

*broken
trust*

EMILIA SWANE

BROKEN TRUST

A BETRAYAL ROMANCE

THE RIZZO FAMILY
BOOK ONE

EMILIA SWANE

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ABOUT EMILIA SWANE

Emilia Swane turned heartbreak into a career. She was cheated on and dumped by her ex, so she started writing the happily-ever-afters she was denied, full of betrayal, grovel, and women who come out on top. To everyone who's been left and told there's no such thing as a happy ending: it's in her books.

(Therapy is expensive. Writing is cheaper)

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ABOUT BROKEN TRUST

She pretends she doesn't love him anymore. He pretends he always did.

Gia Rizzo knows her marriage is over the moment she overhears her husband admit he's never loved her. And while she grieves for the children she can never have, Dante is finding comfort somewhere closer to home: in her twin sister, the **surrogate** carrying his baby.

When her family orders Gia to keep up appearances, because they can't think of anything worse than a family scandal, she does the opposite. She turns off her phone and walks out on everyone who takes his side.

Two years later, the divorce papers are still sitting unsigned in his drawer, and Gia has built a whole new life without him.

Now Dante knows that everything he said before was a lie. And he'll do whatever it takes to keep her. He'll grovel, beg, and fight for her for as long as it takes.

Tropes

Marriage in Crisis

Twin Betrayal

Surrogacy Gone Wrong

Groveling MMC

Betrayal & Grovel

Dual POV

Trigger Warning: This story contains infertility, infidelity, pregnancy themes, a mention of suicide, and physical violence.

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FOREWORD

Hi,

This book is from two different points of views, you will notice that at times Gia's version is different from Dante's.

I did it on purpose, because there are two sides of the story, and at times they can be different and sometimes the same.

People tend to see what they want to see.

I hope that this doesn't cause too much confusion. Read on, you may actually enjoy it.

In Italian, suocera means mother-in-law and suocero means father-in-law.

Emilia

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GIA

Tonight I'm bringing romance back into these walls.

Dante. My husband, who showed me there was hope for someone like me. I'm nothing special. Not next to the women in my village with their long legs and their collarbones like blades. Americans would file me under Plain Jane and move on. Dark hair that never does what I ask it to. A medium sort of height. Wide hips, a soft stomach, a chest that leaves nothing to the imagination.

And then there was Dante, who looked at me as if I were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

When he asked me on a date I didn't even pretend to think about it. Around here, men wanted the Rizzo name more than the girl attached to it. The top fashion house in Europe was born in this valley, grew out of it, and became one of the biggest labels on the planet, so my surname opened doors before I reached them. Dante never once looked at the door. He looked at me.

So tonight I'm going to remind us both of that.

I've been on my feet since morning. The good glasses are polished until they throw little rainbows on the ceiling. Rose petals run down the length of the table, though it took twenty minutes of fussing because they looked staged, and another ten of putting them back because everything looks staged when you're this nervous. Candles burn low and warm down the middle, throwing gold up the walls. Sade turns over on the speakers, the same voice he used to play me in the dark years ago, when we owned

nothing worth naming and didn't care. Two glasses of the Barolo he loves sit breathing on the counter. And in the center of it there's me, in a champagne slip I bought this afternoon and buried at the bottom of my bag like a teenager, because if I'd stood in that shop one second longer, thinking, I'd have put it back and driven home in my old cardigan and hated myself the whole way.

The silk slides over the parts of me I've started avoiding in mirrors. Funny. I'd forgotten those insecurities for years. They stopped mattering somewhere between the engagement and the wedding, between building his career with him and trying for a baby. Then the baby never came, and they crept back in. Anyway, that's behind me. I push the thought out and make myself stay here, in this room, on him.

A quiet night alone with my husband should feel like breathing. It doesn't. I don't know if he wants me anymore, and some cold part of me suspects I stopped being wantable the day we learned I'm infertile. Tonight I'll find out. And I'm not sure I'll survive the answer if it's yes.

I laid the table the way I did the first time I ever cooked for him. We were sixteen, his pockets empty, my parents away for the weekend, so instead of a date he couldn't afford I told him I'd feed him. I've loved cooking for people since my Nonna put me on a stool at her counter at six years old. It gathers my heart into two hands and sets it on a plate where someone can see it, and that was the thing that undid him back then. *You do everything wide open*, he used to say. *Nothing held back*. For ten years I believed that was a safe way to love a person.

The garage door grinds awake beneath the floor and my heart shoots into my throat.

He's early. *He's never early anymore.*

Bare feet quick on the tile, I check it all one last time and hate the way my hands won't settle. The candles. The petals I have to step around now so I don't bruise them. The record is turning low. The wine breathing. Me, in silk I already want to hide under.

The door from the garage opens and he's still on the phone.

"Let me call you back." A pause. "No. Tomorrow's fine." He hangs up without waiting for an answer and slides the phone into his jacket. I file it away without meaning to, the way I file everything now, because a year ago he didn't end calls like that.

Then he steps into the light, and my foolish heart does the thing it's done since I was sixteen. It lifts.

He's in the dark polo and trousers he left in this morning, creased now in a way they weren't at breakfast, sleeves shoved up his forearms. Stubble he skipped shaving catches the light and makes him look tired and rough and unfairly beautiful. He ducks his head out of habit under the low beam by the door, though he clears it easily. His hair's gone a little long at the collar because he keeps canceling the barber. Those eyes are so dark brown they read as black until you're close, and I've been close enough, for long enough, to know every shade in them. Ten years of loving this man and the sight of him in a doorway still knocks the wind clean out of me.

His gaze goes to the table. "What's all this?"

Not *you look beautiful*. Nothing. My heart drops through the floor, and I fight to keep the fall off my face, because there it is already, the first small cold confirmation, and the night hasn't even started.

"Dinner." Instead of retreating to the couch I move toward him, and I feel him take in the length of me as I come, and I hold my breath the whole way. "This is me missing my husband. Since when do I need a reason?"

He sets his keys down without once glancing away from me. Something shifts in his face, and I grab for it with both hands like a woman going over the side of a boat.

"You hid something in your bag this afternoon." His voice drops low. "This was it."

He noticed. He was watching me closely enough to notice. Relief floods up my neck, warm and shameful and far too big for what it is, and I hate what I've become, a woman counting a noticed shopping bag like a love letter. "Maybe," I say.

He crosses the last of the floor and takes my face in his hands, palms cool and huge against my cheeks. The old current of him runs straight through me, and beneath the wanting sits the fear, both of them wired to the same switch now, so I can't feel one without the other lighting up.

"Whatever you're about to say about yourself," he murmurs against my hairline, "leave it alone tonight."

"I only want it to be perfect." My voice frays on the last word, and I could weep at how easily I give myself away.

He kisses my forehead, then the bridge of my nose, his mouth curving against my skin. "I'm half dead, Gia. The production's late and running over

every number we set.” He says it almost like an apology, and strangely it steadies me, because he hasn't told me anything real about his work in months.

I draw his mouth down to mine and go slow. For one terrible second there's nothing. He's stone, and I think, *there it is, there's my answer*. Then it breaks. A low rough sound climbs out of his chest, surprise going molten, and his hands slide off my face to the small of my back and spread wide there like he means to hold as much of me as he can. I could cry from that alone, from being wanted for the length of a single kiss.

The day slides off him all at once. Everything in him pulls tight to the two inches of air where we're pressed together, and it goes to my head faster than the wine could. And still I watch him. That's the thing I can't stop doing now. Even wanting him this badly, some cold clerk in the back of me stands over a ledger, checking.

“Bedroom,” I say against his mouth, desperate for anything warmer than that chill. Dinner can wait. This can't.

He doesn't argue, and I let that stand in for proof. See? Paranoia. Probably the IVF hormones still working out of me. The doctor warned it would take time, though I never thought a year on it would still be in my blood.

I walk him backward down the hall holding his hand, and he lets me, laughing low, catching the doorframe once with his free hand. Our room is dark but for two more candles. Flattening a palm on his chest, I press him down to sit on the edge of the bed and take a moment just to hold his eyes, and I let myself believe it's going to be all right.

Then, before my nerve can fail, I lift the slip over my head and let it pool near his feet.

I stay standing there and don't cover a single part of myself, though every instinct I've built this past year is screaming at me to. My arms want to fold. My hands want to come up. I keep them at my sides and let him take me in, because if he's going to decide I'm not what he wants, I'd rather he decide it to my face than in the dark.

And he takes me in. My hips, my thighs, the soft belly I won't meet in mirrors. Then he's holding on to me like I'm the reward and not the compromise, like there was never a thing here that needed forgiving. He says my name, low and wanting, and the fist inside me loosens one finger. A man doesn't hold a woman like this and wish he were somewhere else.

So I take my time, the way no one has let me take my time with anything in a year.

Up comes the polo, and my palms settle on the warm plane of his chest, and the heat of him rises into me.

“Dante?”

“Mmm. Don't stop.”

That's all I need. His breath drags rough, the most honest thing he's given me in weeks. When his hands rise for me on instinct I catch him by the wrists and press them back to the mattress, and he lets me. My mouth finds the place his heart is racing, and I feel more than hear what it drags out of him. I want to nail time to the wall right here, before anything can go wrong, while he's still only mine.

“You're going to end me,” he says, one hand escaping to sink into my hair.

“That's the whole idea.” My mouth travels up his throat until he shivers, and the fear gives up another inch with every part of him that answers me.

Then I go the other way, down the center of his chest and the hard plane below it, his stomach tightening the lower I reach, his belt opening under my fingers without any hurry. A thousand times I've watched this man lose himself, and not once has he let me set the pace, so tonight I draw it out until his patience frays. When I finally take him in hand he says something that isn't a word. When I take him into my mouth he says my name like it's torn up by the root. His hips lift. My forearm comes down to pin them flat, and the helpless sound he makes at being held there lights something low in me and leaves it burning.

I keep him at that edge, patient and a little cruel, until his fist knots in the sheet and his breathing splinters. Then I sit back on my heels and let him go before he can fall. His eyes drag open, awake now, close to desperate, and I've wanted to be looked at like that for so long that my own breath catches.

His trousers go the rest of the way down, he kicks free, and he reaches for me. This time I let him guide me where he wants me. Straddling him, holding his eyes, I sink down slow and watch his whole face come undone as he fills me, and when there's no space left between us neither of us moves, both of us caught in the plain relief of being one person again instead of two strangers keeping a bed warm.

Then I begin, and I keep the rhythm mine.

His control tears loose. A hand leaves my hip, slides behind me, drags me down onto him hard, and his head goes back into the pillow.

"That's it," he breathes. "You're such a dirty girl."

The strangeness of it snags at me. We've never talked like this, not once in ten years. I tell myself it's new, that maybe there's a whole side of him tonight I've never met, and something in me leans toward it, half thrilled. I fold down against him, chest to chest, and turn my face into his neck to breathe him in the way I've been starving to for weeks.

"That's it. I'm going to fuck you so hard."

He flips me over without warning and lifts my leg high.

"You like it like this, don't you?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

This is me doing this to him. He's craved me as much as I've craved him, and after everything the last few years took from us, I'd half stopped believing we could find our way back here. But here we are.

"Harder." He gives it to me, filling me up, driving into me until the room narrows to the slick sound of us and my own breath breaking. One hand pins my leg in the air. The other closes over my breast.

He's missed me I've longed for him.

Then his rhythm turns ragged, his fingers dig in too hard, his whole body pulls tight and desperate above me, and he tips over with a low sound wrenched out of the back of his throat.

He drops to the side, chest heaving, an arm slung over his eyes.

"Shit. Mia, you were wild."

I wait for it to turn into some other word. Some ordinary word that only sounded like her name in the dark. It doesn't. It stays exactly what it was.

I freeze. "What did you say?" He doesn't even lift the arm from his eyes. "Hmm?" A slow, satisfied breath, a man with nothing at all on his conscience. "Nothing. Come here."

He pulls me back against his chest, my back to him, the way I've always liked, and murmurs at me to sleep. I lie there with my eyes shut and my breathing slow, already cold everywhere his hands aren't.

The fear I've carried for a year, the thing I kept flushing out and blaming on hormones, was never paranoia.

My husband is fucking our surrogate, my twin sister.

