That he saw me stumble into his arms and thought *there she is*. Like he'd been waiting.

I believed him. I believed every word he ever said to me.

Nero breaks into a faster canter, responding to tension in my legs I didn't realize I was creating. I bring him back, circle him, ask for a transition down to walk.

My hands are shaking.

Maybe Lucy was right.

The thought settles into my chest. Ripples spreading outward, disturbing everything.

Maybe Liam Blackwood looked at me ten years ago and saw something he wanted. Maybe those glances across crowded rooms weren't professional vigilance.

Maybe I was too blind to see what was right in front of me.

And then I fell in love with his boss. His best friend. The man he stood beside at the altar, watching me walk down the aisle.

God.

I bring Nero to a halt and press my palm against his warm neck, feeling his pulse slow beneath my fingers. My own heart won't cooperate. It pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

There's no other explanation. I've turned it over and over in my mind for two weeks, examining every angle, searching for some interpretation that makes sense. *I couldn't look at you without being in pain.*

Pain.

Not hatred. Not indifference.

Pain.

The kind that comes from wanting something you can't have.

But even as I think it, doubt creeps in. Maybe I'm being paranoid. Maybe I'm projecting meaning onto words that meant something else entirely. Maybe Liam resented me for reasons that have nothing to do with attraction. Maybe he blamed me for something I don't even know about.

Maybe I'm losing my mind.

I dismount and lead Nero toward the stable, my boots crunching against the gravel path. The afternoon sun sits low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the paddocks.

Since that night, Liam has retreated behind his walls. The cold posture is back. The clipped responses. The way he looks through me instead of at me.

But sometimes—

Sometimes I catch him watching.

It happens in stolen moments. When he thinks I'm not paying attention. When I turn my head and find his gaze already on me, heavy with something that makes my skin flush hot.

Hunger.

That's the word my treacherous brain supplies. He looks at me like he's starving and I'm the only thing that could satisfy him.

Then he blinks and it's gone. The mask slides back into place. He becomes Liam Blackwood, head of Sartori security, professional, distant and completely unreachable.

I'm probably imagining it.

Liam likes women. That much is obvious.

Maybe that's all I am. Another woman he finds attractive. A passing interest, complicated by circumstance and history.

Even if he wanted me once, it doesn't mean anything. Not really. Men like Liam want things all the time. They see a woman and their bodies respond, simple as breathing. It's biology, not devotion.

I hand Nero off to the stable hand and thank him for the lesson. My muscles ache in that pleasant way that comes from a good ride, but my mind refuses to quiet.

I see Liam before I reach the door.

He's leaning against the fence post near the parking area, his phone in his hand, his attention fixed on the screen.

He's texting someone.

Vampire romance or a slow-burning love story?

Look up **Lokepub** on Google to find your next read.

Of course he is.

I watch his thumbs move across the screen, watch the faint curve of concentration between his brows, and something bitter rises in my throat.

I square my shoulders and push through the exit.

Liam's head comes up immediately. His phone disappears into his pocket with practiced speed.

"Ready?" His voice is neutral. Professional.

"Yes."

We walk to the car in silence. He opens my door, waits for me to settle into the seat, closes it with a soft click. The routine is familiar now. Two weeks of this dance.

He slides behind the wheel and starts the engine. Classical music plays low on the radio, something with strings that feels too romantic for the tension filling the space between us.

I stare out the window.

The countryside rolls past in shades of green and gold. Horses graze in distant paddocks. The world looks peaceful in a way that feels like mockery.

"Fabio will take tomorrow's shift," Liam says. "I have business at the compound."

"Fine."

Silence stretches between us.

I should be relieved. A day without Liam's presence, without the constant awareness of him in my space, without the weight of his attention when he thinks I'm not looking.

Instead, something hollow opens up in my chest.

Stop it. Stop wanting things that will only hurt you.



Liam

The compound gates swing open, and I pull through without slowing. Same gravel drive I've driven a thousand times.

Dante meets me before I reach the front steps. His hands are in his pockets, but the tension in his shoulders tells me something's shifted.

"Willson's dead," he says without preamble.

I stop walking. "When?"

"Found him this morning. Hanged himself in a motel room outside Milwaukee. The motel owner found him and called the cops." Dante's expression hardens. "Left a note. Confessed to the whole thing —the kidnapping, the finger, everything."

The words land wrong. Too neat. Too convenient.

"Bullshit."

Dante's mouth quirks. "Thought you'd say that."

"Willson was a coward and a fucking idiot, but he wasn't suicidal." I start walking again, and Dante falls into step beside me. "Someone cleaned up their mess."

"That's the working theory. Police have confirmed that he wrote the note. But we both know that if you threaten someone, he'll do whatever you want him to do." He holds the front door open. "Bruno wants you."

We find him in the living room, settled into a chair by the fireplace. Vittoria perches on the arm of the sofa, her laptop balanced on her knees, and Dmitri stands behind her with one hand resting on her shoulder. Possessive bastard can't keep his hands off her for five minutes.

I nod to each of them. Vittoria gives me a small wave. Dmitri's pale gaze tracks me, motionless, weighing. I've seen that stillness put harder men on edge.

"Liam." Bruno gestures to the chair across from him. "Sit."

I don't sit. I stand near the window where I can see both the door and the drive. Old habits.

Bruno doesn't push it. He knows me. "How are things at the Ashford mansion?"

"Quiet." I cross my arms. "Nothing happening besides the usual circus around Pierce."

"He's still sniffing around Ava?" Vittoria asks without looking up from her screen.

"Like a dog with a bone."

Bruno steeples his fingers. The firelight catches the silver threading through his dark hair, the deep lines carved around his mouth. He aged ten years in that wheelchair. Some of it never left.

"If Ava wants to continue her life," he says slowly, "she can. She is, and always will be, part of this family." A pause. "But she's young, Liam. She deserves happiness."

"Pierce isn't the right option."

Vittoria lets out a short, sharp laugh. "That's not your call."

I turn to face her fully. "I don't trust him. That's all."

"You don't trust anyone," she fires back. "That's your job."

"And my job is telling you that something's off about him." I keep my voice level, but I force myself to remain still. "The timing of Julian's rescue. The tracker in the car. None of it adds up."

Dmitri's fingers tighten slightly on Vittoria's shoulder. He doesn't speak, but his gaze sharpens with interest.

Bruno holds up a hand before Vittoria can respond. "We're aware of your concerns. Dante's been digging. He never stopped."

"And?" I look at Dante.

He shrugs. "Pierce is careful. Very careful. His legitimate businesses check out. His less legitimate connections are buried deep, but nothing that points to the kidnapping directly."

"Yet."

"Yet," Dante agrees.

Bruno rises from his chair.

"Until we find something concrete on Pierce, you stay put." Bruno's dark eyes meet mine. "Keep watching. Keep protecting her. But if we don't find anything within a month—two at most—we withdraw."

"Withdraw." The word tastes like ash. "You mean leave her to him."

"I mean let her make her own choices." Bruno's voice hardens. "Ava isn't a prisoner. She isn't cargo to be guarded indefinitely. She has every right to move on with her life. And she asked for that. She doesn’t want us to have men on her. We need to show some respect."

The fire crackles. Someone's phone buzzes. The silence stretches like a wire about to snap.

"She doesn't know what he is," I say quietly.

"Then find proof." Bruno limps toward the door, conversation clearly over. "One month, Liam. Two if you're lucky. Make it count."

He leaves. Dmitri murmurs something to Vittoria and follows him.

Vittoria closes her laptop and studies me with those sharp dark eyes that see too much.

"You care about her."

It's not a question.

"She's family."

"That's not what I asked." She stands, tucking the laptop under her arm. "I've known you for years, Liam. You've never fought this hard for anyone except—"

"Don't."

She stops. Holds my gaze for a long moment.

"Riccardo was my brother," she says softly. "I loved him. But he wasn't perfect, and Ava deserves to know—"

"Know what?" I step closer. "That her husband had a son with another woman?"

Vittoria flinches. "She should hear it from family. Not find out some other way."

"Then tell her." My voice drops. "But not now. Not while she's dealing with Pierce."

"You're protecting her from the truth."

"I'm protecting her from being destroyed by it."

We stare at each other. The fire pops and hisses.

Finally, Vittoria sighs. "One month. Find something on Pierce, or let her go."

She walks out, leaving me alone with the flames and the weight of everything I can't say.

Because Riccardo did more than that.

Ava won't blame him for having a kid he didn't even know existed. But she will blame him for things that he did while they were married.

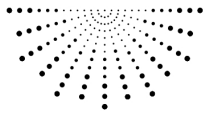
One month. Maybe two.

Sixty days to prove that Pierce orchestrated the kidnapping. Sixty days to find the thread that unravels his carefully constructed web. Sixty days before they expect me to step back and watch him claim her.

Not fucking happening.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Ava

The ice clinks against crystal as I swirl my cocktail, watching the amber liquid catch the lamplight. Father's living room feels smaller tonight, stuffed with too many bodies and too much pretense. The fire crackles in the hearth like it's trying to compete with Nolan's voice, which carries across the room as he regales my father with tales of his meeting with Senator Crawford.

"The man practically begged for campaign contributions," Nolan says, leaning back in his chair with the ease of someone who believes he belongs everywhere. "I told him we'd discuss it over golf next month."

My father nods, genuinely impressed. "Crawford's been difficult to pin down. How'd you manage it?"

"Patience, Franklin. And knowing what people want before they ask."

I take a longer sip of my drink than strictly necessary.

Julian catches my eye from across the room and makes a subtle face—the same one he used to make when we were children forced to attend our father's business dinners. I press my lips together to keep from smiling. At least someone else in this room shares my opinion of these gatherings.

Sylvia shifts closer to me on the sofa, her perfume overwhelming even the smell of the fire. "Ava, darling, do you have time tomorrow for

shopping? I have an appointment at the salon—my nails are absolutely tragic—and I thought we could make a day of it."

I glance down at her manicure, which looks perfect to me. But then, Sylvia's standards for "tragic" differ vastly from the rest of humanity's.

"I'd love to go shopping," I say. "But I'll need to come back after. I have some work to do."

Sylvia's eyebrows rise a fraction. "Work? What kind of work?"

"A project I've been thinking about." I keep my voice light. "It's not finished yet. I'll tell everyone once I'm ready."

The truth is, I've been sketching plans for a nonprofit focused on survivors of violence . Something that would actually *matter*. But I'm not about to share that with Sylvia, who would either dismiss it or somehow make it about herself.

"How mysterious." Sylvia sips her cocktail, her red lips leaving a perfect imprint on the glass. "Well, I suppose we all need our little hobbies."

I don't correct her. Let her think it's a hobby.

The room tilts slightly as I shift my weight, and I realize I'm on my third drink. Maybe fourth. The pleasant fuzziness wrapping around my thoughts softens the sharp edges of this evening, makes Nolan's laugh less grating, makes Sylvia's presence less suffocating.

I actually like this amount of dizziness. Just enough to blur reality without losing control of it.

Nolan excuses himself from my father's conversation and crosses the room toward me. His movements are smooth, the kind of confidence that comes from a lifetime of getting exactly what he wants. He settles into the space beside me that Sylvia has conveniently vacated.

"You look bored," he says, voice pitched low enough that only I can hear.

"Do I?"

"You've been staring at your drink like it holds the secrets of the universe."

"Maybe it does."

He laughs, and I hate that the sound is pleasant. Warm and rich, like good whiskey. If my gut didn't scream *danger* every time he looked at me, I might have found him attractive. More than attractive.

It's been three years since Riccardo died. Three years of my own hand, a drawer full of toys that get the job done but leave me feeling hollow

afterward. I miss the weight of another body, the heat of skin against mine, the way someone else's breath sounds in the dark.

But not Nolan's body. Not Nolan's breath.

He leans closer. "I've been thinking about you, Ava."

"Have you?"

"Constantly." His eyes drop to my mouth, then back up. "I'd like to take you to dinner. Saturday. Somewhere nice, just the two of us."

By the door, Liam shifts his position. He's turned slightly toward us now.

Oh.

He doesn't like that.

Liam, who apparently doesn't enjoy watching another man ask me to dinner.

I blink twice at Nolan, letting my lashes flutter in a way that probably looks flirtatious but is really just me processing this new information.

"I would love to," I say, smiling at him.

Nolan's face lights up. It's a good face, objectively speaking. Strong jaw, straight nose, eyes the color of cognac.

"Wonderful." He reaches out and pulls me into a brief hug, his hand warm on my lower back. "I'll send details tomorrow."

I hold myself still in his embrace, counting the seconds until he releases me. Three. Four. Five.

When he steps back, his smile is triumphant. "Goodnight, everyone." He raises his voice to include the room. "Franklin, we'll talk more next week. Sylvia, always a pleasure. Julian, take care of that hand."

Julian lifts his bandaged fingers in acknowledgment but says nothing.

Nolan's eyes find mine one last time. "Saturday, Ava."

"Saturday," I echo.

He leaves, and the room feels lighter without him. My father and Sylvia exchange a look I can't quite read, and Julian suddenly finds his phone fascinating.

I finish my drink in one long swallow and set the empty glass on the side table. The fire pops. The clock on the mantel ticks. And across the room, Liam stares at the spot where Nolan stood with an expression that could freeze lava.

Good, some petty part of me thinks.

I excuse myself and head for the stairs, hyper-aware of Liam's footsteps behind me.



Liam

I follow her up the stairs, each step measured, controlled. The opposite of what's happening inside my chest.

She accepted. She fucking *accepted*.

My shoulders lock. Two weeks of keeping my distance, of forcing myself back into the role I've played for a decade and she undoes it all with one sentence to Pierce.

The words echo in my skull like a gunshot.

Ava reaches her door and turns.

"Goodnight, Liam."

Her hand reaches for the doorknob.

"Hell no."

She freezes. Those brown eyes snap to mine, surprise flickering before she schools her features.

"Excuse me?"

I step closer. "Get inside."

For a moment, I think she'll argue. Her chin lifts, defiance sparking in her gaze. But my expression must tell her I'm not in the mood for her usual deflection, because she pushes the door open and walks in.

I follow and shut it behind us.

The click of the latch sounds too loud in the quiet room. Alfie lifts his head from the bed, watches us for a moment, then settles back down.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The words come out rougher than I intend.

Ava sets her clutch on the dresser, movements precise. Controlled. "I don't know what you mean."

"Pierce. Dinner. Saturday." Each word feels like broken glass in my throat. "Why did you say yes without asking me first?"

She turns to face me, one eyebrow raised. That aristocratic look she does so well. The one that makes lesser men feel like insects beneath her heel.

I'm not a lesser man. And right now, I don't give a damn about her walls.

"I didn't realize I needed your permission to accept a dinner invitation."

"You need to run it by me. Security concerns—"

"This has nothing to do with security." She cuts me off, voice sharp. "I need to get closer to Nolan."

"Why?"

"Because you've had plenty of time to find something on him, and you haven't." She crosses her arms, the movement pulling her dress tighter across her chest. I force my eyes to stay on her face. "Weeks, Liam. Dante's investigation turned up nothing. Willson is conveniently dead. If there's something to find, I'll find it myself."

"By doing what? Playing house with him?"

"By getting close enough to see what he's really after."

"I know what he's after." I step toward her, my control fraying at the edges. "He wants you in his bed."

The words hang between us, brutal and honest. Ava doesn't flinch.

"What's wrong with that?"

My heart stops.

"Maybe I want that too."

Something inside me snaps. The leash I've kept on myself fucking *breaks*.

I close the distance between us in two strides. She backs up until her shoulders hit the wall, and I plant my hands on either side of her head, caging her in.

"You're not allowed to let him touch you."

Her breath catches. This close, I can see the rapid pulse at the base of her throat, can feel the heat radiating off her skin.

"Why?" Her voice is barely a whisper.

"Because I don't want you to."

"*Why*, Liam?"

The question cuts through me. I search for words that won't destroy everything, that won't cross the line I've been standing behind.

"He's not for you."

"Then who is?" Her eyes lock onto mine, demanding. "Who's best for me?"

I don't answer. Can't answer. Because the truth would burn us both.

The silence stretches. Her expression shifts from challenge to something colder. More resigned.

"That's what I thought."

Her hands come up and push against my chest. I don't move. Can't move. Every muscle in my body has locked down, frozen between what I should do and what I'm dying to do.

"You look pretty tough to everyone, Liam." Her voice drops. "But maybe you're just a coward. Too scared to do what you actually want."

Coward.

The word hits like a blade between my ribs.

I've been called a lot of things. Killer. Soldier. Monster. I've earned every one of them. But no one—*no one*—has ever called me a coward.

Fuck it.

I grab her face in both hands and crush my mouth to hers.

She gasps against my lips, and I swallow the sound. My fingers slide into her hair, pulling her closer, deeper, and for one perfect moment, nothing exists except the feel of her mouth moving against mine.

Then her hands fist in the back of my shirt.

She's kissing me back.

Christ.

Her body arches into mine, and I press her harder against the wall, years of want pouring out in the slide of my tongue against hers. She makes a sound—half whimper, half moan—and it shoots straight through me, lighting up every nerve.

I've imagined this. Dreamed it. Hated myself for wanting it.

Nothing compares to the reality.

Knock, knock, knock.

We break apart like we've been burned. Ava's chest heaves, her lips swollen, her eyes wide with shock. I step back, running a hand through my hair, trying to remember how to breathe.

The door swings open.

Sylvia stands in the doorway, her gaze sweeping over us both with calculating interest. Whatever she sees makes her smile.

"Ava, darling. I wanted to discuss the guest list for Sunday's dinner party." Her eyes slide to me. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No." My voice comes out flat. Empty. "I was just leaving."

I don't look at Ava as I walk past Sylvia. Can't look at her. If I do, I'll see everything I've been denying for a decade written across her face, and I won't be able to stop myself from finishing what we started.

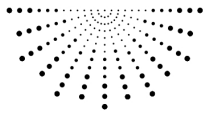
The door closes behind me.

I lean against the wall in the hallway, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Ava

Chicago traffic crawls past the tinted windows, and Sylvia's voice fills the car.

I barely slept last night.

When I opened my bedroom door this morning, Fabio sat in a chair outside. Not Liam. Fabio looked up from his phone with those dark, unreadable eyes.

Liam didn't come back.

Relief washed through me when I saw Fabio instead. Relief and something else. Something that felt too much like disappointment, which made me hate myself even more.

"—and the boutique on Michigan has the most divine collection this season," Sylvia continues, adjusting her silk scarf. "I thought we could start there, then perhaps lunch at—"

I make a sound that might be agreement. My reflection stares back at me from the window.

That kiss.

God, that *kiss*.

I've replayed it a hundred times since last night. The wall against my back. Liam's hands gripping me. His mouth on mine like he was drowning

and I was air. The way my body melted into his without permission, without thought, without any of the control I've always had.

My stomach twists with guilt so sharp it steals my breath.

Riccardo.

I close my eyes and see him. The man who laughed at my terrible jokes. Who held me through nightmares. Who promised me forever and meant it, even if forever turned out to be seven years and a bullet at his brother's wedding.

If he could see what happened last night—

The Riccardo I knew would burn heaven itself to punish us. He loved hard and he raged harder. He would never forgive this betrayal.

Betrayal.

The word sits in my chest like a stone.

I kissed his best friend. His brother in everything but blood. The man who stood beside him at our wedding, who failed—

No. That's not fair. Liam didn't fail. No one could have stopped what happened.

But he's alive. And Riccardo isn't. And last night, I pressed my body against his and wanted more.

"Ava? Darling, are you listening?"

I open my eyes. Sylvia watches me with that careful expression she's worn since last night. Since she walked into my room and found Liam's mouth inches from mine, my back against the wall like some desperate teenager.

She didn't mention it. Not a single word when she interrupted us to ask about Sunday's guest list for a small gathering my father arranged. Not at breakfast this morning when she chatted about shopping plans like nothing had happened.

But I'm not stupid.

Sylvia saw my swollen lips. She saw how close we stood. She saw the way Liam fled without looking back, like the room was on fire.

She knows exactly what happened.

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "What were you saying?"

"I was asking about your dress for Saturday. For the dinner." Sylvia tilts her head. "You'll want something special for Nolan."

My jaw tightens at his name. "I'm sure I have something appropriate."

"Appropriate." She laughs, light and musical and completely fake. "Darling, Nolan Pierce isn't interested in appropriate. He's interested in *you*."

"So everyone keeps reminding me."

"Because it's a wonderful opportunity." Sylvia leans forward slightly. "He's wealthy, connected, and clearly devoted. After everything you've been through—"

"I don't want to discuss Nolan."

"Of course. We'll focus on shopping."

I turn back to the window. The city blurs past in gray and glass, and I force myself to think about Nolan instead of Liam. About the investigation. About uncovering what Nolan really wants from my family.

That's what matters. Finding the truth. Protecting Julian and my father.

Not the way Liam's stubble scraped my chin. Not the sound he made when I called him a coward. Not the desperate, hungry way he kissed me like he'd been starving for years.

Stop it.

I dig my nails into my palm.

I can live again. I know I can. Three years of grief have taught me that life continues even when you wish it wouldn't. The sun rises. The heart beats. Eventually, the pain becomes something you carry instead of something that carries you.

But with Liam?

No.

That can't happen. It's wrong on every level—morally, practically, emotionally.

I shake my head slightly. Last night was a mistake. A moment of weakness after too much alcohol and too many days of tension. I pushed him. I called him a coward. I practically dared him to kiss me.

This is my fault.

And I won't let it happen again.

"We're here," Fabio says from the front seat.

The car glides to a stop outside a gleaming shopping center. Fabio exits first, scanning the area with the same quiet alertness Liam always showed. Different from Liam's intensity, though. Fabio moves like still water. Calm on the surface, dangerous underneath.

He opens my door. I step out into the cold Chicago air, and Sylvia joins me on the sidewalk, already surveying the storefronts like a general planning a campaign.

"Shall we?" She takes my arm with practiced ease.

I let her lead me toward the entrance, Fabio following at a respectful distance.

Focus on Nolan. Focus on the investigation. Focus on anything except the ghost of Liam's mouth on mine.

But as we enter the boutique, as Sylvia begins pulling dresses from racks and holding them against me, all I can think about is how that kiss felt like coming home.

And how much that terrifies me.

Because my lips want more. My body wants more. Every nerve ending remembers the pressure of his hands, the heat of his chest against mine, the way he said *you're not allowed* like he had any right to claim me.

Stupid body.

Stupid, traitorous, lonely body that doesn't understand loyalty or grief or the thousand reasons why wanting Liam Blackwood is the worst idea I've ever had.

Sylvia holds up a red dress. "This would be perfect for Saturday."

I stare at the silk.

"I'll try it on," I say.

And I wonder if there's a dress beautiful enough to make me forget the taste of his lips.



Liam

The tennis ball rockets past my head.

I don't even swing.

Pietro lowers his racket, staring at me across the net. "That's the third one you've missed. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Everything. Everything is wrong with me.

I grip my racket so hard the handle bites into my palm. The Lakeside Athletic Club is empty at this hour, just the two of us and the echo of balls hitting the court. Good. I don't need witnesses for whatever this is.

"Serve again," I say.

Pietro doesn't move. "Not until you tell me why you're trying to murder the baseline instead of playing tennis."

I turn away from him, walking to retrieve the ball. My muscles ache with tension I can't release. Haven't slept properly in two days. Haven't been able to look at her without remembering the taste of her mouth, the way she melted against me before going rigid with guilt.

Coward.

The word echoes in my skull like a gunshot.

She called me a coward. And she was right. She was so fucking right it makes me want to tear something apart with my bare hands.

"Liam." Pietro's voice is closer now. He's walked to the net, racket hanging loose at his side. "Talk to me."

I should have let her think I was a coward. Should have walked away and never touched her, never kissed her, never let her see anything behind the mask I've worn for ten goddamn years.

Because that's what I am, isn't it?

A coward.

"I had plenty of time," I hear myself say. The words come out rough, scraped raw. "Ten years ago. I had plenty of fucking time to go up to her and say something. Anything. To make it obvious I wanted her."

Pietro goes still. He knows who I'm talking about. He's always known, even when I pretended otherwise. When Pietro became Don of the Sartori family after Riccardo's death, he once told me he knew and I didn't say a fucking thing.

"But I didn't." I laugh, and it sounds like broken glass. "Because I was nobody. I'm still nobody. A soldier. A man who takes orders and kills when he's told to kill. And she—"

I can't finish.

Ava screams of power. Of old money and elegant bones and a spine made of steel wrapped in silk. She needs an equal beside her. Someone who can stand in her world without drowning.

I've never had a problem flirting. Never struggled to make it clear when I want someone. Women have always been easy—a smile, a look, a few words, and if they want to, they're in my bed. Simple. Straightforward.

But her.

The only woman who made my heart crack open also felt completely untouchable. Like looking at the sun and knowing you'll go blind if you stare too long.

That's why I never took that step.

Riccardo did.

I was there. I saw the whole fucking thing. She crashed into him at Celestine, literally stumbled and fell against his chest, and I watched from across the room as her face lit up. As she laughed at something he said. As his hand touched her waist.

My heart broke into tiny pieces that night. Shattered so quietly no one heard it.

And when Riccardo told me the next morning that he'd found his future wife—that she was perfect, that he was going to marry her—I decided something.

I loved my brother more than I loved myself.

"Riccardo would have stepped back," I say. "If I'd said one word. One fucking word about how I felt. He would have walked away. He was loyal like that. To me. And I was to him."

Pietro's jaw tightens. He doesn't interrupt.

"So I kept my mouth shut." I drop my racket. It clatters against the court. "I stood beside him at his wedding. I watched him put a ring on her finger. I spent the years that followed avoiding her, treating her like she meant nothing, because I couldn't look at her without wanting to—"

I stop. My hands are shaking.

"He wasn't loyal to her," Pietro says quietly. "You know that."

I do know.

The first year, Riccardo was devoted. Obsessed, even. He bought her presents, took her on trips, showed her off like she was the most precious thing he'd ever owned.

Then the spark faded.

I didn't see it at first. I was too busy keeping my distance, burying myself in work, pretending I didn't notice when she walked into a room and all the air disappeared from my lungs.

But then I found out. About the others.

We had a fight. The worst one in twenty years of friendship.

"You're married," I'd said. *"You made vows."*

"I love her," Riccardo had replied, like that explained everything. *"But the spark isn't there anymore, Liam. It happens. I still care about her. I'll never let her go. She's mine. She'll always be mine."*

Mine.

Like she was property. Like her heart didn't matter as long as he kept her in his bed.

I should have told her. Should have pulled her aside and said *he doesn't deserve you, he's fucking other women, you deserve better.*

But I didn't.

Because I'm a coward.

I let him have her. I let him treat her like a trophy he was bored with. And I never said a single goddamn word.

I left her believing Riccardo hung the moon. That their marriage was happy.

"She called me a coward," I say.

Pietro moves closer. "When?"

"Two nights ago. I—" I stop. "I kissed her."

Silence.

I wait for the judgment. The anger. The reminder that Ava is Riccardo's widow and I have no right to touch her.

Instead, Pietro exhales slowly. "And?"

"And she kissed me back. Then Sylvia interrupted and I left like the fucking coward I am."

"Liam—"

"Don't." I hold up my hand.

"What's wrong with you?" Pietro asks again, softer this time.

I meet his eyes.

"I'm wrong," I say. "I'm the wrongest thing on planet earth."

His footsteps echo across the empty court.

"Riccardo was my brother," he says, and his voice rises. "I loved him. I will always love him. That doesn't change."

I stare at the ground. The tennis ball sits near my foot like a useless reminder of why we came here.

"But I'm not fucking blind, Liam." Pietro's voice gets louder. "And neither was he."

My head snaps up. "What?"

"Riccardo knew." Pietro's jaw is tight. His eyes burn into mine. "He knew you were in love with her."

"No." I shake my head. "He didn't know. I never said anything. I never—"

"You didn't have to say shit." Pietro throws his racket. It clatters against the court and slides across the painted lines. "He knew."

Before I can react, he grabs the front of my shirt. His knuckles press against my sternum. We're the same height, eye to eye, and I can see every flicker of rage on his face.

"Let go of me," I say.

"He told me." Pietro's grip tightens. "One night. We drank too much. He fucking told me, Liam."

My blood turns to ice.

"He said he knew his best friend was in love with his wife. He laughed about it." Pietro's voice cracks. "Back then I didn't understand. I thought he was drunk and talking nonsense. But two years ago, when we found out about Luna—"

Luna.

The name cuts through me like a blade.

Lorenzo's fiancée. The woman Riccardo fucked behind everyone's backs. The woman who gave him a son.

"—I put the pieces together," Pietro finishes. "After Luna, he changed. He became someone I didn't recognize. Cold. Selfish. A man who didn't give a fuck about anyone but himself."

I can't breathe.

"He knew you loved her." Pietro's voice drops to something deadly. "He could have backed off. He could have let you have a chance. But he didn't. He married her anyway. He kept her. And then he made you watch."

The words slam into me one after another.

"He let you see him with other women," Pietro says. "He let you carry that weight. Because he knew you'd never say a word to her. You were too loyal. Too fucking devoted to him."

My hands shake at my sides.

"He used your loyalty against you." Pietro releases my shirt and steps back. "He used it to hurt both of you."

I see red.

The edges of my vision blur. My heart pounds so hard I can feel it in my throat, my temples, my fingertips. Twenty years of friendship. Twenty years of brotherhood. And the whole time—

The whole fucking time—

"Liam." Pietro's voice sounds far away. "Liam, listen to me—"

I back away from him.

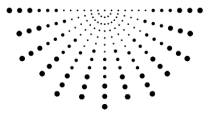
"Don't." The word comes out broken. "Don't fucking touch me."

"I'm not trying to—"

"I need to leave." I turn and walk toward the edge of the court. My legs feel like they belong to someone else. "I need to get out of here."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Ava

Fabio stands by the car.

"Liam asked for a few days off," he says. "I'll be taking you to the restaurant tonight."

The words land somewhere in my chest, a dull thud of confirmation. I nod once, keeping my face still.

A few days off.

Liam doesn't take days off. In the weeks since Julian's finger arrived in that white box, Liam hasn't left my side for more than a few hours at a time.

And now, the night I'm supposed to have dinner with Nolan, he's suddenly unavailable.

He regrets it. The kiss.

Of course he does.

I start walking toward the car, my heels clicking against the driveway stones. The evening air carries a bite, and I pull my wrap tighter around my shoulders. The silk does nothing against the cold, but it's something to hold onto.

"You look nice," Fabio offers as he opens the door for me.

I glance down at myself. The dress is wine red. A deep, rich burgundy that clings to my waist before falling in soft waves to my knees. Sylvia

insisted I try it on at the boutique, practically shoving it into my hands while I reached for something black.

"Black again, Ava? You're not in mourning anymore. You're allowed to be seen."

I wanted to tell her that black isn't about mourning. It's what I always liked most.

This dress catches the light. It draws the eye. The neckline dips just low enough to be interesting without being obvious, and the color makes my skin look warm, alive. If I'd been shopping alone, I would have walked past it without a second glance.

But Sylvia has plans for me. I'm not stupid enough to miss that anymore.

"Thank you," I tell Fabio, sliding into the back seat.

He closes the door and rounds the car.



The restaurant announces itself before I even step inside. Crystal chandeliers. White tablecloths pressed to perfection. Servers moving with choreographed precision between tables occupied by people who measure their worth in zeros.

A Michelin-starred establishment. Of course.

I've never been impressed by these places. The artfully arranged foam on a plate the size of my palm. The wine pairings that cost a fortune. The hushed reverence, as though we're in a cathedral instead of a dining room.

Give me a cramped trattoria in Trastevere any day. Checkered tablecloths. A nonna in the back making pasta the way her grandmother taught her. Wine served in water glasses because presentation matters less than flavor.

During my years with Riccardo, I used to slip away whenever we visited Italy. I'd find the places tourists never discovered. The ones down narrow alleys, where the menu was whatever the family felt like cooking that day. Those were the meals I remember. Not the elaborate tasting menus at restaurants where reservations required connections and patience.

My father once told me my mother was the same way. Oriana loved food, he said. Real food. She could spend hours at a market, touching vegetables, smelling herbs, talking to vendors about their farms. She believed cooking was an act of love, and you could taste the difference.

Sometimes, when I bite into something made with genuine care, I feel like I'm touching a piece of her I never got to know.

Sylvia's idea of food is calorie counts and social currency. Where you're seen dining matters more than what you eat.

I spot Nolan before the hostess can guide me to him. He rises from a corner table, his smile wide and expectant. I'll admit—objectively—he looks handsome tonight. Dark suit. Crisp white shirt open at the collar.

"Ava." He steps forward and kisses both my cheeks, letting his lips linger a beat too long. "You look absolutely stunning."

"Thank you." I keep my voice pleasant.

He pulls out my chair before I can reach for it myself. His hand brushes my bare shoulder as I sit, and I force myself not to flinch.

"That color suits you," he says, settling across from me. "Wine red. Passionate. I knew you had fire hidden beneath all that composure."

"You're very kind," I say.

A server appears immediately with champagne, pouring two glasses without asking our preference. Nolan must have ordered before I arrived. Must have planned every detail of this evening down to the minute.

"To new beginnings." He raises his glass.

I touch mine to his and take a small sip. The bubbles are sharp on my tongue.

"I'm glad you agreed to join me tonight." Nolan sets down his champagne and leans forward. "I know this has been a difficult time for your family. I wanted to give you something pleasant to focus on."

"That's thoughtful."

"I'm a thoughtful man." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "When something matters to me, I pay attention to every detail."

The server returns with menus, but Nolan waves them away. "I've already arranged a tasting menu. The chef is a friend. He's prepared something special for us."

Of course he has.

I clasp my hands in my lap and maintain my pleasant expression. This is what I came here to do. Get close. Find out what he wants. Discover why a

man who supposedly rescues kidnapping victims is suddenly so interested in me.



Liam

I last twenty-seven hours before I break.

Twenty-seven hours of staring at the ceiling in my flat, replaying Pietro's words until they carve grooves into my skull.

The whiskey doesn't help. The silence doesn't help. Nothing fucking helps because every time I close my eyes, I see her face when I kissed her and I hate myself for walking away.

But not as much as I hate Riccardo.

For almost half of my entire life, I stood beside that man. Then watched him marry the woman I loved, convinced myself I was being honorable. Noble, even. And the whole time, he knew exactly what he was doing. He saw me suffering and he *enjoyed* it.

I grab my keys and I'm out the door before the rational part of my brain can object.

The drive takes twenty-three minutes. I spend every one of them arguing with myself.

You asked for time off. You're supposed to be processing. You're supposed to be getting your head straight.

But my head will never be straight when it comes to her.

The restaurant's valet takes my car with a practiced smile. I straighten my jacket and push through the heavy glass doors.

Fabio spots me immediately from his position near the bar. His eyebrows rise a fraction, the closest thing to surprise he ever shows. I cross the floor and stop beside him.

"Thought you were taking time," he says quietly.

"Changed my mind."

He studies me for a moment. Whatever he sees makes him nod slowly. "She's in the back corner. Private table."

"I know."

Fabio claps a hand on my shoulder. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Then he's gone, and I'm alone with the soft piano music, the clink of glassware and the knowledge that Ava is thirty feet away, pretending to enjoy the company of a man who wants to own her.

I find a position near a decorative column, half-hidden by a massive floral arrangement. From here, I have a clear sightline to their table without being obvious about it.

And there she is.

The deep red dress hugs her shoulders, leaving her arms bare, the fabric falling in a way that suggests elegance rather than seduction. Her dark hair is pinned up, a few strands escaping to frame her face. The candlelight catches the hollow of her throat, the delicate line of her collarbone, the wide mouth that told me off two nights ago and kissed me back in the same breath.

She's holding a champagne flute but not drinking from it. Her smile is polite. The same smile I watched her deploy at a hundred Sartori dinners when she was bored, uncomfortable or counting the minutes until she could escape. Pierce doesn't notice. He's too busy talking, gesturing with his hands, leaning forward.

I want to drag her out of that chair.

I want to cross the room, take her hand, and walk her out of this restaurant without a single word of explanation. I want to drive her somewhere quiet and tell her everything—about Riccardo, about the affairs, about the child he had with another woman.

But I don't move.

Because she deserves the choice. She deserves to know the truth before she decides anything, and telling her here, now, with Pierce watching like a hawk—that's not fair to her. That's me being selfish.

Again.

Pierce reaches across the table and touches her hand. My vision narrows to that single point of contact. His fingers covering hers. Ava doesn't pull away, but I see the micro-tension in her shoulders, the way her spine straightens almost imperceptibly.

Come on, love. Look at me.

As if she hears the thought, her head turns.

Our eyes meet across the crowded room, and the rest of the world falls away. There's only her face, her dark eyes finding mine with a glance that looks like relief.

She smiles.

It transforms her entire face, softening her features.

My chest aches with it.

Pierce notices her attention has shifted. He turns, following her gaze, and when he sees me, his expression flickers through several emotions in rapid succession. Surprise. Irritation. Then a forced pleasantness that doesn't reach his eyes.

He nods at me.

I nod back.

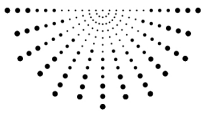
Bastard.

Pierce's jaw clenches.

Good.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



Liam

I stand at the bar like a fucking idiot.

The bartender asks if I want something. I shake my head. What I want isn't on any menu.

From here, I have a clear view of their table. Pierce leans forward, talking with his hands, selling himself like he's closing a deal. Ava nods at appropriate intervals. Sips her wine. Plays her part beautifully.

I shouldn't be here.

I don't trust myself not to do something stupid tonight.

But lately, I've been nothing but stupid. So why stop now?

I pull out my phone. Type three words before I can talk myself out of it.

End this. Now.

Send.

I watch Ava reach for her clutch. Watch her glance at the screen. She puts her phone back.

I count every second. Watch Pierce's face shift from animated to confused as Ava says something. She touches her temple. The universal signal for headache.

Pierce's hand reaches for hers across the table. She pulls back before he makes contact, and I feel a savage satisfaction at his barely concealed

frustration.

Ava stands. Pierce scrambles to his feet like a gentleman, but the tightness around his eyes tells a different story. He didn't expect this. Didn't plan for his carefully orchestrated evening to end before dessert.

I push off from the bar and move toward the entrance, positioning myself near the host stand.

They approach together. Pierce's hand hovers at the small of her back.

"Let me have my driver take you home. I'll—"

"No, no." Ava shakes her head. "I have Liam to take me back."

Pierce's gaze slides to me. The pleasant mask doesn't quite hide the irritation underneath.

"She's not feeling well," he tells me, like I'm the hired help who needs instructions. "She needs to go and lie down."

I nod once. Don't give him the satisfaction of a response.

"Thank you for dinner, Nolan." Ava's voice is perfectly polite. Perfectly distant. "We'll reschedule."

Pierce catches her hand before she can step away, pressing a kiss to her knuckles that lingers too long. "Feel better, Ava. I'll check on you tomorrow."

She retrieves her hand smoothly. "That's not necessary."

I'm already moving toward the door. Don't look back. Don't need to see Pierce's face to know he's watching us leave. Watching *her* leave with *me*.

The night air hits us as we step outside. Cool. Clean. A relief after the suffocating atmosphere of that restaurant.

Ava's fingers wrap around my arm.

The touch stops me dead.

She's never voluntarily touched me before. And now her hand is on my arm, her grip firm, and we're walking together like this is normal. Like we've done this a thousand times.

"You better have a good reason," she says, her voice low enough that only I can hear, "for pulling me away from dinner with a handsome man."

I smirk. Can't help it.

"I could spend my entire life making you regret teasing me like that."

Ava laughs.

The sound hits me somewhere in the chest.

And I know I'm fucked.

Completely and utterly fucked.

Fabio waits by the valet stand, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp. He clocks us immediately, gaze moving from Ava's hand on my arm to my face.

"I've got her," I tell him. "Go rest."

Fabio doesn't argue. Just nods once and walks toward the parking garage where the Sartori car is waiting.

I lead Ava toward the street where I parked. My car. Not the armored Sartori vehicle with its bulletproof glass and tracking systems. Just my Range Rover, black, ordinary and completely off the grid.

Ava notices.

"This isn't the usual car," she says as I open the passenger door for her.

"No."

She slides into the seat, that red dress riding up her thighs just enough to make my jaw clench. I force myself to look away. Close her door. Walk around to the driver's side and take a breath before getting in.

"Where are we going?" Ava asks as I start the engine.

"Wherever you want."

Ava's quiet for a moment. I can feel her looking at me in the darkness of the car, the streetlights casting shadows across her face.

"There's a place," she says finally. "Up on the north side. A spot that overlooks the city. Do you know the one I mean? Off Lake Shore Drive, near the—"

"I know it."

I do. A small parking area tucked away from the main road, hidden by trees but with a clear view of the Chicago skyline. The kind of place teenagers go to make out. The kind of place I've never been with anyone.

But I know it exists because I know this city. Every street. Every shortcut. Every dark corner where trouble hides.

I pull away from the curb and merge into traffic. The city lights blur past us as I head north.

Ava kicks off her heels and pulls her feet up onto the seat, tucking them beneath her. The movement is so casual, so comfortable, that something in my chest tightens.



Ava

Ten minutes of silence thick enough to choke on, the city lights blinking in the distance like scattered diamonds, the lake a dark mirror stretching toward nothing.

I haven't looked at him. Can't look at him. My fingers twist in my lap, the red silk of my dress pooling around my thighs like spilled wine.

A car sits parked beside us, its windows tinted as dark as ours. Could be empty. Could be full of people. The glass reveals nothing, same as the man next to me.

I turn.

Liam is already looking at me.

My heart stutters.

"Did you regret it?" The words come out before I can stop them. "The kiss."

He laughs.

It's not a happy sound. The laugh grates, raw, and when I look closer his eyes are bright with grief. The steel is gone. What's left is bleeding through.

"Regret it," he repeats, like the words don't make sense. His head tips back against the headrest. "Ava."

"What?"

He's quiet for so long I think he won't answer. Then he turns his face toward me, and the look in his eyes makes my breath catch.

"I've spent ten years watching you," he says. "Ten years standing in rooms with you, leaving the second you walked in because I couldn't fucking breathe when you were near me. Ten years of wanting something I had no right to want."

My chest tightens.

"Liam—"

"You asked me once why I treated you like you were invisible." His voice drops, rough and raw. "It wasn't because I didn't see you. It was

because I couldn't *stop* seeing you. Every room. Every dinner. Every time Riccardo touched you, I wanted to tear his fucking hands off."

The words hit me like a wave, knocking the air from my lungs.

"He was my best friend," Liam continues, and now there's something bitter in his tone. "My brother. And I loved his wife from the moment I saw her. So I stayed away. I kept my distance. I told myself it was the right thing to do."

I can't speak. Can't move. Can barely remember how to breathe.

"Regret the kiss?" He laughs again, broken and beautiful. "I've been regretting not kissing you for a decade. The only thing I regret is that I stopped."

I've been regretting not kissing you for a decade.

The words sink into my skin, my bones, my blood. They wrap around my heart and *squeeze*.

I should think about this. Should analyze it, pick it apart, find the reasons this is wrong. Riccardo. Loyalty. The ghost of a marriage that ended in blood on a church floor.

But Riccardo isn't here.

He's been gone for three years, and I've been carrying the weight of a dead man's memory like a stone around my neck. Drowning in guilt. Freezing in place. Waiting for permission to feel something again.

I don't think. I just move.

My mouth crashes into his.

Liam makes a sound low in his throat and then he's kissing me back. Hard. His hand fists in my hair, tilting my head, angling my mouth so he can take more. Take everything.

I kiss him like I'm starving.

His other hand finds my waist, fingers digging into the silk, pulling me closer. The center console presses into my hip and I don't care. I climb over it and then I'm in his lap, my knees bracketing his thighs, the red dress bunching up around my hips.

Liam groans against my mouth and reaches down. The seat jerks back with a mechanical whir, giving us space, and then his hands are on me again. Gripping. Claiming.

We kiss until my lips feel bruised. Until my lungs burn. Until I feel *him*—hard and thick, pressing against me through layers of fabric.

I rock my hips.

"*Fuck*," he breathes.

I do it again, chasing the friction, the pressure, the sweet ache building between my thighs. His hands slide down to my hips, guiding me, grinding me against him until I'm panting into his mouth.

"Ava." His voice is wrecked. "We should—"

"Don't." I bite his lower lip, and he shudders beneath me. "Don't tell me to stop."

"Wasn't going to." His hands tighten. "Was going to say we should move somewhere else."

"No." I reach between us, my fingers finding his belt. "Here. Now."

I've never done this before. Never been so desperate for someone that I couldn't wait, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but *take*.

My fingers fumble with the buckle. Liam helps me, his breath ragged, and then I'm pulling down his zipper and reaching inside and—

Oh.

He's thick. Long. Already slick at the tip when I wrap my hand around him, and the sound he makes sends heat flooding through me.

"Christ, Ava—"

I stroke him once. Twice. Feel him pulse in my palm.

His hands move to my thighs, sliding under the bunched fabric of my dress. His fingers find the thin material of my underwear and he *tears* it.

The sound rips through the car. Cool air hits my bare skin. I gasp.

"I'll buy you new ones," he mutters against my throat, and I laugh.

"Are you clean?" I ask.

"I always use condoms, and I get checked once a year, " he says, and that’s all I needed right now.

I rise up on my knees, positioning him at my entrance. His hands grip my hips, steadying me, and for one suspended moment we just breathe.

His eyes find mine in the darkness.

"Are you sure?"

I answer by sinking down onto him.

The stretch is almost too much. He's huge, filling me completely, and the sound that tears from his throat vibrates through my entire body.

"*Fuck*," he grits out, his fingers digging into my hips hard enough to bruise. "You feel—*Christ*—"

I roll my hips experimentally and he chokes.

His forehead drops to my shoulder, his breath hot against my collarbone. I feel him fighting for control, feel the tension in every line of his body.

I did this to him.

Me.

I lift up slowly, then sink back down. His hands guide my rhythm—unhurried at first, letting me adjust, letting my body learn the shape of him.

Then his mouth finds my throat, teeth scraping over my pulse, and the words spill out of him like a confession.

"Ten years," he breathes against my skin. "Ten fucking years I've wanted this."

I move faster.



Liam

She takes the reins from me.

Ava's hips roll forward, and my hands grip her waist so hard I know I'll leave bruises. She doesn't seem to care. Her fingers dig into my shoulders as she finds her rhythm, rising and falling, taking me deeper with every movement.

I won't last. Being inside her has already pushed me to the edge. Every slide of her body against mine threatens to undo me completely.

"Ava." Her name comes out rough. A warning.

But she doesn't slow down. If anything, she moves faster, her breath coming in sharp gasps as she chases something I'm desperate to give her. The windows have fogged completely now, sealing us inside this cocoon of heat and want.

God, she's fucking beautiful.

Her head tips back, exposing the long line of her throat. The red dress bunches at her waist, her skin flushed and gleaming in the dim light filtering through the condensation. Her eyes are half-closed, lips parted, and

every sound she makes—every whimper, every moan—drives another nail into my control.

"Don't stop." The words tear from her throat. "Please, don't—"

I couldn't stop if someone held a gun to my head.

My hips thrust up to meet hers, and she cries out, her nails biting into my shoulders hard enough to sting. The pain only sharpens everything.

She goes frantic now. Her movements lose their rhythm, becoming urgent and uncoordinated as she chases her release. Her thighs tremble against mine. Her breath comes in ragged sobs.

"Liam—" My name breaks apart in her mouth. "Oh God, I'm—"

I pull her closer, one hand sliding up her spine to cradle the back of her head. "I've got you. Let go."

She shatters.

The scream that rips from her throat goes straight through me. Her whole body convulses, clenching around me so tight I see stars. I watch her fall apart in my arms.

"I'm not going to last," I manage, my voice barely recognizable. Every muscle in my body strains toward release, held back by nothing but sheer willpower. "Ava, I can't—"

Her eyes open. They're dark and glassy with pleasure.

"Come inside me." Her voice is wrecked, barely a whisper. "I want to feel you. I want—"

She doesn't have to ask twice.

The orgasm tears through me like a storm, violent and overwhelming. I bury my face in her neck and groan her name as I spill inside her, my hips jerking helplessly, my hands fisting in her hair. It goes on forever—wave after wave of release that leaves me shaking and undone.

We stay tangled together, breathing hard. Her forehead rests against mine. My hands won't stop touching her. I can't seem to stop.

I don't want to stop.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks. The only sounds are our ragged breathing and the distant lap of waves against the shore. Her heart pounds against my chest, or maybe that's mine. I can't tell where she ends and I begin.

"That was..." Ava starts, then stops. A breathless laugh escapes her. "I don't actually have words."

"Good." I press my lips to her temple. "You talk too much anyway."

She pulls back just enough to look at me, and the smile on her face makes my chest ache. I've never seen her look at me this way.

"You're still inside me," she observes, and there's a hint of wonder in her voice that makes me want to keep her here forever.

"Aware of that, yeah."

"I should probably move."

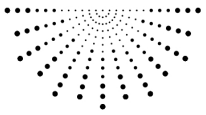
"Probably." My hands tighten on her hips. "Don't."

She laughs again, and it's the best sound I've ever heard. Better than her scream. Better than my name on her lips. This laugh is real and for now it belongs to me.

I earned this.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



Ava

His apartment isn't what I expected.

I don't know what I pictured. Something sparse, maybe. Military corners and bare walls. A place where a man like Liam sleeps between shifts of violence and vigilance.

Instead, I find books.

They're everywhere. Stacked on the coffee table, lined along shelves that cover an entire wall, piled beside a worn leather armchair. Paperbacks with cracked spines. Hardcovers with faded dust jackets. Some in English, some in what looks like Italian, a few in languages I can't identify.

I wander deeper into the space while Liam moves to the kitchen. The apartment is small. A living area that flows into a galley kitchen, a single hallway that must lead to the bedroom and bathroom. Cozy.

My fingers trail along the spines. A battered copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that makes me smile despite myself.

"You read Austen?" I ask without turning around.

"Don't sound so surprised." Ice clinks against glass behind me. "I can read, you know."

"I didn't say you couldn't." I pull out a slim volume of Neruda's poetry. "I just... you have a lot of books."

"Hazard of the profession. Long nights. Lots of waiting." His footsteps approach. "Books don't ask questions."

I slide the Neruda back into place. My body hums with residual heat, still electric from what happened in the car.

What we did in the car.

Christ.

I move to examine a framed photograph on a side table. A woman with silver hair and Liam's steel-gray eyes, standing in front of a modest brick house. His mother, I assume. The only personal item visible in the entire space.

"She's lovely," I say softly.

"Was." His voice comes from directly behind me now. Close enough that I feel the warmth radiating off his chest. "Passed years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He sets two glasses of whiskey on the table beside the photograph. "She'd have liked you. Would've called you 'too good for my boy' and meant it as a compliment."

I don't know how to respond to that. Being in his space, seeing his books, his mother's photo, the life he keeps hidden from the world. It's more vulnerable than anything we did in that car.

His hand settles on my hip. Not demanding. Just there.

"Ava."

I turn to face him. He's shed his jacket somewhere between the door and here, sleeves rolled to reveal those forearms I've been trying not to stare at for weeks. The faded tattoo. The corded muscle.

"Are you on the pill?" he asks.

I raise an eyebrow. "That's your post-coital conversation starter?"

"Answer the question." His thumb traces a circle on my hip bone through the silk of my dress. "And have you been fucking anyone else?"

The bluntness should offend me. Instead, warmth curls in my belly at the possessive edge in his voice. At the way his jaw tightens while he waits for my answer, like he's bracing for a blow.

"I have an IUD," I tell him. "Had it placed years ago. And no, Liam. There hasn't been anyone else since Riccardo."

His brow furrows. "A what?"

"An IUD. Intrauterine device. A small—" I pause, fighting a smile at his genuine confusion. "It's a form of birth control. Goes inside the uterus. Lasts for years."

Understanding dawns across his features, followed immediately by something darker. Hungrier.

"So you're protected."

"Yes."

He moves before I can prepare, one hand fisting in my hair while the other grips my hip, pulling me flush against him. His mouth finds mine.

I kiss him back just as fiercely, my fingers curling into his shirt, my body arching into his.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I press my palm flat against his chest.

"I need to wash up."

His grip tightens. "Why?"

"Because—" I feel heat crawl up my neck. "If you're not aware, I currently have your cum inside me. Spilling down my thighs."

The sound Liam makes is barely human. A groan that rumbles up from somewhere deep in his chest, his eyes going dark and feral.

"Fuck." His forehead drops to mine. "You can't just say things like that."

"It's a fact."

His hand slides down to cup my ass, pulling me harder against him. Against the evidence that he's already getting hard again. "Do you know how much I'd love to watch you walk around like this? With my cum dripping down your legs?"

My thighs clench involuntarily. "That's..."

"Filthy?" He nips at my lower lip. "Possessive? Wrong?"

"All of the above."

"And yet." His fingers trail along the hem of my dress, threatening to dip beneath. "You're not saying no."

I'm not. God help me, I'm not.

But I also need a moment. Need to breathe, to think, to process the fact that I just had sex with Liam Blackwood in a car overlooking Lake Michigan and now I'm standing in his apartment surrounded by his books and the overwhelming reality of *him*.

I push gently at his chest. He lets me create distance, though his hands don't leave my body entirely.

"Wait for me in your bedroom," I tell him.

His jaw works. The muscle ticks once, twice.

Then he nods.

"Down the hall. Door on the right." He catches my free hand, brings it to his lips. The gesture is strangely courtly—at odds with everything else about this night. "Don't take too long."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll come find you." His thumb brushes across my knuckles. "And I won't be patient."

I smile.

"Ten minutes," I tell him, and slip down the hallway before he can change my mind.



Liam

The bathroom door opens.

Ava steps out completely naked, and my brain short-circuits.

I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, stripped bare while waiting for her, and now I can't fucking move. Can't breathe. Can barely think beyond the singular, devastating fact of her walking toward me.

She moves slowly, like she knows exactly what she's doing to me. Her dark hair spills over her shoulders. My gaze drops to the line of her throat, the swell of her breasts, perfect handfuls tipped with dusky pink nipples already peaked in the cool air.

My cock throbs against my thigh.

Her waist curves inward, then flares to hips made for gripping. For holding. For bruising with my fingers.

Her lips part. That wide, expressive mouth that tells the truth when the rest of her won't. Right now it's telling me she likes being looked at. Likes being wanted this badly.

Good. Because I've never wanted anything more in my fucking life.

"Come here," I rasp.

She takes another step. Then another. Each one brings more of her into focus.

I reach out and catch her hip, pulling her the final distance until she stands between my knees.

"Liam—"

"I want to taste you."

Her breath catches. I look up at her, my thumb stroking circles on her hipbone. "I want you on my face, Ava. I want to feel you come on my tongue."

The sound she makes goes straight to my cock.

I shift back on the bed and lie flat, my head on the pillow. "Come here."

She hesitates. I hold out my hand. "Trust me."

Her dark eyes go soft and hungry, and it wrecks me. Then she climbs onto the bed, graceful even now, and swings one leg over my chest.

"Higher," I tell her.

She shuffles forward. My hands find her thighs, guiding her until she's positioned exactly where I want her. Her knees bracketing my head, her pussy hovering inches from my mouth.

Christ.

I can smell her arousal, musky and sweet. My mouth waters.

I grip her hips and pull her down.

The first taste of her wrecks me.

She's wet already, slick and hot against my tongue, and the moan that tears from her throat nearly undoes me. I lick up through her folds, slow and deliberate, learning her. Finding the spots that make her thighs tremble.

"Oh God—"

I seal my mouth over her clit and suck.

Her whole body jerks. Her hand flies out, grabbing the headboard for balance while her other hand fists in my hair. The sharp tug sends sparks down my spine.

More.

I work her with my tongue. Circling, flicking, pressing flat and licking broad strokes through her wetness. My hands slide around to cup her ass, squeezing the firm flesh, pulling her tighter against my face.

"Liam—" Her voice breaks. "I can't—it's too—"

I growl against her pussy, the vibration making her cry out. She's holding herself so rigid, trying to maintain control, and I want to shatter it. Want to break her apart and put her back together.

I squeeze her ass harder and yank her down, burying my tongue inside her.

"*Fuck!*"

Her hips roll. Finally. That careful control cracking as instinct takes over. She starts rocking against my face, small movements at first, then longer, deeper grinds as she chases her pleasure.

That's it.

I let her use me. Let her ride my tongue while I grip her ass and hold her steady. Her moans fill the room and make my cock ache. I can feel her thighs shaking, feel the tension building in her body.

"I'm going to—" She gasps. "Liam, I'm—"

I suck her clit into my mouth and flick it with the tip of my tongue.

She comes.

Her whole body convulses, her back arching, her hand yanking my hair hard enough to hurt. The sound she makes isn't a moan or a scream. It's raw and primal, torn straight from her chest. I feel her pussy clench against my mouth, feel the flood of wetness on my tongue, and I don't stop. I lick her through it, drawing out every last tremor until she's shaking and pushing weakly at my shoulders.

"Too much—I can't—"

I ease off, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs while she catches her breath. Her legs are trembling so badly I'm surprised she's still upright.

"Get on top of me," I tell her.

She moves down my body on unsteady limbs, and when she positions herself over my cock, I have to clench my jaw to keep from thrusting up into her.

Patience.

She reaches between us, wrapping her hand around my shaft, and guides me to her entrance. The head of my cock presses against wet heat, and I stop breathing.

Then she sinks down.

Fuck.

She takes me slowly, inch by inch, her head falling back as she adjusts to the stretch. I grip her hips hard enough to bruise, forcing myself to stay

still, to let her set the pace even though every instinct screams at me to flip her over and fuck her through the mattress.

When she's fully seated, she looks down at me with those dark eyes.

"Liam," she whispers.

I sit up.

She gasps as the angle changes, her arms wrapping around my shoulders for balance. Now we're face to face, chest to chest, my cock buried deep inside her. I can feel her heartbeat against my skin. Can see every flicker of emotion crossing her face.

"Move," I tell her.

She rolls her hips experimentally, and we both groan. I slide my hands down to cup her ass, helping guide her rhythm as she starts to ride me. Slow at first. Deep, grinding movements that have her clit rubbing against my pelvis with every stroke.

"Eyes on me," I demand.

Her gaze locks with mine. Dark, wanting and *mine*.

I thrust up as she comes down, and she cries out. We find a rhythm together—push and pull, give and take, her hips rolling as I drive into her from below. My forehead presses against hers. Our breath mingles, hot and ragged.

"Liam—"

"You're mine now." I punctuate each word with a thrust. "Say it."

"Yours." Her voice breaks on a moan. "I'm yours."

The pressure builds at the base of my spine. I can feel her walls fluttering around me, feel her getting close again. I slide one hand between us, finding her clit, and she bucks against me.

"Come with me," I rasp.

She shakes her head. "I can't—not again—"

"You can." I circle her clit with my thumb, matching the rhythm of our hips. "Give it to me, Ava. One more."

Her body tightens. Her nails dig into my shoulders. And when she shatters this time, I'm right there with her. My cock pulsing as I spill inside her, my face buried in her neck, her name torn from my throat like a prayer.

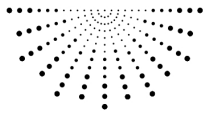
We stay tangled together, both of us shaking, neither of us willing to move.

This changes everything.

And I don't give a damn.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Ava

I've been awake for three hours. Showered twice. Changed clothes once. Stared at myself in the mirror for longer than I care to admit, searching for some visible evidence of what happened last night.

There isn't any. My face looks the same. My eyes are the same dark brown they've always been. My hair falls in the same waves around my shoulders.

But everything is different.

Liam brought me back at five in the morning. Fabio was already waiting in the hallway when we came inside, ready for his shift. The two of them exchanged a look and then Liam was gone.

I haven't seen him since.

Now I sit at the breakfast table, pushing scrambled eggs around my plate while my mind replays every moment from last night. His hands. His mouth.

The guilt sits heavy in my chest, tangled up with something else. Something that feels dangerously close to happiness.

"How was last night?"

Sylvia's voice cuts through my thoughts. She sits across from me, perfectly composed in cream silk, her coffee cup positioned just so.

I set down my fork. "Fine."

"You came home late." It's not a question. "Very late."

My father looks up from his newspaper. Julian continues eating, though I catch him glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

"I left the restaurant early, actually. I needed to be alone for a while. Stopped by my apartment."

Sylvia nods slowly, her expression unreadable. "Of course. All this stress with Julian's situation. Anyone would need space."

I don't trust her concern. I never have.

"Speaking of the dinner," my father says, folding his newspaper and setting it aside. "How are things progressing with Nolan?"

My stomach tightens. "Progressing?"

"He's quite taken with you. Anyone can see it." His tone is casual, but his eyes are intent. "I thought perhaps last night might have... escalated things."

I close my eyes. Count to three.

"I don't think I'm ready."

"Ready?" My father leans back in his chair. "Ava, you're thirty-four years old. You're not getting any younger."

"Dad—" Julian starts.

"No, let me finish." My father holds up a hand. "If you want a family someday, children, you can't wait until you feel *ready*. That day may never come. Riccardo has been gone three years. You've mourned long enough."

The air leaves my lungs.

Children.

Everyone assumes. Everyone has always assumed.

"Dad, that's not really helping," Julian says quietly.

But my father continues, oblivious. "Nolan is successful, well-connected, clearly interested. He saved your brother's life. What more do you need?"

I push my chair back from the table. The legs scrape against the hardwood floor with a sound that makes Sylvia wince.

"Good morning," I say.

I don't look at any of them as I walk out.



The garden is empty this early. Dew still clings to the rose bushes, catching the morning light like scattered diamonds. I find a bench near the back wall and sit, my hands pressed flat against the cool stone.

Everyone believes I need a family. A husband. Children.

Not once has anyone asked me what *I* want.

Not my father, who sees me as an asset to be strategically deployed. Not Sylvia, who views me as competition or a tool; I've never been sure which. Not even Riccardo, who loved me in his way but always assumed our future would unfold according to his expectations.

The years of trying to conceive. The doctors. The tests. The careful scheduling and the crushing disappointments, month after month after month. I blamed myself. Riccardo never said it was my fault, but I saw it in his eyes sometimes. The quiet resignation. The way he stopped asking about appointments.

Footsteps on gravel. I don't turn around.

"Thought I might find you here."

Julian lowers himself onto the bench beside me. His bandaged hand rests in his lap, a constant reminder of what we almost lost.

"I'm fine," I say automatically.

"No, you're not." He bumps his shoulder against mine. "Dad's an idiot."

"He means well."

"He means to marry you off to Nolan Pierce like you're some medieval princess." Julian's voice is uncharacteristically sharp. "It's disgusting. You're his daughter, not a business transaction."

I look at my brother. His face is thinner than it was two weeks ago, the shadows under his eyes deeper. But his jaw is set with a stubbornness I recognize.

"When did you grow up?" I ask softly.

"Somewhere between the blindfold and the amateur surgery." He attempts a smile. It doesn't quite land. "Nothing like having your finger removed to give you perspective."

"Julian—"

"I'm serious." He turns to face me fully. "These past weeks, watching everyone circle around you like vultures... Dad pushing Nolan on you, Sylvia with her shopping trips and her knowing looks, Pierce himself with his flowers and his dinners..." Julian shakes his head. "You deserve better than being auctioned off."

My throat tightens. "It's complicated."

"Is it?" He holds my gaze. "You're not interested in Nolan. Anyone with eyes can see it. So why are you entertaining this?"

Because I'm trying to protect you. Because something about Nolan's convenient timing doesn't add up.

I can't say any of that.

"There are things I can't explain right now."

Julian is quiet for a moment. "Does it have anything to do with Blackwood?"

My heart stutters. "What?"

"The way he looks at you." Julian's expression is careful, neutral. "The way he's barely left your side since this started."

I don't answer. I can't.

"I'm not judging," Julian continues. "Riccardo's been dead three years. You're allowed to live your life. I just..." He pauses, choosing his words. "I want you to be happy. Actually happy. Not performing happiness for Dad's benefit or society's expectations."

The kindness in his voice undoes something in my chest.

"I don't know what I am right now," I admit. "Everything is... tangled."

Julian nods slowly. "Then take your time. Figure it out. And tell Dad to go to hell if he brings up your biological clock again."

A surprised laugh escapes me. "Julian."

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"What? Someone needs to say it." He grins, and for a moment he looks like the carefree boy I remember from before all this darkness descended.

"Now, I believe there's coffee in the kitchen that isn't terrible, and I intend to steal it before Sylvia lectures me about caffeine consumption."

He stands, then pauses.

"Whatever you decide, Ava—about Nolan, about anything—I'm on your side. Always."

He walks back toward the house, leaving me alone with the roses and the morning light and the impossible weight of decisions I'm not ready to make.

I think about the question no one has ever asked me.

What do you want?

I'm thirty-four years old. I've been a daughter, a sister, a friend, a wife, a widow. I've played every role expected of *me*.

Maybe it's time to figure out who I am when no one else is watching.



Liam

The thirty-fifth floor feels different when Pietro's behind the desk.

Not wrong, exactly. Just different.

I close the door behind me and cross to the chair facing his desk. He doesn't look up from whatever document he's pretending to read. We both know he's not actually reading it.

Pietro doesn't come here like he used to. He spends most of his time now outside these walls, outside the family business entirely. He was never as invested as the others. Pietro always stood slightly apart. Showed up when called, did what was asked, then disappeared back into his life.

I can't blame him for that. Some men aren't built for boardrooms and shipping manifests. Some men need a different kind of purpose.

I settle into the chair and stretch my legs out. Neither of us speaks.

The silence isn't uncomfortable. It's familiar. Pietro and I have spent countless hours in quiet. During stakeouts, long drives, those endless nights

after Riccardo's funeral when grief sat heavy between us like a third presence. We don't need words to fill space.

But I need them now.

"I got close to Ava."

He looks up. His dark eyes hold mine for a long moment, then he nods. A single dip of his chin that could mean anything or nothing.

"Should've talked to me earlier. I was waiting." His voice carries no accusation. Just fact.

I shake my head. "Riccardo was your blood."

The name hangs in the air. Three years dead, and he still takes up space in every conversation. In every room. In every goddamn thought I have about the woman who was his wife.

"I might not have had a brother or sister," I continue, "but being around your family all these years taught me things."

Pietro leans back in his chair. Waits.

"If I could choose not to be in love with her, I would have." The admission scrapes out of me, rough and honest. "Not only because of the pain I endured. But the pain I might cause to others."

Pietro's fingers tap once against the desk. "No one can actually stand between you and Ava."

I start to argue, but he cuts me off.

"Not even Bruno."

My jaw tightens. Riccardo's closest brother, his confidant, his mirror in so many ways. If anyone would take issue with me pursuing Riccardo's widow, it would be him.

"Bruno and Riccardo might have been closer to each other than to the rest of us," Pietro says, his voice dropping lower. "But Riccardo did many things over the years. Things I believe Bruno isn't okay with."

I frown. "I don't think so."

"No?"

"Bruno will be pissed off." I state it as certainty because it feels like certainty. The Sartoris protect their own. Their living and their dead. Ava was Riccardo's. In their eyes, she might always be Riccardo's.

And I'm the outsider. The employee. The man who stood beside Riccardo at his wedding and wanted to burn the church down around us.

Pietro shrugs. "He may be pissed. But he has no right to be."

I turn the words over in my mind, searching for the trap, the complication, the reason they can't be true.

"Riccardo's dead," Pietro continues. "Three years now. Ava's a widow, not a possession. She doesn't belong to his memory, and she sure as hell doesn't belong to this family's expectations."

"You make it sound simple."

"It's not complicated. People just pretend it is because the truth makes them uncomfortable." Pietro's eyes hold something I can't quite name. "You loved her before he did. You stepped aside because you thought you had to. Now he's gone, and she's choosing you. Where's the crime in that?"

Nowhere and everywhere at the same time. In the guilt that still claws at my chest when I remember how his blood looked on the marble floor at Bruno's wedding. In the knowledge that I failed to protect him, and now I'm taking what was his.

"Riccardo knew, you said." The words come out before I can stop them. "About my feelings for Ava. Riccardo knew the whole time, and he married her anyway."

"That sounds like him, Liam. You know it," he says.

"He watched me suffer. For years. And he enjoyed it."

"Also sounds like him."

The casual agreement should make me angrier. Instead it lets me breathe. It feels like permission. Like absolution.

"Riccardo used everyone." Pietro's voice goes flat. "Luna. Lorenzo. Ava. You. Bruno. The family. He took what he wanted and dressed it up as love, as duty, as necessity. But it was always just taking."



The elevator doors slide open, and I'm already reaching for my keys when my phone buzzes.

Ava's name flashes across the screen.

I answer before the second ring. "Everything alright?"

"I'm at Fairhaven." Her voice comes through slightly breathless, like she's been moving fast. "I just finished with Nero."

I check my watch. She's early. Two hours early.

"I want you to pick me up." A pause. "If you're available."

I push through the building's front door into the afternoon sun. The Range Rover sits in the parking structure across the street, waiting. "I'm available."

"Good." Another pause. "Then hurry."

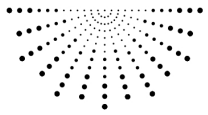
A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. The sound feels foreign in my own throat—rough and unused. "Why the rush?"

"Because if you take too long, I'll change my mind."

"I'm on my way," I say, smiling.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Ava

The screen glows in the dim light of Liam's bedroom. Nolan's name sits there like an accusation.

Enjoyed our evening despite the interruption. Dinner Saturday? I'd like to continue our conversation.

I stare at the message while Liam's arm tightens around my waist. His chest presses warm against my back, his breath stirring my hair.

"Pierce?" His voice comes out rough with sleep.

"Dinner. Saturday."

Silence stretches between us. I can feel Liam's gaze on the side of my face, waiting.

"I don't know what to do with him," I admit. "I thought getting close to him would give us answers. But your investigation has found nothing. Dante has found nothing. Maybe I'm wrong about him."

Liam's hand slides up my arm, his calloused fingers leaving trails of heat on my skin. "Being close to him doesn't mean we get more information. I've been in this job for many years, Ava. This is not the way it usually works."

I turn my head to look at him. "Then what does?"

"Either he has nothing to do with Julian's kidnapping, or he has everything to do with it but he's waiting for the right moment to make his move." Liam's jaw tightens. "Men like Pierce don't show their cards until they're ready. Getting close to him just puts you in his reach."

The weight of his words settles over me. After all those dinners, those garden walks, and those moments of forced politeness, none of it has brought me closer to the truth. It's only brought me closer to Nolan.

And I don't want to be anywhere near Nolan.

I pick up my phone and type my response before I can overthink it.

Thank you for the invitation, but I'm not interested in dinner. I need to focus on my family right now.

I hit send and drop the phone face down on the nightstand. My heart pounds harder than it should for such a simple message. But I know Nolan won't take rejection well. Men like him never do.

"What did you say?" Liam asks.

"That I don't want to go."

His hand stills on my arm. "Your father won't be happy."

"My father can manage his own business relationships without using me."

I turn fully in his arms, and for the first time since we stumbled through his front door hours ago, I actually *look* at him.

Liam Blackwood is naked in front of me, and I'm allowed to stare.

So I do.

The sheets have fallen to his waist, leaving his chest bare. He's all hard lines and lean muscle. Dark hair dusts his chest, trailing down his stomach in a line that disappears beneath the white cotton. His shoulders are broad, his arms thick with muscle that shifts when he moves.

Scars mark his skin. A thin white line across his ribs. A puckered circle near his left shoulder that looks like a bullet wound. Another scar, older and more faded, running along his forearm.

His jaw is sharp, covered in stubble a shade darker than the near-black hair falling across his forehead. Those steel-gray eyes watch me watching him, patient and knowing.

He's beautiful in a way that makes my chest ache. Not pretty, not soft. Beautiful like a storm. Beautiful like something dangerous.

"Enjoying the view?" His voice holds a hint of amusement.

Heat floods my cheeks. "Maybe."

"Only maybe?"

"Don't fish for compliments. It doesn't suit you."

That earns me the ghost of a smile. Just a twitch at the corner of his mouth, there and gone.

I reach out and trace the scar on his ribs. His muscles tense beneath my touch.

"How did you get this one?"

"Knife fight. Sixteen years ago."

"And this?" My fingers move to the mark on his shoulder.

"Bullet. Twelve years ago."

I wait for more, but he offers nothing. Just facts. No stories, no context.

"You don't like talking about yourself," I say.

"No."

"Why not?"