DANTE

Earlier That Evening

I smelled her sister on me the whole way home.
Fuck.

I should have washed first. A shower at seven in the evening is exactly the kind of thing Gia would notice, so I told myself I'd risk the scent instead, and that was the first stupid decision of the night.

What am I doing?

I keep telling myself this isn't right, and then, like an idiot, I do it again anyway. This is wrong in more ways than I can count.

At the lights I grab the cologne from the door and spray it down my collar. It doesn't help. I bunch the front of my shirt to my face and breathe in, and there she is. Orange blossom. Amber under it. Mia, sitting on my skin like she owns it.

I could still turn off. Wash at the gym, buy myself an hour. Then the light goes green and I drive, because the one thing my hands won't do tonight is scrub her off in the bathroom that belongs to Gia.

My heart is going too hard. I feel it in my throat, in my wrists on the wheel. Ten years Gia has done nothing but love me past what I'm worth, and here I am carrying her sister home on my collar.

I take our street too fast, pull into the garage, kill the engine. I sit there while it ticks and cools, and then I make myself get out.

I come through the door, and the whole place is lit with candles, and something in me just lies down.

She's set the table the way she set it the first time she cooked for me. Sixteen, her parents away, her whole heart out on a plate. There's a slip the color of champagne on her, songs from our past, bringing back memories which have been long forgotten.

I'd give anything to be the man walking into that room. Instead I'm the one who spent the afternoon where he had no right to be, and I can't even hand her the one word she's earned, that she's beautiful, because it will come out crooked and she'll hear the crook in it.

So I say the stupid thing.

"What's all this?"

I watch her face fall, and I watch her hide that it fell, and I know I did that. I put it there. And I still haven't fixed it.

Gia comes to me anyway, like always.

"I'm missing my husband." She's close now, close enough that if she turned her head she'd find Mia on me, and my whole body braces for it. She doesn't turn her head. She reaches up.

I take her face in my hands, so she'll keep looking up and won't lean in. A cheap trick. I've got a hundred of them now.

"I only wanted it to be perfect," she says, and her voice cracks on the last word.

So I do what I always do. I talk. The production, the money, the late nights, and she listens attentively, like she always does.

"Stop talking." She brings my mouth down to hers. "Let me have you."

I freeze.

For one second I could set her back by the shoulders and say it, and let the candles burn down over the wreck of it. Then I feel myself drive straight past the exit. Her mouth is soft and certain.

So I let the day fall off me and let my body answer her. My body is a better liar than my mouth. I feel the hope go through her like current when I give her the sound she's been starving for, and God forgive me, I give it, because it's easier, and I have never once chosen the hard thing when an easy one stood open.

She walks me to our room, sits me on the edge of the bed, and lifts the slip over her head, and stands there in the low light not hiding a single part of herself, and it undoes me that she still trusts me with that. I let her run the

night. That's the mercy I can give her and the cowardice I hide inside the mercy, both at once. She pushes my shirt off my shoulders, flattens her hands on my chest, holds my wrists to the mattress, and there's a relief in it I could weep for, because when she's the one driving I don't have to be present.

And I give her a performance. God help me, I do. I let her have every sound she's been starving for, and I don't let up, because there's one thing I still know about Gia when I know almost nothing else worth knowing anymore. She has never had my stamina, not even at the start, when we were young and couldn't keep our hands off each other. Gia burns bright and then she's gone. So I give it to her long past where I should stop, tender and thorough and hating myself the whole way through, because a part of me has already worked out that the more I give her the deeper she'll sleep, and the deeper she sleeps the easier it is for me to do the unforgivable thing waiting in the other room. I don't even let myself name it while I'm doing it. That's the kind of man I've become. I can love Gia and plan around her in the same breath.

Gia lowers herself against me, chest to chest, spent, and turns her face into my neck, and I let my eyes close and let her have me, and I don't think once about what I'm still wearing there.

After, I gather her in the way she likes, her back to my chest, my mouth at the nape of her neck, and I tell her to sleep, that it was perfect, that she's perfect, in a voice so gentle it should be a crime for me to own it. I hold Gia and feel the pull of the phone on the floor beside the bed, the thing I still have to go and do, the sour relief of a night survived.

I wait her out. Her breathing goes long and slow against my arm, and when I'm sure she's under I ease free of her and stand, and I look down at her, one bare shoulder above the sheet, and I think: she doesn't know. She never has to know. I can keep this one thing from ever touching her.

I take the phone into the bathroom and pull the door to and hold my thumb over the catch so the lock won't snap. Cold tile underfoot. Only the strip of light over the mirror, low and yellow, and I hate the sight of my naked reflection.

I dial before I can find a reason not to.

She answers on the second ring. She's always awake.



“It's the middle of the night,” Mia says.

“I'm ending it.” I stay under the fan and I start to move, because I can't say a thing like this standing still. Three steps to the wall, turn, three back. “For good this time, and I need you to hear me. It's wrong, and it's taking her apart a day at a time, and I'm the one doing it, and I can't walk into my house one more night wearing you on my skin.”

The pause tells me she's choosing which sister to be. She has more than one, and I've met all of them.

“Come here,” she says, soft, almost tender, the way you'd talk someone down off a roof. “You're exhausted and you're guilty. I know this hasn't felt wrong to you, not really, not when it's just us.” A breath. “You don't love her, Dante. You haven't in years, and we both know it. There's nothing in that house to protect. There's no marriage there.”

Somewhere in the last three years my marriage stopped being a marriage and turned into a calendar. Injections timed to the hour. Waiting rooms where my hand went numb in hers. Two rounds, then a third, then the quiet turn to Mia's body when Gia's wouldn't hold anything. I came into that family with empty pockets and a book nobody wanted, and it was their money that bought me the years to sit and write while Gia worked their floors and ran their numbers and carried their name into rooms I was never born to stand in. I married a Rizzo. That's the sentence I've never let out of my mouth, and it may be the truest thing about me.

“I never loved her the way she loves me.” I confess, because Gia has sacrificed so much for me. Maybe that is why I stay out of guilt.

“Then stop fighting me.” Her voice warms and curls around the back of my neck. “Come to us. We're having a baby, Dante.”

“No.” I press my forehead to the window and shut my eyes. “I'm ending this, and you won't breathe one word of it to her.”

“Fine.” Easy. Far too easy, and it should warn me, and it doesn't. “But you'll be back. You always come back, Dante. And when you're done playing the good husband for a woman you stopped loving years ago, the baby and I will be right where you left us.”

I open my mouth to answer, but then I hear a sound from the bedroom.

Fuck!

“I have to go.” I kill the call, then my heart beat sounds like a drum roll. I take a deep breath, and then open the door. The room is exactly as I left it. Candles are dead. Gia on her side, her back to me, that one shoulder up, her

breathing slow and long and even. In, out. In, out. The same as when I slid out from under her.

I don't breathe. I watch the sheet lift and fall over her ribs and count it. Ten. Fifteen. The deep, unbroken sleep of a woman who heard nothing, who lit candles for her husband and fell asleep believing she'd got him back.

"Gia," I say, barely a sound.

Nothing. Not a flicker. Only the long tide of her breathing, going on and on.

I let the air out of my chest and lean on the door frame, because my legs have stopped being reliable. She didn't hear. I drag a hand down my face and promise the dark that I'll end it clean and carry every ounce of it myself, and she'll never know, not one hour of it.

And I almost believe me.

On the bed, Gia lies perfectly still with her back to me, and as I cuddle her, I decide one thing for sure, I'm not going to break her heart, she has been through enough. No more fooling around with Mia from this day forward.

GIA

Dante's weight lifts off the mattress, and I keep my eyes shut and my breathing slow and let him think I'm under.

I listen to him cross the room in the dark, careful, quiet, the way you move when you don't want to wake anything. The bathroom door pulls to. The lock eases down so it won't snap. The fan clicks on. And then his voice underneath it, low and even and going on way too long for a man who has nothing to say to me.

I fold the sheet back and put my bare feet on the cold boards one at a time, and I cross the floor as softly as he did, holding my breath, and I press my face to the gap at the hinge where the wood never quite meets the frame, and I listen to Dante talk to someone in the middle of the night.

The fan eats most of it. That's the only mercy I get, and it isn't one, because half a sentence is worse than the whole thing. It comes to me in pieces, in the gaps where he turns toward the door, and every piece is worse than the quiet around it.

never loved her the way she loves me.

My heart loud against the wood, but my feet stay planted. I don't move.

I listen to Dante hand the whole inside of our life to someone else. Flat. Tired. Like a man putting down something he's carried too far.

I back away from the door, not wanting to hear another word, hating myself for eavesdropping. He loves me. I know he does. Everyone goes through the ten-year itch, especially after everything we've been through. My family. His nonexistent career at the start of the marriage.

Everything in me wants to go through that door right now and make him say it to my face. But instead I hold back the tears and go back to bed. I turn on my side, my back to the bathroom door, and I cry myself to sleep, unable to ignore the words I heard.

If he doesn't love me, then why is he here?

Then again, that isn't what he said. He said he doesn't love me the way I love him.

I never noticed it until now. When he couldn't get a job and I went to work for my dad, he didn't flinch. He never said a man is supposed to provide for his family. If anything, he encouraged me to go. Didn't he know how much I put up with from my own family to keep him? Papa ran a background check. Mama tried to bribe him. I know, even though he never told me. My sister Nella told me. We fought so hard to get down that aisle, not knowing it would turn out to be the easy hurdle.

Now, as I lie here soaking the pillow with my tears, the realization hits me. Dante was never the man who truly saw me. He was just the man who settled, and his prize for settling was me.

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DANTE

The next day I get up early. Gia is still sleeping like a log. I must have really worn her out last night. It works in my favor. I don't have to face her, or stand there and lie again about going to work when I'm really going to her sister's. The guilt sits heavy the whole drive over. There's only one thing I'm going there to end it with Mia.

She opens the door in the grey dressing gown Gia gave her two Christmases ago, and for half a second my body can't tell the two of them apart. But Gia has never once looked at me the way Mia does, like she wants to peel my clothes off the second she sees me, like she can't breathe without my skin against hers. That's lust. It isn't love. What Gia and I have, nothing can replace. I need to bring some of this into my own bedroom, treat Gia the way I treated her last night, because sex was never the thing that was missing. Respect and honesty were, and right now I'm short on both. Then the belly comes out of the shadow, and I'm staring at the lie itself. Most men would be glad to know the baby is theirs. When I look at Mia it only makes me sick, because ours wasn't made in a lab the way we told Gia. It's so much worse than that.

"You look terrible." She leaves the door hanging open and turns back inside, deciding that's an invitation, so it is one. "Come in before you let all the heat out."

"I'm not staying." I keep my feet on the mat, the cold stairwell at my back. "I came to tell you to your face. It's as if you didn't hear me last night."

She doesn't answer. She pads into the little kitchen, fills the kettle, drops the switch. I make myself look at the apartment instead of at her. Small, low-ceilinged, orange blossoms over something medicinal. Prenatal vitamins in a row on the counter. A scan photo on the fridge under a magnet shaped like a lemon. On the sill, the plant she can never keep alive leans brown-edged toward a window with nothing behind it. Somewhere in here is a drawer full of things for a baby I made in the wrong bed, and I can't look at that either.

"Mia."

"You always say you're not staying." She takes down two cups, though I haven't agreed to tea and never will. "And then you stay."

I step in and pull the door shut behind me, because having this out with the whole building listening is worse than having it out at all, and the latch clicks like something closing on more than a stairwell.

"This is over. For real, and I need you to actually hear me this time, because I'm not doing it in pieces anymore."

She sets the cups down without pouring. She doesn't cry and she doesn't fight. She lays a hand flat on the top of her belly and gives me a calm so patient it turns my stomach. I'd rather she threw a cup at my head than look at me like this, like a woman waiting out a tantrum.

"Sit down, Dante."

"No."

"You're acting all nervous. You're making me feel anxious." She hooks a chair out from the table with her ankle, the exact way Gia does it, and it lands like a knife. "Sit before you fall down, say your speech, and I'll hear the whole thing. I always hear you out. It's the one thing she never does."

I don't sit. I grip the back of the chair instead, because it's the only steady thing within reach.