Liam's hand catches mine, stilling my exploration. He brings my fingers to his lips and presses a kiss to my knuckles. The gesture is so tender, so at odds with everything I thought I knew about him.

"Because most of it isn't worth telling."

"That's not true."

"You don't know that."

"Then tell me something." I shift closer, resting my head on my hand. "Anything. I've known you for ten years, and I don't actually *know* you at all."

His jaw works. That muscle ticks—the one that tells me he's holding something back.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from? Really from, not just 'London.'"

"East London. Hackney." The words come out clipped, reluctant. "Working class. My mother cleaned houses. My father left before I was born."

"She's beautiful."

"She was." Liam's gaze drifts past me, focusing on something I can't see. "She died. Cancer."

My heart clenches. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

But his voice has gone flat in that way voices do when the wound hasn't healed, only scarred over. I know that voice. I've used it myself when

talking about my mother.

"Is that why you joined the military?"

"Part of it. I had nothing keeping me in London. No money, no prospects. The Army offered structure. Purpose." He pauses. "They taught me how to be useful."

Useful. The word sits wrong in my mouth. Like he's describing a tool rather than a person.

"What did you do? In the military?"

"Special Air Service. SAS." His eyes meet mine again. "You don't want the details."

"What if I do?"

"Then I'd tell you I was very good at my job, and my job was violence." His thumb traces circles on my wrist. "I killed people, Ava. Efficiently. Without hesitation. That's what they trained me for."

"How did you end up with the Sartoris?"

"Giuseppe needed security. I needed a reason to stop killing for governments that didn't care whether I lived or died." A muscle in his jaw tightens. "He gave me something I'd never had before."

"What?"

"A family."

The word hangs between us, heavy with meaning. I understand it more than he knows. The Sartoris gave me the same thing—belonging, purpose, a place where I fit. Until I didn't anymore.

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"Giuseppe was not a good man," I say quietly. "But from what I know, he did some good things."

"He was the closest thing I've had to a father." Liam's voice roughens. "When he died, I promised myself I'd protect what he built. His family. His legacy."

"Including Riccardo."

Liam's expression shutters.

"Including Riccardo," he confirms.

I want to ask more. About their friendship, about what Liam knew, about the years of watching me from across crowded rooms. But his walls are going up, and I've already pushed further than he wanted to go.

So instead, I lean forward and kiss him. Soft. Slow. A thank you for the pieces of himself he gave me.

When I pull back, his eyes have darkened.

"We should sleep," he says, but his hand is already sliding down my spine.

"Should we?"

"You're going to be the death of me, Ava Fontana."

I smile against his lips. "At least you'll die happy."



Liam

The bedroom falls quiet after my confession, but I can tell from the rhythm of her breathing that she isn't sleeping.

I'm lying on my back, one arm behind my head, staring at the ceiling. Ava's curled on her side facing me, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from her skin. The sheets are tangled around our legs. My flat is dark except for the streetlight bleeding through the blinds.

"Liam."

Her voice is soft. Careful. The way people speak when they're about to ask something they're not sure they want answered.

"Yeah."

"That day in your office. When I came to tell you I was leaving the family." She pauses. "Why were you so cruel? The remark about your hands—you made me feel like an idiot for even bothering to show up."

My jaw tightens. I knew this was coming. I've been waiting for it since the moment we kissed.

"Ava—"

"I need to understand." She shifts, propping herself up on one elbow. In the dim light, I can see the outline of her face, the fall of dark hair over her bare shoulder. "You say you loved me for ten years. But every single interaction we had, you treated me like I was nothing. Less than nothing. Like my presence physically repulsed you."

The words hit harder than they should. Because she's right.

I sit up, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. I can't have this conversation lying next to her, feeling the heat of her body, smelling her perfume on my sheets.

"It was the only weapon I had against you."

"Weapon?" She sounds confused. Hurt.

"You have no fucking idea what you did to me." I run a hand through my hair. "Every time you walked into a room, every time I heard your laugh from across the house, every time Riccardo touched you in front of me. I wanted to put my fist through a wall. I wanted to drag you away from him and tell you the truth. I wanted to do a hundred things that would've destroyed everything."

The bed shifts as she moves closer. "So you pushed me away instead."

"I made it obvious. Crystal fucking clear. That I didn't want to be around you. That way, you'd never try to get close." I let out a bitter laugh. "You'd never smile at me. Never ask me to stay. Never give me any reason to hope."

"Liam—"

"Riccardo asked me to join you for dinners. Did you know that? He'd invite me, and I'd say I had a date. A woman waiting." I shake my head. "And most of the time, it was true."

Silence stretches between us. I can feel her watching me.

"I wanted to make myself feel something for someone else. Anyone else." The confession scrapes out of me like broken glass. "I tried dates. I tried relationships. I tried to be normal, to want what was in front of me instead of what I couldn't have."

"What happened?"

"They left." I turn my head, finally meeting her eyes. "Every single one of them. Because besides sex and restaurants and whatever gifts I threw at them, I had nothing to give. Nothing real. Nothing that mattered." My voice

drops. "I was empty with them. Hollow. Going through the motions of a life I didn't want."

The moonlight catches the shimmer in her eyes. Tears.

Fuck.

"Don't." I'm on my knees beside her before I can think, cupping her face in my hands. "Ava, don't cry. Please."

She lets out a watery laugh. "You're going to have to get used to it."

"What?"

"I cry." She reaches up, covering one of my hands with hers. "A lot. When I feel comfortable enough to cry around someone." Her thumb traces across my knuckles. "It's been a long time since I felt comfortable."

Something cracks open in my chest. Something I've kept locked down for a decade.

I press my forehead to hers, breathing her in. We stay like that for a moment, just existing in the same space, and it's more intimate than anything we've done tonight.

Then my mouth opens before my brain can stop it.

"The IUD. When did you get it?"

She stills against me.

I pull back slightly, searching her face. "Everyone knew you and Riccardo were trying for a baby. For years."

The moment the words leave my lips, I regret them. I can see it in the way her expression shifts. The walls going up, the careful mask she perfected during seven years as a Sartori wife sliding back into place.

"Ava, I'm sorry. You don't have to—"

"No." She takes a deep breath. "You asked. You deserve an answer."

She pulls away from me, sitting up against the headboard. The sheet slips, and she tugs it up to cover herself. Like she needs armor for this conversation.

"I got it six months before Riccardo died."

I should tell her.

Right now. Right here. I should tell her that the man she mourned, the man she's still carrying guilt over betraying by being with me, betrayed her first. In the worst possible way. Multiple times.

But I look at her face. The tears still clinging to her lashes. The vulnerability she's giving me that she hasn't given anyone in years.

And I can't.

Not tonight. Not when she's finally letting me in. Not when she's finally mine.

Tomorrow. I'll tell her tomorrow.

"Come here." I reach for her, and she comes willingly, folding herself against my chest. I wrap my arms around her, holding her like she might disappear if I let go.

"I'm sorry," I murmur into her hair.

"For what?"

For everything. For ten years of silence. For the truth I'm not telling you. For the fact that Riccardo never deserved you, and I knew it, and I said nothing.

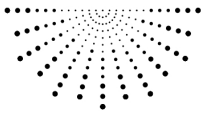
"For making you cry."

She laughs softly against my neck. "I told you. Get used to it."

I hold her tighter and hate myself a little more with every passing second.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Ava

"Coffee before we go?" He stands in the doorway, already dressed in dark jeans and a gray sweater that makes his eyes look like storm clouds.

"Please."

I sit up in bed, pulling the sheet against my chest. Not from modesty; we're well past that now. I need something to hold onto, something to anchor me for what I'm about to say.

Last night, he asked about the IUD. I deflected. Changed the subject after a while. Let him distract me with his mouth and his hands and the way he says my name like it's the only word he knows.

But I can't keep deflecting. Not if this is real. Not if I want it to be.

Liam returns with two mugs, steam curling from the tops. He hands me one and sits on the edge of the bed, close enough that our knees almost touch.

"You're thinking too loud," he says.

"You asked me something last night. About the IUD."

His expression doesn't change, but I notice the way his fingers tighten around his mug. "You don't have to—"

"I want to." The words come out steadier than I feel. "I need to."

He waits. Patient. Still. Giving me the space I need to find my way into this.

"Everyone assumed I wanted children," I begin. "Riccardo's mother, Aria, was... persistent. She wanted grandchildren. She'd already given up on Bruno ever settling down, and Vittoria was too young. So the pressure fell on us."

I take a sip of coffee. It's strong and bitter, exactly how I need it.

"The truth is, I was never sure. About motherhood." I stare at the dark liquid in my mug. "Part of me wanted it. At some point, I really did. But mostly I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of being like her." I don't have to say who. He knows. "My mother left when I was ten. Just vanished. No goodbye. No explanation. One day she was there, and the next she wasn't."

The old wound aches, familiar and sharp.

"I grew up wondering what I did wrong. What made her leave. I grew up believing she left us. Even though I know that something bad might have happened to her. But growing up feeling that your own mother left you made me wonder. If I had a child, would I do the same thing? Would I wake up one morning and just go? Is that something that runs in the blood?"

Liam sets his mug on the nightstand and takes my free hand. His palm is warm and rough.

I shake my head. I need to continue talking. "The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with me. All the tests came back normal. They said it was probably stress. Anxiety. That my body was too tense to conceive. Riccardo refused to get tested. His ego wouldn't allow for the possibility that he might be the problem." A bitter laugh escapes me. "Aria had to push him into it. She wanted grandchildren badly enough to wound his pride. Eventually, he agreed. The tests came back normal for him too."

I pull my hand away from Liam's, needing distance for this next part. Needing to say it without his touch softening the edges.

"Six months before he died, we went to a charity gala. There was a woman there. Beautiful. Young. She was flirting with him. Touching his arm, laughing at everything he said, leaning in too close. And he let her. He encouraged it."

The memory rises, sharp and clear. The champagne in my hand. The way Riccardo smiled at that woman. The sick feeling in my stomach.

"When we got home, I told him I didn't like it. That I didn't appreciate him letting women throw themselves at him in public while I stood right there."

Liam's jaw tightens.

"He snapped at me. Said that at some point, he'd have to use one of them to give him a child since I was so useless at doing it myself."

The words hang in the air between us. Ugly. Raw.

"Ava—"

"It wasn't about the baby," I cut him off. "I didn't care about whether I could conceive or not. Not really. What broke something in me was realizing that a man who claimed to love me could have those thoughts in his head. Could look at me and see *useless*. Could say he loved me in one breath and tear me apart in the next."

I finally meet Liam's eyes. They're black with feeling. Anger. Grief. He lets me see all of it.

"He tried to take it back. He apologized for weeks. Bought me flowers. Wrote me letters. Told me he didn't mean it, that he was frustrated, that he loved me more than anything."

"But you couldn't unhear it."

"No." I wrap both hands around my coffee mug, letting the heat seep into my palms. "I couldn't. Because if that's what he really thought of me—if that was hiding underneath all the *I love yous* and the *you're everythings*—then what else was hiding there? What other cruelties was he keeping behind his teeth?"

Liam doesn't speak. He just watches me with those gray eyes, waiting.

"I got the IUD the next day. Found a doctor Riccardo didn't know, paid cash, made sure there was no record he could find. I didn't want to have his child anymore. Not after that."

The admission feels like releasing a breath I've held for three years.

"And then he died." My voice cracks on the word. "He died, and I never got to tell him I forgave him. I never got to—" I stop, pressing my lips together until the trembling stops. "That's why I couldn't stand losing him. Not only because I loved him so much. But because I lost him while I was still angry. Still hurt. Still waiting for something that would make it okay again."

Liam takes the mug from my hands and sets it aside. Then he pulls me into his arms, and I let him. I let myself be held while the tears I've been

fighting finally fall.

"You deserved better," he says against my hair. "You deserved so much better than that."

I don't answer. I just hold onto him and let myself feel all of it—the grief, the guilt, the relief of finally saying the words out loud to someone who isn't going to tell me I'm wrong for feeling them.

When I finally pull back, Liam cups my face in his hands and wipes my tears with his thumbs.

"He was a fool," he says. "And a bastard. And if he weren't already dead, I'd kill him myself for saying that to you."

A broken laugh escapes me. "That's not very respectful to your former best friend."

"Fuck respect." His voice is rough. "Anyone who ever made you feel like you weren't enough—I don't care who they were or what they meant to me. They were wrong."

He kisses me then. Soft and slow.



Liam

The night air bites through my jacket as I stand on the Ashford terrace, watching the garden lights cast long shadows across the manicured lawn. Inside, Ava is having dinner with her family. I can see her through the window, pushing food around her plate while Franklin drones on about something.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Dante.

"Blackwood."

"We've got something strange on Pierce."

I step further from the house, putting distance between myself and the warm glow of the dining room. "I'm listening."

"He owns a property about ninety minutes outside Chicago. Rural area, no neighbors for miles. He's been paying for it for years."

"Has anyone seen him going there?"

"That's the thing. We haven't caught him visiting once in all the time we've been watching him. But he paid a grocery delivery service yesterday. Had supplies sent to the address. We checked on that thread. He pays for this service every two weeks."

My jaw tightens. "Someone's living there."

"That's what we figured." Papers rustle on Dante's end. "We dug into his family. Parents, siblings, extended relatives. Everyone's accounted for in the Chicago area. None of them have any connection to this property."

The muscle in my jaw works. A hidden house. A recent grocery delivery. No known occupant. Pierce is keeping someone out there, and he doesn't want anyone to know about it.

"Bruno said you should pay a visit," Dante continues. "I can go with you if you want."

"No. I'll take Fabio." I glance back at the house, at the window where Ava sits. "Send Luca here tomorrow to stay with Ava."

"Done. I'll text you the coordinates."

I slip the phone back into my pocket but don't move. The information churns through my mind, arranging itself into possibilities I don't like.

A secret property. Years of payments. Someone who needs groceries but never leaves.

Maybe he has a girlfriend stashed out there. A wife he's keeping hidden while he pursues Ava. Pierce is forty-eight, four years older than me. Plenty of time to accumulate secrets.

But something about this feels wrong. You don't hide a girlfriend in the middle of nowhere. You don't pay for groceries to be delivered to a woman who could drive to the store herself.

You hide someone who can't leave.

The French doors open behind me, and I don't need to turn around to know who it is. The scent hits me first. Too sweet. Nothing like the clean warmth of Ava's skin.

"Mr. Blackwood." Sylvia's voice carries that practiced warmth she deploys like a weapon. "Standing out here all alone in the cold. Do you need a drink? Or something else to warm you up?"

I turn my head just enough to see her. She's positioned herself closer than necessary, one hand resting on the doorframe in a pose that's meant to look casual.

"I don't need a thing from you, Mrs. Ashford."

The smile doesn't falter. "So serious all the time. You know, Franklin was just saying how dedicated you are to your work. To Ava, specifically."

There's an implication underneath those words.

"That's my job."

"Is it?" She steps onto the terrace, letting the door close behind her. The garden lights catch the angles of her face, and for a moment I see past the expensive treatments and careful makeup to the predator underneath. "Because the way you look at her suggests it might be more than professional obligation."

I turn fully to face her. She's trying to rattle me, and I've been rattled by men with guns and knives and nothing to lose. This woman with her silk and her schemes doesn't register.

"What I do and why I do it isn't your concern."

"Everything that happens in this house is my concern." Her voice drops, losing that false sweetness. "You're very attached to her. I noticed that the other night, when you were comforting her in her room."

The kiss. She saw the kiss and she's been holding it, waiting for the right moment to use it.

"Whatever you think you saw—"

"I know what I saw." She steps closer, and I hold my ground. "A woman in distress being comforted by her bodyguard. How touching."

The way she says it makes the words sound filthy. She's closer now.

"You should go back inside, Mrs. Ashford."

"Should I?" She tilts her head, studying me like I'm something she might want to acquire. "You know, Franklin doesn't appreciate you the way he should. A man with your talents. Your dedication."

Her hand reaches out, fingers brushing against my forearm. The touch is lingering.

I don't move. Don't react. But my mind is racing, trying to work out her angle. This woman is married to a man worth billions. She has everything she could possibly want. And she's out here in the cold, touching the hired help while her husband sits fifty feet away.

Either she's stupid, which I doubt, or she doesn't give a fuck about it.

"What exactly do you want?" I keep my voice flat.

"Just getting to know you better." Her smile widens. "We'll be spending so much time together, after all. With Ava living here, and you always at her

side..."

She moves closer still. Close enough that if anyone looked out the window, they'd see something that could be interpreted a dozen different ways. None of them good.

"I don't think your husband would appreciate this conversation."

"Franklin?" She laughs, soft and knowing. "Franklin appreciates very little about me these days. He's too busy with his business. His children. His guilt."

Before I can respond, the doors open.

"Is everything alright out here?"

Ava's voice cuts through the night air like a blade. She stands in the doorway, arms crossed, her expression carefully neutral. But I've learned to read her tells. The slight tension around her eyes. The set of her jaw.

She's angry.

Sylvia doesn't step back. Doesn't show an ounce of shame or concern at being caught standing too close to me in the dark. Instead, she turns to Ava with that practiced smile firmly in place.

"Perfectly fine, darling. Mr. Blackwood and I were just having a little chat." She pauses, and something glitters in her eyes. "About a secret, actually."

Ava's expression doesn't change, but I see her shoulders stiffen.

"That night in your bedroom," Sylvia continues, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that's still loud enough for Ava to hear. "I came closer so no one could overhear. Don't worry." She reaches out and pats my arm like we're old friends. "Your secret is safe with me."

The implication hangs in the air between us. She's letting Ava know she saw the kiss, and she's holding it over both of us like a weapon she might use later.

"Goodnight, both of you." Sylvia glides past Ava, disappearing into the warm light of the house without a backward glance.

The door closes behind her.

Ava stares at me. Her dark eyes are hard, her mouth pressed into a thin line. The garden lights catch the angles of her face, and Christ, even furious she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"She was flirting with you."

It's not a question.

"Yes."

Ava exhales, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. "Of course she was." She moves to stand beside me at the terrace railing, looking out at the garden. "Sylvia flirts with everyone. The gardener. The delivery men. Julian's friends when they visit. My father doesn't seem to notice. Or if he does, he doesn't care."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"It's frustrating." She turns to face me, and the anger in her eyes has shifted to something else. Something warmer. "But right now, I'm more frustrated about other things."

"Such as?"

"Such as the fact that I've been sitting through an interminable dinner, listening to my father discuss golf course investments, while thinking about you out here." She steps closer. "Could you escort me to my apartment? I need to pick up a few things."

I raise an eyebrow. "What things?"

The smile that curves her lips is pure sin. She moves into my space, close enough that I can feel the heat of her body through the cold night air. Her mouth brushes against my ear as she speaks.

"Underwear."

The word hits me like a punch to the gut. My hands clench at my sides, every muscle in my body going tight.

"Ava." Her name comes out rough. "You keep teasing me like that, I'll fuck you right here. Right now. Against this fucking railing where anyone could see."

She pulls back, and the look in her eyes tells me she knows exactly what she's doing. Knows exactly what she does to me.

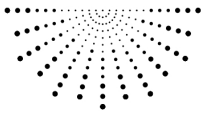
"Promises, promises," she murmurs.

Then she turns and walks toward the side gate that leads to the driveway. Her hips sway with each step, that tight skirt hugging every curve. She glances back over her shoulder once, just to make sure I'm watching.

I'm watching. I'm so hard it hurts.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Liam

The house sits dark against the tree line, windows like dead eyes staring back at us.

Two fucking hours of nothing.

I shift in the driver's seat, my back protesting the stillness. Beside me, Fabio hasn't moved in thirty minutes, his gaze fixed on the property through a pair of binoculars. The man has the patience of a saint.

Pierce's secret property looks abandoned. No lights. No movement. No cars in the gravel drive. Just an old farmhouse with peeling white paint and a sagging porch, surrounded by overgrown fields. Not the kind of place a man like Pierce should own. Not the kind of place anyone should be living.

But someone is. The grocery delivery proves that much.

"Anything?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

Fabio lowers the binoculars. "Nothing. Same as the last hour."

I check my phone. No messages from Luca, which means Ava is safe. The knot in my chest loosens slightly, but it doesn't disappear. It won't disappear until I'm back at her side.

The silence stretches between us, comfortable in the way it can only be between men who've spent too many nights like this one. Waiting. Watching. Ready for violence that may or may not come.

"How's Paola?" I ask.

Fabio's jaw tightens. It's a small movement, barely visible in the darkness, but I've known him long enough to read it.

"She misses a mother she never had." He says it flat, like he's reporting the weather. Like the words don't cut him open every time.

"Any luck with the new nanny?"

He exhales through his nose. "Gone. Left three days ago."

"What happened?"

"Paola happened." A bitter edge creeps into his voice. "She makes their lives impossible. Every single one of them. They stay a month, maybe two, then they leave. Can't blame them, really. She's..." He trails off, searching for the word. "Difficult."

I don't respond. What is there to say? I've met Paola twice. A small girl with her father's dark eyes and a permanent scowl etched onto her face. She didn't speak to me either time. Just stared with the kind of distrust that shouldn't exist in a child.

"If I wasn't doing this—" Fabio gestures vaguely at the dark house, at the guns holstered under our jackets, at the life we've chosen. "I'd have to take her with me to work. Can you imagine? Paola in the back of an armored car while I escort someone to a meeting where half the room wants to kill each other."

The image would be funny if it wasn't so fucking sad.

"Six years," I say quietly. "That's a long time to do it alone."

Fabio's silence confirms what I already know. Seven years ago, a woman in Sicily got pregnant. When she gave birth, she brought the baby to Fabio's door, said she didn't want her, and left. No explanation. No forwarding address. No contact since.

I don't know the details. Fabio doesn't share them, and I don't ask. Some wounds are too deep to pick at, even between men who trust each other with their lives.

"The last two years have been the worst," Fabio continues, his voice low. "Back and forth between Chicago and Sicily. She never knows where home is. Neither do I, most days."

"Is that why you asked Bruno to stay stateside?"

He nods. "Paola needs to settle. She needs school, friends, a routine. Something that doesn't change every few months." He pauses. "Bruno

agreed. Three to four years, minimum. Valentino's already put three other men in Sicily to cover what Luca and I were doing."

I process this. Fabio asking for anything is rare. Fabio asking for something personal is almost unheard of.

"Bruno made the right call," I say.

Fabio doesn't respond, but his shoulders drop slightly. Relief, maybe. Or exhaustion. Hard to tell with him.

We fall back into silence. The wind picks up, rustling through the tall grass surrounding the property. Somewhere in the distance, an owl calls out.

"She doesn't understand why her mother left," Fabio says suddenly. "She asks me sometimes. Not often, but when she does..." He shakes his head. "I don't have an answer. How do you explain to a child that some people aren't capable of love? That some people look at their own flesh and blood and feel nothing?"

I think of my own mother. The way she worked herself to the bone cleaning other people's houses so I could eat. The way she smiled even when she was exhausted. The way she held my hand in the hospital at the end, telling me she was proud of me.

"You can't explain it," I say. "You just have to be enough for her."

Fabio turns to look at me. In the dim light, his face is all shadows and hard angles.

"What if I'm not?"

The question hangs between us. It's not really a question. It's a fear, dressed up in words.

"You are," I tell him. "You stayed. That's more than most."

He doesn't respond, but something in his posture shifts. Not agreement, exactly. More like acknowledgment.

Movement catches my eye. A light flickers on in the farmhouse—upstairs, second window from the left.

"Fabio."

He's already lifting the binoculars. "I see it."

We watch as a figure passes in front of the window. Too far away to make out details, but definitely human. Definitely alive.

"Someone's home," I murmur.

The light stays on for approximately three minutes, then goes dark again. No other movement. No other signs of life.

"We need to get closer," Fabio says.

"Not tonight." I check my phone again. Still nothing from Luca. "We don't know what we're walking into. Could be one person, could be ten. Could be nothing. Could be everything."

Fabio nods, accepting the logic even if he doesn't like it. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. With backup." I start the engine, keeping the headlights off as I reverse slowly down the dirt road. "And with a plan."

As we drive away, I glance in the rearview mirror. The farmhouse has disappeared back into darkness, keeping its secrets for another night.

But secrets don't stay buried forever.



Ava

The mattress dips beneath Alfie's weight as he kneads my thigh, purring loud enough to vibrate through my bones. I scratch behind his ears.

"You're the only male I trust completely," I murmur. "Don't let it go to your head."

Alfie blinks slowly, which I choose to interpret as agreement.

The door opens.

I don't hear a knock. Don't hear footsteps in the hallway. One moment I'm alone with my cat, and the next Nolan stands in my bedroom doorway, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

I'm on my feet before my brain catches up, Alfie tumbling off my lap with an indignant meow.

"What are you doing here?" Luca needed to leave earlier and Nolan finds this exact moment to appear.

Nolan's smile stretches slow and wrong across his face. "Why do you make things so difficult, Ava?"

"I don't understand what you're—"

"I know." He steps closer, and the room shrinks. "I know you've been fucking around with that bastard."

Ice floods my veins. "Get out of my room."

The slap comes so fast I don't see it. Pain explodes across my cheek, snapping my head to the side. Before I can recover, his hands are on my shoulders, shoving me backward onto the bed.

I try to scramble away but he's faster, climbing over me, pinning my wrists above my head with one hand. His weight presses down on my hips, trapping me beneath him.

"Stay put." His voice is almost conversational. Pleasant. Like we're discussing the weather. "I almost liked you, you know. That poise. That breeding. That body."

I spit in his face.

The second slap catches my mouth. I taste copper.

"That body," he continues, wiping my saliva from his cheek with his free hand, "I'm going to fuck one day. One way or another."

Bile rises in my throat. I force it down, force myself to think past the terror clawing at my chest. Liam. Where is Liam? He's supposed to be—

Nolan reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a phone. He holds the screen in front of my face.

The video plays.

Julian. My Julian. Bound to a chair, blindfolded, his left hand strapped to a table. A figure in black moves into frame, holding something that glints under harsh light.

I can't breathe.

The blade comes down. Julian screams. Blood sprays across the table, and his finger—his finger—

"No." The word tears out of me. "No, no, no—"

"Yes." Nolan's breath is hot against my ear. "I'm going to say this once, Ava. Only once. You have one week to announce our engagement."

The video keeps playing. Julian's screams loop in my skull.

"If you tell Liam the truth—" Nolan's lips brush my temple, and I flinch so hard my spine arches off the mattress. "If you tell the police. Your father. Your stepmother. The Sartoris. Anyone."

He pauses, letting the silence stretch.

"Everyone dies. And I'm not working alone."

I nod. I nod so hard my neck aches.

"Good girl."

He shifts his weight, and I feel him—hard against my thigh. Fully aroused. My stomach heaves.

A gray blur launches itself at Nolan's face.

Alfie.

Claws rake across Nolan's cheek, drawing three parallel lines of blood. Nolan roars, rearing back, and kicks out blindly.

His foot connects with Alfie's small body. My cat hits the wall with a sickening thump.

Something breaks inside me.

I don't remember deciding to fight. My fists are just suddenly flying, connecting with Nolan's jaw, his chest, his throat. I'm screaming words that don't make sense, clawing at him the way Alfie did.

He catches my wrists again, slamming them back against the headboard hard enough to make me see stars.

"One week." His face hovers inches from mine, blood dripping from the scratches onto my cheek. "One week, and you become Mrs. Nolan Pierce. Or everyone you love dies."

He releases me and stands, adjusting his jacket like nothing happened. Like he didn't just—

At the door, he pauses.

"Oh, I almost forgot." That smile again. That wrong, terrible smile. "How did you take the news about Riccardo?"

I push myself up on shaking arms. "What?"

"His son." Nolan's eyebrows rise in mock surprise. "With his brother's fiancée? Luna, wasn't it?"

The world tilts.

"What are you talking about?"

"No one told you?" He laughs, a genuine sound of delight. "Not even your father? That's rich." He shakes his head, still chuckling. "Your devoted husband had a child with another woman."

The door closes behind him.

I don't move.

I can't move.

Riccardo. A son. With Lorenzo's fiancée.

A small, broken sound comes from across the room. Alfie. I force my body to obey, crawling off the bed, stumbling to where he lies crumpled against the wall.

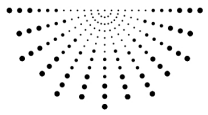
"Hey." My voice cracks. "Hey, baby. I'm here."

He's breathing. His eyes are open, watching me with that patient, knowing gaze. When I gather him carefully into my arms, he doesn't fight me. Just presses his face into my neck and purrs, weak but steady.

I sit on the floor with my cat in my lap, my cheek throbbing, blood coating my tongue, my entire world crumbling around me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Ava

The door opens and Liam walks in, already talking. "Ready to go? Fabio's waiting downstairs with—"

He stops.

I don't know what I look like right now. I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, Alfie cradled against my chest. My cat hasn't moved since I picked him up from the floor. His breathing is shallow. Too shallow.

"Sit down," I say.

Liam's eyes sweep the room. Taking in details I can't hide. The rumpled bedsheets. The lamp knocked sideways on the nightstand. The red mark blooming across my cheekbone that I haven't bothered to check in the mirror.

"What happened?" His voice drops to something dangerous. "Ava. What the fuck happened?"

"Sit. Down."

He doesn't move. His hands curl into fists at his sides, knuckles going white. I watch the muscle in his jaw tick once, twice, three times.

"*Liam*." My voice cracks on his name. "Please. Just sit."

Something in my tone makes him obey. He lowers himself into the armchair by the window. His body remains coiled, ready to spring. His eyes

never leave my face.

I stroke Alfie's fur. He makes a small sound of pain and I want to scream.

"Did Riccardo have a son?"

The silence that follows tells me everything.

"Ava—"

I start laughing.

It's not a good sound. It's the kind of laugh that scrapes out of your throat when the alternative is screaming until your voice breaks. The kind of laugh that tastes like blood and bile and betrayal.

"Why the *fuck* didn't anyone tell me?"

Liam exhales slowly. "We only found out two years ago. Everyone. The whole family."

"Two years." I repeat the words like they're in a foreign language. "Two *years*."

"Riccardo didn't know either."

That makes me stop laughing.

I stare at him. "What?"

"He didn't know he had a son. None of us did." Liam leans forward, elbows on his knees. "It's complicated, Ava. Let me explain."

"Then explain."

He runs a hand through his hair. A piece falls forward across his forehead, something that only happens when he's exhausted or unguarded. I used to collect those moments like precious things. Now they just feel like another lie.

"Two years ago, while you were in Sicily with Aria, a woman showed up at the compound. Luna Torrino."

I know her only because of her past with Lorenzo. I never met her.

"She had a boy with her." Liam's voice is careful, measured. "She claimed the boy was Riccardo's."

My hands tighten on Alfie. He mewls softly.

"Bruno already knew about her," Liam continues. "He'd known for years. When he found out Riccardo and Luna were having an affair—behind Lorenzo's back—"

The room tilts.

Riccardo. My Riccardo.

He was sleeping with his brother's fiancée.

"Bruno wanted her dead," Liam says. "But she was pregnant by then, and killing a pregnant woman..." He shakes his head. "Even Bruno has limits. So he sent her away. Paid for everything—the birth, the child, her silence—for years. When Bruno ended up in a coma, the payments stopped. Luna came back when she heard Riccardo was dead. She wanted money. She wanted the boy to be acknowledged."

I'm having trouble breathing.

"No one wanted to tell you," Liam says quietly. "You were grieving. You'd just buried your husband. And then you went to Sicily with Aria, and it never seemed like the right time, and—"

"And two years passed."

"Yes."

"Two years of everyone knowing. Everyone looking at me and *knowing*." My voice rises. "Vittoria. Lorenzo. Bruno. Aria. They all knew my husband had a child with another woman. Riccardo never knew, and you kept that from me too when you found out."

Liam doesn't deny it.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demand. "After everything—after we—" I can't say the words. "You're supposed to love me. That's what you said."

"I do."

"Then why didn't you say *anything*?"

"I was going to." He stands, takes a step toward me. "Tonight. I was going to tell you tonight."

"Convenient."

"It's the truth."

"The truth." I laugh again, that broken sound. "You don't know what truth means. None of you do."

"Ava—"

"What else?"

He stops.

"What else, Liam? What else has everyone been hiding from me?"

He takes a deep breath.

The kind of breath people take before they deliver news that will shatter something irreparably. I've heard that breath before. From doctors. From funeral directors. From my father, the day he told me my mother was gone.

"Riccardo knew," Liam says finally. "About my feelings for you. He knew before he married you."

I blink. "What?"

"He knew I was in love with you. From the beginning." Liam's voice is flat now. Controlled. "Pietro told me. Riccardo admitted it to him once, drunk. He knew how I felt, and he married you anyway."

"That doesn't—"

"He enjoyed it." Liam's jaw tightens. "Watching me watch you. Knowing I couldn't have you. Knowing I'd never betray him because I was loyal to the family, to Giuseppe's memory. He *used* that."

I shake my head slowly.

"And the affairs," Liam continues. "Luna wasn't the only one."

The room goes very quiet.

"I confronted him once. Years ago. I told him he didn't deserve you." Liam's hands are shaking. I've never seen his hands shake. "He said he still loved you. That you were his wife. But the spark had faded, and he needed—"

"Stop."

"Ava—"

"I said *stop*."

I close my eyes. Alfie is warm against my chest, his heartbeat too fast, too fragile. Everything I thought I knew about my marriage, about my husband, about my life—it's all crumbling.

And underneath the rubble, something new is emerging.

Not grief.

Rage.



Liam

"What happened?" I ask again, my voice rough.

Ava's head lifts. Her eyes meet mine, and the fury burning there stops me cold. Not grief. Not shock. Pure, undiluted rage.

"Nolan came by," she says, her voice flat. Dead. "To see if I was okay."

My hands curl into fists at my sides. "Pierce was here? In your room?"

"He thought I knew about Riccardo's son." A bitter laugh scrapes out of her throat. "Asked me if I'd ever seen the kid. Can you imagine? He assumed I knew my husband had a child with another woman. That everyone knew except the stupid, blind wife."

The red mark on her cheek. The way she's holding herself, curled around Alfie like a shield.

"The mark on your face—"

"I got angry." She cuts me off. "And I slapped myself."

"Ava—"

"Get out of my room."

The words hit like bullets. I stay where I am, rooted.

"I want you out of my life." Her voice rises, gaining strength. "Out of this house. I want you gone, Liam."

"No."

I cross the distance between us and drop to my knees in front of her. Alfie shifts in her arms, a tiny whimper escaping him. Up close, I can see the way her hands tremble despite her white-knuckled grip on the cat.

"You don't mean that," I say quietly. "Something happened. Pierce did something, and you're—"

"Don't tell me what I mean."

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I've never seen her like this. The woman I know, the one who deflects with grace and wears composure like armor, is gone.

In her place is someone stripped raw. Someone who's been holding a scream inside her chest and finally let it loose.

"You claim you loved me." The words drip with contempt. "You say you loved me for ten fucking years."

I don't flinch. "I did. I do."

"Then why?" She leans forward, and her breath catches on something that might be a sob or might be a snarl. "The first moment—the *first moment* you knew Riccardo was fucking other women, you should have told me."

"It wasn't my place to—"

"Bullshit." The word cracks through the room like a whip. "That's bullshit, and you know it. You were his best friend. His right hand. You

knew everything about him, and you let me stay married to a man who was laughing at me behind my back."

"Ava—"

"Seven years." Her voice breaks on the number. "Seven years I tried to be enough for him. I gave up my career. My independence. My *body*, Liam—I let doctors poke and prod and test every inch of me because I thought something was wrong with *me*. Because he made me believe I was failing him."

Alfie mews, and she adjusts her hold on him, her movements automatic. Protective.

"And the whole time," she continues, "he was fucking other women. He had a *child* with one of them. And you—" Her gaze cuts through me like a blade. "You watched. You knew. And you said nothing."

"I couldn't—"

"You *could*." She shakes her head slowly. "You just chose not to. You chose your loyalty to him over any feeling you claim to have had for me."

The accusation lands where it should. In the center of my chest. In the hollow space where my conscience used to live before I buried it under years of duty and silence.

"He was like a brother to me." The excuse sounds pathetic even as I say it. "I owed him everything. Giuseppe trusted me with—"

"I don't care what you owed him." Ava's voice drops to something cold. Something final. "I don't care about your loyalty or your duty or your fucking code. You left me alone with a man who used everyone around him. You watched me break myself trying to give him what he wanted, and you never said a word."

She shifts Alfie to one arm and wipes her face with the back of her hand. The movement is rough. Angry.

"I don't want anything to do with you," she says. "Not with you. Not with the Sartoris. Not with any of it."

I move closer, reaching for her hand. "Ava, please—"

"Don't touch me."

The scream rips out of her throat, raw and jagged. She flinches back so hard she nearly drops Alfie, and the sound of her voice echoes off the walls.

I freeze.

Her chest heaves. Her eyes are wild, and for a split second, I see it—the fear underneath the fury. The kind of fear that doesn't come from old

betrayals or broken trust.

The kind of fear that comes from something that happened tonight.

Something she's not telling me.

I move backward. One step. Two. Putting distance between us even though every instinct screams at me to stay, to push, to force her to tell me what Pierce really did.

But she's shaking now, her whole body trembling as she clutches her injured cat to her chest.

"Okay," I say quietly.

Her eyes snap to mine, startled. Like she expected me to fight. To refuse.

"Okay," I repeat. "I'll go."

I stand slowly, keeping my movements calm. Non-threatening. The way you move around a wounded animal.

"But I'm not leaving this house." I hold up a hand when she starts to protest. "I'll stay downstairs. Out of your way. You won't see me unless you want to."

"I won't want to."

The words should hurt. They do hurt. But underneath the pain, something else is taking shape. A cold, focused certainty.

Pierce did something to her tonight. Something she's covering with anger aimed at me—anger I deserve, but anger that's also serving as a shield.

I nod once. "I know."

I turn toward the door. My hand is on the handle when her voice stops me.

"Liam."

I don't turn around. Can't. If I look at her again, I won't be able to leave.

"Alfie needs a vet." Her voice is smaller now. Tired. "There's a twenty-four-hour clinic on—"

"I know the one." I open the door. "I'll send someone up."

I step into the hallway and close the door behind me.

For a long moment, I stand there. My forehead pressed against the wood. My hands flat on either side of the frame.

She's right.

Every word she said was right. I watched Riccardo hurt her. I knew what he was, and I said nothing. I told myself it was loyalty. Duty. The code

I lived by.

But the truth is simpler. And uglier.

I was a coward.

I was so afraid of losing her completely that I settled for having nothing at all. I convinced myself that keeping my distance was protection. That silence was sacrifice.

But all I really did was leave her alone with a monster.

I push off the door and pull out my phone. My thumb hovers over Dante's contact.

Pierce was in her room tonight.

Pierce put that mark on her face.

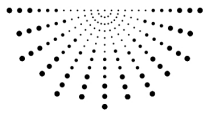
And when I find out exactly what he did, I'm going to take him apart piece by piece.

I dial the number and bring the phone to my ear.

"Dante. I need everything you have on that farmhouse. We're moving tomorrow."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Ava

The water runs hot enough to turn my skin pink, but I don't move away from the spray.

I stand beneath it, letting it pound against my shoulders, my back, the places where Nolan's hands held me down. Steam fills the bathroom until I can barely see the tiles in front of me. Good. I don't want to see anything right now.

Alfie is okay.

The vet called twenty minutes ago. Bruised ribs, mild shock, but nothing broken. They're keeping him overnight for observation. When Margaret came to tell me, I thanked her with a voice that didn't sound like mine and asked her to inform my father that I'd be down for dinner shortly.

Dinner with Nolan.

My stomach lurches, and I press my palm flat against the cool tile to steady myself. In less than an hour, I'll sit across from the man who just threatened to murder everyone I love. I'll smile. I'll be gracious. I'll pretend nothing happened in this room.

Because that's what I do. That's what I've always done.

I tip my head back and let the water run over my face, washing away the tears I've been holding since Liam walked out my door.

Liam.

The things I said to him. The way I screamed at him not to touch me. The look on his face when I told him to leave my life.

I meant every word.

And I hate myself for meaning them.

He knew. For seven years, he *knew* Riccardo was sleeping with other women.

Loyalty. That's what he'll call it. Duty to his best friend, to the man who gave him a family when he had none.

I would have done the same thing.

The realization hits me like a slap, sharper than the one Nolan left on my cheek. If someone I loved asked me to keep a secret that would destroy someone else's marriage, would I have told? Would I have broken that trust, even knowing the truth would set someone free?

I don't know. I honestly don't know.

But I can't think about Liam right now. I can't think about the way his voice cracked when he said *Riccardo knew I loved you*.

Riccardo is dead. His sins died with him.

Nolan wants to marry me.

I turn off the water and stand dripping in the sudden silence. Steam curls around me like smoke.

That's what I needed to know. That's the piece I couldn't figure out—why take Julian, why the elaborate rescue, why the flowers and dinners and patience? He could have just killed us all. Could have burned this house to the ground and taken whatever he wanted from the ashes.

But he doesn't want some of the money my family has. He doesn't want territory or power or whatever my father can offer him.

He wants *all of it. He wants me.*

Which means once he has me—once that ring is on my finger and the vows are spoken—he won't need my family anymore.

I reach for my towel with steady hands. Steadier than they should be, given what I'm planning.

One week. Nolan gave me one week to announce our engagement.

I'll give him exactly that. I'll be the perfect, grieving widow who finally found love again. I'll let my father believe he's securing my future. I'll let Sylvia gloat about finding me such a *wonderful opportunity*.

And I'll ask for a summer wedding.

Eight months. Eight months to find out who Nolan is working with. Eight months to gather evidence, make plans, build a case that even the FBI couldn't ignore. Eight months to figure out how to kill him before he kills everyone I love.

I wrap the towel around myself and wipe the condensation from the mirror.

The woman looking back at me has a red mark blooming on her cheekbone. It'll bruise by morning. I'll need concealer. I'll need a story—walked into a door, clumsy me, you know how I am after a few glasses of wine.

But her eyes.

Her eyes are different.

There's something cold there. Something that wasn't there this morning, when my biggest worry was whether Liam regretted sleeping with me. Something that settled into place the moment Nolan showed me that video of Julian screaming.

I've spent my whole life being someone's daughter. Someone's wife. Someone's widow. Someone's potential bride.

Tonight, I become something else.

I think about Vittoria. We haven't really talked in months—not the way we used to, before Riccardo died. I thought she was my closest friend in that family, the sister I never had. But she knew about the son. She knew, and she kept it from me just like everyone else.

I can't blame her. Not really. The Sartoris have been through hell these past few years. They were protecting their family. I was just the stranger who wanted to leave anyway.

But it still hurts.

Everything hurts.

I move to my closet and pull out a simple black dress. Appropriate for a family dinner.

Armor. That's what clothes have always been for me. Another mask to hide behind.

I dress slowly, carefully, painting over the evidence of what happened in this room. Foundation. Concealer. A light touch of color to distract from the bruise forming beneath my eye. By the time I'm finished, I look almost normal.

Almost like a woman who wasn't just pinned to a bed and threatened with her brother's torture.

My phone buzzes. A text from Julian: *You okay? Dad said you've been up there a while.*

I type back: *Fine. Coming down now. Save me a seat away from Sylvia.*

His response is immediate: *Already done. And there's wine.*

I almost smile. Almost.

Julian doesn't know what Nolan did. He can't know. The moment he finds out, he'll do something stupid. And Nolan will make him pay for it. Another finger. An ear. Whatever piece of my brother he decides to carve off next.

So I'll protect Julian by lying to him.

I'll protect everyone by lying to them.

And when the time comes, I won't be lying anymore.

I check my reflection one final time. The mask is perfect.

I head downstairs to have dinner with the man I'm going to kill.



Liam

I can't fucking believe what I'm seeing.

Ava sits beside Pierce. Not across from him. *Beside* him. She changed seats before I could blink, sliding into the chair next to his like she belonged there. Like she wanted to be there.

She hasn't looked at me once.

Not when she walked into the dining room wearing that black dress that hugs every curve I've memorized with my hands. Not when she sat down. Not when the first course arrived or the second or the goddamn third.

Two hours. Two fucking hours of watching them whisper to each other. Of watching her lean close to catch something he says. Of watching her *laugh*.

My hands grip the edge of the windowsill behind me hard enough to crack the wood. I stand where I always stand during these dinners. Invisible. But I've never felt less invisible in my life. Every nerve in my body screams at me to cross this room and drag her away from him.

Pierce murmurs something against her ear. Ava tips her head, exposing the column of her neck. The throat I've kissed so many times. The neck where I felt her pulse hammer when she came apart in my arms.

She smiles at whatever he said.

I want to tear every single thing in this dining room apart. The crystal glasses. The white tablecloth. The fucking chandelier hanging above their heads. I want to flip this table and put my fist through Pierce's face until he stops breathing.

But I don't move.

Because something is wrong. Something beyond the obvious betrayal unfolding in front of me. Ava's shoulders are too rigid. And she hasn't looked at me—not because she's forgotten I exist, but because she's *trying* not to look.

She's performing.

The question is, for who?

Franklin pushes back from the table. "Shall we move to the living room for drinks?"

Sylvia rises with him, dabbing her napkin at the corner of her mouth. Julian follows, shooting me a look I can't read. Confusion. Maybe warning.

They file out. Ava and Pierce stay behind.

Pierce looks directly at me. His eyes hold something I've never seen before—triumph. Pure, undiluted triumph. Like he's won a game I didn't know we were playing.

Then he reaches for Ava's hand.

She lets him take it. She lets him tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow like she's his. Like she's always been his.

They walk toward me.

I don't breathe. I don't blink. I watch them approach, and Ava keeps her gaze fixed somewhere past my shoulder. Her jaw is tight. Her pulse jumps at the hollow of her throat.

Look at me, I think. *Fucking look at me, Ava.*

She doesn't. They move in front of me.

Pierce's hand slides down her back. Lower. Lower still, until his palm cups her arse. He squeezes.

And something inside me snaps.

I move before I can think. My hand closes around Pierce's forearm and I *wrench* it away from her body. The bone makes a sound like dry wood breaking when I twist. Pierce screams.

I punch him in the face. His nose explodes. Blood sprays across Ava's black dress.

"Liam, stop!"

Her voice cuts through the red haze. I have Pierce by the throat now, his back against the dining room wall. He's crying. Actually crying. Blood pours down his chin and his arm hangs at an unnatural angle.

"Touch her again," I say, my voice barely human. "Touch her again and I'll break every fucking bone in your body."

"Liam." Ava's hand closes around my arm. "Stop. Please."

Franklin bursts through the doorway. "What the hell is going on?"

Pierce whimpers. Ava steps back from me, and the distance between us feels like a canyon.

"Liam was just leaving," she says. Her voice is ice. "He's leaving this house and he's not coming back."

I stare at her. "Ava—"

"Get out."

"You don't understand—"

Franklin moves between us, his face purple with rage. "You heard her. Get out of my house. Now."

Pierce slides down the wall, cradling his destroyed arm. He's still watching me through bloody, swollen eyes. Still wearing that fucking triumphant expression.

He did something to her. He threatened her. That's the only explanation. That's why she's acting like this, why she's protecting him, why she won't *look at me*.

I reach for my gun.

The weight of it feels right in my hand. Natural. I've killed men with less reason than I have right now. I've killed men for looking at the wrong person the wrong way. Pierce deserves worse than a bullet. He deserves to be taken apart piece by piece until he begs for death.

I aim at his head.

"Liam, no." Ava moves. She steps directly into my line of fire, her body blocking Pierce. Her eyes finally meet mine.

They're empty. Hollow. Like the woman I held three nights ago has been erased and replaced with a stranger.

"If you want to shoot someone," she says quietly, "shoot me."

The gun wavers in my hand.

"Ava." Her name comes out broken. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing." She doesn't blink. "He didn't do anything. You're the one who hurt him. You're the one who needs to leave."

I search her face for something—anything—that tells me she doesn't mean it. A flicker of the woman who kissed me in my car. Who laughed in my bed. Who told me she was mine.

Nothing.

"I'm not leaving you with him."

"You don't have a choice." Franklin's hand closes around my arm. "I'm calling security. You have sixty seconds to get off my property before I have you arrested."

I could kill them all. Franklin. Pierce. The security guards who are probably already on their way. I could take Ava and disappear. Keep her safe whether she wants it or not.

But the look in her eyes stops me.

She's afraid. Not of Pierce. Not of her father.

Of *me*.

I lower the gun.

"This isn't over," I whisper to Pierce. "Whatever you've done, whatever you're holding over her head—I will find out. And when I do, I'm going to kill you slowly."

Pierce says nothing. He just smiles through the blood.

I walk out of the dining room. Through the foyer. Out the front door into the cold Chicago night.

The gravel crunches under my feet as I cross to my Range Rover. My hands are shaking. My knuckles are split and bleeding.

I get in the car. Start the engine.

In the rearview mirror, I see the Ashford house lit up like a fucking mausoleum.

I slam my palm against the steering wheel. Once. Twice.

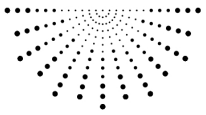
Tomorrow I'm going back to that farmhouse. I'm going to find whatever Pierce is hiding. And then I'm going to burn his entire world to the ground.

Ava can hate me all she wants.

I'm not losing her again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Ava

The Sartori dining room hasn't changed.

Same long mahogany table that seats twenty. Same morning light streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. Same scent of fresh coffee and something sweet baking in the kitchen. I spent years at this table, performing the role of perfect wife while servers moved silently around us and Aria guided conversations with a conductor's precision.

Now I stand in the doorway, and everything feels different.

Antonella rises from her chair the moment she sees me. Bruno's wife moves with the easy grace of someone who belongs here, her blonde hair catching the light, green eyes warm with genuine concern.

"Ava." She crosses to me, taking both my hands in hers. "I'm so glad to see you."

The sincerity in her voice nearly undoes me. Antonella married into this family after I left, but she's always treated me like a sister rather than a ghost from her husband's past.

"Thank you."

I move past her and take the empty seat beside Kristen, Nico's wife. Kristen offers me a small smile, her gray-blue eyes understanding without demanding explanation. She knows what it's like to be the outsider in this

world. She knows what it's like to carry secrets that could shatter everything.

Giulia appears at my elbow, her weathered face creased with motherly concern. "Ricotta pancakes? Your favorite. I made extra."

The kindness of this woman is a thing that I've missed. Giulia has been with this family for decades. She remembers when I was newly married, terrified and trying so hard to fit in. She remembers sneaking me extra dessert when Nico wasn't looking. Nico wanted it for himself. She remembers everything.

"Just coffee, please." I manage a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. "Thank you, Giulia."

She hesitates, clearly wanting to argue, but she pours the coffee and retreats.

I scan the table. Bruno sits at the head, dark eyes already assessing me with that calculating intelligence that made him Don. Lorenzo is to his right, his handsome face carefully neutral. Sophia, Lorenzo's wife, nods at me. Kristen. Antonella returning to her seat beside Bruno.

No Vittoria.

I wanted her here. Needed her here. She's the one who helped me navigate this family when I first arrived, terrified and overwhelmed. Even though she is almost ten years younger than me. She's the one who made me feel like maybe I could belong. But she's not here, and I can't wait for her.

I don't have time.

"Bruno." I set down my coffee cup. "After breakfast, I need to speak with you."

Bruno nods, his expression giving nothing away. He's filled out since leaving the wheelchair behind, muscle replacing the gauntness of those early months after the shooting.

Lorenzo leans forward, concern breaking through his careful mask. "Are you okay?"

The question hits me like a punch to the chest.

Lorenzo. Beautiful, charming Lorenzo, who once planned to marry Luna Torrino. Who discovered that his brother had been sleeping with his fiancée. Who learned that betrayal had produced a child he'll never be able to forget.

How does he sit at this table with Bruno, who knew about the affair and said nothing? How does he share meals and discuss business and pretend that everything is fine?

I look at Bruno, and Bruno looks at me, and I watch understanding dawn in his dark eyes. He knows. He knows that I know. About Riccardo. About Luna.

"You can talk here if you want." Bruno's voice is quiet. "Everyone in this house knows."

Of course they do.

Everyone knew except me.

I smile, and it feels like cracking glass. "From now on, I won't bother you again."

"Ava—" Lorenzo starts.

"Please." I hold up a hand. "Let me finish."

The table goes silent. Even the kitchen sounds seem to fade.

"I wanted to thank you." My voice doesn't shake. I'm proud of that. "All of you. For making me feel like family. Even after Riccardo died. Even when I walked away and tried to disappear. You kept guards on me. Kept me safe. Kept treating me like I belonged here."

I pause, gathering the pieces of myself that want to scatter.

"I hate you a little bit for not telling me." The words come out softer than I planned when I walked in. "About Riccardo. About Luna. About everything."

No one speaks. No one defends themselves or offers excuses.

"But you had your own wounds." I look around the table, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. "And to be fair, they were bigger than mine. That story was not mine. It was yours and his."

My gaze lands on Lorenzo. He's watching me with an expression I can't quite read—something between pain and understanding and a strange kind of peace.

"I hope you're okay," I tell him. "Truly."

Lorenzo's smile is small but genuine. "Holding on to hatred for dead men feels immature." He shrugs, an elegant movement that somehow contains years of self-reflection. "I tried really hard to be a mature man, given the odds of being raised in this family."

A surprised laugh escapes me. It sounds wrong in the heavy silence, but Lorenzo's smile widens slightly.

"Bruno." I turn back to the Don. "I'll need your help for one more thing."

His dark eyes sharpen. "Name it."

"Within the next few days, I'll call you. I'll explain everything then."

I can't tell them about Nolan. Not yet. Not until I have a plan that doesn't end with everyone at this table dead. Nolan said he's not working alone. Nolan said he'll kill everyone I love if I breathe a word of the truth.

So I won't breathe a word.

I'll just make sure he dies before he can hurt anyone else.

"You'll always be family, Ava." Bruno's voice carries the weight of a vow. "Whatever you want. You just ask."

The words should comfort me. Instead, they feel like a goodbye.

I push back from the table, my coffee untouched. "I need to go."

Antonella rises. "Stay for breakfast at least—"

"I can't." I'm already moving toward the door. If I stay any longer, I'll break. I'll tell them everything. I'll put them all in danger. "Thank you. For everything."

I don't look back as I leave the dining room.

I can't afford to.



Liam

The walls in Bruno's office press in as he speaks, and every word lands like a blade between my ribs.

"She came here this morning," Bruno says. His voice is too calm. Too measured. "Thanked the family. Said her goodbyes." He pauses, watching me. "It felt like a goodbye, Liam. A permanent one."

I'm on my feet before I realize I've moved. Pacing. The carpet muffles my footsteps, but nothing muffles the roar building in my chest.

Something is wrong.

Nolan did something to her. I saw the mark on her cheek. The fear in her eyes she tried to hide behind rage. The way she flinched when I reached for her.

"She texted me asking to make sure you never get near her again," Bruno continues. "Care to explain why?"

I stop pacing. Turn to face him.

"I broke his arm," I say. "And his nose."

Bruno's expression doesn't change. "Whose?"

"Pierce's."

Silence stretches between us. Bruno pinches the bridge of his nose and releases a long breath.

"*Cazzo*." The curse is quiet. Tired. "Why?"

I meet his eyes without flinching.

"He touched her."

Bruno stares at me. Really stares. The kind of look that sees too much, digs too deep.

"Since when," he asks slowly, "do you and Ava have anything between you?"

I exhale. Run a hand through my hair. There's no point lying now.

"Two weeks. Maybe a bit more."

Bruno's jaw tightens. Something dark flickers across his face.

"She was Riccardo's wife, for fuck's sake."

The door opens behind me. Pietro walks in, casual as ever, until he reads the tension in the room and stops.

"Riccardo is dead," I say. My voice comes out harder than I intend. Colder. "And I don't give a fuck."

Bruno's eyes narrow.

"In fact," I continue, "I wouldn't give a fuck even if he was alive."

"Watch your fucking mouth." Bruno's voice drops. A warning. The kind that precedes violence.

"No."

The word hangs in the air. Pietro shifts behind me, but I don't turn. Don't break eye contact with Bruno.

Bruno moves fast. His fist connects with my jaw before I can react, snapping my head to the side. Pain explodes across my face. I taste copper.

Pietro steps between us immediately, hands up. "Bruno—"

"Back off," I tell Pietro. My voice is steady despite the blood pooling in my mouth.

Pietro doesn't move. "Liam—"

"I said back off."

I step around him. Face Bruno directly. The rage I've been swallowing for ten years claws its way up my throat, and I let it come.

"I don't give a fuck how you feel about it either," I say. "None of you do. You all left her in that marriage. Seven years, Bruno. Seven fucking years she tried to give him a child while he was sticking his cock into half of Chicago."

Pietro grabs my arm. "Shut the fuck up if you want to keep breathing."

I shake him off. "You knew, didn't you?" I ask Bruno. "You knew Riccardo was fucking other women. You knew and you said nothing. Let her believe she was the problem. Let her blame herself—"

Bruno's hand moves to his hip. The gun clears the holster before I can finish speaking.

He points it at my chest.

The click of the safety echoes through the room.

"Shoot me then," I say. The words tear out of me. "Go on. Do it."

Pietro pushes me back, positioning himself between us. "Bruno, calm the fuck down—"

I laugh. It sounds wrong. Broken.

"Of course you knew," I say over Pietro's shoulder. "Just like you knew about Luna. How was it, Bruno? Backing up one brother while the other drowned? Lorenzo didn't know his fiancée was fucking Riccardo. But you knew. You always knew."

Bruno's finger tightens on the trigger.

The gunshot is deafening.

Fire rips through my shoulder. I stagger back. Hit the wall.

Blood. Warm and wet, spreading down my arm.

The pain is distant. Muted. Nothing compared to the rage still burning through me.

"Shoot me properly," I hear myself say. My voice sounds far away. "Finish it. Now."

Bruno's face is white. His hand shakes.

"Pietro." His voice cracks. "Get him out of here. Now."

"SHOOT ME!" I roar.

The door bursts open. Antonella stands in the doorway, eyes wide, hand pressed to her mouth.

"What happened?" she breathes.

Lorenzo appears behind her. Takes one look at the blood streaming down my arm and moves.

Pietro and Lorenzo grab me. One on each side. Dragging me toward the door.

I fight them. Twist against their grip.

"Bruno!" I yell. "Fucking finish it! You owe me that much!"

"Get him out," Bruno repeats. His voice is hollow. The gun hangs loose at his side now. "Get him the fuck out of my sight."

They pull me through the doorway. My shoulder screams. Blood drips onto the marble floor, leaving a trail behind us.

I don't want to leave this office.

I want him to end it. End the decade of silence. The decade of watching her love a man who didn't deserve her. The decade of standing by while Riccardo took everything I wanted and laughed about it.

"Let me go," I snarl at Pietro.

"Not a chance." His grip tightens. "You're bleeding out, you stupid bastard."

Lorenzo says nothing. Just keeps dragging me forward.

Antonella follows, her voice high and frightened. "Someone tell me what's happening—"

"Later," Pietro snaps.

The hallway blurs. The blood loss is catching up. My legs feel heavy. Wrong.

But all I can think about is Ava.

Her face when she told me to leave.

She's going to sacrifice herself to save them.

"We need to get to the farmhouse," I manage. My voice sounds weak. I hate it. "Tonight. Pierce—he's got something there. Someone."

"You're going to a fucking hospital," Pietro says.

"The farmhouse—"

"Liam." Pietro stops. Turns me to face him. His expression is grim. "You just got shot. By Bruno. You're not going anywhere except to get that bullet out."

"Ava—"

"Will still be there tomorrow." His voice softens slightly. "Let us handle Pierce tonight. You handle not dying."

Lorenzo signals to someone down the hall. Medical team. Already moving toward us.

The edges of my vision darken.

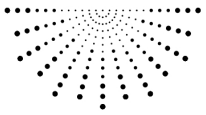
But I don't let go of the one thought keeping me conscious.

Ava is in danger.

And nothing—not Bruno, not a bullet, not my own bleeding body—will stop me from getting to her.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Ava

The leather seat feels cold against my back despite the car's warmth. Pietro drives in silence, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Liam got shot.

Bruno shot him.

The words keep circling in my head like vultures, but they won't land. Won't make sense.

"Can you tell me what happened?" I'm surprised by how steady I sound. "The whole story?"

Pietro's jaw tightens. He doesn't look at me, just keeps his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "Liam talked shit to Bruno."

"He what?" I turn in my seat to face him fully. "What did he say?"

Pietro sighs, the sound heavy with exhaustion. His fingers flex on the wheel before he answers. "He told Bruno he doesn't give a fuck about Riccardo."

The words knock the breath from me.

"And then," Pietro continues, "he asked Bruno how it felt to back up Riccardo while Lorenzo was drowning."

I close my eyes.

"Liam was ready to take all of Bruno's bullets if necessary." Pietro shakes his head slowly. "He just stood there. Bleeding. Telling Bruno to finish the job."

I don't know what to do with this information. Don't know what to think.

"What's going on with Pierce?"

Pietro's question cuts through my spiral. I look at him, and his dark eyes flick to mine briefly before returning to the road.

"Liam keeps saying something's wrong," he presses. "That Pierce is dangerous. And you won't tell him what it is."

I let out a breath that feels like it's been trapped in my chest for days. Maybe weeks. "I'm going to marry Nolan."

The car swerves slightly. Pietro's head whips toward me. "What?"

"I'm going to marry Nolan Pierce." The words taste like ash on my tongue. "It's the best choice I have right now."

"I don't believe that." His voice is sharp now, the casual Pietro replaced by something harder. Something more like the man who runs the Sartori family's operations. "You're not the kind of woman who marries a man like Pierce because it's convenient."

I look at him. Really look at him. At the concern etched into his features, the genuine confusion in his eyes. He doesn't understand. None of them understand.

"Liam had years," I say, and the bitterness floods out before I can stop it. "Years to come clean. Years to tell me Riccardo was fucking other women."

Pietro's expression shifts. Guilt flickers across his face before he can hide it.

"I endured all that pain." My voice wavers, but I push through it. "All those years of doctors and tests and hope and disappointment. All those years of thinking there was something wrong with me. With my body. And Bruno knew. He knew Riccardo had a child with another woman."

The silence in the car feels suffocating.

"I would have preferred that someone had told Riccardo he had a child." I stare out the windshield, watching the city lights streak past like tears. "Told him to go be with Luna and his son. Leave me alone. Leave my body alone."

Pietro doesn't respond immediately. What can he say? There's no excuse. No justification. His family protected Riccardo's secrets while I blamed myself for every failed pregnancy test, every month of heartbreak, every whispered conversation that stopped when I entered a room.

"Ava." His voice is gentle now. Careful. "Whatever Pierce is holding over you—"

"Don't."

"We can help. Liam can—"

"Liam kept his silence for a decade." I turn to face Pietro again, and I can feel the tears threatening, but I refuse to let them fall. "He watched Riccardo treat me like a broodmare who couldn't perform her only function, and he said nothing. He knew about the affairs. He knew I was destroying myself trying to give Riccardo something he'd already gotten from someone else."

Pietro's hands tighten on the wheel again. "He was trying to protect you."

"From what?" I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "From the truth? From making a choice with all the information? He didn't protect me, Pietro. He protected Riccardo. Just like all of you did."

The car slows as we approach the hospital.

"Marrying Pierce won't fix this," Pietro says quietly.

"Maybe not." I gather my bag, my composure, the broken pieces of myself that I've been holding together with nothing but spite and survival instinct. "But it might keep the people I love alive long enough for me to figure out how to destroy him."

Pietro's eyes widen. "Ava—"

"Thank you for the ride." I open the door before the car fully stops. "And thank you for being honest with me. It's more than most people have managed."

I step out into the cold night air, and Pietro calls after me.

"He loves you, you know. Liam. That's why he did it. Why he said all those things to Bruno."

I pause, my hand on the car door. "I know."



My heels click against the linoleum. The nurse at the station doesn't look up as I pass. Pietro must have handled that already.

Room 412.

I push the door open slowly, quietly, and slip inside.

The monitors beep in a steady rhythm. The blinds are half-drawn, casting pale stripes across the bed where Liam lies motionless. His shoulder is wrapped in white bandages, a stark contrast against his skin. Someone removed his shirt. The sheets are pulled to his waist, and I can see the rise and fall of his chest.

He looks younger when he sleeps. The hard lines of his face soften. The permanent furrow between his brows smooths out. For a moment, I just stand there, watching him breathe.

Bruno shot him.

Because of me. Because Liam defended me. Because he couldn't keep his mouth shut about Riccardo.

I move closer, my footsteps silent now. There's a chair beside the bed, but I don't sit. Instead, I lower myself onto the edge of the mattress, careful not to jostle him.

His eyes open.

Gray steel, unfocused for half a second before they sharpen on my face. He tries to sit up immediately, muscles tensing, a grunt of pain escaping through clenched teeth.

"Don't." I plant my palm on his chest, holding him down. His skin is warm beneath my fingers. His heart pounds hard and fast. "Stay."

"Ava—"

"You're going to listen to me." I force my voice to stay level. "Very carefully. And you're not going to interrupt."

His jaw works. That muscle ticks. But he doesn't speak.

I take a breath.

"I'm going to announce my engagement to Nolan."

"Hell no." The words rip out of him, raw and immediate. He tries to rise again, and I push harder, my other hand gripping his uninjured shoulder.

"I said listen."

"I'll kill him." His voice is low, dangerous, stripped of everything polished and controlled. "I'll kill him before you can finish spelling those words. I'll—"

"Liam." I lean closer, my face inches from his. "Shut. Up."

He goes still beneath my hands. His breathing is ragged. His eyes burn into mine with something desperate and furious.

"You are not allowed to touch him," I say. Each word a command. "You are not allowed to get in the middle of this. If you want to help me, you will dig into him. Follow him. Find out who he's working with. There's someone else. He told me he's not alone."

Liam's hands fist in the sheets. "Ava—"

"Until you find them, you cannot harm him. Do you understand? If you do—" The words catch in my throat. I swallow hard and force myself to continue. "If you touch him before I say, I will never forgive you. And you will never see me again. For the rest of your life."

Silence.

The monitors beep. Somewhere down the hall, a cart rattles past.

"What the hell did he say to you?" Liam's voice is barely a whisper. "What did he do?"

I can't answer that. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Instead, I reach down and take his hand. His fingers curl around mine instantly, holding on like I might disappear.

A tear escapes. Just one. It slides down my cheek before I can stop it.

"Ava." My name is a broken thing in his mouth. "Please. Tell me what he did."

I lean forward and press my lips to his.

The kiss is soft. Brief. A goodbye that tastes like salt and a feeling I can't name. His hand tightens around mine, and I feel him start to pull me closer.

I don't let him.

I pull back. Stand up. My fingers slip from his grasp.

"Find who he's working with," I say. "That's how you help me."

"Ava, don't do this." He's struggling to sit up again, pain etched across his face. "Don't fucking do this. Let me help you. Let me—"

"You are helping me." I'm already at the door. My hand rests on the handle. "This is how."

"I love you."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I freeze, my back to him, unable to turn around.

"I've loved you for ten years," he says. "And I will not watch you marry that man. I won't. So whatever you're planning, whatever you think you have to do alone—you're wrong. We do this together or not at all."

My throat burns. My chest aches.

"Find his partner," I say. "Then we'll talk."

I open the door and walk out.



The corridor stretches endlessly before me. I walk without seeing, my heels clicking that same measured rhythm. One foot in front of the other. Don't stop. Don't think. Don't feel.

I love you.

If I had met him earlier, would I have felt this way? Would I have fallen for him?

Or is this something different?

This ache in my chest. This desperate need to go back into that room and tell him everything. The way his hand felt wrapped around mine, like he would never let go.

Is this love?

I don't know. I've been wrong before. I thought I knew what love was, and I spent years discovering I was married to a stranger.

But this feeling—this terrifying, consuming, impossible feeling—

It doesn't matter.

I push through the hospital's front doors and step into the cold night air. Pietro is waiting by the car, his face grim.

"He's going to come after you," Pietro says. "You know that."

"He won't." I open the back door. "He'll do what I asked."

"You're betting a lot on that."

I slide into the car and stare straight ahead.

"I'm betting everything."

Pietro doesn't respond. He just closes my door and walks around to the driver's side.

As we pull away from the hospital, I allow myself one glance in the side mirror. The building grows smaller behind us. Somewhere inside, Liam is probably already trying to get out of bed. Probably already planning how to ignore every word I said.

But he won't. At some point, he'll calm down and play this smart.

He'll find who Nolan is working with. He'll dig until he uncovers every secret, every connection, every weakness.

And then I'll kill the bastard myself.

Until that day, I can endure not seeing him. I can endure the silence, the distance, the ache of wanting something I can't have.

I press my palm against the cold glass and close my eyes.

I love you.

Maybe I do.

Maybe I've been falling for him since that first night in my bedroom. When he let his eyes do all the talking he refused to do.

Maybe love doesn't arrive all at once. Maybe sometimes it grows in the spaces between anger and longing, between secrets and silence.

It doesn't matter.

Love won't save Julian. Love won't stop Nolan. Love won't bring back the years I wasted on a man who never deserved me.

But revenge might.



Liam

The clinic ceiling has seventeen tiles from my bed to the door. I've counted them four times since Ava walked out. The Sartoris own this clinic and I can’t even count how many times men have died in here all these years.

My shoulder throbs where Bruno's bullet tore through muscle and grazed bone. The doctors stitched me up, pumped me full of antibiotics, and

told me I'm lucky the shot went clean through. Lucky. That's one word for it.

I reach for my phone on the bedside table. The movement sends fire through my shoulder, but I don't care. Pain is good. Pain keeps me sharp.

Dante answers on the second ring.

"You're supposed to be resting," he says.

"I need you here. Bring everything you have on Pierce. Every file, every photograph, every scrap of paper with his name on it."

Silence stretches across the line. I can picture Dante in his office, dark eyes calculating, already running through scenarios.

"The doctors cleared you to work?" His tone says he already knows the answer.

"The doctors said I'm stuck here for three days." I shift against the pillows and wince. "I may have encouraged them to reconsider releasing me early."

"Encouraged."

"I showed one of them my gun."

Dante exhales slowly. "Cristo, Liam. You threatened a doctor with a weapon?"

"He was being unreasonable about my recovery timeline."

"Three days is unreasonable?"

"Three hours is unreasonable. Ava just told me she's marrying Pierce." The admission burns in my mouth. "So yes, lying in this bed while that bastard puts his hands on her is fucking unreasonable."

Another pause. When Dante speaks again, his voice is lower. Careful.

"I'll bring the files. But there's something you should know first."

My fingers tighten on the phone. "What?"

"The Ashfords called Bruno. They've requested no Sartori presence on their property. Effective immediately."

The words hit harder than Bruno's bullet.

"What do you mean, no presence?"

"I mean they want us gone. All of us. Luca pulled out two hours ago. Fabio left before dawn." Dante's voice carries an edge of frustration. "Whatever happened at that dinner, Pierce convinced Franklin to cut ties."

"Fuck." I push myself upright, ignoring the scream of protest from my shoulder. "Fuck."

"That about sums it up."

Ava is alone in that house. Alone with Pierce and whatever threats he's holding over her head. Alone with her father who's too blind or too compromised to see the monster he's invited into his home. Alone with Sylvia, who probably handed Pierce the keys herself.

"I need those files, Dante. Tonight."

"I said I'll bring them." He hesitates. "But first, I need to ask you something."

"Ask."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

The question hangs between us. I stare at the ceiling tiles again. Eighteen. I miscounted.

"You walked into Bruno's office and said things that got you shot," Dante continues. "Bruno. You stood there and threw every ugly truth you could find at him until he pulled the trigger."

"He needed to hear it."

"Did he? Or did you need to say it?"

My jaw clenches. The pain in my shoulder is nothing compared to the pressure building in my chest.

"There are things Bruno hasn't heard enough," I say slowly. "Things he's spent years avoiding because facing them would mean admitting what he caused."

Dante is quiet for a long moment.

"You love her," he says finally. Not a question.

"I've loved her from the moment I first saw her. And I watched this family—my family—destroy her without ever laying a hand on her."

"So you decided to burn it all down?"

"I decided to stop pretending." I close my eyes. "I might love this family, Dante. I do love you. But I loved you because of how you treated each other. Because when I had nothing, you gave me everything."

"And now?"

"Now I've seen how some of you treat the people who can't fight back. Luna was a snake, fine. She deserved what she got. But Ava?" My voice cracks on her name. "Ava did nothing except love a man who didn't deserve her. And they let her suffer to protect his memory. I let her suffer too."