"Last night I stood in my doorway wearing your perfume." I take a deep breath choosing my words carefully. "Gia had lit the whole house. Cooked. Then, looked at me like I was worth the trouble, and I let her have me with you still on my skin. That's the man I am now. I can't walk into that house one more time carrying this. I won't."

"So don't."

She says it lightly, like she's handing me back something I keep dropping, and she crosses to me, slowly, one hand under the bump, until

she's close enough that I have to look down into Gia's face worn by the wrong sister.

"Stop driving back there to suffocate," she says. "You've talked yourself into believing what you have with her is love."

"That's my wife you're..."

"You said it yourself. You don't love her. I heard it in your voice last night." Her hand settles on my chest, over the shirt, over the scent that started all of this, and the warmth of it comes through the cotton and I hate that I don't step back.

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"That isn't what I said." Even as it leaves me, I feel the ground tilt, and there it is, the thing she does, the way she can take my own words and hand them back bent until I don't trust my own memory. "I said Gia doesn't love me the way I love her. She would never cheat on me. Pretend our child was conceived in a lab."

The moment I say it out loud I feel sick, because I can see Gia's face the day Mia told her she was pregnant. *Amazing. First try, too.* I'd never seen her so happy. By then it was already too late to tell her the truth, so I told myself the damage was done and kept my mouth shut, and I've been telling myself that ever since.

"We don't need her." Her voice drops, warm and sure, and it goes straight into the oldest, weakest part of me, the part that came up out of nothing and never once believed it earned the good house on the hill. "That's the thing you won't let yourself believe. We never did. Let her keep the house." She lifts my hand off the chair, and I let her, and lays it low on the curve of her belly. "This is real. This is yours."

And then, under my palm, faint and certain, the baby moves.

It goes through me like it's current.

"A blessing, whatever the family wants to call it. Come and have a life with the two of us and stop dying by inches in that house."

I think of Gia, asleep with my lie still warm on her skin, breathing slowly and even the way I taught her without meaning to.

The pull lets go. I take my hand back.

“No.” I step back, and the cold rushes into the space where I was. “You’ve got it wrong. I’m not choosing you over her. There’s nothing here to choose. I did a filthy thing, and I’m going home to tell her after work, and then I’m going to be sorry for the rest of my life. That’s the plan.”

“You won’t tell her.” She folds her arms over the top of the bump. “You’ll get in your car full of nerves, and talk yourself out of it.”

“Watch me.”

I wrench the door open and the cold of the stairwell hits me like a bucket of water, and I go down two at a time in the dark, one hand on the rail, before she can put another word in me. Behind me she calls my name once, easy, unbothered, a woman who’s already done the sum and knows how it comes out. I don’t turn around.

Fuck work. I’m going home to tell her now.

Gia can throw me out. She can keep the house and the child and I’ll have earned every inch of whatever she does with it, but she’ll have the truth, and she’ll stop pouring that wide-open heart into a man who’s been lying to her in the dark.

I reach for the ignition, and the phone goes off in my hand.

I nearly sent it to voicemail. Then I see the name, and a decade of instinct answers before I can think, and I pull out of the space and take it on the road.

“Marco. I told you that I had stuff to take care of this morning. This had better be the building on fire.”

“It’s worse.” He’s talking too fast, the way he only does when it’s already out of his hands. “Tomás left, and he’s taking the financing with him. The bond company’s on the phone threatening to pull the plug on the whole thing by morning.”

I put the car to the curb, and I sit there with the engine running and the heater ticking and Gia four miles the other way.

“I’ll deal with it later, Marco. I’ve got a family thing. It can’t wait.”

“Dante. If you’re not in that room in the next hour, there’s no production on Monday. Just a hundred and forty people out of work. Whatever’s at home, it’s still going to be at home at nine. This won’t be.”

He's right, and I feel the honest thing I built the whole drive down curled in my chest, because I've spent my whole life choosing the fire in front of me over the one I lit myself.

I look down the street in the direction of home. Gia, asleep, believing she got me back. The truth I promised her, still whole in my mouth.

"Give me forty minutes," I say.

I hang up before he can thank me, and I sit there one second longer, telling myself it's a delay and not a choice. Then I check my mirror, and I pull out the other way.

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GIA

*Did I really hear what I thought I heard?
Are my eyes deceiving me?*

We were at it like animals. I haven't done that much exercise since I did a spinning class with Mia five years ago, and it took me nearly five years to recover.

This question keeps circulating in my mind.

As soon as he left this morning, I did the same and followed him, and I've regretted it ever since. I didn't know what to do with myself. I roamed around trying to make sense of it. Day became night, and with my crazy thoughts I decided to come back home and have it out with him.

Someone is here. Dante's car isn't outside, so there are only two people that can be here, as I see the coats hanging near the doorway. My parents. I knew I never should have given Mamma a key.

"Mamma," I call out as I head to the kitchen.

She's standing in the middle of my kitchen, lipstick on, hair set exactly like that woman off the television she's decided to become in her sixties, and behind her at my own table sits Papa, coat still buttoned to the throat, both broad hands flat on the wood on either side of a glass of my Barolo he hasn't touched.

"There she is." Mamma turns from the counter with a hand pressed to her chest. "You gave your father a fright, tearing about in the dark like a madwoman. Why are you looking at me like you've seen a ghost?"

She's the one who looks at it. She's done something new to her face again, something tight around the eyes, refusing to acknowledge her age. She has no idea what I've just stood outside a window and watched. And still, God help me, the second I see her the whole night comes up my throat, because I've never once in my life managed to think straight in front of my mother. I know better than to say a word. I say it anyway.

"I saw Dante. With Mia. At her apartment." My voice is shaking and I can't stop it. "I think they're having an affair, Mamma..."

"Shh." She waves it off like there's some bug in front of her face. "You've worked yourself into a state over nothing. You're exhausted, look at your face. You asked your sister to carry this baby and she's carrying it. That's all you saw. You should be down on your knees grateful to her."

"What?" I hear myself. "For fucking my husband."

"For giving your husband the one thing you couldn't, cara. Be honest for once." She comes a step closer and drops her voice, letting me in on a kindness. "And if she's warming his bed a little now, so what. When the baby comes she'll drop him and move on to the next one, you know your sister. She keeps nothing. This will pass, and you'll still have a husband and a child, and no one will be any the wiser."

"Do you think before you speak?"

"Do you?" she says, and smiles at me.

Pa's chair scrapes back. He stands slow, the way he stands now that his knees have gone, and he comes around the table with both hands open in front of him, the way a man crosses a field toward a spooked animal, and when he speaks there's real feeling in it, which is the worst part, because he believes every word.

"Sit down, cara. We came because your sister called us in tears, saying you'd been spying on her. So we're here. We're trying to help you."

"You're not." I heat toward the foot of the stairs, out of his reach. "You're doing exactly what he does. Ignoring what I'm saying, because you don't want a family scandal."

"What would you have us do?" Mamma's voice sharpens for the first time. "Do you have any idea how many women would give their right arm for a man like Dante? For this house, this name, this life you stand inside and cannot see?"

"He made something of himself. Something I didn't think was possible at first." Papa has stopped below me, one hand on the newel post, and he

shakes his head slowly. “That boy came from nothing and made this family proud by doing it. He gave you a life half this city would trade places for. You were about to have everything, cara. A husband people respect, a child on the way, all of us whole under one roof. Are you certain you want to set fire to the whole of it over something this small?”

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Something this small. I feel sick knowing that they’ve been lying to me.

I keep climbing. I want Nella. The sensible one, the only rock I've ever been given. She's the one I should have called from that freezing landing, and the only thing that stopped me is knowing what her face would do first, before the love came, that flicker of I told you so, because she did tell me, years ago, and I married him anyway.

Mamma comes up the stairs behind me, of course she does, she has never once let a door close on her before she's had the last word.

“You know your sister has always been jealous of you,” she calls up, and then, because she can't help herself, “It's a wonder anyone can tell the two of you apart at all.” A little laugh follows it up the steps. “Though they could, mind, if you dropped forty pounds.”

My sister is ready to give birth. I stop with my hand on the banister and let that hang in the stairwell between us, and she doesn't even hear it land. That's the thing about Mamma. She never once hears herself.

“And you,” she goes on, warming to it, reaching the landing a breath short from the climb she won't admit is hard on her, “if you did something with your hair, took a little care over your body, your home, no man would look sideways to begin with. But you let yourself go, Gia. You never did take after your sister that way.”

And for one second the years drop away and I'm fifteen again, home with the report card full of the marks Mia never brought home, watching them pin Mia's photograph to the wall instead, because Mia was the

beautiful one and I was the clever one, and everyone knows what clever girls are for. Clever girls are *used*.

They get the scholarships and the good grades and then they get handed the family's books to balance, the accounts to run, the numbers nobody glamorous wants to touch, and a lifetime of people being faintly surprised that a man chose them.

Mia got the opposite. She was worshipped, forgiven every debt and every man, and never once made to build a single thing of her own, which is how the most cherished girl in the family ended up in an apartment which Papa paid for, so she could get herself together.

"Now you listen to me." She's a breath short from the climb she won't admit is hard. She takes my chin in her cold ringed fingers and turns my face to hers, the way she did when I was small and had cried my composure off before company. "Saturday is the baby shower. You're going to fix your face and you're going to be a good wife. You'll smile. And all this other nonsense, following Dante, it ends tonight." Her fingers tighten on my jaw. "There is no divorce. Not in this family. Not one of us, not ever. You will not be the first, do you hear me?"

I could go back there, and pull down every last lantern and tell each aunt and cousin exactly what I watched through a gap in a curtain. And Mamma wouldn't be at my shoulder while I did it. She'd be off across the grass with Mia and Dante and the miracle, and by Sunday morning she'd have me remade into the bitter, jealous, difficult sister who couldn't keep her own husband and tried to poison a baby shower to spite the pretty one. She'd make the calls, and set the story before I reached my car. I have watched her do exactly that to other women, and I have clapped along, because it was never me.

And I feel it happen in my own body, standing there. The cold clean resolve I drove home with goes soft and runs out of me like water through my fingers, because leaving Dante was never going to cost me Dante, but my family too.

Her rings are cold when I lift her fingers off my chin, one at a time, and set her hand back down at her side. Whatever's working in my face, I smooth it flat, flatter than hers.

Papa hasn't moved from the newel post. He gives me a small nod, proud of me for folding, and reaches out and pats my arm twice, and that is

somehow worse than anything Mamma has said all night, because he means it kindly.

“Good girl,” he says. Then he goes down to fetch their coats.

“I hear you, Mamma.”

I feel nothing as I say it. That's the part that frightens me. Then I turn, and I go into my room, and the door closes behind me soft as a held breath, because even now, even in this, I'm still the girl who learned never to make a sound.

I stand in the dark with my back against the door and I listen to their car pull out of my drive, and it dawns on me, slow and cold and complete.

Dante was broke when we were engaged, a nobody, and I begged my parents ten years ago to give us their blessing to get married.

It serves me right, thinking that he was my knight in shining armor and not the cheating lying pig that he really is.

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DANTE

The last few days have wrung me out. A week ago I had a lead, a budget, and a theatre. Tonight I've got a half-built set, an assistant director named Riccardo threatening to quit by text, and money vanishing in quiet little cuts made by men who never pick up the phone themselves and always send someone else to do it.

I've spent most nights in hotel bars instead of my own bed, sitting across from men who shake my hand, smile, and slice another line off the budget while I'm still talking. A whole production is coming apart, a dozen people want something from me, and I'm holding it together with my bare hands. And still I keep finding the time to check on Mia: a text about a scan, a voicemail I return from a stairwell at midnight, a detour past her building while I talk myself out of going in.

Four days of that, and now the family wants me in a garden with a smile on my face.

"Go home," Riccardo told me this morning, of all people, the man whose job I've been doing on top of my own. "Smile for the family. Whatever's falling apart here will still be here on Monday, and you look like you haven't slept all week. Go be a husband for one afternoon."

The phone lights up on the passenger seat. Mia, for the third time since I left the set. I flip it face down and keep driving. Her calls have been coming closer together all week, and they aren't about the baby anymore, or about ending things. *Come to us. We don't need her. Stop dying by inches in that house.* Every time I let it ring out, she calls back sooner, and I know what

that means. My sister-in-law doesn't chase something she thinks is already walking out the door.