The silence stretches long enough that I wonder if Dante has hung up.

"Bruno is furious," he says at last. "Lorenzo had to physically restrain him after you left. He wanted to finish what he started."

"He should have."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? At least then I wouldn't have to lie here knowing Ava is in that house with Pierce and I can't do a goddamn thing about it."

Dante sighs. The sound carries exhaustion, frustration, and something that might be understanding.

"I'll be there in an hour," he says. "With everything we have on Pierce."

"Make it thirty minutes."

"Liam—"

"She told me to investigate him. To find out who he's working with." I open my eyes and stare at the door Ava walked through. "She's playing some game with Pierce, and she won't tell me the rules. But she asked me to dig. So I'm going to dig until I find something that buries him."

"And if Bruno orders you to stand down?"

"Bruno can go fuck himself."

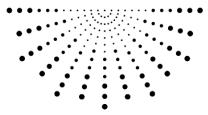
Another sigh. "I'll be there soon. Try not to threaten any more medical staff before I arrive."

The line goes dead.

I let the phone drop onto the mattress and press my hand against the bandage on my shoulder. Blood is seeping through the gauze.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Ava

I asked Dad to ride with me today, just the two of us, before he heads to one of his companies. He agreed without question, probably assuming I wanted comfort after everything with Julian.

I watch the city thin out, glass towers giving way to trees and open sky. My hands rest in my lap, perfectly still. I've practiced this conversation a dozen times in the mirror, rehearsed the smile, the lightness in my voice.

"I've made a decision," I say, turning to face him. "About Nolan."

His attention sharpens. "Oh?"

"I'm going to marry him."

My father's face transforms. The tension he's carried melts away, replaced by pure, uncomplicated joy. I haven't seen my father like this in years.

"Ava." He reaches for my hand, squeezing tight. "Are you serious? You're not just saying this to make an old man happy?"

I force my lips to curve upward. "I'm serious."

"My God." He laughs, actually laughs, and the sound is so foreign that I almost flinch. "I was starting to think—well, it doesn't matter what I thought. This is wonderful news. Nolan will be thrilled."

Nolan will be thrilled because he's getting exactly what he wants.

I keep my expression pleasant. Interested. Like a woman in love.

"I have to admit," he continues, still holding my hand, "I was worried. There was talk, you know. About you and that security man. Blackwood."

My heart stutters, but I don't let it show on my face. "Talk?"

"People said you two were close. Too close, perhaps." He studies me with those sharp Ashford eyes. "Sylvia mentioned something about seeing you together. And the way he looked at you at dinner, before he attacked Nolan..."

"There was nothing between us." The lie slides out smooth as silk. "Liam Blackwood was my bodyguard. That's all."

Dad exhales. Relief softens the lines around his mouth. "Good. That's good. I didn't want to believe it, but you understand—a man like that. No family, no background worth mentioning. You deserve better, sweetheart."

A man like that held me while I fell apart. A man like that loved me for ten years and never asked for anything in return.

I swallow the words and nod.

"But I need a favor," I say, shifting the conversation before the ache in my chest becomes visible. "Nolan mentioned wanting to move quickly. A fast engagement, a faster wedding."

"That sounds reasonable. Strike while the iron is hot, as they say."

"I don't want that."

His brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

I take a breath, letting real emotion color my voice. This part, at least, I don't have to fake.

"Winter and spring," I say quietly. "My wedding to Riccardo was in March. He died in February, at Bruno's wedding. I can't—" I pause, pressing my lips together. "I can't plan a wedding during those months. I can't choose flowers and taste cakes while everything reminds me of what I've lost."

Understanding dawns in my father's eyes. He pulls me into an embrace, his arms tight around me, and for a moment I let myself sink into it. Let myself pretend this is real, that I'm simply a grieving woman asking for time.

"Say no more," he murmurs against my hair. "I'll speak to Nolan myself. A summer wedding. That gives you plenty of time to heal, to prepare. He'll understand."

He won't understand. He'll be furious. But he won't refuse you, because he needs your blessing as much as he needs me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

Dad releases me, holding me at arm's length. His eyes are wet. "I just want you to be happy, Ava. I know I haven't always shown it well, but everything I've done—it's been for you and Julian. For this family."

The guilt is a knife between my ribs. He truly believes this marriage will save me. Protect me. Give me the future he thinks I deserve.

He has no idea I'm walking into a cage with a monster, planning to burn it down from the inside.

We sit in comfortable silence as the car turns onto the long drive leading to Fairhaven. The paddocks stretch out on either side, horses grazing in the morning sun. Normally this view calms me. Today it feels distant, like I'm watching it through glass.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

"Anything."

"Have you stopped looking for her? For my mother?"

Franklin goes very still. The question hangs between us, heavy with two decades of silence.

"Yes," he finally says. "We stopped years ago. The investigators found nothing. No trace, no evidence, no body. It was as if she simply vanished."

"And you never searched again?"

He shakes his head slowly. "What would be the point? She's gone, Ava. Whether she's dead or whether she chose to leave us. Either way, she's gone."

I nod, filing this away.

"I want access to her file," I say. "The missing person reports, the investigation notes, whatever you have."

Franklin's eyebrows rise. "May I ask why?"

"I don't know, exactly." I turn to look out the window, watching the fences blur past. "I've been thinking about her lately. More than usual. Remembering things—small things. The way she smelled. The songs she used to sing when she thought no one was listening."

"You were so young when she disappeared. I'm surprised you remember anything."

"That's just it. I shouldn't remember as much as I do." I rest my palm against the cool glass. "But lately it feels like she's closer, somehow. Like

she's been on my mind for a reason I can't explain."

He says nothing for several seconds. When I glance back at him, his expression is unreadable.

"I'll arrange it," he says finally. "In fact, I've wondered for years which of you would ask first. You or Julian."

"Julian never asked?"

"Never. He was so young when Oriana left. I don't think he has any real memories of her." Franklin's voice carries old grief, worn smooth by time. "But you were ten years old. You adored her. I always knew this day would come."

The car pulls up to the stables, and I see Nero's dark head already visible over his stall door, waiting for me.

"Thank you," I say, gathering my bag. "For the file. For understanding about the wedding."

He catches my wrist before I can open the door. "Ava. I know I failed you in many ways. I know this house, this family... we weren't what you needed after Oriana left. But I'm trying. I hope you can see that."

I lean in and kiss his cheek. His skin is papery, thinner than I remember.

"I see it," I tell him.

Another lie. Another performance.

I step out of the car and walk toward the stables, toward the only creature in the world who asks nothing of me but presence. Behind me, I hear the car pull away, carrying my father back to his companies, his deals and his blind trust in a man who is about to kill us all.

Eight months.

That's what I've bought myself. Eight months to find out who Nolan is working with. Eight months to gather evidence. Eight months to plan the murder of my future husband.

Vampires and forbidden love.

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And somewhere out there, Liam is hunting for the same answers.

I just have to survive long enough to use them.



Liam

The elevator doors slide open with a soft chime.

I step inside, my shoulder screaming with every movement. The bandages pull tight against the wound, but I've had worse. Walked off worse. This is nothing compared to what's coming.

"Sir?"

A nurse appears at the elevator doors, clipboard pressed against her chest. Young. Nervous. The kind who still believes hospitals are places where people follow rules.

"Where are you going?"

"Home." I press the button for the ground floor. "Signed the discharge papers. Left them on the bed."

"Sir, you're not allowed to leave. The doctor hasn't—"

"Best for you," I say, meeting her eyes, "is to not tell me what I'm allowed to do."

She opens her mouth. Closes it. Something in my face must convince her that arguing would be a waste of oxygen.

The doors slide shut.

I lean against the elevator wall, letting the cool metal press against my good shoulder. The files Dante brought me are burned into my memory now. Twelve hours of reading. Twelve hours of piecing together the shape of Nolan Pierce's empire while my shoulder throbbed and the nurses kept trying to pump me full of painkillers I refused. I don't take anything that dulls my head.

The elevator reaches the ground floor. I push off the wall and walk through the lobby, ignoring the stares from the reception desk. My shirt is wrinkled. My hair is a mess. There's probably still blood on my collar from when Bruno's bullet tore through muscle and grazed bone.

Good. Let them stare.

The automatic doors open, and Chicago's cold night air cuts across my face. I breathe it in.

A black car idles at the curb.

Fabio leans against the driver's side door, arms crossed, watching me approach with an expression I can't quite read.

"You're supposed to be at the farmhouse," I say.

"Plans changed." He doesn't move. "Dante called. Said you might do something stupid."

"I'm leaving a hospital. Not storming a compound."

"Yet."

I stop in front of him. The streetlight catches the angles of his face, the permanent tiredness in his eyes that comes from raising a daughter alone while working for men who kill.

"Are you suicidal?" he asks.

The question lands like a punch. Not because it's wrong, but because it's the first honest thing anyone's said to me in days.

I think about Bruno's gun. The way I stood there, bleeding, and told him to finish it. The way some part of me wanted him to pull the trigger again. Make it easy. Make the wanting stop.

"No," I say. "I was just late."

Fabio's eyebrow lifts.

"Late to react," I clarify. "On everything that had to do with Ava. I should have reacted a long time ago."



The flat is dark when I enter.

I don't bother with the lights. Don't need them. I know every corner of this place, every shadow, every creak in the floorboards. Twelve years I've lived here, and it's never felt emptier than it does right now.

The shoulder wound is manageable.

The pain in my chest is another matter entirely.

I make it to the bedroom and stop in the doorway. The bed is still unmade. The sheets are tangled, the duvet pushed to one side. Evidence of her. Of us.

I cross to the bed and lower myself onto the mattress, biting back a grunt as my shoulder protests. The movement pulls at the stitches, sends a fresh wave of heat down my arm. I ignore it.

Her pillow sits on the left side. The side she claimed without asking, like she belonged there. Like she'd always belonged there.

I reach for it.

The fabric is cool under my fingers. Soft. I lift it to my face and breathe in, and there she is. That subtle scent of jasmine.

My eyes close.

Part of me wants Nolan Pierce in pieces. Wants to feel his bones crack under my hands, wants to watch the light leave his eyes while I make him pay for every second he's spent near her. For touching her. For frightening her. For whatever he did that put that red mark on her cheek and that look in her eyes.

The rage is a living thing inside me. It coils and writhes and demands release.

But Ava told me to stand down.

I press the pillow closer. Inhale again.

She's the most extraordinary woman I've ever known. Sharp and fierce and so bloody intelligent it takes my breath away. She walked into that family dinner with Pierce after he'd hurt her, sat beside him, laughed at his jokes, played her part so perfectly that even I almost believed it. Almost.

If she says she needs me to leave Pierce alive, there's a reason.

My jaw clenches at the memory of her kiss at the hospital. The brief press of her lips against mine. The way her hand closed around mine, just for a moment. The way she pulled back before I could deepen it, before I could hold her there and make her stay.

That kiss wasn't passion.

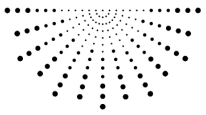
It was goodbye.

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling. The shadows shift and move, streetlight filtering through the blinds in thin strips.

She won't want me after this. I see that now.

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CHAPTER THIRTY



Ava

The phone feels warm against my ear, pressed there for the past ten minutes while I pace the length of the living room.

"Mrs. Sartori, my name is Helen Jones. I'm a private investigator." The woman's voice carries the weight of someone who's been doing this work for decades. Steady. Professional. "Your father contacted me yesterday and asked if I would reach out to you directly. He said you might have questions about an old case."

My heart stutters. "Thank you for calling."

I move toward my bedroom, away from the possibility of Sylvia appearing. The door clicks shut behind me, and I lean against it, letting the solid wood support my weight.

"I'd like to meet with you," I say. "I want to know what happened with the investigation. Everything you found."

There's a pause. Papers rustling. "I understand, but there isn't much to share in person that I can't send you digitally. Your father asked us to stop the investigation eighteen months after your mother disappeared."

"He stopped looking after eighteen months?"

"Mrs. Sartori—" Her voice softens. "I was working with my own father back then. I was younger, still learning the business. But I remember this

case clearly because of how devastated your father was when he made that call."

I sink onto the edge of my bed, the mattress dipping beneath me. The same bed where Nolan pinned me down. Where Alfie got hurt protecting me.

"Devastated," I repeat. The word feels hollow.

"He could barely get the words out. Said he couldn't keep hoping anymore. That it was destroying him to keep searching for someone who clearly didn't want to be found. Something like that." Helen pauses. "Some cases stay with you. This one stayed with me."

I close my eyes. My father, the man who built an empire through sheer force of will, brought to his knees by my mother's absence. The same man who just handed me over to a monster like I was a business acquisition.

People are complicated. I know this. But knowing it doesn't make it hurt less.

"I'll email you everything," Helen continues. "I've digitized all my old case files. It's easier that way. You'll have the complete record of what we investigated, where we looked, who we spoke to."

"Thank you." I keep my voice level. "I appreciate you taking the time."

"Of course. And Mrs. Sartori?" She hesitates. "Sometimes cold cases get solved decades later. Technology improves. People talk. If you want to reopen this investigation properly, I'm still in the business."

"I'll keep that in mind."

We exchange pleasantries and end the call.

I stare at my phone's black screen, my reflection ghostlike in the glass.

This isn't helping.

I know digging into my mother's disappearance does nothing to solve the Nolan problem. She vanished twenty-four years ago. Whatever happened to her won't tell me who Nolan is working with, won't reveal the leverage I need to destroy him before he destroys everyone I love.

But Liam is investigating Nolan. I gave him orders. Clear instructions.

And until Liam has something concrete, I'm stuck here. Playing the blushing fiancée. Smiling at dinner. Letting Nolan touch my hand while bile rises in my throat.

I need to do *something* other than wait.

My mother's case is something. A puzzle to occupy my mind. A distraction from—

Liam.

His name moves through me like a physical ache.

I was so worried. When Pietro told me Bruno shot him, my heart stopped. Actually stopped. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except get to that hospital and see for myself that he was still breathing.

I press a hand to my chest, as if I could reach through skin and bone to quiet the chaos underneath.

A knock on my door makes me flinch.

"Ava?" Julian's voice, muffled through the wood. "You in there?"

I clear my throat. "Yeah. Come in."

The door swings open, and my brother leans against the frame. His face looks better than it has in weeks. Less haunted. The cut on his temple has faded to a thin pink line.

"You look tired," he says cheerfully.

"Thanks. Really appreciate that."

Julian grins, and for a moment he looks like the boy I used to chase through these hallways.

"I'm bored," he announces. "And you've been locked in this room all morning doing God knows what. So I'm proposing we get out of here."

I raise an eyebrow. "Get out where?"

"Anywhere. A restaurant. A bar. Somewhere that isn't this place." He gestures vaguely at the bedroom walls, at the cold perfection of the Ashford estate. "I want greasy food, bad lighting, and a waiter who doesn't know my net worth."

Despite everything, a small laugh escapes me. "That's oddly specific."

"I've been thinking about it for approximately three days." Julian pushes off the doorframe and steps into the room. His eyes sweep over me. "Come on, Ava. When's the last time we just... hung out? Like normal people?"

Normal.

The word feels foreign. A language I used to speak but have long since forgotten.

"I'm not sure I remember how to be normal," I admit.

"Neither do I." Julian shrugs. "But we can fake it together. That's what siblings are for, right? Mutual delusion?"

I look at my brother. At the hope in his eyes, fragile and determined. He's trying. Despite everything Nolan did to him, Julian is standing in my

doorway asking me to have lunch with him like none of it happened.

Maybe that's strength. Maybe it's denial. Either way, I don't want to be the one who crushes it.

"Okay," I hear myself say.

Julian's face lights up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I stand, my legs stiff from sitting too long. "Let me get dressed. Give me twenty minutes."

"Take your time. I'll be downstairs, avoiding Sylvia." He makes a face that tells me exactly how his morning has been going. "She keeps asking me about the engagement. Wants to know if you've picked a date yet."

My stomach clenches, but I keep my expression neutral. "What did you tell her?"

"That I'm not your wedding planner and she should mind her own business." Julian's grin returns, sharper now. "She didn't appreciate that."

"I imagine she didn't."

He backs toward the door. "Twenty minutes, Ava. Don't make me come back up here and drag you out."

"I'll be ready."

Julian disappears into the hallway, and I hear his footsteps retreating toward the stairs.

I let out a long breath.

Okay. Normal. I can do normal.



Liam

The knocking drags me up from somewhere dark and thick. My head pounds like someone's taken a hammer to it. I don't know what day it is. Don't know what time. Don't know much of anything except that my shoulder screams when I roll over, and my mouth tastes like something died in it.

The knocking doesn't stop.

I shove myself upright. The room tilts. I grab the edge of the bed until the world steadies, then force my legs to carry me to the door.

When I open it, three men stand in my hallway.

Pietro. Lorenzo. And Bruno.

I look at Bruno. At the hard set of his jaw and the cold darkness in his eyes.

"Came to finish the job?" I ask.

My voice sounds like gravel scraped over concrete. Bruno's expression doesn't change. Doesn't flicker. He just stares at me like I'm something he's still deciding whether to scrape off his shoe.

"Go wash your face," Pietro says. "Get back here with less talking."

I brace one hand against the doorframe. The movement pulls at my shoulder, and I feel the bandage shift beneath my shirt. "What time is it?"

"Seven in the evening," Lorenzo says.

Seven in the evening. I got back here around... I don't even remember. Sometime last night. Which means I've been out for at least twenty hours.

No wonder I feel like shit.

Before I turn to head to the bathroom, I look at Lorenzo. "Ava. Something happen to her?"

"No," he says.

The word brings a flicker of relief. Just enough that I can breathe without the air catching in my throat.

I nod once and walk toward the bathroom.

My legs feel like they belong to someone else. Heavy. Uncooperative. The flat is dark, and I don't bother turning on lights.

The bathroom light hurts my eyes when I flip the switch.

I need to piss first. That's the priority. Although I remember now, somewhere in the fog of the last hours, I got up at some point. Made it to the toilet.

I handle that, then turn on the tap. Cold water. I splash it on my face once. Twice. Three times. Let it drip down my jaw and onto my shirt. The shock of it clears some of the haze from my head.

Not enough. But some.

I stare at myself in the mirror.

I look like death. Pale and tired.

Maybe that's fitting.

I dry my face with a towel and walk back out.

They've made themselves comfortable in my living room. Pietro sprawls on the sofa like he owns it. Lorenzo stands by the window, arms crossed, watching the city lights below. Bruno sits in the armchair with his hands folded in his lap.

"Sit," Pietro says.

I don't argue. My legs are grateful for the excuse. I lower myself onto the opposite end of the sofa, careful not to jostle my shoulder. The movement still sends a spike of pain through me.

Then I look at Bruno.

He meets my gaze. Holds it.

Bruno clears his throat.

"I apologize."

The words come out rough. Like they're being dragged over broken glass. Like every syllable costs him something he doesn't want to pay.

I watch him for a long moment. The tension in his jaw. The way his hands stay perfectly still in his lap, controlled, when I know he wants to clench them.

"Who threatened you into doing such a thing?" I ask.

Bruno's eyes flash. Fury, bright and hot. For a second I think he might finish what he started. Put another bullet in me, this time somewhere more permanent.

Then the anger fades. And a sad smile takes its place.

"Being angry at everyone," Bruno says quietly. "That was always easy for me."

He pauses. Looks down at his hands.

"I shouldn't have shot you. You were speaking the truth."

I don't say anything. There's nothing to say.

"I'm not the best person on this planet," Bruno continues. His voice is low, measured. "I know that. But I've always tried to make the right choices. Even when that meant choosing between my brothers."

My gaze shifts to Lorenzo.

Lorenzo hasn't moved from the window. His face is carefully blank. But I see the tension in his shoulders.

"I don't owe you an explanation," Bruno says. "But I'll give you one anyway."

He leans forward slightly.

"I did what I did because I couldn't hurt Lorenzo that way. Not again. Not after everything." Bruno's voice drops. "So I hurt Riccardo instead. By never telling him Luna was still alive. By never telling him he had a son."

The room goes quiet.

"Because what Riccardo did to Lorenzo was cruel," Bruno finishes. "And someone had to answer for that."

I nod.

There's nothing else to do. Nothing else to say. Bruno made a choice. Protected one brother by punishing another. Whether it was right or wrong—that's not for me to judge.

"Ava is family," Bruno says. His eyes find mine again. Steady. "But none of us can stand in the middle of what you want. Or what she wants."

He pauses.

"If you believe Riccardo's memory doesn't deserve that kind of respect, that's between you and her."

I nod again.

I understand what he's saying. He's not giving me permission. He's not telling me to pursue Ava. He's stepping back. Removing himself from the equation.

What happens next is up to us.

"So." Lorenzo pushes off from the window. His voice is carefully neutral. "What's going on? We heard the Ashfords went public. 'Wedding of the year,' apparently."

I sigh.

The sound comes from somewhere deep in my chest. Somewhere tired.

"I don't know," I admit.

"Do you need anything from me?" Bruno asks.

I meet his gaze.

"Time off," I say. "To work on this."

Bruno nods.

"Fabio," I continue. "And if it comes to it later—more men."

Another nod.

Bruno stands. He crosses the space between us. I push myself to my feet to meet him, ignoring the protest from my shoulder.

He extends his hand.

I take it.

His grip is firm. Strong. The handshake of a man who means what he says.

Then Bruno pulls me in. A brief embrace—one arm around my back, careful of the wound he put there. The kind of contact men like us don't exchange often. The kind that means something.

"Find out what that bastard is doing to her," Bruno says quietly, close to my ear. "And when you do—end him."

He releases me. Steps back. Turns without another word and walks toward the door.

I watch him go.

Pietro rises from the sofa with a grunt. "Try not to get shot again," he says. "It's inconvenient."

"I'll do my best."

He claps me on my good shoulder as he passes. Lorenzo follows, pausing briefly at the door.

"She's stronger than any of us give her credit for," Lorenzo says. "Remember that."

Then they're gone.

The flat is quiet again.

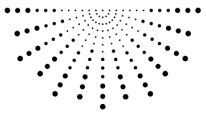
I stand there for a long moment. Processing.

I walk to the window. Look out at the city spread below me. Somewhere out there, Ava is in that house with Pierce. Wearing his ring. Planning a wedding she doesn't want.

Waiting for me to find what she needs.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Ava

The restaurant hums with quiet conversation and the soft clink of ceramic. Steam rises from the bowl of miso soup in front of me, carrying the familiar scent of dashi and tofu. I've always loved Japanese food. The clean flavors, the precision, the way each dish arrives like a small work of art.

Julian sits across from me, his chopsticks hovering over a plate of salmon sashimi. The bandage on his left hand is smaller now, less bulky, but I still can't look at it without my stomach turning.

"So," I say, picking up a piece of yellowtail with my chopsticks. "Are you still seeing that girl? The one you mentioned before everything happened?"

Julian shakes his head, dipping his salmon into a pool of soy sauce. "Nah. That fizzled out."

"Already? It's been what, three months?"

"Two and a half." He pops the fish into his mouth and chews thoughtfully. "She was sweet, but... not really my type."

I raise an eyebrow. "You have a type?"

"Everyone has a type, Ava."

"And what's yours? Blonde? Brunette? Someone who laughs at your terrible jokes?"

Julian grins, that boyish smile that makes him look younger than his twenty-five years. "Older."

I pause, my chopsticks suspended midair. "Older?"

"Yeah." He shrugs like this is the most obvious thing in the world. "I don't really enjoy spending time with women younger than me. Or my age, honestly. They're fine, but..." He trails off, reaching for his sake.

"But what?"

"I like older women." He says it plainly, no embarrassment, no hesitation.

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. "I didn't know that about you."

"There's lots you don't know about me." He winks. "I'm a man of mystery."

"You're a man of something, that's for sure."

Julian takes a sip of sake and sets the cup down with a soft click. "Look, maybe a psychologist would say it has something to do with the mother I lost. Early abandonment, seeking maternal figures, blah, blah, blah." He waves his hand dismissively. "I don't really care. Older women are hot as hell."

I nearly choke on my edamame. "Julian."

"What? It's true."

"I don't need to know what you find hot."

"You asked."

"I asked if you were seeing someone, not for a detailed breakdown of your preferences."

He laughs, bright and genuine, and for a moment everything feels normal. Like we're just two siblings having dinner, catching up on life. Like there isn't a monster waiting for me at home. Like I'm not going to start planning a murder.

"Fine, fine." Julian holds up his hands in surrender. "No more information about what happens in my bed."

"Thank you." I take a sip of my green tea, letting the warmth settle in my chest. "I appreciate your restraint."

We eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes. The sushi chef behind the counter works with practiced precision, his knife moving in smooth,

confident strokes. I focus on my food, on the delicate balance of flavors, on anything that isn't the weight pressing down on my shoulders.

"Ava."

I look up. Julian's expression has shifted. The playfulness is gone, replaced by something sharper. More serious.

"What's going on with Nolan?"

My chopsticks still. "What do you mean?"

"Don't." His voice is quiet but firm. "I know you. I've known you my whole life. Whatever is happening with this engagement, it's not good, and you're keeping me in the dark."

I set my chopsticks down carefully, lining them up on the ceramic rest. "Julian—"

"You've been different since he showed up with me." He leans forward, lowering his voice. "You agreed to marry him out of nowhere. You're barely sleeping. You flinch every time someone mentions his name. And that night at dinner, when Liam broke his arm—"

"Liam overreacted."

"Did he?"

I meet my brother's eyes. They're dark like mine, like our mother's. Full of the same stubborn determination that runs through both of us.

"Everything is going to be fine," I say. The lie sits bitter on my tongue.

Julian shakes his head slowly. "What is going on?"

My throat tightens. I want to tell him everything. About the video on Nolan's phone. About the way Nolan pinned me to the bed, his voice promising to destroy everyone I love. About Alfie's small body hitting the wall.

But if I tell Julian, he'll do something reckless. He'll confront Nolan, or try to protect me, and Nolan will kill him. Nolan showed me exactly what he's capable of. He's not working alone. And Julian—my sweet, impulsive, too-brave brother—would get himself killed trying to save me.

I can't let that happen.

"I might look unsettled," I say carefully, "because I've been looking into Mom's file."

Julian blinks. Whatever he expected me to say, it wasn't that.

"Mom's file?"

"The investigation. From when she disappeared." I pick up my tea again, wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic. "Dad gave me access

to everything."

"Why?"

I stare into the pale green liquid. "I don't know."

It's not entirely a lie. I did ask for the files. I did spend hours last night reading through witness statements and police reports and dead-end leads. Helen Jones' voice still echoes in my head: *Your father stopped the investigation after eighteen months because he was devastated and couldn't keep hoping.*

"I've been thinking about her more lately," I continue. "With everything that's happened." I look up at him. "Maybe I just need to understand. Why she left. Where she went. If she's even still alive."

Julian falls silent, his jaw working as if he's chewing on words he doesn't want to say.

"Do you want help?" he finally asks. "I can look through the files with you. Maybe a fresh set of eyes..."

"That would be nice." I manage a small smile. "Thank you."

He nods, and I can see him filing away his questions about Nolan. For now. The distraction worked.

This is how I keep him safe. By keeping him in the dark.

It's the same thing Liam did to me for years. The same thing the whole Sartori family did. Protecting me by lying to me.

I hated them for it.

Now I somehow understand. Though I still hate them.

Will Julian hate me too?

Julian reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. His grip is warm and familiar, careful around his injured finger. "Whatever you need, Ava. I'm here."

I squeeze back, blinking against the burning behind my eyes. "I know."

We finish our meal in easier silence. Julian tells me about a book he's reading, some thriller about spies and double-crosses.



I open the front door.

Nolan stands on the threshold, his broken forearm secured in a splint and his other fist raised to knock, his smile spreading like oil across water. My heart slams against my ribs so hard I'm certain he can see it through my blouse. Instinct tells me to run, to slam the door, to claw his eyes out the way Alfie did.

I do none of those things.

"Ava." He says my name like he owns it. Like he owns me. "Perfect timing."

"Nolan." I keep my voice light, pleasant. "I was just heading out."

He doesn't ask where. He doesn't care. Instead, he pulls me into an embrace that makes my skin crawl, his arms wrapping around me like a cage. I force myself not to stiffen, not to flinch, not to give him any sign that his touch makes me want to vomit.

"Walk with me," he says against my hair. It's not a request.

I step back, creating distance between us, and nod. "Of course."

We move down the front steps and onto the gravel path that winds through the gardens. The afternoon sun filters through the bare trees, casting long shadows across the lawn. It's beautiful here. Peaceful. The kind of place where nothing bad should ever happen.

But I learned a long time ago that beautiful places hide the ugliest secrets.

Nolan walks close enough that our shoulders almost brush.

"I have to say," Nolan begins, his tone conversational, almost friendly, "I'm surprised by how well you've cooperated."

I keep my gaze forward, watching the path ahead. "Did you expect something different?"

"I expected more fight from Riccardo Sartori's widow." He chuckles, low and amused. "But you've been pleasant. Agreeable. I find myself liking you more than I anticipated."

The words slide down my spine like ice water. I don't want him to like me. I want him dead. I want to watch the light leave his eyes.

But that's not what I say.

I stop walking and turn to face him. The sunlight catches his features, highlighting the fading scratches Alfie left across his cheek. Good. I hope they scar.

"I'll do whatever is necessary," I tell him, my voice steady, "to ensure my father and brother are never harmed."

It's the truth. Just not all of it.

Nolan studies me for a long moment, his pale eyes searching my face.

"Such devotion to family," he murmurs. "I admire that."

We continue walking. My mind races beneath the calm surface, calculating, planning. Julian is waiting for me at Johan's house across town. I told him we should do our research there, not here. At the time, I wasn't sure why. Just a feeling, an instinct honed by years of living in a world where your enemies can always find a way inside.

Now, watching Nolan move through these gardens like he belongs here, I understand.

He had access to this house for months. Months of dinners, meetings, casual visits while he wormed his way into my father's trust. If he could breach Vittoria's security system at my apartment, plant himself in my bedroom while I slept, then cameras in my father's house would be child's play.

My bedroom. The thought makes bile rise in my throat.

Has he been watching me this whole time? The violation of it burns through my veins, but I push it down, bury it deep where he can't see.

"Your father spoke to me this morning," Nolan says, pulling me from my thoughts. "About the wedding."

My pulse spikes, but I keep walking, keep my expression neutral. "Oh?"

"He requested a summer ceremony." Nolan's smile sharpens. "I assume that was your doing."

I don't deny it. There's no point. "I can't plan a wedding during winter and spring. Those months hold... difficult memories."

"Riccardo." He says the name like a curse. "Of course."

We round a corner of the path, coming to the small fountain that marks the garden's center. The water is still, the fountain turned off for winter. Dead leaves float on the surface like tiny corpses.

"I agreed to the delay," Nolan continues, "but I want you to understand something, Ava."

He stops, turns to face me fully. His hand reaches out and cups my chin, tilting my face up to meet his gaze. I want to jerk away, to spit in his face, to drive my knee into his groin and run.

I stand perfectly still.

"From now on," he says softly, "you'll have protection. One of my men. He'll accompany you everywhere you go."

My carefully constructed plans crumble around me.

I can't show the panic clawing at my chest. Can't let him see how this changes things.

So I nod. Just once, like I don't really care. Like having a spy attached to my every movement is perfectly acceptable.

"For my safety," I say flatly.

"Exactly." His thumb strokes my cheek. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to my fiancée."

The word makes my stomach turn.

"When do I meet him?" I ask, pulling my face from his grip as casually as I can manage. "My new protector?"

"He's already here. Waiting in the house." Nolan gestures back toward the estate. "His name is Victor. Ex-military, very capable. He'll keep you safe from outside threats."

Outside threats. Meaning Liam. Meaning the Sartoris. Meaning anyone who might actually help me.

I think of Liam in that hospital bed, his shoulder wrapped in bandages, his eyes burning with rage, love, and desperation. I told him to investigate Nolan, to find out who he's working with. But now, with Victor watching my every move, how am I supposed to contact him? How am I supposed to pass along information or receive it?

"I should get back inside," I say, my voice perfectly pleasant. "I have some calls to make."

Nolan catches my arm before I can turn away. His grip isn't painful, not this time, but the threat is there in every finger.

"Remember what's at stake, Ava." His voice drops to a whisper meant only for me. "Your father. Your brother. Sylvia. Everyone you love. Their lives depend on your continued... cooperation."

I meet his eyes without flinching. "I haven't forgotten."

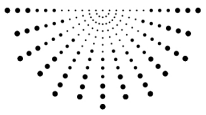
He releases me with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Good girl."

I walk back toward the house on steady legs, my spine straight, my mask firmly in place.

Okay, bastard. I can be a really bad girl too.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Liam

The call comes at eleven in the morning.

"Celestine. Now. Back office."

He hangs up before I can ask questions.

I'm out the door in under a minute, shoulder still aching from Bruno's bullet, though I've stopped noticing the pain. Pain is background noise now. Everything is background noise except finding a way to get Ava out of Pierce's reach.

The drive takes twenty minutes. I spend every second of it running scenarios, cataloging threats, wondering what the hell happened that couldn't wait for a phone explanation.

Celestine looks different during the day. Empty tables, chairs stacked, the massive windows letting in pale winter light instead of the golden glow of evening service. I nod at the hostess and head straight for the back.

The office door is closed.

I push through without knocking.

Dante stands near the desk, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. But it's the other person in the room that stops me cold.

Julian Ashford sits in one of the leather chairs, looking like he hasn't slept in days. Dark circles under his eyes. When he sees me, he stands.

"What happened?" I ask.

Julian doesn't answer. Instead, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small piece of paper, folded twice. He holds it out to me.

I take it.

The paper is thin, the kind you'd find in a hotel notepad. The handwriting is neat, controlled, familiar.

Find Liam. Ask him to kill Nolan two days from now. Come with two cars to pick us up. I've arranged somewhere safe for us.

Don't let anyone see this. Burn it after.

I love you.

I read it three times. Then I look up at Julian.

"What the fuck did Nolan do?"

Julian shakes his head. "I don't know. That's the thing—I didn't even know my sister was working against him. I thought she'd given up. I thought she was just accepting it." He runs his good hand through his hair. "I need some explanation too."

I fold the note and slip it into my pocket. My mind is already racing, piecing together the fragments.

"I don't know exactly what he did," I say. "But I'm certain he threatened her somehow. Pierce doesn't work alone. We've known that from the start. Someone else is pulling strings with him. Ava must have been working these past days to find a way to get your family out."

"Get us out of what?" Julian demands.

"Whatever hold Pierce has on her. Whatever he used to make her agree to this marriage."

Dante shifts against the desk. "She's been playing a longer game than any of us realized."

"Yesterday," Julian says, his voice tight, "Nolan put a man on her. Victor. He's with her constantly now. Follows her everywhere, watches everything she does." He starts pacing, three steps one way, three steps back. "The note ended up with me at breakfast this morning. She came over to hug me, and I felt her hand shove something into my pocket. I didn't even realize what it was until I was alone."

I picture it. Ava, surrounded by enemies, watched every second, still finding a way to reach out. Still fighting.

God, I love her.

Julian stops pacing and turns to face me. His jaw is set, his eyes burning with something I recognize.

"I need to be with you when you kill him."

"Absolutely not."

"Don't fucking tell me no—"

"Julian." I keep my voice level. "You're not trained for this. You'd be a liability, and worse, you'd put your sister at risk."

Dante nods. "Liam's right. You go in hot, you make mistakes. Mistakes get people killed."

Julian's hands ball into fists. "If you were in my position, what the hell would you do?"

The question hits harder than it should.

I think about Ava.

I sigh.

"I'd probably do something really stupid."

Julian's expression shifts. Validation mixed with desperation.

"Which is exactly why you can't come with me," I continue. "You need to stay with Ava. You need to be able to protect her and whoever else she's managed to get to safety."

"I can't just sit there while—"

"You won't be sitting. You'll be the last line of defense if something goes wrong." I meet his eyes and hold them. "She trusted you with this message. That means she needs you alive and functional, not bleeding out on Pierce's floor because you wanted revenge."

Julian's jaw works. He wants to argue. I can see the words building behind his teeth.

But he's not stupid. He knows I'm right.

"Fine," he says finally. "Fine."

I nod once. Then I ask the question that matters.

"Do you know how to use a gun?"

Julian blinks. "I've been to ranges. Hunting trips with my father's colleagues."

"That's not what I asked."

He hesitates. "I can point and shoot. I'm not... I'm not trained."

"Dante," I say without looking away from Julian. "Get him something small. A Glock 19. Easy to handle, reliable. And find someone to run him through the basics before we move."

"Done," Dante says.

Julian watches me with something like surprise. "You're actually going to do this."

"She asked me to kill him." I pull the note from my pocket and read it again, letting her words settle into my bones. "Two days from now, Pierce dies."

Vampire romance or a slow-burning love story?

Look up **Lokepub** on Google to find your next read.

"What about Pierce's partner?" Dante asks. "We still don't know who he's working with."

"I know." I fold the note carefully and tuck it away. "But Ava's smart. If she's made a move, it's because she's found a way to neutralize the threat. Or at least buy enough time for us to figure it out."



Ava

My phone buzzes against the vanity table, and I almost ignore it. Victor stands outside my door like a shadow I can't shake, and every call feels monitored now, every text potentially intercepted.

But the name on the screen stops my breath.

Vittoria Sartori.

I stare at those two words until they blur. We haven't spoken in months. She stopped calling after the third unanswered message, and I told myself it was better that way.

I told myself a lot of things.

My thumb hovers over the screen. The ache in my chest is immediate and brutal, a physical thing that presses against my ribs. Vittoria was never just my sister-in-law. She was my friend. The one person in that family who saw me as Ava, not just Riccardo's wife or the woman who couldn't give them an heir.

I answer before I can talk myself out of it.

"Ava?" Her voice is soft, uncertain. So different from the confident tech genius who once hacked into my phone to install a better security system without asking permission.

"Vittoria." My throat tightens around her name.

A pause stretches between us, heavy with everything unsaid. I can hear her breathing on the other end, and I wonder if she's as nervous as I am. If she's been staring at her phone for an hour, working up the courage to call.

"I was wondering," she starts, then stops. Tries again. "Do you have time for coffee? Or I could come to you, if that's easier. I know you're at your father's house, and I don't want to—"

"Coffee." The word comes out too fast, too desperate. I force myself to slow down. "We can do coffee. If you want."

"I want." Her voice cracks slightly. "I really want."

The tears I've been holding back threaten to spill. I press my free hand against my eyes, pushing them back through sheer force of will. Victor is outside. Nolan's cameras might be everywhere. I cannot break down. Not yet.

"Two hours?" I manage.

"Two hours. There's a place in Lincoln Park—Giovanni's. It's small, quiet. Good espresso."

"I know it." Riccardo took me there once, years ago. Before everything soured. Before I became a disappointment he tolerated rather than a wife he cherished.

"Ava." Vittoria hesitates. "I'm glad you answered."

I close my eyes. "Me too."

The line goes dead, and I sit motionless for a long moment, phone pressed against my chest like a talisman. This call wasn't random. Vittoria doesn't do random. She's too precise.

She knows I know.



I spot Vittoria immediately. She's tucked into a corner booth, hands wrapped around a cup, dark eyes fixed on the door.

The moment she sees me, she's on her feet.

"Ava."

She crosses the space between us and throws her arms around me. The hug is fierce. The embrace of someone who's been holding their breath for too long.

A sob escapes her, muffled against my shoulder.

"Shh." I stroke her hair. "It's okay. I'm here."

She was always a good friend, but she started as something more. The little sister I never had. I spent years with her, watching her grow from a teenager who hid behind computer screens into a woman who could hold her own in any room. We shared late nights and early mornings, secrets whispered over wine, the kind of bond that forms when you're both navigating a world that wasn't built for women like us.

My eyes burn, and I pull back slightly, keeping my hands on her shoulders.

"I put makeup on today," I tell her, my voice thick. "Specifically to come see you. I'm not willing to ruin it."

Vittoria laughs with a wet, broken sound that's somehow still beautiful. She swipes at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"I know you don't give a fuck about your image," she says. "You never have."

I laugh too, and it feels strange in my chest. Foreign.

"If I hadn't been raised to watch my appearance, I would never have worn makeup in my life." I shake my head. "But that's another story."

We settle into the booth across from each other. A waitress appears, and I order a cappuccino. Victor is outside, leaning against a car across the street, watching the café entrance. I can feel his eyes even through the glass. I don't know why he is leaving me alone in here. Maybe he believes that two women like us wouldn't manage to burn him alive. Lucky him. Today I just want to talk to Vittoria.

"How's Dmitri?" I ask, steering us toward safer ground.

Frustration crosses Vittoria's face, and I smile.

"Grumpy as always." She rolls her eyes, but her mouth curves. "He spoils me every day. Too much, honestly. I told him I don't need chocolate cookies delivered to my office three times a week, but does he listen? No. He says it's 'non-negotiable.'"

I smile despite everything. "That's sweet, actually."

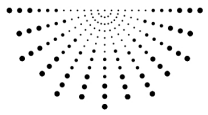
"But he's facing some trouble with another family right now. Territory disputes, old grudges resurfacing." She sighs, her fingers tracing the rim of her cup. "I'm sick of all this, Ava. So sick of it."

The words land between us, heavy with meaning neither of us speaks aloud.

"I know," I say quietly.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Ava

Vittoria wraps her hands around her coffee cup, but she doesn't drink. Her fingers tremble slightly, and I recognize the nervous energy radiating off her. The same restless tension she carried as a teenager whenever she had something important to say but couldn't find the right words.

"Ava." She exhales my name like it's been sitting heavy in her chest. "When I found out about what Riccardo did, I couldn't handle it."

I set my cappuccino down. The foam has started to deflate, but I don't care. Vittoria's eyes are glassy, her jaw tight with the effort of holding herself together.

"I wanted to talk to you from the first moment," she continues. "The second I learned the truth, you were all I could think about. How you'd feel. What it would do to you." She swallows hard. "And I know—I *know* this isn't me avoiding responsibility for staying silent. I'm not making excuses."

"Vittoria—"

"Please." She holds up a hand. "Let me say this. I need to say it."

I nod and wait.

She takes a shaky breath. "I felt so disappointed in him. My own brother. The person I looked up to my entire life." Her voice cracks on the last word. "I was *ashamed*, Ava. Not just of what he did, but of the idea that I'd have to watch your face when you found out. That I'd have to witness what that knowledge would do to you."

A tear slips down her cheek. She wipes it away quickly, almost angrily.

"The thing with Luna—I told myself it happened before you and Riccardo were together. That maybe it was some mistake from his past, something he regretted." She shakes her head. "But the fact that he did that to Lorenzo? His own brother? It left no room for me to keep believing he was the man I thought he was."

I stay quiet, letting her finish. She needs this. Maybe I do too.

"If Riccardo could betray Lorenzo like that—someone he claimed to love, someone he grew up with—then how could I trust that he treated *anyone* he loved any differently?" Vittoria's voice drops to barely a whisper. "Including you."

The words land deep in my chest.

"I was so close to him," Vittoria says. "He was my hero. My protector. The brother who always had time for me, even when the others were too busy. And finding out who he really was..." She presses her lips together. "It broke something in me."

I reach across the table and take her hand. Her fingers are cold despite the coffee cup she's been clutching.

"The only reason I feel any shame about Riccardo anymore," I say slowly, carefully, "is that he made *you* feel this way."

Vittoria blinks at me. "What?"

"I learned that he didn't respect me the way I thought he did. That much is true. And it hurt—God, it hurt more than I can describe." I squeeze her hand. "But watching you carry this guilt? Seeing how much pain you're in because of *his* choices? That's what makes me angry now."

Her chin wobbles. "Ava..."

"It's really strange," I continue, "to realize that your person, the one you built a life with, the one you thought you knew better than anyone, was a complete stranger. I spent seven years with a man I didn't know at all. That's a hard thing to accept."

"I'm so sorry." Vittoria's voice breaks completely. "I should have told you. I should have found a way. I was a coward, and you deserved better,

and—"

"Stop." I hold her gaze. "Vittoria, you have the sweetest heart of anyone I've ever known. You always have. Even as a teenager, you felt everything so deeply—everyone's pain, everyone's joy. You carried it all."

She shakes her head, more tears spilling. "That doesn't excuse—"

"There's nothing for me to forgive."

The words hang between us.

"I was hurt," I admit. "By all of you. When I found out the truth, I was furious. I wanted to burn everything down." I pause. "But I understand now. You were protecting Lorenzo. You were protecting the family. And honestly? If our positions were reversed, I would have done the same thing."

"You don't know that."

"I do." I think about the past weeks. "I know exactly what it means to protect the people you love, even when it means keeping terrible truths from them. Even when it tears you apart inside."

Vittoria searches my face.

"I missed you," she whispers. "So much. These past months without you... I didn't know how to reach out. I didn't know if you'd want to see me."

"I missed you too."

She laughs and suddenly she's out of her chair and pulling me into a hug so tight I can barely breathe. I hold her back just as fiercely, this woman who is my sister in every way that matters.

"I'm here now," she says against my shoulder. "Whatever you need. Whatever's going on. I'm here."

I close my eyes. For a moment, I let myself feel safe. Let myself believe that everything might actually work out.

Victor shifts outside the window, and reality crashes back.

Two days. I have two days until Liam moves on Nolan. Two days until this nightmare either ends or gets much, much worse.

But right now, in this café with Vittoria's arms around me, I allow myself this single moment of comfort. This one small gift.

"Thank you," I murmur. "For coming back."

Vittoria pulls away, wiping her face with both hands. Her mascara has smudged, and she looks younger than her years—like the girl I met a decade ago, all fierce loyalty and tender heart.

"Always," she says. "You're my family, Ava. That never changed. Not for a single day."

I believe her. And for the first time in weeks, the knot in my chest loosens just a fraction.



Liam

Ten fucking hours of planning, arguing, refining, and planning again.

Julian's question echoes in my skull as I pour two fingers of whiskey into a glass.

How come Nolan hasn't harmed you already?

The boy asked it casually, like he was inquiring about the weather. But it landed like a grenade in the middle of our strategy session. Dante went quiet. Fabio stopped cleaning his weapon. Even Pietro, who rarely shows surprise, looked up from the blueprints spread across the table.

Because Julian was right.

If Pierce is working with someone powerful enough to threaten the Ashfords, someone with reach inside Vittoria's security systems, someone who could kill a professional like Marco without leaving a useful trace—then why am I still breathing?

They could have pulled me out of the equation the moment I became a problem. The night I broke Pierce's arm. The morning I showed up at the hospital. Any of the dozen times I've been alone and vulnerable over the past two weeks.

But they didn't.

I take my first sip. The whiskey burns a path down my throat, and I welcome it. I don't drink often. Spent too many years watching men lose themselves at the bottom of bottles. My father, whoever the fuck he was, apparently couldn't stay sober long enough to stick around for my birth. At least that's the only thing I know about him. Half the soldiers I served with

in the SAS drowned their demons in alcohol and became less than shadows of themselves.

Drinking makes you slow. Stupid. Predictable.

But tonight, I need something to quiet the noise in my head.

I sink onto the sofa, the leather creaking beneath my weight. The flat is dark except for the lamp in the corner casting long shadows across the walls.

The plan is good.

I turn the glass in my hands, watching the amber liquid catch the light.

My phone buzzes.

Fabio: *All set. Teams in position. Rest tomorrow. We move at dawn.*

I type back a single word: *Good.*

Tomorrow I rest. I let my shoulder heal as much as it can in twenty-four hours. I eat. I sleep. I prepare my body for violence the way I've done a hundred times before.

And the day after tomorrow, I rise before the sun and drive out with Fabio and Luca to find Pierce. I walk through whatever guards he has stationed there. I find him.

And I kill him.

I close my eyes and let myself imagine what comes after.

Three months. Minimum.

I'll take Ava somewhere far from Chicago, far from the Sartoris and the Ashfords and every shadow that's haunted her for the past decade. Greece, maybe.

I want to cook for her. I want to read beside her in bed while she does her skincare routine. I want to watch her ride horses on beaches where no one knows her name. I want to hear her laugh without looking over her shoulder.

I want to spend every second of my life with her.



Ava

The living room stops me cold.

My father sits on the cream sofa, his arm wrapped around Sylvia, her head resting against his shoulder. Their bodies curve into each other like puzzle pieces that have finally found their match. Sylvia's hand rests on his chest, her fingers splayed over his heart, and my father's chin tips down toward her hair.

They look intimate. Connected.

Never once have I seen them touch like this. Sylvia kisses his cheek for photographs. My father offers his arm when they walk into galas. But this feels like stumbling into someone else's home.

My shoes make no sound on the carpet, but Sylvia's head lifts anyway. Her eyes find mine.

"Ava." She straightens, though she doesn't pull away from my father entirely. "How are you, darling?"

The word *darling* lands wrong. It always has. Sylvia uses endearments like weapons.

"Fine," I say, although it's a lie.

My father turns, and he looks tired. Worn down.

"You were out with Vittoria?" he asks.

"Yeah." I keep my voice light. "It was nice to see her."

Sylvia's gaze moves over my face, searching. For what, I don't know.

"I'm tired," I say instead. "Long day."

My father nods slowly. "Of course. Get some rest."

"We'll see you at dinner," Sylvia adds. Her hand hasn't moved from his chest.

"Sure," I say.

I turn and walk toward the stairs, feeling their eyes on my back. Victor falls into step behind me, his presence a constant shadow I can't shake. He doesn't speak. He never does. Just watches.

I close my bedroom door behind me and lean against it, listening to Victor's footsteps retreat down the hallway. He'll station himself at the end of the corridor.

The walls press in, and every shadow holds a threat. Nolan's cameras could be anywhere. In the light fixture. Behind the mirror. Tucked into the

carved wood of my headboard.

I can't even pace without wondering if someone is analyzing my body language.

But I can do this.

I cross to my desk where the box of files sits. Helen sent the digital copies, but my father also had Margaret bring up the physical documents from his study. Twenty-four years of dead ends and unanswered questions, all stuffed into a single cardboard box.

I pull the lid off and stare at the contents.

My mother's face looks up at me from a photograph clipped to the first folder. She's laughing in this picture, her dark hair caught mid-swing, her eyes bright with joy, maybe.

I set the photograph aside and pull out the first stack of papers.

The police report is on top. Dry language describing a woman who walked out of her house and never came back. *Oriana Fontana Ashford, age 28, reported missing by husband Franklin Ashford on the evening of September 15th.*

I flip to the witness statements.

My father's interview takes up three pages. He describes a normal morning. Breakfast together. My mother mentioning she needed to see a friend. Him leaving for work. Coming home to a house and a daughter asking where Mommy went. Julian’s nanny at that time was a woman named Amelia.

"She said she was meeting a friend," my father told the detective. *"I asked which one. She just smiled and said she'd tell me about it later."*

Later never came.

The investigators interviewed everyone in my mother's social circle. Her book club. Her tennis partners. The women she lunched with at the country club. Every single one of them said the same thing.

No plans with Oriana that day. Hadn't spoken to her in at least a week. No idea where she might have gone.

Either they were all lying, or my mother invented a friend who didn't exist.

I pull out the next folder. Neighbor statements.

Mrs. Patricia Henley lived three houses down. She was walking her dog when she saw my mother leave the house around ten in the morning.

According to Mrs. Henley, my mother looked *"perfectly normal. Happy, even. She waved at me and kept walking toward the end of the street."*

No car. No one picked her up. Just a woman in a sundress walking down a tree-lined road in broad daylight.

I trace my finger over the hand-drawn map attached to the statement. Someone marked the route from our house to the end of the street. Drew little X's where neighbors had been interviewed. Circled the spots where security cameras should have captured footage but didn't.

If she was meeting a friend, it had to be somewhere close. Close enough to walk. But the investigators canvassed every house within a mile radius. No one saw her after Mrs. Henley.

She just vanished.

I set the folder down and rub my eyes. The words are starting to blur together. Twenty-four years of searching, and this is all they found. A woman who said she was seeing a friend. A neighbor who watched her walk away. Nothing else.

The next document is a timeline the investigators put together.

9:47 AM - Franklin Ashford leaves for work.

Approximately 10:00 AM - Oriana Ashford exits residence on foot. Last seen by Patricia Henley walking east on Maple Drive.

10:00 AM - 6:30 PM - No confirmed sightings.

6:47 PM - Franklin Ashford returns home. Finds daughter alone. Wife absent.

7:15 PM - Franklin Ashford contacts local police.

Eight hours. My mother disappeared for eight hours before anyone thought to look for her. And by then, whatever trail might have existed had gone cold.

I flip through more pages. Bank records showing no unusual activity. Phone records that revealed nothing suspicious. Credit cards untouched. Passport still in the house.

She didn't run away. That's what the investigators concluded. Women who run take money, identification, something. My mother took nothing but the clothes on her back.

Which means something happened to her.

I find a section labeled *Theories* and spread the pages across my desk.

Theory one: Random abduction. A stranger grabbed her off the street. But there were no witnesses, no signs of struggle, no reports of suspicious

vehicles.

Theory two: Targeted kidnapping for ransom. But no ransom demand ever came.

Theory three: She left voluntarily and staged her disappearance. But she left behind a husband she loved and two kids.

Theory four: Someone she knew harmed her. But everyone in her life had alibis.

The investigators circled back to that last theory multiple times. They questioned my father extensively. Checked his alibi. Verified his whereabouts with his secretary, his driver, three separate business associates. He was in meetings all day. Couldn't have done it.

Everyone's alibi checked out.

I lean back in my chair and stare at the ceiling. The case went cold within six months. The investigators moved on. My father hired private detectives who found nothing. Eventually, he stopped searching.

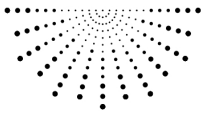
Once the whole Nolan thing settles, I'm going to dive into this.

I stand and head to the bathroom as my mind drifts back to Liam.

I miss him so much it hurts.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Liam

The neon sign flickers above me—*Velvet Dreams*—casting pink and purple shadows across the wet pavement. Rain started twenty minutes ago. Light drizzle. Enough to keep the street empty but not enough to matter.

I check my watch. 1:47 AM.

The guards rotated at midnight, just like Dante's intel promised. The dancers filed out at one-thirty, climbing into rideshares and boyfriends' cars, heels clicking against concrete. I counted twelve women. Same number as last night when I ran surveillance.

Nolan Pierce walks into that back office at two. Every single night. Alone with his money.

I wait thirteen minutes.

I take two deep breaths. The first one steadies my heartbeat. The second clears my head of everything except the mission.

Ava asked me to do this.

That's all that matters now.

I step out of the shadows and cross the street. The bouncer at the side entrance—big bastard with a neck thicker than my thigh—straightens when he sees me approaching. His hand moves toward his waistband.

"Private entrance," he grunts.

I don't slow down. "Pierce is expecting me."

The lie rolls off my tongue smooth as silk. I'm close enough now to see the uncertainty flicker in his eyes. He doesn't know me, but he knows the type. The suit. The posture. The way I move like I belong wherever I fucking please.

"Nobody told me—"

My fist connects with his throat before he finishes the sentence. He goes down gasping, hands clutching his windpipe. I catch him before he hits the ground and drag him behind the dumpster. Zip tie around his wrists. Another around his ankles. Duct tape over his mouth.

I slip through the side door.

The hallway smells like cheap perfume and cigarette smoke. Bass thumps through the walls from the main floor. Red lights line the corridor, washing everything in blood-colored shadows.

Fitting.

Two women in sequined bikinis round the corner ahead of me. One blonde, one brunette.

"Hey, handsome." The blonde steps into my path, running her fingers down the lapel of my jacket. "Looking for some company?"

I don't blink. Don't slow. My eyes stay fixed on the door at the end of the hallway.

"Private party in the back," the brunette adds, pressing herself against my other arm. "We could make it real private."

I remove the blonde's hand from my chest. Gently. No need to hurt civilians.

"Move."

One word. That's all it takes. Something in my voice—or maybe something in my eyes—makes both women step aside without another word. The blonde whispers something to the brunette as I pass. I don't catch it. Don't care.

The back office door appears at the end of the corridor. Light seeps through the crack at the bottom. Voices filter through—one male, one female.

I press my ear to the door. The woman's voice rises in a high-pitched moan that sounds about as genuine as a three-dollar bill. Rhythmic thumping. Desk legs scraping against tile.

Of course.

Pierce can't even wait until his money's counted before he sticks his cock in something.

I pull my Sig from its holster. Screw the suppressor onto the barrel. The weight feels familiar in my palm—an extension of my arm after twenty-odd years of training.

Kill Nolan, Ava's note said.

I plan to. But not before he suffers.

I turn the handle and push. The door isn't locked. Arrogant bastard didn't even bother with basic security protocols.

The scene that greets me would be comical if I wasn't here to kill someone.

Nolan Pierce stands behind a massive oak desk, trousers around his ankles, thrusting into a redhead bent over stacks of cash. Her sequined dress bunched around her waist. His shirt still buttoned, tie loose, sweat gleaming on his forehead.

Neither of them notices me for a full three seconds.

The redhead sees me first. Her eyes go wide. Her mouth opens to scream.

"Out." I jerk my head toward the door. "Now."

She doesn't need to be told twice. The woman scrambles off the desk, yanking her dress down, and sprints past me without looking back. Smart girl. The door slams behind her.

Nolan fumbles one-handed with his trousers, his broken forearm still secured in a splint. "What the fuck—"

I cross the room in four strides and slam the butt of my gun into his temple. He goes down hard, cracking his head against the corner of the desk on his way to the floor. Blood blooms from a gash above his eyebrow.

"Stay down."

He tries to push himself up with his good arm. I put my boot on his chest and press until I hear ribs creak.

"I said *stay down*."

His eyes finally focus on my face. Recognition dawns—slow at first, then all at once. Terror follows close behind.

"Blackwood." He spits blood onto the tile. "You stupid son of a bitch. You have no idea what you're walking into."

I crouch beside him, keeping my weight on his chest. The Sig dangles loosely in my right hand.

"I know exactly what I'm walking into." I lean closer, letting him see the emptiness in my eyes. "You threatened her."

"She told you." His laugh comes out wet and broken. "That stupid bitch actually told you."

My fist connects with his jaw before I consciously decide to throw the punch. Bone crunches. Blood sprays across the scattered bills on the floor.

"Call her that again." I grab his hair and yank his head back. "Please. Give me a reason to make this last all night."

He whimpers. Actually fucking *whimpers* like the pathetic piece of shit he is.

"You don't understand," he gasps. "I'm not working alone. Kill me and they'll come for her. They'll come for all of them."

"Who?"

He shakes his head. Blood drips from his ruined mouth.

I press the Sig's barrel against his kneecap. "I'll ask once more. *Who* are you working with?"

"You'll never get to them in time." He's crying now, tears mixing with blood and snot. "They're already inside. Already watching. You kill me, and by morning—"

I pull the trigger.

His scream echoes off the walls as his kneecap explodes. The suppressor muffles the shot but does nothing for the sound of his agony.

"I've got all night, Pierce." I move the barrel to his other knee. "And I intend to make you suffer first."



Ava

The letter burns in my pocket like a live coal.

Julian's handwriting, hasty and slanted: *Tonight. Be ready.*

I stare at the ceiling of my bedroom, watching shadows shift across the crown molding. Sleep abandoned me hours ago. Every creak of the house sounds like footsteps. Every gust of wind against the windows sounds like someone trying to get in.

My phone vibrates at 2:47 AM.

Julian's name glows on the screen.

"Now," he says. "We need to start now."

My heart slams against my ribs. "I'm ready."

"I'm already downstairs. I woke them up. Dad's confused but he's coming. Sylvia too."

"Victor?"

"Still outside your door. You'll need to handle that until you get here."

I end the call and swing my legs over the side of the bed. My bare feet hit cold hardwood. I'm already dressed—black pants, dark sweater, flat shoes I can run in if necessary.

This is it. The moment everything changes.

I open my bedroom door and Victor straightens from his position against the wall.

"Mrs. Sartori. Is something wrong?"

"Mind your business," I say, walking past him. "I need to speak with my family."

"At three in the morning?"

I don't answer. I keep walking, and I hear his footsteps behind me. Following.

The stairs creak under my weight.

Light spills from the living room doorway.

I step inside.

Julian stands near the fireplace, his posture rigid. My father sits on the sofa in his bathrobe, silver hair mussed from sleep, confusion written across his weathered face. Sylvia perches beside him in a silk robe, her makeup removed, looking oddly vulnerable without her usual armor of elegance.

"Ava." My father rises halfway. "Julian woke us. What's happening? Are you alright?"

Victor enters behind me. "Mr. Ashford, I apologize for the disturbance. I wasn't informed of any—"

Julian moves.

One moment he's standing by the fireplace. The next, he has a gun pressed to Victor's temple.

Sylvia screams.

"Ava." Julian's voice is steady. "Come hold this."

Victor's eyes widen. His hands twitch toward his own weapon.

"Don't," Julian warns. "I'll put a bullet through your skull before your fingers touch the holster."

I cross the room on legs that feel like they belong to someone else. My hand closes around the grip of the gun.

"What the hell is going on?" Victor demands.

I press the barrel harder against his temple. "On your knees."

"Mrs. Sartori—"

"Now."

Something in my voice makes him comply. He sinks to the carpet, and Julian produces zip ties from his pocket. Within seconds, Victor's wrists are bound behind his back. His ankles follow. When Julian tears a strip of duct tape and slaps it over Victor's mouth, the man's muffled protests die to nothing.

Sylvia's hands cover her mouth. Her eyes are wild, darting between me and Julian and the bound man.

"Ava." My father's voice cracks. "What have you done? What is this?"

I lower the gun but don't release it. My fingers ache from gripping too tight.

"Sit down, Dad."

"Ava—"

"Please." The word comes out softer than I intend. "Sit down. Both of you."

Sylvia sinks back onto the sofa like her strings have been cut. My father follows more slowly, his gaze never leaving my face.

I look at Julian. He nods once. *Go ahead.*

"Things are not good," I say. The understatement of the century. "What you're about to hear will scare you. But I need you to listen. All of it. And then I'll tell you what we're doing about it."

"Ava, you're frightening me." Sylvia's voice trembles. "Why is there a man tied up on our floor? Why does Julian have a gun?"

"Because Nolan Pierce is not who he claims to be."

My father's face goes pale. "Nolan? What does Nolan have to do with—"

"He orchestrated Julian's kidnapping."

Silence. The kind that swallows sound whole.

"That's impossible," my father breathes. "Nolan rescued Julian. He—"

"He set up the kidnapping so he could rescue Julian." I force myself to keep my voice calm. "He wanted to position himself as our savior. To earn your trust. To get close to this family."

"Why?" Sylvia whispers.

"Money. Power. Access." I meet my father's eyes. "He wants to marry me. Not because he cares about me, but because marrying into this family gives him control over the Ashford fortune. Once he has that, he won't need any of us alive."

"No." My father shakes his head. "No, that can't be right. Nolan has been nothing but helpful. He's invested in our business, he's provided security—"

"His security is surveillance," Julian cuts in. "Victor here? He's not protecting Ava. He's watching her. Making sure she doesn't contact anyone who could help us."

"The engagement," my father says slowly. Horror dawns across his features. "You agreed to marry him. Ava, did he force you?"

My throat tightens. The memory of Nolan's hand across my face, the weight of him pinning me to my bed, the video of Julian screaming as they cut off his finger—it all rises like bile.

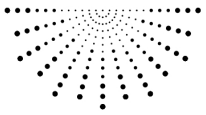
"Yes," I say simply. "He threatened to kill you. Julian. Everyone I love."

"Oh God." Sylvia's hand presses against her chest. "Oh my God."

"But I have a plan." I straighten my spine. Force steel into my voice. "We need to move," I continue. "All of us. Tonight. Julian and I have arranged safe transport."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Liam

The warehouse stinks of rust and old blood.

Nolan Pierce sits in a metal chair, wrists zip-tied to the arms, ankles bound to the legs. Dante’s team handled the transport faster than any other time.

His suit is ruined, and the splint on his broken forearm is stained with blood. Blood runs from his broken nose, dripping onto the white shirt I tore open ten minutes ago.

And the bastard is laughing.

"That all you've got?" He spits blood onto the floor. "The famous Liam Blackwood. Riccardo's loyal dog. I expected more."

I circle behind him, rolling my sleeves to my elbows. Dante stands near the door, arms crossed, watching. Fabio paces along the far wall, checking his phone every thirty seconds for updates from the teams positioned around the city.

"Names," I say. "Who's working with you?"

Nolan's laugh echoes off the corrugated walls. "Go fuck yourself."

I grab a fistful of his hair and yank his head back. "Wrong answer."

"What are you going to do? Beat me? Torture me?" His eyes—still bright, still arrogant—meet mine. "I've been beaten by better men than you,

Blackwood. Men who actually knew what they were doing."

I release him and walk to the table where I've laid out my tools. Pliers. A blowtorch. A hunting knife with a serrated edge. I pick up the pliers and return to him.

"Last chance. Who's your partner?"

Nolan grins, blood coating his teeth. "You really think you can have her, don't you?"

My hand stills on the pliers.

"Ava Fontana. Ava *Sartori*." He says her name like it's a joke. "You're a fucking bodyguard. A hired gun. And you think a woman like her—educated, wealthy, *refined*—is going to end up with someone like you?"

"Shut your mouth."

"She let you fuck her, didn't she?" His grin widens. "Once, maybe twice. But that's all you are to her. A distraction. A warm body while she figured out her next move." He leans forward as far as his restraints allow. "She'll leave you, Blackwood. They always do. Women like Ava don't end up with men like us. We're useful until we're not."

The pliers close around his index finger.

I twist.

Bone crunches. Nolan screams—a raw, animal sound that bounces off the warehouse walls—and then he's laughing again. Laughing through the tears streaming down his face.

"There it is," he gasps. "There's the monster. Does she know what you really are? Does she know what you've done for the Sartoris? All those bodies you've buried?"

I drop the pliers and pull my knife from my belt. The blade catches the dim light.

"Names."

"You're pathetic." He's still laughing, quieter now, almost wheezing. "All of you. The great Sartori family. All that power, all those resources, and not once—*not once*—did you figure out who the enemy was."

I pause. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're amateurs." Blood and spit fly from his lips. "Playing at being dangerous while the real snake slithered right past you."

The knife presses against his cheek. "I'm done asking nicely."

"Then stop asking." His one good eye—the left one is already swelling shut from where I hit him earlier—locks onto mine. "You want to spend

your night here with me? Fine. Carve me up piece by piece. But while you're playing butcher, poor little Ava is alone with the person who's going to end her."

My blood turns to ice.

"The snake that's going to kill her?" Nolan's grin is grotesque. "She's already there. Has been for years. She had men killing your precious Marco. Oh and that loser, Willson."

Behind me, Dante curses. "*Cazzo.*"

The knife moves before I can think. I take Nolan's right eye.

His scream is different this time—higher, sharper, filled with genuine agony. Blood pours down his face, and his body convulses against the restraints. But even through the screaming, even through the horror of what I've done, he's still laughing. Still fucking laughing.

"Sylvia," I breathe.

The realization slams into me. Sylvia Ashford.

The snake who's been inside the house all along.

"Should have known," Nolan gasps, blood streaming from his ruined eye socket. "Should have seen it. She's been playing all of them for over twenty years."

I grab his jaw and force him to look at me with his remaining eye. "What's the plan? What is she going to do?"

"Kill them." He's still smiling, even now. "All of them. Franklin, Julian, and your precious Ava. Can't have loose ends when you're inheriting a fortune."

The knife slides across his throat.

Blood sprays. His body jerks once, twice, then goes still.

I'm already running.

"Liam!" Dante shouts behind me, but I don't stop. Can't stop.

My phone is in my hand before I reach the door. I dial Ava's number. It rings once. Twice. Three times.

Voicemail.

"*Fuck!*"

I burst through the warehouse door into the cold night air. My car is parked fifty feet away. I sprint, legs pumping, lungs burning.

Dial again.

Voicemail.

"Ava, answer the fucking phone!"

I tear open the car door and throw myself inside. The engine roars to life. Tires scream against concrete as I peel out of the lot.

Dial again.

Voicemail.

"Come on, come on, come on."



Ava

The words leave my mouth before I can stop them.

"Right now, Liam is killing Nolan."

My father's face goes pale. "What?"

Sylvia's hand flies to her chest. She's breathing hard, her perfectly manicured nails digging into the fabric of her robe. I watch her, expecting the shock that should come with learning your husband's business partner is being murdered.

But something is wrong.

Her breathing is too fast. Too ragged. Her eyes dart to the door, then back to me, and there's something in them I've never seen before.

Fear. Real fear.

"I knew this would be a terrible idea," she whispers.

For a moment, I can't place what she means. I step closer, my grip tightening on the gun I'm still pointing at Victor's form.

"What are you talking about?"

Sylvia's face crumples. Tears spill down her cheeks. She looks older suddenly. Desperate.

"You stupid girl." Her voice cracks. "You've ruined everything."

My father reaches for her. "Sylvia, what—"

She moves faster than I've ever seen her move. One moment she's crying, the next there's a gun in her hand, pulled from somewhere in her robe.

The barrel swings toward me.

Time slows.

Julian screams my name and throws himself in front of me. The gun fires. The sound is deafening in the enclosed space, ripping through the air like thunder.

We hit the ground together, Julian's body covering mine. I feel the impact shudder through him, hear the grunt of pain that tears from his throat.

"JULIAN!" My father's voice is raw, broken.

I scramble out from under my brother. Blood blooms across his back, spreading through his white shirt like ink through water. His eyes are open but unfocused, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"No, no, no—" I press my hands against the wound, but the blood keeps coming, hot and slick between my fingers.

My father lunges for Sylvia. His hands close around the gun, and they struggle, two silhouettes grappling in the dim light of the living room. Sylvia is screaming something—words I can't process, sounds that don't make sense.

Another shot.

The sound splits my skull. My father staggers back, his hand flying to the side of his head. Blood pours from his ear, running down his neck.

"DAD!"

He's still standing. Still alive. But Sylvia is raising the gun again, her face twisted into something I don't recognize.

I move without thinking.

My fist connects with the side of her head. The impact reverberates up my arm, sends pain lancing through my knuckles. She crumples, the gun clattering from her fingers.

I grab it before she can recover. My hands are shaking, covered in Julian's blood, but I keep the barrel trained on her as she moans on the floor.

"HELP!" The scream tears from my throat. "SOMEONE HELP!"

Footsteps. Margaret appears at the top of the stairs, her face white with terror. She takes one look at the scene below and fumbles for her phone.

"911," she says, her voice trembling. "Yes, there's been a shooting. Multiple people injured. Please hurry. Please—"

Sylvia stirs beneath me. I drop my knee onto her back, pressing her into the floor with all my weight. She's crying now, ugly sobs that shake her whole body.

"Nolan," she moans. "Nolan, Nolan, Nolan—"

The truth clicks into place. She's not crying for my father. Not for Julian. She's crying for him.

"You." My voice sounds like it belongs to someone else. "You were working with him."

She doesn't answer. Just keeps sobbing his name like a prayer.

My father stumbles toward Julian, his hand still pressed to his bleeding ear. He falls to his knees beside my brother, gathering him in his arms.

"Julian. Son. Stay with me. Stay with me."

Julian's eyes have closed. His chest rises and falls in shallow, uneven breaths. The pool of blood beneath him is growing.

I hear my name.

Someone is shouting it. The sound is distant at first, then closer, then the front door crashes open so hard the hinges groan.

Liam.

He fills the doorway, his shirt splattered with blood that isn't his, his eyes wild. He takes in the scene in a single sweep.

"Ava." He says my name like it's the only word he knows.

"Liam." I don't recognize my own voice. "She shot them. She shot Julian. She was working with Nolan the whole time."

He crosses the room in three strides and drops to his knees beside me. His hands frame my face, tilting it up, checking for injuries.

"Are you hurt? Ava, are you hurt?"

"No. Julian—" I turn toward my brother, and Liam's hands fall away.

"Fabio's right behind me," he says. "Ambulance is already on the way."

Sylvia writhes beneath my knee. "Nolan," she wails. "You killed him. You killed him!"

Liam's expression goes cold. Whatever humanity was in his eyes a moment ago vanishes, replaced by something hard and empty.

"I did," he says. "And I'll kill you too if you move."

She goes still.

More footsteps. Fabio appears in the doorway, gun drawn, taking in the chaos. Behind him, I hear the distant wail of sirens.

"The boy," Fabio says, already moving toward Julian. "How long has he been down?"