There's a child on the way, my child, however she was made and whatever lie sits on top of her. A man doesn't get to walk away from something he's tied to for life just because walking away would be cleaner for him. So I hold the one line I can hold and let Mia have the rest, and I call that principle, when the honest word for it is weakness with better manners.

That's how I ended up at her apartment again this week, the night I can't stop replaying. I'd gone home for an hour to shower and change, and Gia was at the stove making risotto when Mia rang at seven, breathless and frightened, with cramping low down and spotting that hadn't been there an hour before. I told Gia a rigger had been hurt on set. I didn't even bother to make up a name. Whatever else I am, I wasn't going to leave Mia alone in a taxi and a dark waiting room with my baby inside her, so I drove her to San Luca's and sat in a plastic chair under the fluorescent lights while a tired doctor ran the wand over her belly and found a heartbeat pounding like a drum. False alarm, he said, the body practicing, and he sent us home near midnight, limp with relief.

I walked her up instead of dropping her at the curb, because her legs were shaking and mine weren't, and that's the whole story of us. Mia took my hand and pressed it flat to her belly, and the baby kicked hard against my palm, and for one moment I let myself lean into it, my forehead resting against hers, before the skin on the back of my neck prickled with that old animal certainty of being watched. I went to the front window, absolutely sure I'd look down and find Gia's car at the curb and my whole life finished on the sidewalk below.

There was nothing but an empty street, a trash can on its side, and across the way a curtain swinging back into place as if someone had just let it go.

"It's the widow on the second floor," Mia said from the sink, without turning around. "She sits at that window all night counting who comes and goes. Ignore her." Then she came over to look for herself, made a small scornful sound, and let her own curtain fall. "See? Nobody. You're jumping at ghosts, Dante."



Now I'm pulling up at the one place I have no business being, Gia's twin sister's baby shower. A valet in a rented vest is waiting for my keys at the foot of the drive. I hand them over, stand on the gravel for a moment, button my jacket, and arrange my face into something the family will recognize.

The Rizzos never do anything simply. They have money, and they want everyone to know they're not just rich but filthy rich. The garden has been staged within an inch of its life, with paper lanterns in three shades of blush hung at heights somebody measured, and a long table of food laid out like a still life nobody dares to touch. A photographer drifts through the crowd, and every woman here is dressed for the camera.

Zia Lucia reaches me before I'm three steps onto the grass, grabbing my arm with both hands as if she's been lurking behind the gate for this.

"There he is. There's our boy." She squeezes hard enough that her rings bite through my sleeve, and up close her smile is lovely without ever getting near her eyes. "You look tired, tesoro. Poor lamb, working yourself to the bone." She pats my cheek twice, hard enough to sting.

"Somebody has to keep the lights on," I tell her, and give her the grin that costs me nothing and buys me everything. It's a joke and we both know it, because nothing I earn will ever keep this family's lights on. It's about pride, about letting the Rizzos see that the broke kid their daughter married finally has money of his own.

She laughs as if I've said something clever. Behind her, a cousin's husband named Tino catches the tail end of it and steps in to pump my hand. His palm is damp, and his grip lasts a beat too long.

"The show, the show," Tino says. "I read something. Trouble with the money? My brother-in-law does this for a living, he could look at your books, no charge. Family."

"We're fine," I tell him. "You know how the papers are. Trouble sells."

"Sure. Sure it does." He nods too fast, relieved to be let off the hook, and I watch the worry drain out of his face simply because I told him not to worry. That's the whole trick of me: a man will believe anything if you hand it to him with a smile. I can do it dead on my feet, and today I am.

In the middle of the lawn my mother-in-law is holding court in cream silk, a glass of something she'll never drink balanced in one hand and the other resting lightly on Mia's belly for the photographer crouched in front of them.

“Closer, Mamma,” the photographer says. “A little closer. Beautiful.”

My suocera tips her head toward Mia's and beams, the shutter clicks, and the second it's done the smile switches off like a lamp and she's already scanning the yard for the next thing that needs arranging. Her eyes land on me.

“Dante.” She raises a hand, and it isn't a wave, it's a summons. “Come. One with the three of us. Where have you been hiding?”

Mia turns. Her eyes find mine and hold them half a second longer than a sister-in-law's should, a whole conversation packed into one look and meant for no one but me. Then she's laughing down at an aunt who's fussing over her bump, as if I'm just another guest who wandered into the frame.

“Later,” I call back, keeping it light. “Let me grab a drink first.”

My suocera's smile stays in place, but her eyes go flat as she files it away. In this family a no only ever means not yet, and she'll collect.

A waiter floats past with a tray, and I take a glass of something pale I didn't ask for, just to have something in my hands and a reason to stand at the edge of the yard instead of in the middle of the photo. For one clean breath I let myself believe I can get through this. Survive the afternoon, drive home tonight, and finally be a man about all of it.

Then I start looking for Gia.

It takes a full minute to find her, and when I finally spot her at the far end of the garden, half hidden behind the trellis, I wish I hadn't. She's wearing a dove-gray dress, gathered high under the bust and falling loose over a belly she doesn't have, and it hits me that it's a maternity dress.

Christ.

Gia hasn't glanced my way once. She's holding a tumbler with something brown in the bottom of it, and her other hand is bunching the skirt so it won't billow out over her flat stomach. Nella is beside her with a silver flask, topping her up every time the glass runs dry. When Nella's eyes land on me they turn to ice. She knows something, maybe not all of it, but enough to look at me like I'm something she scraped off her shoe.

I set my glass on the nearest table and head for Gia. I have no idea what I'm going to say, only that I can't leave her standing over there in that dress one minute longer.

I make it four steps before my suocera's hand clamps around my arm, her smile still fixed for the guests while her rings dig through my sleeve.

“Dante, the photograph. Now, please. You've kept us waiting long enough.”

“Give me a minute, Suocera. I need to talk to Gia.”

“Gia's fine. Nella's looking after her.” She's already steering me across the lawn, and I let her, because making a scene here feels harder than walking away from Gia, and that tells you everything about the man I've become. “One picture,” Suocera says, “and then you can go and sulk in the corner with her if that's what you'd rather do.”

The photographer lines us up with my suocera on one side, Mia in the middle, and me on the other. Mia slides her arm through mine as though it belongs there and leans her hip into me, warm through her blush silk, and I catch the orange blossom on her skin.

“Put your hand on the bump, Dante,” the photographer says. “Daddy's privilege.”

A few of the aunts laugh, and every face on the lawn turns our way, waiting. So I do it. I lay my palm on Mia's belly, the baby shifts under it, and the shutter fires. Over the photographer's shoulder I can see Gia by the trellis, lifting her tumbler toward us in a slow toast before she knocks it back. She saw every second of it, my arm hooked through her sister's and my hand on that baby, posed for the family album.

“Beautiful,” the photographer says. “Now just the ladies.”

I pull free the moment he lowers the camera, but Mia is faster.

“Gia!” Mia's voice rings across the garden, sweet as sugar. “Come help me open the presents. I won't do them without you.”

The aunts make that soft sound they save for weddings, isn't that lovely, the twins together, and the crowd parts to let Gia through. She walks down the middle of it with her chin up and her fist still knotted in that gray skirt. She has always been able to walk into a room with her back straight while everything inside her is falling apart. I used to love that about her. Today it scares the hell out of me.

I'm close enough to hear when she reaches the gift table and Mia leans in and sniffs her.

“Have you been drinking? I can smell it on you,” Mia says, and then, louder, over her shoulder, “Mamma!”

My suocera's there before the word has finished leaving Mia's mouth. “Gia, you are ruining your sister's day.”

“Leave her alone, Mamma,” Nella says, shouldering in beside Gia with the flask still open in her hand.

Somebody bumps somebody, I don't see who, and the flask tips. Whiskey pours down the front of that gray dress in a long dark stain from the neckline to the hem, and for a second the entire party freezes. Then Gia starts to laugh, high and wild and nothing like her usual laugh, and Nella catches it and cracks up too, and the two of them stand at the gift table soaked and shaking while my suocera's face turns the color of the lanterns.

“You will not embarrass me,” my suocera hisses at Gia. “Go and clean yourself up.”

That's enough. I'm going to put my jacket around Gia's shoulders and walk her out of this garden, and I don't care who watches me do it. I take one step, and my suocera's hand is on my sleeve again, though she doesn't even look at me.

“Don't,” Suocera says, low and flat. “Carmela will take care of her. You go near her right now and every person here is going to want to know why.”

It works on me every time, and I hate that she knows it will. So I stand there and do nothing.

Carmela comes out through the kitchen door in her black dress and apron, takes one look at the girls, and puts an arm around each of them. She guides them toward the house, murmuring something that makes Nella laugh harder and Gia go quiet. Gia passes within three feet of me, and her eyes slide over my face the way you'd look at a stranger's coat on a hook before she keeps walking.

Behind me, Mia hands a gift bag to one of the aunts and sighs. “She's had such a hard year. The IVF does terrible things to your hormones. We just have to be patient with her.”

The women around her nod. Poor Gia. It goes around the circle like a plate of cake, and not one of them notices that the woman saying it is resting a hand on my child.

A waiter presses a flute of prosecco into my hand for the toast to the baby. I manage one sip before it turns sour in my mouth, and I set it down on the nearest tray. I can't drink here. I need a clear head for whatever comes next, because the moment Gia comes back out, I'm taking her home, sitting her down at our table, and telling her everything, the way I swore to myself in Mia's kitchen days ago and still haven't done.

Twenty minutes pass, and the shower rolls on without her. There are knitted blankets, a silver rattle stamped with the family crest, and a stroller that cost more than my first car. Mia holds each one up for the camera, and my suocera sits in her chair of honor as if none of it happened.

Then the back door of the house swings open and Gia walks out alone.

Gia's in a pair of old gray sweatpants and a shirt washed so many times the print has faded to nothing, her face scrubbed bare and her hair scraped back tight. It's how she looks on a Sunday morning at home, barefoot at the stove, before she thinks anyone is watching. The women nearest the house turn to stare at her, and she stares right back until they look away.

Gia doesn't go back to the trellis. She stands at the edge of the patio with her arms folded, watching Mia at the gift table. She isn't drunk now, and she isn't laughing. She's quiet and steady, the way she gets with the company books when the numbers won't add up and she's about to find where the money went.

Then she looks straight at me, across the whole garden, past the aunts and the cousins and the waiters with their trays. There's no anger in it and nothing soft either, just a long, level look that goes right through me.

Fuck! She knows. My gut twists so hard I press a hand to my stomach. And as I stand there it comes together in my head, the dress, Mia's smile, the person I saw spying on us, and Mia claiming it to be her nosey neighbor.

Mia is watching me from the gift table, and half the family is watching all three of us while pretending they aren't. I don't care anymore. I take a deep breath and start across the grass toward Gia, praying I can find some way to sort out this fucking mess before it swallows every one of us.

GIA

Mamma chose the dress for me to wear. It was wrapped in Rizzo tissue the color of oyster shells, and what unfolded out of it was maternity. Soft dove-gray crepe, gathered high under the bust, cut to fall full and loose over a belly I don't have. A note sat on top in Mamma's slanting hand. *So you feel part of it too, cara.* And there I stood in my room holding a dress built to make me look pregnant, for the shower of the baby growing inside my twin.

So here I am at the edge of it in dove-gray, one hand holding the skirt full over my flat stomach, the other wrapped around a tumbler I've refilled past counting, and every last thing about today is wrong down to the light. The garden's done in three shades of blush, lanterns strung at heights that got measured with a ruler, the roses picked clean of anything brown, a long table of little iced things set out so prettily that nobody dares eat one.

"You need something stronger," Nella says as she hands me her flask.

I shake my head.

"Look, it's cheaper than therapy, which is what we deserve after being brought up by Mamma."

I take a swig off it. She's right. It is cheaper than therapy, and probably better. Nella doesn't drink. Only when she's around Mamma.

"You shouldn't let her bully you like this," Nella says as she watches me take one swig while looking at Mamma and another when my eyes meet Mia's.

"I think she's fucking Dante."

“Mamma or Mia?”

We both chuckle at the idea of them being in a threesome. The whiskey got to me too quickly. Nella's my older sister and my rock.

Across the lawn, Mamma catches my eye and holds it. She does the small tight thing with her mouth that's meant *behave yourself*, the same one she's used on me since I was a child. Her gaze flicks to the glass in my hand and back up to my face. *Put it down. Fix your face. Be a good wife.* I lift the flask instead and drink slowly, watching her, and I see her decide to let it go for now, because there are people watching and Mamma doesn't correct her daughter where the guests can hear.

And the ladies are in heaven, all of them, the aunts and the cousins and the women from the stores, swarming around Mia in her blush dress with her hand resting on the top of that perfect round belly, laughing, touching her, telling her she's glowing, telling her she's never looked more beautiful.

Mia's in the middle with the light on her and everyone leaning in, and me at the edge in the dress that makes me look like a bad copy of her, drinking. I used to bring home good grades, and she had all the attention with her looks and charm.

“Gia.” Mia's voice, bright, sailing over everyone's heads. “Gia, come, you have to help me open them, come.”

She's reaching for me, hand held out across the crowd, pulling me in front of everybody toward the table piled with blush-wrapped gifts, and the aunts make a warm little sound and part to let me through, because isn't that lovely, the sisters, the two of them, and I go because my legs carry me before my mind can refuse, and I end up beside her at the table with a hundred faces turned toward us, waiting to watch us be happy together.

“Ugh, have you been drinking? I can smell it on you,” she snaps. “Mamma!” She screeches, and as if on automatic dial, Mamma is by my side.

“You're ruining your sister's day.”

Really? Is this my sister's day? I thought it was mine.

“Mamma, just leave Gia alone,” Nella says in my defense, but the flask is open and the whiskey pours down my front. I burst out laughing, and Nella does the same.

“You will not embarrass me. Go freshen up and come back.”



Nella and I can't stop laughing, until Carmela is by our side. She raised us, the one Mamma treats as if she's her servant, but who was more of a mother to us than Mamma could ever be.

"Girls, you know this isn't the way to behave."

We both nod our heads like the obedient girls she brought us up to be. Carmela is more than a maid. She's the one I went to when the girls bullied me back at school and cut off my hair after they invited me to a sleepover. She's the second person I told after Nella when Dante asked me to marry him, and she was the first person to know when I found out that I'm infertile. Her dark eyes soften as she strokes my hair.

"Let's see if Mamma has something you can wear," she says, and smiles to comfort me.

"Mamma can't even fit into Mamma's clothes," Nella says. Carmela tries to scold us, but as we walk to the entrance of the house, even she ends up laughing too.



The only thing I could find was my old sweatpants from when I was a teen. Luckily, I always wore big clothes to hide my figure, so they fit.

I take off my makeup, then head back downstairs. Nella passed out on her bed while I changed.

The baby shower is going ahead in full swing. I realize more and more that this thing that's happening has nothing to do with me needing to be a good wife, but is all for them to let me know I'm no longer needed.

Mia picks up a box, then smiles for the photographer. And then, small and quick, thinking nobody's looking because everybody's looking at her belly and not her face, she lifts her eyes, finds Dante across the garden, and winks at him.

That's it. *One wink*. I can't take it anymore.

I storm into the middle of the garden. "Stop it. Stop, all of you, stop looking at her like she's a saint."

The garden goes quiet in a spreading ring, the way a stone silences water.

"Cara." Mamma's already moving toward me, smile fixed on, voice sweet and deadly. "Gia, you've had too much. Come and sit down."

“My husband’s fucking my twin sister. Our baby was supposed to be by surrogacy, but what Mia wants, Mia gets.”

The sound goes through the crowd, the little gasps, the cousin nearest me stepping back. Mamma's face is disgusted.

“You see what she is. You were always a disgrace, Gia. Always. Ruining your sister's day, drunk, in front of everyone. This is who you are,” Mamma says.

Dante's coming across the lawn fast now, hands already out in front of him. “Gia. Gia, please, let me explain, it's not, just let me,” and he can't finish it either, none of us can ever finish our sentences in this family, and I watch him come at me with his handsome guilty face and his explaining hands and I feel nothing but very, very tired.

“You can’t even tell us apart. You call her name in our bed.”

He shakes his head denying it, it’s even worse than I thought...he didn’t even realize he’d done it.

Mia sets the gift down on the table, calm, rests both hands on the top of her belly, looks at me out of our own shared eyes, and says it like it's the most reasonable thing in the world.

“You wanted a baby, Gia. I'm giving you one. I don't see the problem.”

My heart slams against my ribs, my head swims, and Papa only sits there watching me as though he has no idea what to do with his own hands. He probably doesn't. Nothing has ever held his interest unless it arrives with a contract attached. Work. Only ever the work.

So I turn, and run. The crowd parts for me exactly the way it once parted for Mia, and I go through it past the untouched food and the paper lanterns, the tears coming so fast the whole garden dissolves into wet smears of blush and gold and gray, colors bleeding together like paint left out in the rain. I don't stop, nor look back to see whether he follows, because in my bones I already know he won't.

A hand closes around my arm near the roses. Zia Fiorella, heavy with perfume, her rings biting into my skin.

“Gianna. Gianna, tesoro, basta, you're making a scene.” Her voice drops to that syrupy hush the women in this family use like a blade. “Come, sit, drink a little water. Think of what people will say.”

“Let go of me, zia.”

“Cara mia, listen to me, this is the wine talking, not you. Tomorrow it will all look different, I promise you, come and sit with Mamma and I will

fix you a plate.”

I peel her fingers off my arm one by one, and my voice comes out so calm it frightens even me. “There's nothing to fix, zia.”

I leave her standing there with her mouth working, and I make it to the front of the house and stop on the gravel, chest heaving, with no idea in the world where a woman like me is supposed to go now.

Footsteps behind me. Fast and light. Not his.

“Vieni qui.” Nella's arm is around my shaking shoulders before I've even turned, her phone still glowing in her free hand, her voice sinking into that low steady place it has lived my whole life. “Look at me, cara. Only at me. I've called an Uber and it's already on its way to the gate. Let's head to the cabin. Sì?”

“Sì.” The word barely survives the crying. “Sì. Please. Take me far away from all of this.”

“I thought you passed out cold on the bed.”

“I was.” She tucks the phone away and folds me in properly, cheek coming down against my hair the way it did when we were small. “Then Carmela shook me awake.” A breath that's almost a tired laugh against my temple. “I'm in no state to drive anyone anywhere, amore, we only have to reach the gate before Mamma works out which door you went through.”

Carmela is the one soul in this whole house I'll grieve when I go. A maid. A woman they pay to stand in the corners. A tear escapes my eyes as I think about her. I know leaving now means I can never come back here, and if it wasn't for her, I never would want to.

DANTE

The garden empties the way a tide goes out, slow and then all at once, and I stand in the wreck of it and watch my marriage leave with the guests.

They go the way people go when they've seen something they'll be retelling in every kitchen in the city by morning. Long, tender goodbyes to my suocera, hands pressed to hers, the sympathy already rehearsed on their faces. Poor family. An aunt I've sat beside at a dozen Christmases passes close enough to touch and looks straight through me, chin lifting, and she's the first one in this family to decide with her whole face that I no longer exist. A cousin steers her husband wide around me toward the cars, a hand at his back, murmuring. Nobody comes to me. That's how I know how bad it is. An hour ago I was the son-in-law who made good, the boy from nowhere who married up and handed them a name to be proud of. Now I'm something they detour around on their way to the valet.

A waiter drifts between the tables lifting glasses, the good crystal, half of them still full, a whole afternoon of toasts nobody got to make. One of the staff has started taking down the lanterns Gia hung, easing them off the wire one at a time, the blush going dark as each little light dies, just like my fucking marriage.

She's gone. Nella took her. I watched the car go from the top of the drive and I didn't run after it, because what was I going to say on that gravel with a hundred people watching, and now the not-running feels like the

truest confession I've made all day. She walked out of her own family in front of everyone, and I stood still like the fucking coward I've become.

I have spent a year getting my duties so tangled I can't tell anymore which woman I'm supposed to be standing beside. I keep tending the one who needs nothing, and abandoning the one who needs everything, and calling it responsibility.

Or that's the story I'm telling myself, right up until she speaks, and I hear she isn't coming apart at all.

"So what happens to us now, Dante?"

I can't even look at Mia, let alone answer her right now.

"Gia knows. There's nothing left to hide behind. No more driving home to her. And you want to know what I feel, standing in the wreck of it. Relief."

"Mia, don't."

"She was never going to raise this child." Gentle, like she's handing me good news she's been saving up. "I've known about it since summer. Hand my baby over and then stand at every birthday watching her play mother with your eyes and my face on it. I couldn't stomach the thought. Now I don't have to. She's gone, and she took the lie out the gate with her. It's you and me and our baby."

"That's not what this was." I can't get the rest out. None of us in this family ever finish a sentence.

"We don't need her." A hand lifts off the belly and lands flat on my chest. Her palm presses in. "In six weeks there's a baby that belongs to you and me and no one on this earth besides, and today won't matter at all."

I look down at her hand, then up at the calm sitting on her face, and something goes cold clean through me, because there isn't a single crack in her. No panic. No grief for what the afternoon cost. Her twin just detonated her own life in that garden in front of every soul she's related to, and Mia stood dead center of it in her blush dress and felt one thing only, the last thing in her way finally stepping aside.

"Gia's always wanted kids. When we found out that she had premature ovarian insufficiency, it broke her heart." I remember that painful day in the hospital, after years of telling Gia that it wasn't the right time to have a family. I wanted to be the provider, the one who could support our family. Then when we were ready, we found out she could never get pregnant. She cried so much, it broke my heart seeing her that way.

“Please! If you want to keep lying to yourself then fine, but you married the wrong sister to get her family's money. I'm the only person who has ever told you the truth.”

Did fame and fortune turn me into this lowlife?

“Go on. Go to her.” She steps back and smooths both hands down over the belly, slow, almost fond, and it turns my stomach to watch. “Do your groveling. Get it out of you. Play the heartbroken husband as long as it takes.” The smile comes back, serene, certain, a woman who has already watched how this ends and is content to wait for me to arrive there too. “She is finished with you, and once the dust settles, the baby and I will be exactly where you left us. We were always going to be your family, Dante. Take all the time you need. We're not going anywhere.”

Behind us my suocera's voice carries bright and ruined across the lawn, seeing the last stragglers off at the gate, laughing at something, holding the photograph together to the bitter end, even now, even with her daughter gone and her garden in pieces.

The final lantern comes off the wire. The light goes with it.

And so does my soul. Gia didn't deserve to be treated like this. I took an oath to love her in sickness and in health, and I did her wrong. I feel sick to my stomach as I think about the way she looked at me. As if I'd put a knife straight through her heart.

GIA

The car takes the last turn off the main road and the tarmac gives out beneath the tires, dropping into gravel and then into two deep ruts with a spine of grass running down the middle. The trees lean close over the track until the headlights are the only thing left in the world. When the cabin shows at the end of it, low and dark against the treeline, something in my chest loosens for the first time since the garden. Nonna's house, where she was born and raised.

The driver eases to a stop and cuts the engine, and the quiet drops over us, wide and old. Nella and I sit side by side in the back seat, and neither of us moves. The glow off the dash barely reaches us; back here we are almost in shadow. I turn and look at my sister properly for the first time all day.

"Let's go inside," she says as she opens her door.

I agree. Nella is ahead of me and works the stiff old lock with her shoulder the way you have to, then reaches into the dark and throws the breaker. A single bulb stutters awake above the sink and lays long shadows across the room.

I loved coming here as a child during the holidays. Nothing has changed, from the scrubbed pine table to the two soft chairs gone saggy beside the cold stove. The air is cold enough to see, and it smells of old ash and dust and, beneath that, faint and impossible, of her.

Nella fills the kettle and sets it on the ring, because she can never stay still even for a second. I watch her move around the little kitchen and I have to press my mouth shut so I don't cry.

“You'll be all right up here.”

“You're not staying?” I already know the answer to my own question.

“I'm on at seven tomorrow. Right now, I need to go home and sleep.”

She glances at the black window as though she can see the road back through it. “Full ward, a girl off sick, and they're short as it is. I can't be up a mountain with a dead phone while somebody's coding on my floor.”