"Minutes." My father's voice is barely a whisper. "Just minutes."

Fabio kneels beside Julian, checking his pulse, examining the wound. His face is grim but focused.

"Bullet's still in him. Entry wound is high. If it missed the spine..." He doesn't finish the sentence. Doesn't need to.

I look down at Sylvia. At the woman who raised me with conditional love and quiet cruelty. Who smiled at family dinners while planning our deaths.

Sylvia starts screaming.

"I told him!" Her voice cracks, raw and ugly. "I told him you would be a problem. From the very beginning, I knew. But Nolan wouldn't listen. He wanted more. Always more."

She's writhing beneath my knee, her perfectly styled hair coming loose, mascara running down her cheeks in black rivers.

"We had so much money," she sobs. "So much. It would have been enough. But he wanted all of it. All of you. And now—" A sound tears from her throat, somewhere between a laugh and a wail. "Now they've taken him from me."

The front door crashes open again. Paramedics flood in, their equipment bags swinging, voices sharp and professional. They push past Liam and Fabio, heading straight for Julian.

"GSW to the upper back," one of them announces, dropping beside my brother. "Pulse is weak but present. We need to move him now."

I watch them work. Watch them cut away Julian's shirt, press gauze to the wound, lift him onto a stretcher. His face is gray. His eyes are closed.

My father stands frozen, blood still dripping from his ear, as they wheel his son toward the ambulance. He looks like a man watching his world collapse in slow motion.

"Sir, you need medical attention too," a paramedic says, reaching for him.

My father doesn't move. Doesn't respond. Just stares at the blood on the floor where Julian lay.

I turn back to Sylvia. She's stopped struggling, her body limp beneath my weight. But her eyes are open, staring at the ceiling, tears still sliding down her temples.

"What else?" My voice comes out steady. Cold. "What else have you done to us?"

She doesn't answer.

I grab her chin, force her to look at me. Her pupils are dilated, her breathing shallow. She looks like someone who has lost everything and no longer cares what happens next.

"Sylvia." I dig my fingers into her jaw. "What. Else."

Her eyes meet mine. Something shifts in them. Something cruel and broken and satisfied.

"You'll never find her."

The words don't make sense at first. They hang in the air between us, meaningless syllables.

Then they land.

"Find who?" I whisper.

Sylvia's lips curl into a smile. It's the most terrifying thing I've ever seen on her face.

"Oriana."

The name hits me like a bullet. My mother's name. The woman who vanished twenty-four years ago. The woman we mourned. The woman my father never stopped loving.

"What did you say?"

My father's voice cuts through the chaos. He's turned away from the door, away from the ambulance carrying Julian, his entire focus locked on Sylvia.

"What did you just say about my wife?"

Sylvia starts laughing. The sound is high and thin and wrong, mixed with sobs that shake her entire body. Tears stream down her face, but she's smiling, actually smiling, like this is the funniest thing she's ever heard.

"Your wife," she gasps between laughs. "Your precious Oriana. You searched for years. Spent millions. And she was right there the whole time."

My father moves.

I've never seen him move like this. He shoves me aside, drops onto Sylvia, his hands fisting in her hair. He yanks her head back, forcing her to look at him.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

Sylvia just keeps laughing. Crying. Both sounds tangling together into something inhuman.

"Tell me!" My father's voice breaks. "Tell me where she is, you goddamn—"

"Chicago PD! Everyone freeze!"

The shout comes from the door. Blue uniforms pour in, weapons drawn, shouting commands that blur together into noise. Hands grab my father, pulling him off Sylvia, dragging him back despite his struggles.

"No! She knows where my wife is! Let me—"

"Sir, you need to calm down—"

"SHE HAS MY WIFE!"

I watch them restrain him. Watch Sylvia curl into herself on the floor, still laughing, still crying. Watch the chaos unfold around me like I'm standing outside my own body.

A hand closes around my arm.

"Farmhouse."

The word is quiet. Almost lost in the shouting.

I turn. Liam is beside me, his face pale, his grip tight.

"What?"

"The farmhouse." His eyes bore into mine. "Pierce's property. Someone's been living there. Dante confirmed it days ago."

My heart stops.

"You think—"

"I think we need to go." He's already pulling me toward the back of the house, away from the police, away from the chaos. "Now."

I look back. At my father, still fighting against the officers restraining him. At Sylvia, being lifted to her feet, her wrists being cuffed behind her back. At the blood on the floor still wet and gleaming under the lights.

"Ava." Liam's voice pulls me back. "We need to move."

I look at him. At this man who killed for me tonight. Who would kill again without hesitation if I asked.

"How far is the farmhouse?"

"Ninety minutes."

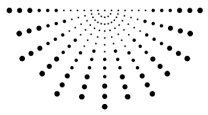
Ninety minutes. My mother might be ninety minutes away. Dead or alive.

I take Liam's hand.

"Then drive fast."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Liam

The phone rings twice before Dante picks up.

"I need a team at the farmhouse," I say, my voice steadier than my hands on the wheel. "Now."

Dante goes quiet for half a second. That's all it takes for him to understand. "I'll send the nearest crew. They'll clear the place before you arrive."

"Tell them to check for traps. Explosives. Anything. Pierce had time to prepare."

"Understood." A pause. "Liam. What are you walking into?"

I glance at Ava in the passenger seat. She's shaking so hard the seatbelt vibrates against her chest. Her knuckles are white where she grips her thighs.

"I don't know," I admit. "But we're going in regardless."

"Give us forty minutes to clear it."

"You've got thirty."

I hang up and push the accelerator harder. The engine roars as we tear through the empty streets, heading north toward Pierce's secret property.

Ava hasn't spoken since we left the house.

Now she starts talking.

"I had two phones." Her voice comes out thin, barely above a whisper. "From the moment I started dating Riccardo."

I keep my eyes on the road, but every part of me focuses on her.

"He asked me to," she continues. "Said it was safer that way. The second phone had to stay hidden somewhere no one would think to look." She swallows hard. "I kept that habit after I came back to Chicago. Hid the phone at Fairhaven. In the women's bathroom, behind a loose tile."

My jaw tightens.

I didn't know about this.

"When I needed to make calls Nolan couldn't monitor, I'd excuse myself during my riding lessons. Use the toilet." A bitter laugh escapes her. "Victor never followed me into the ladies' room."

"Who did you call?"

"The Ferettis."

My head snaps toward her. "The Ferettis?"

"Lucrezia Feretti. She helped me find a house in Mexico. Fake passports for my father, Julian, Sylvia, and myself." Ava's voice cracks. "I was going to disappear. Take my family and vanish before Nolan could hurt them."

Lucrezia Feretti is the youngest sibling in that family. The Ferettis are the Sartoris' closest partners in New York. Lucrezia was going to marry Bruno. That was the wedding where Riccardo was shot to death and Bruno ended up in a coma.

The road blurs for a moment. She built an entire escape plan without telling anyone. Without telling me.

"Why didn't you come to me earlier?" The question comes out harsher than I intend. "I would have—"

"I know what you would have done." She finally turns to look at me. Her eyes are red-rimmed, exhausted, but steady. "That's exactly why I didn't."

"Ava—"

"I'm smart, Liam. I know I am." She takes a shaky breath. "My first thought was to keep you out of it because I was angry. Furious. You knew Riccardo was cheating on me for years and you never said a word."

The accusation lands like a blade between my ribs. I deserve it. Every fucking syllable.

"But that wasn't the real reason." Her voice softens. "The real reason was that I knew if you got involved, Nolan would kill you."

I shake my head. "Nolan couldn't have touched me. I would have—"

"No." She cuts me off. "You don't understand. I believed Nolan had people everywhere. In my father's house. In the security teams. He had cameras, ears, and eyes on everything." Her hands twist in her lap. "If I had come to you, if we had made any kind of plan together, he would have known. And he would have killed you before you ever got close to him."

"I would have found a way to protect you and your family."

"I believe that." She reaches across the console and touches my arm. Her fingers are ice cold. "But I wasn't willing to risk your life to prove it."

"Ava." My throat feels like sandpaper. "You should have trusted me."

"Maybe." Her hand stays on my arm. "But maybe it needed to happen this way."

I want to argue. Want to tell her she's wrong. That I could have handled it differently, better, faster.

But Pierce is dead. Sylvia is in custody.

And we're driving toward a farmhouse where her mother might have been held.

Maybe she's right.

Maybe this was the only way it could have worked.

"The Ferettis," I say, forcing my mind back to practical matters. "They know about tonight?"

"Lucrezia does. I sent her an Instagram post. That was the code." Ava's voice steadies slightly. "She's holding the house in Mexico."

"We won't need it."

"You don't know that."

"I do." I reach over and cover her cold hand with mine. "Whatever we find at that farmhouse, we're not running. We're ending this."

She doesn't argue. Just turns her hand over and laces her fingers through mine.



Ava

The farmhouse emerges from the darkness like a ghost.

Peeling white paint. Sagging porch. Windows that stare back at us like empty eye sockets. The kind of place you'd drive past a thousand times and never think twice about.

Liam pulls the Range Rover to a stop behind two black SUVs already parked in the overgrown driveway. Men stand outside the front door, their postures alert but relaxed. The door hangs open, spilling weak yellow light onto the rotted porch boards.

I'm out of the car before Liam cuts the engine.

"Ava, wait—"

But I'm already walking. Running. My boots crunch on dead grass and gravel. The cold air burns my lungs. I don't care.

Liam catches up to me at the porch steps, his hand finding my elbow. Not to stop me. To steady me.

"Is it clear?" he asks one of the men.

The man nods. "Swept it twice. No traps. No explosives."

"Anyone inside?"

"Two women in the back bedroom." The man's jaw tightens. "One of them looks sick. Real sick."

My knees threaten to buckle.

Liam's grip on my elbow tightens. "Ava."

"I'm fine." The words come out strangled. I'm not fine. I'm the opposite of fine. But I'm also not stopping.

I step through the front door.

The smell hits me first. Dust and mildew, with antiseptic underneath. Like a hospital that's been abandoned for decades. The wallpaper peels in long strips, revealing water-stained plaster beneath. A single lamp burns in the corner of what might have been a living room once, casting more shadows than light.

More of Dante's men stand inside. Three of them. They watch me with careful, unreadable expressions.

One of them steps forward. Young. Dark hair. A scar bisecting his eyebrow.

"Two women," he confirms. "That bedroom." He points to a door at the end of a narrow hallway. "The older one... she's not well. We didn't want to move her until you got here."

I'm already moving.

My hand finds the wall. I need it. My legs have stopped working properly, and the hallway seems to stretch forever, the door getting farther away instead of closer. The floorboards creak and groan under my weight like they're protesting my presence.

Liam's footsteps follow behind me. Close. Steady.

I reach the door.

My hand trembles on the handle.

What if it's not her? What if Sylvia lied? What if this is just another cruel trick?

Liam reaches past me and opens the door.

My knees give out.

I hit the floor hard, my palms slapping against worn wooden boards, but I don't feel the impact. I don't feel anything except the earthquake happening inside my chest.

There's a woman standing next to a bed. Tired. A caretaker, maybe. She steps back when she sees us, her eyes wide with fear.

I don't care about her.

I care about the woman on the bed.

She's thin. So thin. Her hair is faded, not the rich dark brown I remember from photographs. Her skin is pale. Tubes and wires connect her to machines. Her eyes are closed.

For a few seconds, I'm not sure.

Twenty-four years is a long time. Memory plays tricks. Hope plays worse ones.

Then her eyes flutter open.

And I know.

Those eyes. Deep brown. Warm, even now, even after everything. The same eyes that looked at me when I was ten years old and promised she'd be back before dinner.

My mother's eyes.

I'm crawling. I don't remember deciding to crawl, but my hands and knees are carrying me across the floor because standing is impossible. The

distance between the door and the bed might as well be a mile. Every inch feels like a battle.

I reach the edge of the mattress.

My hand finds hers.

Her fingers don't close around mine, not at first. They just rest there, delicate as bird bones.

"Mama."

The word breaks in my throat. A child's word. I haven't said it in so many years.

Her eyes find mine. Really find them. Something flickers in those brown depths.

Tears spill down her cheeks.

"I know you." Her voice is a whisper. Hoarse. Unused. "I know your face. But..." Her brow furrows. Pain crosses her features. "Who are you? I can't... they've done something to me. I feel lost. I can't remember."

I can't breathe.

I pull myself up onto the bed. I don't care about the tubes or the wires or the woman standing frozen by the wall. I gather my mother into my arms as carefully as I can, terrified I'll break her, terrified I'll wake up.

"It's Ava, Mama." I'm sobbing now. Ugly, heaving sobs that tear up from somewhere so deep I didn't know it existed. "It's your daughter. It's Ava."

Her thin arms come around me. Weak. Trembling. But there.

"Ava," she repeats. Testing the name. Tasting it. "Ava. My... my little girl?"

"Yes." I hold her tighter. "Yes, Mama. I found you. I'm here."

Behind me, I hear Liam's voice. Low and vicious.

"Fucking hell."

I don't turn around. I can't. My face is buried in my mother's shoulder, and I'm breathing her in. I can't let go.

"They kept her drugged," the caretaker says. Her voice shakes. "For years. I didn't... I didn't know what else to do. He paid me to keep her comfortable. I thought she was someone's mother. Someone who needed care. I didn't know she was..."

"Get out. And stay in this house." Liam's voice is ice. "Now. Before I decide you knew exactly what you were doing."

Footsteps. The door opening and closing.

I don't care.

My mother's hand comes up. Her fingers brush my hair. The touch is uncertain. Searching.

"You're crying," she whispers. "Don't cry, little one."

I cry harder.

Because she's here. She's *here*. Alive. Breathing. Ninety minutes from the house where I grew up believing she'd abandoned me. From the bed where I cried myself to sleep for years, wondering what I'd done wrong. From the father who told me she chose to leave.

She never left.

She was stolen.

And Sylvia—Sylvia watched me grieve. Watched me blame myself. Watched me carry that wound into every relationship, every choice, every moment of my life. For most of my life.

"I've got you." I pull back just enough to look at my mother's face. To memorize every line, every shadow, every sign of the years we lost. "I've got you, Mama. You're safe now. I promise. I promise."

Her eyes search mine. Confused. Hopeful. Terrified.

"Safe," she repeats, like she's forgotten what the word means.

Liam's hand settles on my shoulder. Warm. Solid. An anchor in the storm.

"We need to get her to a hospital," he says quietly. "Whatever they've been giving her, she needs real doctors. Now."

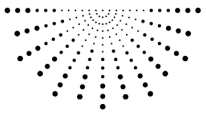
I nod. I don't trust my voice.

But I don't let go of my mother's hand.

I'm never letting go again.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Ava

I press my palms against my eyes until I see stars. Footsteps approach from the far end of the corridor. Heavy. Uneven.

I lower my hands and see my father rounding the corner, two of Dante's men flanking him at a respectful distance. He looks like he's aged a decade since I saw him hours ago. His shirt is untucked, his hair disheveled, and there's a gray pallor to his skin that makes my stomach clench.

"Ava." His voice cracks on my name.

I walk toward him, meeting him halfway. "Julian's out of surgery. The bullet didn't hit any organs, but he lost a lot of blood. They're not certain—" I swallow hard. "They're monitoring him. We'll know more soon."

My father nods, but his eyes are searching my face for something else entirely. Something he's afraid to ask.

"Is it true?" The words come out barely above a whisper. "Was it really... was it really her?"

I reach out and take both his hands in mine. They're trembling.

I nod.

A sound escapes him. Not quite a sob, not quite a word. Something raw and wounded that I've never heard from him before.

"She's alive, Dad." My voice breaks. "She's been alive this whole time."

He takes two steps backward, his hand flying to his chest. His face contorts, and for a terrifying moment, I think he's having a heart attack.

"Dad?" I reach for him. "Dad, sit down. Someone get a nurse!"

He waves his free hand frantically, shaking his head. "No. No, I'm—" He gasps for breath, pressing his palm flat against his sternum. "I need to see her. I need to see Oriana."

"We're waiting for the doctor." I guide him toward a row of plastic chairs against the wall, but he refuses to sit. "They're assessing her condition. She's been—Dad, she's been drugged for years. Kept sedated. She barely recognized me."

The noise he makes then is something I'll carry with me forever. A broken, guttural cry that echoes down the empty corridor.

"Twenty-four years." He grips my shoulders, his fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. "Twenty-four years I thought she was dead. I *hoped* she was dead, Ava, because the alternative—the idea that she chose to leave us —" His voice shatters. "I told you. I told you I'd rather she were dead than have left us by choice."

"I know." Tears spill down my cheeks. "I know, Dad."

"And she was *here*. The whole time. That woman—" His face twists with rage. "Sylvia. Sylvia did this."

"Yes."

"I let her into our home. Into our *family*. I let her raise my children while she—while she—"

A door opens down the hall, and a doctor in blue scrubs approaches us. He's young, maybe mid-thirties, with kind eyes and a clipboard clutched against his chest.

"Mr. Ashford? I'm Dr. Kent. I've been overseeing your wife's care."

My father straightens, visibly pulling himself together. The boardroom mask slides into place, though it's cracked and fragile. "How is she? What's her condition?"

Dr. Kent glances at me, then back at my father. "Mrs. Ashford has been subjected to prolonged chemical sedation. Based on our initial tests, we believe she's been kept on a cocktail of benzodiazepines and other sedatives for an extended period. Years, potentially."

"Twenty-four," I say flatly. "Twenty-four years."

The doctor's composure wavers. "That's... that would be unprecedented . The effects of long-term sedation at that level—" He clears his throat.

"She's severely malnourished and dehydrated. Her muscle mass has deteriorated significantly. There's evidence of bedsores that have healed and reformed multiple times, suggesting minimal movement over extended periods."

My father's hand finds mine and squeezes so hard my bones grind together.

"Her cognitive function is impaired," Dr. Kent continues. "She's disoriented, has difficulty with short-term memory, and struggles to distinguish between reality and what may be drug-induced hallucinations. However..." He pauses, and something like hope flickers in his expression. "She did recognize your daughter. That's significant."

"Can she recover?" My father's voice is barely audible.

Dr. Kent chooses his words carefully. "Recovery in a case like this will require extraordinary patience. Time. And extensive medical support—neurologists, psychiatrists, physical therapists, nutritionists. We're looking at months of intensive rehabilitation, possibly years. Her brain has been chemically suppressed for so long that we simply don't know what baseline function we can restore."

"But it's possible?" I press. "She *can* get better?"

"The human brain is remarkably resilient," the doctor says. "With proper care and an aggressive rehabilitation program, there's reason for cautious optimism. But I need to be honest with you—she may never fully return to who she was before."

My father releases my hand and steps toward the doctor. When he speaks, his voice carries the weight of a man who has commanded empires. "Do whatever it takes. Hire every specialist in the country. In the world. Build her a private facility if you have to." He grabs the doctor's arm. "I don't care what it costs. I don't care if it takes every cent I have. You bring her back to me. Do you understand?"

Dr. Kent nods slowly. "We'll do everything medically possible, Mr. Ashford. I give you my word."

"Can I see her?" The command in his voice falters, crumbling into something desperate and pleading. "Please. I need to see her."

"She's resting now, but yes. I can take you to her room." The doctor gestures down the corridor. "I should warn you—she may not recognize you immediately. The disorientation is severe, and faces from her past are... complicated for her right now."

My father is already moving, following Dr. Kent with steps that are too fast, too urgent. I start to follow, but he turns back and looks at me.

"Stay with Julian," he says. "Stay with your brother. I'll—" His voice breaks again. "I'll come find you."

I nod, even though everything in me wants to follow him into that room. To see my mother again. To hold her hand and tell her we found her, that she's safe now, that Sylvia will never hurt anyone ever again.

But Julian is somewhere in this hospital, fighting for his life because he threw himself in front of a bullet meant for me.

My father disappears around the corner with the doctor.

I sink into one of the plastic chairs and press my face into my hands.

My mother is alive. My brother might die. And Sylvia—

Sylvia is in police custody, but that won't be enough. Not nearly enough.



Liam

I've walked these halls before. After missions gone wrong.

I round the corner near the ICU waiting area and stop.

Ava stands alone against the wall, her arms wrapped around herself like she's trying to hold her own body together. Her shoulders shake. Silent. Contained. Even now, even falling apart, she's trying not to make a scene.

My chest cracks open.

Billionaire romance for your next read.

Browse Lokepub for love stories, big fortunes, and complicated feelings.

"Ava."

Her head snaps up. Those dark eyes find mine across twenty feet of linoleum, and her face just... breaks.

She doesn't walk. She runs.

I catch her as she crashes into me, her body colliding with mine hard enough to knock a lesser man back a step. My arms close around her instantly, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other pressed flat against her spine. She's shaking. Trembling like a leaf in a storm.

"I don't know what to do." The words come out ragged, muffled against my chest. "I can't lose him now. Not now. Not after we found her."

Her fingers curl into my shirt, gripping the fabric like I'm the only thing keeping her from drowning.

"Julian was one year old when she disappeared." A sob tears through her. "He doesn't even remember her face, Liam. He was a *baby*. And now she's back, and he might not—he might never—"

She can't finish.

I hold her tighter, pressing my lips to the top of her head. She smells like antiseptic and fear, with that jasmine that's haunted me for a decade still lingering underneath.

"Look at me."

She doesn't move.

"Ava." I pull back just enough to cup her face in both hands, tilting her chin up until those tear-bright eyes meet mine. Her lips are bitten raw. She's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"After I left that day," I say quietly, my thumbs brushing the tears from her cheekbones, "I was dying. Little by little. Every hour you were gone, every day I couldn't reach you, couldn't protect you—" My voice cracks. I don't try to hide it. "I was disappearing inside my own skin."

Her breath catches.

"You missed your mother. Julian did too, even if he doesn't remember. That's twenty-four years of grief you're both carrying, and now she's back, and your brother's fighting for his life, and your whole fucking world is burning down around you." I stroke my thumbs across her wet cheeks again. "I know. I see it. I see *you*."

She makes a sound. Half sob, half broken laugh.

"You need to be strong for a little longer." I hold her gaze, willing her to hear me. "Stand by their side. Be the daughter and sister they need. You're

the only one who can do that."

Her lower lip trembles. "I don't know if I can."

"You can. You're the strongest person I've ever known." I lean my forehead against hers, breathing her in. "And I'll be here. If you want me. Every step. Every moment. I'm not leaving you again."

She nods, tears spilling fresh. "I want you."

"Then you have me."

I press my lips to her cheek. Salt and skin. Her breath shudders out. I kiss her other cheek, then the bridge of her nose, then her forehead—lingering there, feeling her pulse flutter against my palms where I'm still holding her face.

When I pull back, I'm inches from her mouth.

Her eyes are closed. Lashes wet and dark against her pale skin. She's waiting. Trusting.

I look at her, memorizing the shape of her, the courage it takes to be this vulnerable, the way she's given me something she's never given anyone else.

Then I lean in.

She meets me halfway.

The kiss isn't gentle. It's desperate. Her hands fist in my shirt, yanking me closer, and I feel the salt of her tears on my lips as she cries against my mouth. She kisses me like she's drowning and I'm air. Like she's been holding her breath for weeks and finally she can breathe again.

I kiss her back with everything I have. Every year I waited. Every night I lay awake wanting her. Every moment I watched her from across rooms, from doorways, from the shadows of a life that was never supposed to be mine.

She pulls back just enough to speak, her forehead pressed to mine, her breath warm and ragged against my lips.

"I missed you." Her voice breaks. "So much. Every day. Every hour. I kept thinking—if I just got through one more day, if I just kept Nolan believing—"

"You did." I stroke her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear the way I did that first night in her room, back when I thought I could touch her once and walk away. "You saved them. All of them."

"Seeing my father like this..." She shakes her head, fresh tears falling. "He looked at me and I saw something die in his eyes. For years he thought

she was dead, Liam. For years he mourned her while she was alive, drugged, locked away—"

Her voice cracks completely.

I pull her against my chest again, wrapping her up, trying to shield her from a pain I can't fix. My hand moves through her hair in slow strokes, the way my mum used to do when I was small and scared and the world was too big to understand.

"I loved Riccardo," she whispers into my shirt. "Or I loved what I believed we had. The life I thought we were building. The man I thought he was."

I say nothing. Just hold her.

"But you..." She pulls back, looking up at me with those devastating eyes. "You made me feel like a human again. Like I have feelings that aren't just pain. Like I'm allowed to want things. To feel things."

My throat closes.

"I love you." The words come out rough, scraped raw by ten years of swallowing them. "I love you so fucking much I don't know how to love without hurting. Ten years, Ava."

She reaches up, her palm pressing flat against my chest, right over my heart.

"I could die right now," I tell her, "and I would feel whole. Because you're here. Because you're alive. Because for one moment in my entire miserable existence, I got to hold you and tell you the truth."

Her hand slides up to cup my jaw, her thumb tracing the scar that splits my eyebrow.

"Don't you dare die on me, Liam Blackwood." Her voice is thick with tears but steady underneath. "I didn't survive Nolan Pierce and a twenty-four-year conspiracy to lose you now."

Something that might be a laugh escapes me. Broken. Relieved.

"Yes, ma'am."

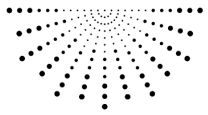
She almost smiles. Almost.

Then she tucks her head back against my chest, and I hold her in that sterile hospital corridor.

I hold her, and I don't let go.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



TWO MONTHS LATER

Ava

The private clinic is quiet today. Liam stands by the window, watching the garden below where nurses guide patients through their morning walks.

My mother sits propped against pillows, her dark hair brushed and pinned back from her face. She's gained weight. Not much, but enough that her cheekbones no longer look like they might cut through her skin. Today is a good day. I can tell by the way her eyes track my movements, present and aware, not lost in whatever fog the drugs created in her mind.

"You're nervous," Liam says without turning around.

"Julian's coming."

He finally looks at me. "I know."

My mother hasn't met Julian yet. Not really. She mentions him sometimes—*my baby*, she calls him, her voice cracking on the words. He has no memory of her face, her voice, her hands. And she has no memory of the man he became.

"What if today isn't—" I stop myself. Can't finish that sentence.

Liam crosses the room and takes my hand. His palm is warm and calloused, familiar now in a way that still surprises me. "She asked about him this morning. Three times."

I nod, swallowing hard. The good days are gifts. The bad days are... something else entirely.

Last week, my mother screamed at us for two hours straight. Called us liars. Demanded to know why we never came for her, why we left her rotting in that farmhouse while we lived our pretty lives. Sylvia showed her photographs, she said. Wedding photos. Birthday parties. Holiday dinners. Twenty-four years of proof that we moved on without her.

I wouldn't have survived that day without Liam. He sat beside her bed, speaking in that low, steady voice, until her rage dissolved into sobs. He held her hand while she wept. He didn't flinch when she dug her nails into his skin hard enough to draw blood.

"She's stronger than you think," he says now, reading my thoughts the way he always does.

"I know she is."

"So is Julian."

A knock at the door makes my heart stutter. Liam squeezes my hand once before stepping back, giving us space.

My father enters first. He looks different these days. There's life in him again. Purpose. For years, he walked through the world believing his wife chose to leave him. Now he knows she was stolen. The guilt is eating him alive, but the hope is keeping him breathing.

Behind him, Julian appears in the doorway.

My brother moves slowly, carefully, one hand braced against the frame. The bullet Sylvia fired tore through muscle and tendon. Doctors said he was lucky it missed his spine.

Julian's gaze finds the bed.

Finds her.

And my brother—who made jokes through his own kidnapping, who never let anyone see him break—*collapses*.

His knees hit the floor. A sound tears from his throat, raw and wounded, something between a gasp and a sob. His whole body shakes.

My mother pushes herself upright, her eyes wide. "Why does this beautiful boy cry?"

The words are soft, confused. She doesn't understand. She doesn't recognize the baby she once held in the man kneeling before her.

I move to her side, taking her thin hand in mine. "Mama." My voice cracks. "This is Julian."

She goes still.

"Julian," she repeats. "My... my Julian?"

"Your baby," I whisper. "He's grown up now."

My mother's face transforms. Recognition floods her features—not the fuzzy, uncertain kind she sometimes shows, but *real* recognition, the kind that comes from somewhere deeper than memory. She throws off her blankets and swings her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Mama, wait—" I reach for her. "You can't walk that far yet. Your legs aren't strong enough."

She ignores me completely.

Julian is already crawling toward her, tears streaming down his face, unable to stand. My mother pushes herself off the mattress and takes one shaky step, then another. Her whole body trembles with the effort.

My father catches her elbow, steadying her. "Oriana, careful—"

"Let me go to my son."

The command in her voice silences him.

Julian reaches the edge of the bed just as my mother's legs give out. They collapse into each other, her arms wrapping around him, his face buried against her shoulder. She's crying now too, rocking him back and forth like he's still the infant she lost.

"My baby," she sobs. "*My baby, my baby, my baby*—"

The sound breaks something inside me.

My tears fall without permission. They always do in this room. Liam's hand finds the small of my back, anchoring me, but he doesn't try to pull me away. He knows I need to witness this. Need to see my family becoming whole again, piece by broken piece.

My father kneels beside them. He wraps his arms around my mother and Julian both, his own shoulders shaking. I've never seen him cry before this month. Now I've seen him do it almost every day.

"I'm sorry," Julian is saying between sobs. "I'm sorry I couldn't remember you. I tried—I *tried*—but I was too young, and I couldn't—"

"Shh." My mother cups his face in her hands, studying every line and angle. "You're here now."

I stand frozen, watching them, until my mother looks up and extends one trembling hand toward me.

"Ava. Come."

I cross the room and sink to my knees beside my brother. My mother pulls me into the embrace, her grip surprisingly strong. My father's arm settles across my shoulders. Julian's hand finds mine.

The four of us huddle together on the cold clinic floor, tangled and weeping and whole.

We stay like that for a long time. No one speaks. No one needs to.

Eventually, Liam helps lift my mother back into bed. She's exhausted from the effort, her face pale but radiant. Julian sits in the chair beside her, refusing to let go of her hand. My father stands behind him, one palm resting on Julian's shoulder.

"You have your father's eyes," my mother tells Julian, her voice thin but steady. "But your mouth is mine. And your stubbornness from the stories I've heard." She manages a weak smile. "Definitely mine."

Julian laughs through his tears. "Ava got the stubbornness too."

"I know." My mother's gaze finds me. "She was always difficult. Even as a child."

"I learned from the best," I say.

Something flickers across her face—amusement, maybe, or just the shadow of who she used to be. Either way, it feels like a victory.

Liam catches my eye from across the room. He doesn't smile, but his expression softens in a way that's only for me. This man who kept vigil during my mother's worst moments, who held her hand through her rage and her grief, who never once complained about the hours spent in this sterile room.

I love you, I think.

I haven't said it out loud yet. He hasn't said it again, not since that night at the hospital. We're both waiting for the right moment, maybe, or just proof that we're allowed to have this.

But watching my family piece itself back together, I think I'm finally starting to believe.



Liam

The late afternoon sun cuts through the windshield as I drive us back from the clinic. Ava's hand rests on my thigh, her fingers tracing absent patterns on my jeans. She's been quiet since we left, but it's the good kind of quiet. The kind that settles into your bones after watching something beautiful happen.

"Lucrezia called while you were talking to the nurse," she says, turning to look at me. "She's coming to Chicago next week with Zoe. We're setting up dinner."

I glance at her, one eyebrow raised. "With whom are they coming?"

Ava tilts her head. "What do you mean?"

"Zoe is Damiano Feretti's wife." I keep my eyes on the road, but I can feel her watching me. "The Don of the Cosa Nostra in New York doesn't let his wife travel without serious protection. A dozen men, minimum."

Ava laughs, and the sound fills the car like sunlight. "She said they'll have almost a convoy following them."

I shake my head, but I'm smiling. "Of course they will."

"Lucrezia thinks it's ridiculous. But Damiano won't budge." Ava shifts in her seat, angling her body toward me. "She said Zoe just rolls her eyes and lets him have his way. Apparently he's insufferable when it comes to her safety."

"Smart man."

"You would say that."

I reach over and rest my hand on her thigh. The warmth of her skin seeps through the thin fabric of her dress. "I would."

She doesn't pull away. Instead, she places her hand over mine and squeezes.

These past two months feel like a dream I'm terrified of waking from. Not because everything has been easy. It hasn't. There have been long nights at the hospital, watching Oriana struggle to remember things she should never have forgotten. Days when Franklin couldn't look at anyone without breaking down. Moments when Julian's recovery hit setbacks that sent Ava spiraling into guilt she didn't deserve to carry.

But through all of it, we've been together.

Every single day.

I wake up with her. I fall asleep with her. I eat meals with her, sit in hospital waiting rooms with her, hold her when she cries and kiss her when she laughs. Ten years of wanting her, and now she's mine.

"Tomorrow I'm going back to Fairhaven," she says, her voice soft. "My first ride since everything."

"I know."

"I want you to come with me."

I tighten my grip on her thigh. "I wasn't planning on being anywhere else."

She smiles, and it hits me square in the chest. That smile. The one she only gives me. The one I waited a decade to see directed at me instead of someone else.

Her hand slides from mine.

And moves to my cock.

I laugh, a rough sound that catches in my throat. "What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like I'm doing?" Her fingers trace the outline of me through my jeans, and I'm already getting hard. Because it's her. Because she's touching me. Because my body has learned to respond to her like a fucking Pavlovian experiment.

"Ava." My voice comes out lower than I intended. "I'm driving."

"I know." She shifts in her seat, unbuckling her seatbelt. "Keep your eyes on the road."

"Put your seatbelt back on."

"No."

Her hand presses harder, and I groan. The road ahead blurs for a second before I force myself to focus.

"I want you in my mouth," she says, and those words destroy whatever resistance I might have had.

"Fuck."

She laughs, low and pleased with herself, and then she's leaning over the center console. Her fingers find my zipper and pull it down with practiced ease. We've been doing this for two months, and she's learned exactly how to take me apart.

My cock springs free, already hard and aching for her. She wraps her hand around the base and I grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles go white.

"Ava—"

Her tongue touches the tip, and I forget what I was going to say.

She licks a slow stripe up the underside of my shaft, and my foot presses harder on the gas. I force myself to ease off, to keep us at a reasonable speed, but my brain is splitting in two—half focused on the road, half consumed by the wet heat of her mouth closing around me.

"Jesus Christ."

She takes me deeper, her lips stretching around my cock as she sinks down. Her tongue swirls, her cheeks hollow, and I'm gripping the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to reality.

The car ahead of us slows, and I brake harder than I should. Ava makes a small sound of surprise but doesn't stop. Doesn't even pause. She just adjusts, bracing one hand on my thigh while the other strokes what her mouth can't reach.

"You're going to kill us," I manage to say.

She pulls off just long enough to respond. "Then drive better."

Then she takes me back in, deeper this time, and I stop talking.

The world outside the windshield becomes abstract. Shapes and colors that mean nothing compared to the sensation of her mouth working me. She finds a rhythm, slow and devastating, and I'm fighting to keep my eyes open.

My hand leaves the steering wheel and finds the back of her head. I don't push but I thread my fingers through her hair and hold on. She moans around me, and the vibration shoots straight up my spine.

"Fuck, Ava. Just like that."

She responds by taking me even deeper, her throat relaxing as she swallows around me. My hips buck involuntarily, and the car swerves slightly before I correct it.

Red light ahead.

Thank God.

I brake, coming to a stop, and use the moment to look down at her. Her dark hair spills across my lap. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips swollen and slick. She looks up at me through her lashes, my cock still in her mouth, and the sight nearly undoes me.

"You're fucking beautiful," I tell her. "And you're going to make me crash this car."

She pulls off with a wet pop. "Then hurry up and come."

The light turns green.

I press the gas and she goes back to work, sucking me harder now, faster. Her hand strokes in time with her mouth, and I'm losing the battle. The pressure builds at the base of my spine, spreading through my limbs like wildfire.

"I'm close," I warn her.

She doesn't stop. Doesn't slow down. Just takes me deeper and swallows around me, and I'm gone.

I come with a groan that feels ripped from my chest, my vision going white at the edges. She takes everything I give her, swallowing it down, her mouth gentle now as she works me through the aftershocks.

When she finally sits up, wiping her lips with the back of her hand, I'm barely breathing.

"Eyes on the road," she says, and there's laughter in her voice.