Nella's a nurse. She rents a small flat across town and works nights. The black sheep of the family, Mamma loves to call her. The Rizzo family doesn't do poor, according to Mamma. When Nella went to college and told Mamma that she wanted to be a nurse, Mamma had her do a DNA test. She claimed that there must be gypsy blood in her, and it can't be from her side of the family.

Nella found it amusing and agreed to it. I think deep down inside she was hoping that Mamma wasn't her mother. That there was a woman out there who had maternal instincts and would be the mother that Carmela had been to us.

Papa explained vaguely, as he did whenever he spoke of the past, that Mamma's own mother, nothing like our sweet Nonna, treated her very badly as a kid, and this is why she never talks about the past and has issues. His way of justifying the coldness of Mamma. I don't get it. If Grandma was horrible to her, then why did she pass on the same traits to us?

Shouldn't she have loved us more?

Questions that have circled my mind so many times, and the answer is always the same.

It doesn't matter. It is all in the past.

She crosses the floor and takes my face in both hands, the way she used to when we were small and I'd come home crying over something Mia had taken and made hers.

“You need to be alone,” she says. “Not me fussing. You've had people in your ear your whole life telling you who to be. Now there's no one. Use the time just to breathe and take it all in.” Her thumbs sweep under my eyes, catching what I hadn't felt fall. “Whenever you need me, whatever hour it is, you call, and I can drop everything, then I'll come running.”

My throat closes and nothing will come past it, so I nod against her hands.

“Go home to rest,” I manage at last. “The hospital needs you more than I do tonight. And honestly...” I try to straighten things in my mind, “being

away from our house will do me good. Help me think properly.”

She holds my gaze a moment longer, searching, the way she reads a chart when the numbers won't quite add up. Whatever she's checking for, she finds it, because she lets go and steps back toward the door.

“There's wood by the stove and soup in the cupboard that's probably older than you. Eat something. Sleep.” A beat. “And Gia. You did good, girl.”

I want to ask her: if I did so good, then how come it hurts so much? Mamma was right. Maybe I should have pretended, and then none of it would have happened. I drank too much. Said things I didn't mean. But before I can tell her my fears, she's gone.

I stand in the open doorway with the cold pouring in around me and watch her fold herself into the back of the waiting car. The headlights swing across the trunks, and the taillights buck and jolt away down the track until the branches close over them and the last red of her is swallowed whole.

Once I shut the door, I don't light the stove yet. I sink into Nonna's chair beside it, and I take out my phone.

It has been buzzing against my hip the whole way up. I am looking at it now for the first time.

The screen is a wall of them. Mamma. Mamma again. Mamma a third time, then an aunt, then a cousin I haven't spoken to since Easter, then Mamma once more. I don't need to read them to know what they say. The drunk daughter. The scene at the shower. The poor sister, nearly eight months along, terrorized her own celebration.

I scroll once, slowly, all the way to the bottom.

Nothing from Dante.

I set the phone face down on Nonna's table and look around the cold little room. And then my heart aches in a way that I didn't think was possible. This time I let it all out.

I hate him.

But then again, I hate myself more for ever thinking a man like Dante wanted to be with me. No, he just wanted to use me. Like all the no-gooders did when they found out that I was a Rizzo. I hate myself for being so blind.

DANTE

*F*uck. I really messed up. Mia wanted me to stay, my suocera wanted me to keep up appearances, and all I could think about was the hurt in Gia's face. It's as if, for the first time since I started messing around with Mia, seeing her, whatever it's called, I've realized Gia is my wife. Like it's only now hitting home. What is wrong with me?

I stood there like a piece of furniture just like mi suocero. Any family drama and the man is never anywhere to be seen.

Everything I loathe about this family, it hit me like a fucking nail on the head, I'm no different from them. I've become one of those people who don't care about anyone's emotions, only appearances. When did I become this jerk? When my book became a bestseller? When this family accepted I had enough millions in the bank to earn their respect? Right now, I want to take it back. I want the decent person I perceived myself to be, to appear, but he doesn't, so I think about finding a bar and just drowning my sorrows.

Instead I go home, expecting Gia to turn up. I shower, tidy up, not that there's much to do. One thing for sure, Gia does always keep the house clean and tidy, but there's no smell from the kitchen. No new recipe that she's deciding to try out.

So I head to the car, and drive to Nella's. She doesn't live far. As soon as I park up, Nella opens the building door. Was she expecting me? She looks down and rolls her eyes at me, to let me know that I'm as pathetic as I feel right now.

“She's not here,” Nella says, before I've got a foot on the step up to the building. She doesn't open the door the rest of the way. She fills the gap in it, one hand flat on the frame, and she has never looked at me the way she's looking at me now, like the sight of me does something to her stomach.

“I know I fucked up.”

“You and your cock have done enough damage. Not with one of my sisters, but the two of them.” She says it flat, then steps down the stairs, and gets close to me, as if to challenge me. “You want to say something? Fine. Say it to me. I'll decide if it's worth passing on.”

“Nella. Please. Five minutes with her. I won't do anything but talk.”

“That's the whole problem with you.” It comes out almost gentle, which is worse than if she'd shouted. “You always want to talk. It's the one thing you've ever been good at.”

“That's not fair.”

Her eyes go bright and wild. “You don't understand the meaning of the word, and I thought you were an author.”

Before I can reply, she steps up to me and her hand slaps me across my face, open, hard enough to turn my head, hard enough that the sound of it reaches me a half second after the sting does.

“You deserve so much more than that. But the sight of you is making me feel sick right now.” She's close enough now that I can watch her whole face working at it. “Dante.”

She doesn't finish whatever she wants to say, but spits in my face instead right across my eyes.

I don't wipe it. It runs, and I let it run.

“I told Gia not to marry you. You had a dream. Some big writing life. And you didn't give a shit what she wanted to do, it was all about you.” Her eyes hold mine and won't let go. “That's what I couldn't stand about you. You're so damn selfish. Do you even want kids? Really? Or is it just about having a legacy?”

“That's not,” I start, and stop, because I don't know how the sentence ends. For the first time since I married Gia, I honestly don't know the answer. I've never really been asked that before. Gia asked, do you want this, do you want to go down the surrogacy route, and I was like sure. Thinking it would keep her happy. But me and the kids. I shrugged at the idea of it. Men who want kids don't shrug. They have this burning urge. Don't they?

“Go home.” She's already reaching back for the handle. “Gia’s going to be fine without you.”

“Will you tell her I came?”

She stops with her back to me. Then she spins around, and for a second there's something in her face that's almost pity, which is the one thing from her I can't stand.

“No,” she says. Then without hesitation she spins on her heels and heads back up the stairs. And flames the door shut.

I stand staring at it, not knowing what to do with myself for the first time in my life.

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DANTE

After spending hours outside Nella's apartment, it dawns on me, the one place Gia would go.

The cabin.

Driving there would prove that I really am a big selfish prick.

I switch the radio on and then off again, scroll through my playlists at a red light and can't stand a single song, and somewhere past the river I realize that I've subconsciously ended up going to my old neighborhood.

I'm going to my parents' house.

I haven't driven down this street in almost a year. I could blame the production or the traffic or a hundred other things, but the truth is I've been sleeping with Gia's sister, and it's hard to sit at your mother's table with that on your conscience. I park across the road, cross over, and knock on the door I grew up behind like I'm a salesman.

Ma opens it in her robe, and the second she sees me her whole expression shifts from annoyance to worry.

"Dante." She grabs my wrist and pulls me over the step before I've said a word. "At this hour? What's happened? You look terrible."

I could say the same about her, and I hate myself a little for thinking it. The robe is silk, and her lips look swollen from too much filler. Her latest facelift has pulled her eyes so tight that even at midnight she looks wide awake and slightly surprised. Ma was beautiful once, stunning really, and some days I barely recognize her anymore. Gia told me off the first time I said it out loud. *It's her face, amore. If changing it makes her happy, who*

are you to judge? Gia always did see the best in people, me included, and look where that got her.

"Nothing's wrong, Ma. I was driving and I saw the light on."

She doesn't believe a word of it, but she shuts the door behind me and heads down the hall toward the kitchen, and I follow. When I was little she'd kiss my face all over at the school gate as if she hadn't seen me in months, even though she'd dropped me off that same morning before her shift at the restaurant. Tonight it's been nearly a year, and she's acting like I popped in yesterday. I don't blame her. I haven't earned the kisses.

"Sit, sit. I'll put the kettle on. Have you eaten? You haven't eaten, I can tell."

"I don't need anything, Ma."

"Bruno," she calls ahead of us, already reaching for a pan. "Bruno, your son's here."

My father is at the kitchen table with his phone in his hand. He looks up, and for a split second I see the face I remember from when I was small, the one that made my whole chest light up when he walked through the door, back when he still walked through it. He left when I was seven. He spent the next ten years in a string of towns I couldn't find on a map, always about to send for us, always a few weeks from coming home, and he only came back for good when my first book sold and there was money in the family again. Ma took him back like he'd never been gone. I've never understood it, and I've never asked.

"Look who remembers the address," Pa says.

"Pa."

He goes back to his phone. "You want a drink? There's wine on the rack. Good stuff, not the cheap garbage we used to buy." He says it with a touch of pride, and it lands somewhere I don't like, because I know whose money bought that wine.

I sit down across from him. Ma is at the stove cracking eggs I told her I didn't want, because feeding me is the one argument she's never lost, and watching her do it I feel about six years old, sitting at this same table with my legs dangling off the chair.

"You're too thin," she says over her shoulder. "Isn't he too thin, Bruno?"

"All the famous people are thin these days. It's the fashion." Pa pats his belly, pleased with himself. "Better than having a gut like mine."

"He isn't famous, he's sick. Look at him."

“And your brother calls me every Sunday from New York,” Ma adds, cracking another egg into the pan without turning around. “Every single Sunday, Dante. You, I have to read about in the newspapers.”

Pa ignores us. Ma sets a plate at his elbow without being asked, and as she passes she touches the back of his neck, quick and soft, the same way she did before he left and every day since he came back. He doesn't lift his eyes from the screen. He picks up his fork with his free hand, and when he raises his glass she hurries over to top it up, and when his plate empties she fills it again. She stands there beside him the whole time, waiting for an order he never has to give out loud.

I've watched this my entire life. But sitting here tonight as a married man, I feel sick to my stomach, because I'm looking at my own marriage from the outside for the first time.

“Ma,” I say. “Sit down for a minute. You haven't stopped moving since I walked in.”

She laughs and waves the spatula at me. “And do what, watch you not eat?”

“Leave her,” Pa says mildly, still reading. “She likes to fuss. Let her fuss.”

“Pa, when was the last time you thanked her?”

That gets his attention. He looks up at me. “What?”

“Ma. She's standing right there. When did you last say thank you for the plate?”

Ma turns from the stove with the dish towel twisted in her hands, and she studies me carefully, the way she used to when I came home from school with a split lip and a story that didn't add up.

“Dante,” she says quietly. “What's wrong with you? Is this about Gia? Is that why you're here?”

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. “He doesn't see you, Ma. And I did the exact same thing to her. Every single day. I'm no better than him.”

Pa sets his phone face down on the table. It's forty years too late for that small gesture to mean much, and it still guts me to watch him do it.

“Gia?” Ma asks again.

“I took her for granted. I let her carry everything while I told myself I was the one holding us up, and I only see it now because I'm sitting here

watching him do it to you. It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen, and I've been doing it for ten years."

Nobody speaks. Behind Ma the eggs start to smoke in the pan, and she doesn't move to save them.

"Sofia," Pa says, low. "Leave the eggs. Sit down."

She sinks into the chair beside me as if her legs have been begging her to for hours. Pa reaches over and turns off the burner, and for a moment the only sound is the hiss of the pan cooling.

"Son." Pa's voice is gruff but not unkind. "Talk to us. What really brought you here at midnight?"

I take a deep breath. Every instinct I have is telling me to talk about the production instead, the money problems and the lead actor who walked, anything that would get Ma stroking my hand and telling me it'll all be fine. I've been hiding behind that production for months. I'm sick of it.

"I've been sleeping with Mia," I say. "Gia's sister. For almost a year."

Ma's hand flies to her mouth.

"And the baby." My voice cracks, and I force the rest of it out anyway. "It was never by artificial insemination. Gia found out today, at the baby shower, in front of the whole family. She's gone, and I don't know if she's ever coming back."

Ma starts to cry without making a sound, tears running down her tight, smooth cheeks. She reaches for my hand and then stops halfway, like she isn't sure she's allowed to touch me.

Pa doesn't cry. He goes very still, and I know what he's thinking about, because I'm thinking about it too. Uncle Paolo, Pa's older brother, hanging in his garage after committing suicide, the winter I turned twelve. His childhood sweetheart, his wife had been cheating on him for years, and when it all came out he learned that the three kids he'd raised and loved weren't his, he bailed out on life. At the funeral Pa stood at the graveside with his jaw set like concrete and told me that anyone who lies in a relationship, doesn't deserve any happiness.

He pushes his chair back and stands. He doesn't shout. That's the worst part. He just looks down at me the way you'd look at something the dog dragged in from the yard.

"When you leave," he says, "don't forget to close the door behind you."

"Bruno," Ma whispers.

He walks out of the kitchen, and a moment later I hear the bedroom door shut down the hall.

I nod at the empty doorway. I understand him perfectly. He isn't just telling me to go home tonight; he's telling me not to come back.

Ma walks me to the front door without a word. On the step she presses a foil-wrapped plate into my hands, because of course she saved some of the eggs, and then she grips my face in both hands and holds it there.

“She was the best thing that ever happened to you,” she says. “You fix it, Dante. I don't care how long it takes.”

The door closes softly behind me, and I stand on the sidewalk holding a plate of burnt eggs, with nowhere to go, but an empty shell of a house.

DANTE

“*P*ush, Mia. One more. Now.”

The midwife's voice cuts through the room, and Mia's growl comes low in her throat. My *suocera* is running the room, the way she runs everything. The Ice Queen. The woman who's never once doubted that her money gives her the right to tell the rest of us how to live. The more time I've spent with Mia and her, I've seen their similarities. They're nothing like Gia. The wife whose heart I broke, and the reason I'm in here with her sister, still thinking about how this is so wrong in so many ways.

On paper, I'm her father, but then in a way I'm her uncle too, because I'm married to Gia.

This is all fucked up in so many ways.

What the fuck was I thinking going along with all of this?

“Breathe, tesoro. Like I showed you. Don't hold it in.” Then, to the midwife, not asking: “She needs more pillows. Look at her, look how she's slipping.”

They put me at the foot of the bed. Close enough to be useful. Far enough to be nobody.

Then I see the head.

I wasn't ready for it. Dark and slick and impossible, and the sight of it goes through me like a blade turned flat, and my stomach rolls hard enough that I have to look at the wall for a second and breathe through my nose.

The reality that a person is coming out of a person, and me standing here having caused it in the worst way a man can.

“Again,” the midwife says. “She’s right there. She’s coming.”

My *suocera* has Mia’s hand, and Mia bears down with a sound I’ll hear for the rest of my life, and then my daughter arrives in a thin, furious, outraged cry.

It’s the most beautiful and disgusting scene. Between the blood, the umbilical cord is about to be cut. Mia calling out in relief. And my daughter is here. The midwife lifts her, red and roaring and streaked white, this tiny raging thing with her fists going, and I wait for Mia to reach for her. Mia doesn’t move. She looks down at the baby laid against the crook of the midwife’s arm, grey and wrung out against the pillows, and she doesn’t lift her hands, and something in her face closes like a shop at night.

My *suocera* reaches out and scoops my baby cooing before the silence can turn into something anyone will have to name later.

“She looks like you,” I say to Mia.

“Maybe.” Mia turns her face to the window, to the black glass and the city smeared across it. “Or both of us.”

The door bangs open before anyone has thought to wipe the baby clean, and Nella comes in still wearing her navy scrubs, her lanyard swinging against her chest and her hair slipping out of its clip, breathing hard like she ran up four flights from her own ward. Somebody must have called down to tell her, or maybe the whole hospital has been whispering about the Rizzo girl in delivery room three since midnight. She takes in the room with one sweep, the way I imagine she reads a chart. My *suocera* is rocking the baby by the window, the midwife is peeling off her gloves, I’m pinned against the wall at the foot of the bed, and Mia is lying back against the pillows, still staring out at the city lights with her arms folded over her empty stomach.

Nella’s eyes go to the baby first, and they soften for a heartbeat before they land on her sister and turn hard.

“Has she held her?” Nella asks the midwife quietly.

The midwife hesitates, glances at my *suocera*, and shakes her head.

Nella crosses to the bed, and when she speaks it’s in the calm, professional voice she must use with frightened patients on her ward, which somehow makes it worse. “Mia, she needs skin to skin, and so do you. It helps with the bleeding, it helps your milk come in, and it helps her settle. Open your gown.”

“I’m tired, Nella,” Mia says without turning her head. “Mamma’s got her.”

“Mamma isn’t the one who just gave birth to her.”

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“I carried her for over eight months. I’ve done my part.” Mia finally looks around, her face gray and damp and completely composed. “That was the arrangement, remember? I was the oven.”

Something jolts through Nella that I can see from across the room. It runs up her spine and locks her jaw, and when she speaks again the nurse is gone and there’s only a sister left.

“Don’t you dare hide behind Gia,” Nella says. “Gia would have crawled over broken glass for that baby. She’d have had her against her chest before the cord was cut, and she’d have cried all over her and never once let go. You’re holding the one thing she’d give her life for, and you can’t even be bothered to lift your arms.”

“Nella,” My suocera snaps from the window. “Not here.”

“Where, then, Mamma? At the christening? In front of the photographer?” Nella keeps her eyes on Mia. “You wanted him, and you got him.” She points at the tiny, furious bundle in Mamma’s arms. “She’s a person. She’s been alive for ten minutes, and the first thing she’s learned is that her mother would rather look out a window than look at her.”

Mia’s mouth tightens. For one second something flickers behind her eyes, fear or maybe guilt, and then she smooths it away like a crease in a sheet.

“Are you finished?” Mia asks.

“No. I’m going to drive up that mountain and tell Gia her niece is here and healthy, because somebody in this family owes her the truth for once, and it isn’t going to be any of you.” Nella straightens up and tucks the loose hair behind her ear with a hand that isn’t quite steady. “And when I come back, you’d better have learned how to hold your daughter.”

Then she turns to me. I've been standing against that wall like a coat rack through all of it, and I brace for whatever she's about to throw, but she only looks at me for a long moment. What's in her face is worse than hatred. It's a tired, bone-deep disappointment, the kind you feel for someone you once hoped better of.

"Take a good look at her, Dante," Nella says quietly, nodding toward the bed. "This is who you chose."

She walks out, and the door swings shut hard behind her. The baby, who had just settled in Mamma's arms, starts screaming again as if she felt the slam in her bones. Mia pulls the sheet up to her chin and closes her eyes, and Mamma rocks faster, murmuring nonsense into the blanket. I stay where I am at the foot of the bed with Nella's words ringing in my ears, because she's right, and I can't find a single thing in this room to say that would prove her wrong.

Hours go by, we move to another room and the rest of the family enter, praising Mia for doing well and falling in love with our daughter. Then my suocera steps out to phone the aunts, and then it's just me and the machines and a nurse who crosses the floor and puts my daughter into my arms without asking whether I know how.

"Mind the head," she says, and folds my hand up under it, and steps back.

And the whole world I've wrecked drops away for the length of one breath.

She weighs nothing, this scrap of a person who didn't ask to be born into this mess of a family. Her hand comes up and closes around the side of my finger, the whole fist of her not as wide as my thumbnail, and she grips like she means it, like she's decided already that I'm hers to hold onto. She's furious at the light, her face screwing up and working itself red, and I turn on instinct and start to sway, this motion I never learned coming up out of some old buried place, and she quiets against me by a degree.

I look down at a face eight inches from mine, and I think, with a clarity that frightens me, *I would burn the world down for you.*

I should have felt this once before, but I never have. I feel a sadness wash over me, as I think about Gia wanting a child so badly, and Mia being able to have one, and not giving her a second look.

"I'll take care of you. Protect and love you, like you deserve to be loved," I whisper. She shifts for a second, I like to think that she understood

what I said, but I know deep down she doesn't.

If this is what it means to truly love someone, then I'm doing it right now.

It's a shame I never did this with Gia. I didn't protect and love her the way I'm doing with my daughter now.

I've been such a fool, to think I didn't have it in me.

I did, but I'm going to fix things one step at a time. I have to.

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GIA

Cooking is the one thing I've never in my life been too sad to do, but things are different in the cabin. Since I've been here I've been living on tea and dry crackers. I sit in my Nonna's chair watching the light cross the floor and back, and I let myself be nothing at all.

Then my stomach growls, and I head to the kitchen in the grey light and I look at what's there: half a bag of flour, some eggs a neighbor down the valley left on the step without knocking, salt, a lemon going soft in the bowl. And my hands start moving before I've decided anything, the way they've always known how to move, and I make myself a plate of something warm and I sit at the table and I eat it, and I cry the whole way through it, but I finish it, and I wash the plate, wondering what to do next.

I'll make the cabin as homely as I can do, then as Nella said spend time here and think. Not about my marriage, or how Dante hurt me so badly, but think about what I want to do with my life, and what to do with it, knowing that one thing for sure, I'm not going back to that house, and I'm certainly not raising my sister's baby.



The last few days, everyone has been coming to see me. They know I'm in the cabin. Well it's a village, and Nella has been coming to see me. And asking the locals to keep me company when they can.

And they can, because they always make time for those who need it. I must admit, I do enjoy their company from time to time. It's not like living in the city, where no one talks to their neighbors unlike here.

Signora Bianchi lives down the lane. She loves my chocolate chip muffins, so I've been making her some on Sundays, and the local bakery buys some too. This little kitchen has been put to good use since I've been here. Then again, Nonna was always cooking. Fiorenzo, who lives a few blocks from here, is an old man whose family never really visits him, and he's been abandoned like so many, so Friday nights I make him a special treat and cook for him. Nella comes to visit when she's not working, and she brings more of my things. We don't talk about the family, and especially not Dante. It suits me. Until today, when she rushed in with a look on her face, and I hadn't been counting the weeks, but I knew the baby was coming. I knew before she said it that the baby had come today.

"The baby came early."

I nod. "Is it alive and healthy?" I say.

She blinks. "Yeah."

"Do you want to know anything else?" Nella asks. "I went to see her."

Her?

I wonder if she means Mia, or the baby too. I know she's a girl, but hearing that she's here makes me feel happy and sad at the same time.

I want to know more, but I don't want to know the answer, so I don't ask. So I shake my head, and we both naturally take our place at the table, as I settle down the coffee, the way she likes it, and I make some extra muffins for her. She can never resist them.

"I can't believe the one who shouldn't be named hasn't been on his hands and knees begging for forgiveness."

I tilt my head. She couldn't resist. "He has sent letters."

"Oh?" She raises an eyebrow.

"I haven't read them."

She chuckles. "I can imagine what they say. Please, Gia, forgive me. I didn't mean to end up fucking your sister. It was an accident."

I shouldn't, but it makes me laugh. So hard. And she chuckles too.

"He's a writer. I'm sure whatever he said was poetic."

She reaches out and bites into her muffin. "This is too good." She licks a crumb from her thumb. "He didn't call. Not that you would pick up."

“You know me too well.” I bite into the muffin. “He sent texts. But then I got bored of it all and decided to block him.”

“Damn, Gia. That's cold.”

“Now it makes sense why he started writing letters.” I set my cup down. “Pages and pages of them. I put them in the fire, to save me from burning wood.”

It's weird, a few days ago, talking about Dante would make me sad, but now he just makes me feel angry, each and every time when I think about all that I did for him. For us.

“Maybe I should buy you a guard dog, just in case he shows up...”

“Come on.” I wave her off. “It's not that bad. We're not resorting to stooping that low.”

“Gia, maybe you could, because I don't like the idea of you being here and hiding as if you've done something wrong.”

I want to defend myself and say that I'm not hiding, but being here is easier. Some days, I just get on with my day, the locals praise me for my baking and cooking, and that's enough.