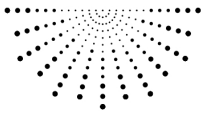
I reach over and pull her close, kissing the top of her head. "You're going to be the death of me."

"But what a way to go."

I can't argue with that.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Ava

We barely make it through Liam's door before his mouth is on mine again.

The drive from the clinic felt endless. My body still hums from what I did to him in the car.

Now we stumble through his apartment, shedding clothes like breadcrumbs. My jacket hits the floor. His shirt follows. By the time we reach his bedroom, I'm down to my underwear and he's working on his belt.

"On the bed," he says. Not a request.

I climb onto the mattress, and before I can turn around, his hands are on my hips, spinning me onto my back. He kneels between my thighs, and the look in his eyes makes my stomach clench.

"You think you can do that to me in the car," he murmurs, hooking his fingers into my underwear and dragging them down my legs, "and I'm not going to return the favor?"

He spreads my thighs wider, and then his mouth is on me.

I gasp, my back arching off the bed. His tongue moves in slow strokes, like he's got all the time in the world. Like he's not going to rush this no matter how much I beg.

And I will beg. I already know that.

He slides two fingers inside me, curling them just right, and my hands fly to his hair. I grip the dark strands, trying to anchor myself as pleasure builds in my core.

"God, you taste good," he says against my skin, the vibration of his voice making me whimper. "Could do this for hours."

He pulls his fingers out and brings them to his mouth, sucking them clean while holding my gaze. The sight of it sends heat flooding through my entire body.

Then his hand moves lower.

His wet fingertip circles my other entrance, and I moan before I can stop myself.

I remember the first time he discovered this about me. The first time his fingers wandered there and I arched into his touch instead of pulling away. The sound he made—this deep, guttural groan that came from somewhere primal—nearly undid me completely. I was so close to coming just from *hearing* him react like that.

He does it again now, that same low sound rumbling through his chest as he watches my face.

"You like that," he says. Not a question.

"Yes." The word comes out breathless, desperate.

"Fucking hell, Ava." His finger presses more firmly, circling in slow, maddening patterns. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

I can't answer. I can barely think. His mouth returns to my clit, sucking gently while his fingers work me from both angles—two pumping inside my pussy, one teasing that sensitive ring of muscle.

The sensation is overwhelming. Too much and not enough all at once.

"Liam—" I'm panting now, my hips moving against his face without my permission. "I'm going to—"

"Then come." He presses harder, sucks deeper. "Come on my tongue."

The orgasm tears through me like lightning. I scream his name, my thighs clamping around his head, my whole body shaking as wave after wave crashes over me. He doesn't stop. He keeps licking, keeps stroking, drawing out every last tremor until I'm boneless and gasping.

When he finally pulls back, his face is wet and his eyes are dark with want.

I reach for him, pulling him up my body until I can kiss him. I taste myself on his lips, on his tongue, and something about that makes me want him even more.

"Lie down," I whisper against his mouth.

He raises an eyebrow but does as I ask, rolling onto his back. I climb over him, positioning myself so my back faces his chest. I reach between us, finding his cock hard and ready.

I sink down onto him in one smooth motion, and we both groan.

This angle is different. Deeper. I can feel every inch of him stretching me open, filling me completely. His hands grip my hips hard enough to bruise.

"Fuck." The word comes out like a prayer. "Look at you."

I start to move, rising and falling on his cock while he watches from behind. His hands slide up to grip my waist, helping me find a rhythm.

"That's it," he says, his voice rough. "Ride me just like that."

I plant my hands on his thighs for leverage and move faster. The sound of our bodies meeting fills the room.

"Your ass," he growls, and I feel his hands move to cup my cheeks, spreading them apart so he can watch himself disappear inside me. "Christ, Ava. You have no idea how good you look like this."

I moan at his words, at the possessive way he's handling me.

"Been thinking about this ass for ten fucking years." His thumb traces over that sensitive spot again, and I jolt, my rhythm faltering.

The combination of his voice and his finger makes me clench around him, and he groans.

"You want that?" His thumb presses more firmly. "Want me here too?"

"Yes." I don't even hesitate. "God, yes."

He curses, low and fervent. "You're going to kill me."

I laugh breathlessly, moving faster on his cock. "Not yet. Not until you make me come again."

His hand snakes around to find my clit, rubbing in tight circles while I ride him. The dual sensation builds the pressure impossibly fast.

"That's my girl." His voice is strained, his hips starting to thrust up to meet mine. "Take what you need."

I bounce harder, chasing the release that's coiling tighter and tighter in my core. His other hand is still on my ass, his thumb still teasing that

forbidden spot, and the combination is pushing me toward the edge faster than I expected.

"Liam—"

"I know. I feel you squeezing me." He sounds wrecked. "Come on, love. Let go."

I shatter with a cry, my whole body convulsing around him. He follows seconds later, his hands gripping my hips as he buries himself deep and empties inside me.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. I'm still impaled on him, my head thrown back, my chest heaving. His hands stroke up and down my sides in slow, soothing motions.

"Come here," he murmurs.

I lift off him carefully, wincing at the sensitivity, and turn around to collapse against his chest. His arms wrap around me immediately, pulling me close.

"I love you," I say into his skin.

The words come out easier than I expected. Easier than they have any right to, after everything.

He goes still beneath me. Then his arms tighten, and he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Say it again."

I smile against his chest. "I love you, Liam Blackwood."

"Again."

"I love you."

His hand cups my face, tilting it up so he can look at me. His gray eyes are soft in a way I've never seen before—vulnerable in a way he's never allowed himself to be.

"I've waited years to hear you say that." His thumb traces my cheekbone. "And I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you never stop."

I kiss him then, soft and sweet, a promise sealed between us.



Liam

Steam curls around us as the hot water hits my back. Ava stands beneath the spray, her head tipped back, water streaming through her dark hair and down her body. I can't stop staring at her.

I love you.

The words echo in my head. Three words I've waited ten fucking years to hear. Three words I'd convinced myself would never come from her lips. Not for me. Never for me.

But she said them. Ava said them.

I reach for the soap, working it between my palms until it lathers. She watches me through half-closed eyes, water droplets clinging to her lashes like tiny diamonds.

"Come here," I murmur.

She steps closer, and I start with her shoulders. My hands slide across her skin, tracing the elegant line of her collarbone, the curve where her neck meets her shoulder. I've memorized every inch of this woman, and still I want to learn her again. Every time feels like the first time.

I love you.

My hands move lower, soaping the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist. She shivers despite the heat, her breath catching when my thumbs brush the underside of her curves.

"Liam."

My name on her lips. Another thing I'll never tire of hearing.

I turn her gently, washing down her spine, over the curve of her arse, down her thighs. She braces one hand against the tile, her head dropping forward. Water cascades down her back, washing away the soap, revealing the smooth expanse of skin I've worshipped with my mouth, my hands, my entire body.

When I'm finished, she turns back to face me. Her eyes are dark, pupils blown wide. She rises on her toes and presses her mouth to mine.

Soft at first. Gentle. A thank you, maybe. Or a promise.

Then her tongue slides against mine, and the kiss turns hungry.

My cock stirs. Again. I should be spent after what we just did in the bedroom, but my body doesn't seem to care about logic when it comes to

this woman. Ten years of wanting her. Ten years of denying myself. Now that I have her, I can't get enough.

I grip her hips and lift her off her feet in one motion. She gasps against my mouth, her legs wrapping around my back, ankles crossing at the base of my spine. The tile is slick beneath my feet, but I brace myself, pressing her back against the cool wall.

"Liam—"

"I've got you." I shift my grip, one hand supporting her arse, the other pressed flat against the tile beside her head. "Always."

She's already wet for me. Not just from the water. I can feel her heat, the slick evidence of her arousal coating my length as I position myself at her entrance.

I love you.

I push inside her.

Her head falls back against the tile, throat bared, and the sound she makes—fuck, that sound—goes straight to my balls. She's tight around me, her body gripping me like she never wants to let go.

Good. Because I'm never letting her go either.

I start to move, thrusting up into her as she clings to my shoulders. Her nails dig into my skin, leaving marks I'll wear proudly. Her back arches, pressing her breasts toward my face, and I take what she's offering.

My mouth closes around one peaked nipple. I lick, suck, scrape my teeth across the sensitive flesh until she's writhing against me. Then I move to the other, giving it the same attention while my hips maintain their relentless rhythm.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I growl against her skin. "Every part of you."

She moans, her fingers threading through my wet hair, pulling hard enough to sting. I love it. Love the way she takes what she wants. Love that she's stopped being careful with me.

I'm not the one who's been broken. She is. And I'll spend the rest of my life putting her back together.

I love you.

The words pulse through me with every thrust. I want to hear them again. Want to hear them a thousand times. A million. Until they're etched into my bones.

But right now, I want something else more.

I lower her slowly, letting her feet touch the floor. She makes a sound of protest, but it dies in her throat when I spin her around.

"Hands on the wall."

She obeys, pressing her palms flat against the wet tile. I step up behind her, gripping her hip with one hand while the other tangles in her hair. Gently, I guide her head to the side, pressing her cheek against the cool surface.

She's panting now, her ass pushing back toward me, seeking friction.

I give it to her.

I drag my cock along the seam of her arse, coating myself in the water and her arousal. She whimpers, her hips rolling, grinding back against me.

"Please," she breathes.

That word. From her lips. Directed at me.

I don't make her wait.

I notch myself at her entrance and thrust home in one smooth stroke. She cries out, her hands curling into fists against the tile. I set a punishing pace, one hand still gripping her hip while the other stays tangled in her hair, keeping her pinned.

The sound of wet skin slapping against wet skin fills the shower, mingling with her moans and my grunts. Water beats down on my back, steam thick in the air, and none of it matters. All that matters is the woman in front of me. The woman who loves me.

"Liam—" She's close. I can feel it in the way she tightens around me, the way her breath comes in sharp gasps. "Liam, I'm—"

"I know." I lean forward, pressing my chest to her back, my mouth at her ear. "Come for me, Ava. Let me feel you."

She shatters.

Her body clamps down on my cock like a vice, her scream echoing off the tile walls. The sensation tips me over the edge, and I follow her into oblivion, spilling inside her with a groan torn from somewhere deep in my chest.

We stay like that for a long moment, my forehead pressed between her shoulder blades, both of us struggling to breathe. The water's starting to cool, but I can't bring myself to move.

I love you.

I'll never stop hearing those words. Never stop being grateful for them.

Finally, I straighten, pulling out of her carefully. She turns in my arms, her face flushed, her eyes soft in a way I've rarely seen.

"I meant it," she says quietly. "What I said before."

My throat tightens. "I know."

She reaches up, tracing the line of my jaw with wet fingers. "I should have said it sooner. I wanted to. I just..."

"You don't have to explain." I catch her hand, press a kiss to her palm. "You said it now. That's all that matters."

She smiles—a real smile, the kind that reaches her eyes—and something in my chest cracks open.

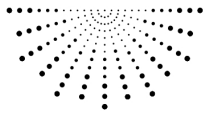
Ten years. Ten fucking years of wanting this woman from across a room, across a marriage, across a war.

Now she's mine.

And I'm never letting her go.

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CHAPTER FORTY



Ava

The morning air carries that particular crispness that only exists at stables.

Nero moves beneath me with the steady rhythm I've come to know better than my own heartbeat, his hooves pressing soft prints into the arena sand.

Liam walks beside us, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket. He refused the offer of a horse with such absolute finality that I didn't bother pushing. Some battles aren't worth fighting.

"You're missing out," I tell him, running my fingers through Nero's dark mane. "There's nothing quite like it."

"I'll take your word for it." His eyes scan the perimeter of the arena, never fully relaxing. "Prefer to keep my feet on solid ground."

"The ground isn't as solid as you think." I guide Nero into a gentle turn, feeling his body respond to the slight shift of my weight. "Horses figured that out long before we did."

Liam's mouth twitches. Almost a smile. "Is that so?"

"They're prey animals. Everything about how they move, how they think, is built around survival." I lean forward slightly, and Nero's ears flick back toward me, listening. "They don't trust easily. Can't afford to."

"Sounds familiar."

I glance down at him. The morning light catches the sharp angles of his face, softening them just enough that I can see the man beneath the soldier. The one who held me in a hospital corridor while I fell apart.

"Horses communicate through energy," I continue, returning my attention to Nero's neck. "They feel everything. Your tension, your fear, your intention. You can't lie to a horse."

"No?"

"No." I stroke Nero's shoulder, feeling the warmth of him through my gloves. "If you're nervous, they know. If you're angry, they know. They read your body before you've even decided what you're going to do."

Liam considers this, his stride matching Nero's pace without conscious effort. "Must make them difficult to work with."

"It makes them honest." I smile despite myself. "Most people find that uncomfortable. We're so used to hiding what we feel. Horses don't let you get away with that."

Nero snorts softly, as if agreeing with me.

"He seems to like you well enough," Liam observes.

"We've earned each other." I pat Nero's neck, feeling the solid muscle beneath his coat. "That's the thing about horses. You can't buy their trust. You can't demand it. You have to show up, day after day, and prove you're safe."

"Safe." Liam says the word like he's tasting it. Testing its weight.

"Safe doesn't mean weak." I meet his eyes. "It means consistent. Reliable. It means when something scares them, you stay calm. When they need direction, you give it clearly. They need to know you won't hurt them, won't abandon them, won't ask them to do something that will get them killed."

Something shifts in Liam's expression. Something raw and unguarded that disappears almost as quickly as it appeared.

"How long did it take?" he asks. "For him to trust you?"

"Months." I guide Nero around the arena's corner, his body bending smoothly into the curve. "He was difficult when I first started working with him. Previous owner had rough hands. Nero learned that humans meant pain."

Liam's jaw tightens. "And now?"

"Now he'd walk through fire for me." I lean down, pressing my cheek briefly against Nero's neck. His ear swivels back, acknowledging the

contact. "And I'd do the same for him."

We continue in comfortable silence for a few moments. The arena is empty except for us. I requested a private session, and Fairhaven accommodated without question.

"Why do you always ride him?" Liam asks. "The same horse, every time. The club must have others."

"They do." I straighten in the saddle. "But Nero isn't just a club horse. He's mine."

Liam's eyebrows lift slightly. "Yours."

"I bought him three years ago. Right after—" I pause, the words catching. "Right after Riccardo. I needed something that was just mine. Something that didn't belong to the Sartoris or the Ashfords or anyone else's expectations."

Understanding flickers across Liam's features. He doesn't say anything, just waits.

"When you bond with a horse, it's not casual," I explain. "It's a relationship. A real one. They remember everything. Every kindness, every cruelty, every moment you showed up when you said you would. Nero knows my hands. Knows my voice. Knows the way I sit when I'm tired or distracted or sad."

I bring Nero to a halt, and he stands perfectly still beneath me, his breathing steady and calm.

"If I rode a different horse every time, I'd never build that. I'd always be a stranger. Always starting over." I shake my head. "That's not what I want. Not with horses. Not with anything."

Liam steps closer, close enough to rest his hand on Nero's shoulder. The horse doesn't flinch, doesn't shy away. Just turns his head slightly to regard Liam with one dark, intelligent eye.

"He's assessing you," I say quietly.

"And?"

"Jury's still out."

That almost-smile again. "Fair enough."

I watch Liam's hand on Nero's coat, the gentleness in his scarred fingers. The same hands that killed Nolan Pierce. The same hands that held me while I sobbed in a hospital corridor.

"He boards here for now," I continue. "But eventually, I want to move him somewhere permanent. Somewhere I can see him every day without

driving an hour north."

"You don't have property for that."

"Not yet." I shrug. "I've been looking, on and off. There's land outside the city that could work. But it never felt like the right time. There was always something else demanding attention."

Liam's hand stills on Nero's shoulder. "And now?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with everything we haven't said aloud. Two months of sleeping in his bed. Two months of learning the shape of his silence, the rhythm of his breathing, the way his body curves around mine in the dark.

Two months of wondering what comes next.

"Now things are different," I say carefully.

Nero shifts beneath me, sensing the change in my energy. I force myself to relax, to breathe, to let the tension drain from my shoulders.

"My mother is recovering. Julian is healing. My father is—" I pause, searching for the right word. "Present. For the first time in years, he's actually present."

"And you?"

I look down at Liam, at this man who waited ten years for me. Who stood in the shadows while I married someone else, loved someone else, grieved someone else. Who never stopped watching. Never stopped wanting.

"I'm figuring it out," I admit. "What I want. Who I am when I'm not performing for everyone else."

Liam holds my gaze, steady and patient. The same way Nero holds his ground when something startles him—not running, not fighting. Just waiting.

"Take your time," he says quietly. "I'm not going anywhere."

Nero's ears prick forward, and I realize I'm smiling. Actually smiling, the kind that reaches my eyes and warms my chest.

"Neither is he," I say, patting Nero's neck. "You two have that in common."



Liam

The compound gates swing open, and my stomach drops.

"Small gathering," I mutter, counting at least fifteen cars already parked along the curved drive. "Bruno's definition of small needs work."

Ava's hand finds my thigh, her fingers pressing into the muscle. She's nervous too. I can feel it in the slight tremor of her touch, see it in the way she's scanning the familiar grounds like enemy territory.

"There were already a lot of Sartoris before they had wives and husbands," she says, her voice tight. "Now there's what—thirty of them? Forty?"

"Forty-three at last count." I pull the Range Rover into a spot near the fountain. "Including the children and some of the closest men."

"Wonderful."

I kill the engine but don't move to open the door. Neither does she.

For years, I walked into this compound as security. As Giuseppe's man, then Riccardo's shadow, then Pietro's backup. I knew my place in every room, against every wall, watching every door. Now I'm supposed to walk in as what? Ava's partner?

Fuck.

Pietro called this morning. Said Bruno wanted us here. Said it was time.

Time for what, he didn't specify. Probably because he knew I'd find an excuse not to come.

"This was going to happen eventually," Ava says, reading my silence the way she always does. "We needed to face them sooner or later. Might as well be now."

"Might as well," I repeat, not believing a word of it.

She turns to look at me, and Christ, she's beautiful. Her skin glows the way it did before everything.

"If anyone makes us feel unwelcome," she says, her chin lifting in that stubborn way I've come to love, "we leave. Immediately. No explanations, no apologies. We just go."

I smile. Can't help it. "Deal."

"I mean it, Liam. I don't care if Bruno himself asks us to stay. If someone—"

"I said deal." I reach over and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, the gesture so natural now when it used to terrify me. "We leave if you're uncomfortable. We stay if you want to stay. Whatever you need."

Her eyes soften. That brown going warm and liquid the way it does when I say something that lands right.

I love her more every day. Not because the feeling grows but because I see more of her now. The woman who laughs at her own terrible jokes. The woman who talks to her horse like he understands every word. The woman who cried in my arms after her mother remembered Julian's name, then pulled herself together and made them have dinner because her family needed normal.

She has a lot of parts, my Ava. I'm learning to love all of them.

"Stop," she whispers.

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that." She swipes at her eyes, which have gone suspiciously bright. "I finally got my skin back to normal after weeks of stress-induced breakouts. I refuse to let you make me cry and ruin it."

I laugh. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"You're dreaming of it right now. I can see it on your face."

"I'm thinking about how much I love you," I admit, because I can say that now. Because she says it back. "That's not the same as trying to make you cry."

"It absolutely is." But she's smiling, that wide smile that transforms her whole face. "You know exactly what you're doing."

I lean across the console and kiss her. Soft. Slow. Her hand comes up to cup my jaw, and for a moment, I forget about the compound full of people waiting to judge us.

"We're going to have a good time," I tell her when we break apart. "You'll see."

I'm not sure I believe it. But I don't want to make her more nervous than she already is.

"Liar," she says fondly.

"Optimist."

"Since when?"

"Since you." I open my door before she can respond, rounding the car to get her door. Old habits. She rolls her eyes but lets me help her out anyway.

The front door of the main house opens before we reach the steps.

Giulia stands in the entrance, wiping her hands on her apron. The woman who raised them all with care. She and Aria were a united front all these years.

She looks at me. Then at Ava. Then at our joined hands.

"About goddamn time," she says, and opens her arms.

Ava goes to her first, and I watch them embrace.

When Giulia releases Ava, she turns to me. Her eyes are wet, but her voice is steady.

"You made me wait years for this, Liam Blackwood. Years of watching you alone and doing nothing about it."

"I know."

"You drove me crazy."

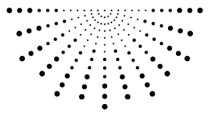
"I know."

She pulls me into a fierce hug, her small frame surprisingly strong.

Something loosens in my chest.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Ava

The moment we step into the living room, Vittoria appears at my side like she materialized from thin air.

"Ava." She wraps both arms around me with the kind of desperation that says she's been waiting for this moment. "How are you? Really?"

I hold her tight, breathing in the familiar scent of her perfume. "Better. Getting there."

She pulls back, searching my face with those dark Sartori eyes that see too much. "You look better. Less like you haven't slept in weeks."

"Charming as always."

She grins, and it's the same grin I remember from years ago, before grief carved lines into both our faces. "Someone has to tell you the truth."

The room is full. That's the first thing I register once Vittoria releases me. At least thirty people scattered across the expansive space, conversations humming, glasses clinking. For one suspended heartbeat, they all turn to look at us—at me and Liam standing together, his hand warm against the small of my back.

Then they go back to what they were doing.

No gasps. No whispered scandals. Just... acceptance.

I spot Lorenzo near the fireplace with Sophia, their heads bent together. Kristen laughs at something Nico says. Pietro catches my eye from across the room where he's talking with Liam, who drifted away the moment we entered. He raises his glass in a small salute.

"They're all here," I say, more to myself than to Vittoria.

"Of course they are." She links her arm through mine. "You're family, Ava. That hasn't changed."

The words settle somewhere deep in my chest, loosening a knot I didn't realize I was still carrying.

Dmitri approaches, his massive frame cutting through the crowd with predatory grace. He stops beside Vittoria, one hand automatically finding her waist, and offers me a nod that's almost warm by Bratva standards.

"Ava. Good to see you."

"You too." I tilt my head. "How are your siblings?"

He sighs. The sound carries the weight of a man who commands an empire but cannot control his own family. "A pain in my ass."

I laugh. The sound surprises me, bubbling up from somewhere I thought had gone dormant. "That bad?"

"Worse." His mouth twitches. "My youngest sister has decided she wants to study art in Paris. My brother thinks he should run the club. Another brother is in love with someone entirely unsuitable." He shakes his head. "I preferred when they were afraid of me."

"Were they ever actually afraid of you?"

"No." He sounds genuinely mournful about it. "That's the problem."

Vittoria pats his chest. "Poor baby."

From across the room, Bruno catches my attention. He stands near the back wall, drink in hand, watching everything with those calculating eyes that see every angle. When our gazes meet, he nods. Just once. Slow and deliberate.

It's not forgiveness. I'm not sure either of us needs that from the other. It's acknowledgment. Recognition. We both loved Riccardo. We both survived him.

"Mother's coming," Vittoria says quietly.

My stomach drops.

If there's one person whose reaction I've dreaded, it's her. Riccardo's mother. The woman who welcomed me into this family with open arms and

treated me like a daughter for seven years. The woman whose son I married, mourned, and am now replacing with his best friend.

I turn, and she's already there. Moving through the crowd with that elegant grace she's never lost, despite everything. Her silver-streaked dark hair is pinned up, and her face carries the same quiet strength I remember from my first dinner at this house, when I was twenty-four and terrified and so desperately in love with her son.

"Ava." She opens her arms. "Come here, *tesoro*."

I go. What else can I do?

Her embrace is warm and familiar and smells like the same perfume she's worn for decades. She holds me close, and I feel tears prick at my eyes.

"How are you?" she asks, pulling back to study my face. "How is your mother? Your brother? Your father?"

"Mom is improving. She recognized Julian. He cried for an hour." My voice wavers. "Julian's physical therapy is going well. And Dad... Dad is present. Finally. After all these years."

Aria cups my face in her hands. Her eyes are bright with unshed tears. "I'm so glad, *cara*. So glad she's back with you. A mother should never be taken from her children."

The weight of her words sits heavy between us. She knows about loss. About children being taken. About the things we survive and the things that break us.

She glances over my shoulder to where Liam stands with Pietro, their conversation low and serious. When she looks back at me, there's no accusation in her expression. No betrayal.

"You're very young," she says softly. "At some point, this was going to happen. Life continuing. Love returning." She squeezes my hands. "I'm happy for you."

"Aria—"

"No." She shakes her head gently. "I knew Liam cared for you. I think I knew before he did, the way he watched you at dinners, the way he left rooms when you entered." A sad smile crosses her face. "My son knew too. Riccardo. He saw things and he kept them. Used them. I didn't understand that about him for a long time."

My throat tightens. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Her voice is firm. "Liam is a good man. He will take care of you. And Riccardo..." She pauses, composing herself. "I've learned things these past years. About my son. About my husband. Things I wish I'd known. Things I'm glad I didn't."

She's a broken woman too. I see it in the lines around her eyes, in the careful way she holds herself together. We've both loved Sartori men. We've both discovered those men were not entirely who we believed them to be.

"Thank you," I manage. "For understanding."

"There's nothing to understand." She pulls me into another embrace. "You are my daughter still. That hasn't changed. That will never change."

I hold her tight, relief flooding through me so fast I feel dizzy with it. This was the reaction I feared most. This was the judgment I braced for.

And instead, I found grace.

When I pull back, Liam is watching us from across the room. His eyes meet mine, and I see the question there. *Are you okay?*

I nod.

Aria follows my gaze and laughs softly. "Go to him, *tesoro*. Life is too short to spend it across rooms from the people we love."

She releases me, and I walk toward Liam, toward the man who waited ten years, toward whatever comes next.



Liam

The room hums with conversation and laughter, glasses clinking as the scent of garlic and rosemary from Giulia's cooking fills the air. I stand with Dante and Pietro near the fireplace, whiskey in hand, watching Ava across the room.

She's laughing at something Vittoria said, her head thrown back, throat exposed. Nora and Kristen flank her like she's always belonged in their circle. Maybe she has. Maybe I was the only one who couldn't see it.

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"You're staring," Pietro says, not bothering to hide his amusement.

"I'm aware."

Dante snorts. "Ten years of pining and you still can't help yourself."

"I'm not pining anymore." I take a sip of whiskey. "I won."

Pietro laughs outright at that, and even Dante cracks a rare smile.

A hand lands on my shoulder. Heavy. Deliberate.

I turn to find Bruno standing behind me, his dark eyes unreadable. The room doesn't quiet, but I feel the weight of this moment settle into my bones. The last time we were this close, he put a bullet in my shoulder.

"Don," I say, inclining my head.

Bruno's jaw tightens at the formality. "Liam."

Silence stretches between us. Pietro and Dante don't move, don't speak. They know better than to interfere.

"Thank you," I say finally. "For including me tonight. For—" I gesture vaguely at the room, at Ava, at everything. "All of this."

Bruno studies me for a long moment. His expression doesn't soften exactly, but something shifts behind his eyes.

"I let my rage overtake my logic," he says, voice low enough that only we can hear. "It's a flaw. One I'm working on." He pauses. "But I always remember who matters in this life. Who I can count on when everything goes to shit."

I wait. There's more coming. I can feel it.

"I won't pretend it doesn't feel strange." Bruno's gaze flicks toward Ava, then back to me. "Knowing you're together. She was Riccardo's wife. That means something to me, even now."

"I know."

"But I respected you before." His voice drops lower. "I respect you more after everything that happened. The way you handled Pierce. The way

you protected her when I—" He stops, swallows. "When I wasn't capable of seeing past my own grief."

My chest tightens.

"This family needs people who care for each other that much," Bruno continues. "People willing to burn it all down for the ones they love." A ghost of a smile crosses his face. "I know I can rely on you. Always."

I nod, not trusting my voice.

Before the moment can settle, Dante steps between us and throws his arms around both our shoulders, pulling us into an awkward three-way embrace.

"This is beautiful," Dante says, his voice thick with mock emotion. "Two stubborn bastards finally making peace. I might cry."

Bruno's entire body goes rigid. "Get your fucking hands off me before I start counting your teeth."

Dante doesn't move. "Come on, Don. Embrace the moment. Feel the love."

"Dante. I'm not joking."

"Neither am I. This is a breakthrough. We should document it. Vittoria has her phone—"

I bark out a laugh before I can stop myself. The sound surprises me. Pietro joins in, shaking his head.

And then Bruno laughs too.

It's brief. More of a rough exhale than anything. But it's real, and the tension that's been coiled in my chest for months finally releases.

Bruno shoves Dante off him, but there's no heat in it. He squeezes my arm once then walks away toward Antonella, who's watching from across the room with knowing eyes.

I feel Ava's gaze on me before I see it. When I turn, she's looking at me from where she stands with the women, her expression soft. Warm.

She smiles.

I smile back.

Something clicks into place. Something that's been misaligned for ten years finally settles where it belongs.

"Where's Fabio?" I ask, turning back to Dante and Pietro. "I haven't seen him all night."

Dante bursts out laughing.

"Oh, you're about to hear a very interesting story." Dante wipes his eyes, still grinning. "Fabio is going to be our next problem."

Pietro groans. "Not this again."

"What happened?" I ask.

"A woman," Dante says, the word dripping with significance. "You'll hear the rest from him."

Pietro mutters something in Italian that sounds like a prayer.

"From now on," Dante announces, "I refuse to put any more men in our inner circle. Every single one of you falls for a woman who causes chaos."

"We're not that bad," I say.

Dante and Pietro both give me identical looks of disbelief.

"You got shot by the Don for her," Pietro says flatly.

"I provoked him."

"You provoked him because you were in love and couldn't handle it anymore." Dante claps me on the shoulder. "Face it, Blackwood. We're all fucked. Every last one of us."

I look across the room at Ava. She's listening to something Nora's saying. Pietro's wife is laughing, but Ava's eyes keep drifting back to me. Each time they do, that small smile returns.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I suppose we are."

And for the first time in years, I don't mind being fucked at all.

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CHAPTER 42

Cassidy

The elevator hums around me. This place has the smell of money.

I don't know if I could ever have the chance to rent an apartment in this building.

In fact, thinking about my rent doesn't really help right now.

My rent that I can't pay.

My rent that's three months late. My rent that doesn't matter anymore because none of it matters if Danny ends up dead in a ditch somewhere.

Focus.

I stare at my reflection in the polished brass doors. The woman looking back at me has dark circles under her eyes, a coat that's four years old and a smile she's been practicing for the last six floors.

"Hi, I'm Cassidy Turner. I'm here about my brother."

Too stiff. I sound like I'm reading from a script. Which I am, technically, because I wrote it on the back of a napkin in the lobby bathroom, and my hands were shaking so badly the words came out crooked.

"Mr. Sartori, I apologize for showing up unannounced—"

No. Don't apologize. Danny said these men can smell weakness. Danny said a lot of things before he stopped answering his phone three days ago, and most of them were lies, but that one felt true.

The elevator hums. Floor twenty-two. Twenty-three.

"My brother made a mistake. I know that. But if you could just—"

Just what? Give him another chance? Forgive the debt? Let him live?

I don't even know what he did. I don't know how much he owes or who he owes it to or why a man who wipes down cars at a garage somehow ended up on the radar of people who live in penthouses with brass elevators.

All I know is that he called me at 3 a.m., voice cracking, saying *Cassie, I fucked up, I fucked up bad,* and then the line went dead.

Floor twenty-eight. Twenty-nine.

My stomach drops and it has nothing to do with the altitude.

You can do this. You've handled worse than some rich guy in a nice apartment.

The elevator dings.

Floor thirty.

The doors slide open, and I don't move.

For three full seconds, I stand there like an idiot, staring at the hallway. Marble floors. A single door at the end. One of those fancy art pieces on the wall that's probably worth more than everything I've ever owned combined.

Move, Cassidy. Move your feet.

I step out. My sneakers squeak on the floor and the sound is obscene in all this silence.

The hallway stretches forever. Or maybe it's only twenty feet. Hard to tell when your heart is trying to escape through your throat.

I reach the door.

It's dark wood. Heavy-looking. The kind of door that says *important people live here* and *you don't belong* in the same breath.

I raise my hand to knock.

It hovers there for a moment. I close my eyes, take a deep breath.

I knock.

The sound is too loud. Too sharp. I flinch at my own knuckles hitting wood.

Nothing happens.

I count to five. Ten. I'm about to knock again when I hear footsteps. Heavy.

The door opens.

My rehearsed smile hits my face on instinct—*Hi, I'm Cassidy Turner, I'm here about*—and then it dies.

Because the man standing in front of me is wearing a towel.

Just a towel.

White. Sitting low on his hips. Water still clinging to his chest like he stepped out of the shower thirty seconds ago.

And his chest is—

Don't look at his chest. Don't look at his chest. Don't look at his—

I look at his chest.

Broad. Scarred. The kind of body that comes from doing things, not from a gym. A tattoo curls up his ribs, disappearing behind his shoulder, and there are marks I don't want to identify. White lines that could be old wounds. Could be.

My eyes snap up to his face.

Worse. His face is worse.

Dark hair, damp, pushed back. A jaw that could cut glass. Eyes that are —I don't know what color, I can't focus long enough to tell—but they're looking at me like I'm something he found stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

"What." Not a question. A statement. A command.

"I—"

My voice cracks. Literally cracks, like I'm thirteen and giving an oral report on the Civil War.

"You're dripping on my floor."

I look down. He's right. There's a small puddle forming at my feet from the rain that caught me between the cab and the lobby. I didn't even notice.

"Sorry. I'm sorry, I—" *Stop apologizing.* "I'm looking for someone."

"This isn't an information desk."

He starts to close the door.

"Wait." The word comes out too fast, too desperate. I put my hand on the door like that's going to stop anything. Like my hand against six feet of dark wood and whatever's behind it matters at all. "Please. Just—one minute. That's all I need."

His eyes drop to my hand on his door. Then back to my face.

The silence stretches.

I am terrified. But Danny is somewhere out there, hiding, scared, maybe hurt, and I have been taking care of him since I was nine years old.

I don't get to be scared.

"My name is Cassidy Turner." My voice comes out steadier than I feel. Steadier than I have any right to sound. "I'm here to talk about my brother Danny."

Something changes in his face.

It's small. Barely there. A flicker behind those eyes that I almost miss because I'm too busy trying not to look at the rest of him. But it's there.

He knows that name.

The door stops closing.



Fabio

The woman standing in my doorway has no idea what she's walked into.

I look at her and see exactly what I expected. Tired. Young, but not as young as the tiredness makes her seem. Dark hair pulled back, cheap coat that's been cleaned too many times, and eyes that keep flicking past me into the apartment.

Eyes that are about to see something they shouldn't.

I need to close this door. Paola is somewhere behind me, probably listening, because she always listens, and I don't need a stranger's face added to whatever information she's already cataloging about my life.

But Danny Turner is missing. Danny Turner works for us. And his sister is standing in my hallway.

"How did you get in?" I ask.

She looks at me like I've asked her something complicated. Like the question has layers she's trying to peel back.

"Security," she says. "The guy downstairs. He called up and said I was coming, and someone gave permission." She pauses. "I assumed it was you."

No one asked me. I would remember being asked, because I would have said no.

She shifts her weight, and I watch her hands. They're ruined—cracked knuckles, bitten nails, a shiny scar across the inside of one forearm. Working hands. The kind that belong to someone who lifts things for a living.

"Look, Mr. Sartori—"

"I'm not Sartori."

Her mouth opens. Closes. She takes two steps backward, and her shoulder blades hit the hallway wall behind her.

"Oh."

That explains it. Nico. The thirty-first floor.

Why the fuck did Nico give permission for a civilian to enter this building?

"I'm sorry," she says. The words come fast, automatic. "I'm so sorry, I didn't—the address I had just said thirtieth floor, and I thought—"

"Daddy?"

Cazzo.

Paola's voice comes from behind me. Small. Careful. The way she always sounds when she's testing the edges of a situation.

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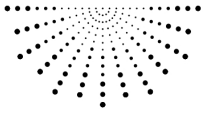


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sherry Blake writes steamy mafia romance with heat, heart, and a little bit of grit. Her stories are fueled by real-life experiences, shaped by a past that taught her strength, survival, and the power of love in all its complicated forms.

She's a married woman, a mom of three, and a full-time storyteller who still believes in the magic of a good bad boy. When she's not writing, you'll find her chasing chaos, sipping coffee, or hanging out with her spoiled cat, Simba.

Her books are raw, bold, and a little dangerous — just like the men who star in them.

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