She sits at the long table with a coffee and she watches me move around the kitchen, and she says, careful, “A place has come up. In the town, the good square, the corner unit with the big windows. Old Benedetti's finally retiring.” She turns her cup around. “It'd make a restaurant. A small one. Yours.”

My hands are still on the board.

“With what money?”

“Yours.” She meets my eye. “You worked so that lying, cheating... when he couldn't even earn a dime. If it wasn't for you...”

“Nella. Don't. I know what happened. I know how I was used.”

She inhales, as if she's sucking all the air out of the room.

“So if you know all this, why are you acting as if he earned those millions alone? He didn't, and you are owed it. You can't stay here and live off the money you're making from the bakery.”

A thought pops into my mind. I remember being in the kitchen with Nonna as a kid, and maybe doing the one thing I'd thought to do back then.

“A restaurant,” I say, testing the word.

Nella smiles, slow. “You, feeding people who chose to walk in the door. Getting paid for the one thing you'd do for free. Under your own name, in the open, where nobody can pretend you're something you're not.”

“Yes,” I say, and my voice doesn't shake. “I'm going to do this. One day I'm going to open my own place. I can't stay here forever, even if it feels easy.”

She rushes to me and holds on to me.

“You can do it, girl. I know you can.” Then she kisses me on the cheek. “I'm so fucking proud of you.”

I can't believe this chapter of my life is over, but I know one thing for sure: it is better, and it should be ending, but it hurts just as much as it did when I found out that Dante had been sleeping with my twin. I hold on to Nella tighter, not wanting to let go.

“You let it all out.”

I do. I cry until I can't anymore, then when I think I've stopped, I cry some more.

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DANTE

The next few weeks, I forget about the theatre, the production and everything else. I can't get over how beautiful she is, my daughter.

My time is spent looking for clothes for her, even if she can't fit into them. Rushing to her every need. And as for Mia, she asked to stay in her apartment.

The house we built together finally feels like the haven Gia always said it could be. She knew what it could become, and I ignored her.

She's still in the cabin.

Apparently, she's using her skills in the kitchen to feed the locals. Something Gia prided herself on was her culinary skills. God, I miss her.

On the nights Rosa won't go down, and there are more of those than anyone warned me about, I stopped fighting it weeks ago. I lift her out of the crib at some black hour, do up the straps, and I drive. The engine turns over and her whole body goes soft against the harness before I've reached the end of the road. Every time. My daughter sleeps, and the one road long enough to hold her all the way under is the one that runs up the valley to the cabin.

So that's where we go. I tell myself it's for Rosa.

I cut the lights before the last bend and let the car roll in on its own weight, and I park under the big pine where the shadow swallows us, and I sit with the heater ticking and my daughter breathing in the back and I watch the lit square of the kitchen the way a man dying of thirst watches a glass he isn't allowed to touch.

Tonight Gia's making ragù. I can tell by the way she moves, unhurried, from the pot she keeps going back to and stirring low and slow, the wooden spoon turning through something that has clearly been on that stove since the afternoon. That's how her Nonna taught her, she told me once, while she was curled into my side on a Sunday. I gave that up.

God help me.

She looks better than she did the day I married her. She tastes the sauce off the spoon and her eyes close for a second, and then she laughs out loud, on her own, for no one. I can't remember the last time she laughed like that when we were together.

I did that. I blamed everything but the truth of the matter was, I'd used her in the worst sense, and I didn't realize it until she'd left.

Mia was fun. She was easy in a way Gia never was. Now, I'm alone, no work and no distractions from anyone, I've had some serious time to think. All that happened with Mia was lust.

They're twins and may look alike, but I never saw the real Mia until Rosa was born. She hasn't held her, or even looked at her once. I thought maybe she is suffering from postnatal depression, so I went to see Nella about it in the hospital.

"Now, you see the real Mia. You've been too blind to see it when you were fucking her."

That was Nella's response. Crude, but true.

Rosa stirs and makes the small sound that means I've got about four minutes to go, before she lets the whole village know I'm spying on Gia. I start the engine, and the kitchen light doesn't so much as flicker. Every time we come here, I leave with a smile on my face. Rosa settles again, but I really need to get her out of her seat for a while, before heading back home.



The drive down is different from the drive up. Going to the cabin I'm nervous in case Gia sees us. But on the way back, I feel at peace knowing Gia is alright. That she's happy. Rosa sleeps the whole way and I keep glancing at her in the mirror at the lights, and I catch myself grinning in the dark like a boy who got away with something.

Once we're home, I rush to put Rosa down without waking her and stand over the crib until she settles.

Mia still hasn't come to see her. Not once. Her own daughter, weeks old now, and she hasn't so much as asked for a photo. Ma wanted to stay for a few weeks after the birth, but then Pa said he needed her at home, and *he* always takes priority. My *suocera* visits, but never stays long and Nella pops in to make sure I'm doing it right.

Nella's face lights up whenever she looks at Rosa. Rosa has that effect on everyone, especially me.

Then as I leave Rosa's room, my phone vibrates.

Mia.

I gave you a baby. Pay up.



I ignore Mia's message. I put my phone face down on the kitchen counter, finish washing Rosa's bottles, and go to bed telling myself I'll deal with it in the morning. I don't sleep much. Rosa wakes at two and again at four, and every time I get up to feed her, I think about those five words and my stomach knots up.

At eight the phone rings. I grab it, expecting Mia, ready to tell her where she can shove her demands.

Fuck! It's my *suocera*.

"Dante." Her voice is crisp, like she's calling one of her maids. "I'm at Mia's. Come over this morning. We need to talk about what happens next."

"I'm raising my daughter."

"Ten o'clock," she says, and hangs up.

I stand there in the kitchen staring at the phone. Part of me wants to throw it at the wall. The other part knows that if I don't go, they'll come to me, and I don't want either of them anywhere near this house. So I pack the diaper bag, strap Rosa into her car seat, and drive across the river.

I think about leaving her with Nella, but Nella's on shift, and to be honest I want Mia to see her. Some stupid part of me still hopes that when Mia looks at her own baby, something in her will wake up. It happened to me in that delivery room. Maybe it can happen to her.

Mia's building looks worse in daylight, with peeling paint on the stairwell and a bike chained to the railing with no front wheel. I climb up with Rosa in the carrier against my chest. She's awake, looking around with those big dark eyes, her little fist hanging on to the strap.

My *suocera* opens the door before I knock. She's in a cream cashmere sweater and pearls, her lipstick perfect, her hair done like she's on her way to lunch at the club. She looks at me, then at the carrier, and her mouth tightens.

"You brought the baby."

"Her name's Rosa."

"I know what her name is, Dante." She steps aside. "Come in. And don't upset Mia. She's been through a lot."

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The apartment smells of nail polish and old coffee. Mia is lying on the couch in silk pajamas, flipping through a magazine, with a bowl of cherries on her stomach. Her stomach's almost flat again, like the last eight months never happened. The vitamins are gone from the counter. The scan photos are no longer on the fridge. If I didn't know better, I'd never guess she'd been pregnant.

She looks up at me and smiles. Then her eyes flick to Rosa and slide straight off her, like she's looking at a coat I've carried in.

"Hi, Dante," Mia says.

"Mia."

I stand there looking at her, and for the first time I really see it. She has Gia's face. Same eyes, same mouth, same dimple on the left when she smiles. For a year I told myself that was what pulled me in. But the face is all they share. If this were Gia, she'd already be on her knees in front of the carrier, cooing and crying and kissing Rosa's fingers. Mia hasn't even put down the cherries.

She's beautiful. And she's ugly as hell on the inside. How did I not see it before?

"Sit down," my *suocera* says, taking the armchair by the window. She crosses her legs and folds her hands in her lap. "We have things to discuss."

"I'll stand."

Rosa squirms, and I rub her back until she settles.

"Fine. Stand." She looks up at me. "You violated my daughter, Dante."

I almost laugh. "I what?"

"You heard me. Mia offered to carry a child for her sister out of the goodness of her heart, and you took advantage of her. You were her brother-in-law. She trusted you. And you got her pregnant in the most disgusting way imaginable, and then you let the entire family find out at her baby shower." Her voice goes cold. "Do you have any idea what you've done to her? What decent man is going to want her now? You've ruined her life. So now you're going to pay for it."

I look over at Mia and wait for her to say something. Anything. That she was the one who called me at midnight. That she kept telling me Gia didn't love me. That she wanted this long before I was stupid enough to go along with it.

Mia eats a cherry and turns a page.

"That's not what happened," I snap. "And you know it."

"It doesn't matter what happened. What matters is how it looks." She shrugs. "And it looks like a married man with nothing to his name got his wife's twin sister pregnant. I can make things very difficult for you in this city."

"You already have."

"Then be smart and let me make it go away."

Mia tosses the magazine onto the coffee table. "Pa has cut me off completely," she says, like she's telling me it's raining. He did that a year ago, but I know my *suocera* has been sneakily giving her money. "Did you know that? He says he's not giving me another cent until I get a job."

"A job," her mother repeats, like it's a dirty word.

"He says he's been paying for my life for twenty-seven years and he's done. He wouldn't even cover my rent this month." Mia rolls her eyes. "He wants me working in a shop, Dante. Can you imagine?"

"So," my *suocera* says, "it falls to you."

And there it is. This has nothing to do with Rosa. It never did. Aldo finally closed his wallet, Mia has never worked a day in her life, and now she's looking for someone else to pay the bills. I'm the closest.

"What do you want?" I ask.

Mia sits up and moves the cherries to the table. "Enough to get out of here. Milan, maybe, or Paris. Somewhere nobody knows me." She glances at the carrier and then quickly away. "And I'll sign whatever you want. You can have her. Full custody. I won't fight you."

"You'd just sign her away?"

"I never wanted to be a mother," Mia says, and shrugs. "That was always Gia's thing. I only ever wanted you."

I nearly chuckle as she says it. She never wanted me, she just wanted me to be her meal ticket, and like an idiot I fell for it.

Rosa picks that moment to wake up properly. Her face screws up, she goes bright red, and she lets out a cry that fills the whole apartment. I unclip the carrier and lift her out and hold her against my shoulder, bouncing her gently, and dig in the bag for a bottle.

Mia winces and reaches for the TV remote.

That's it. Whatever I thought I felt for her, it's gone. Gia would have given anything to hold this baby, and Mia can't even stand to hear her cry.

"Fine," I say.

My *suocera* raises an eyebrow. "Fine?"

"Take it. Take all of it. The house, the savings, whatever's left in the accounts. I don't care." Saying it out loud feels like setting down something heavy I've been carrying for a year. "You want me to pay? I'll pay. But Mia signs every paper my lawyer puts in front of her, and she never comes near my daughter again. Not for anything. Ever."

Mia smiles, Gia's smile on the wrong woman, and it makes my skin crawl.

"See, Mamma?" Mia says. "I told you he'd be reasonable."

Her mother stands up and brushes off her skirt, all business now that she's got what she came for. "Good. I'll have our lawyer call yours. We'll set up a meeting for next week and put everything in writing." She stops at the door and looks back at me. "You married into a good family, Dante. You should be grateful."

I get the bottle into Rosa's mouth and she latches on right away, staring up at me, her whole body going soft. I stand in the middle of the living

room feeding my daughter while her mother flips through TV channels and her grandmother checks her lipstick in the hall mirror, and neither of them looks at her once.

“Oh, I'm grateful,” I say for my baby girl and nothing else.

When Rosa finishes, I burp her, tuck her back into the carrier, and walk out without saying goodbye. By the time I reach the bottom of the stairs she's asleep.

I've just agreed to give away everything I own, and I should be scared to death. But as I step out into the cold with my daughter asleep on me, all I feel is relief. For the first time in a year, I'm free.

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GIA

Saturday is sauce day. By nine I've got two big pots bubbling on Nonna's old stove, one for Fiorenzo and one for the Bianchi twins down the lane, who are eighty-four and still fight over who gets the last meatball. The kitchen smells of garlic and basil and the bread I put in the oven an hour ago. There's flour on my jeans and tomato on my sleeve, and I'm humming along to the radio like a woman without a care in the world.

I hear Nella's car before I see it, her old Fiat rattling up the track, so I wipe my hands on a towel and go out onto the porch. She climbs out with a grocery bag on each hip and a suitcase bumping along behind her.

"Mamma finally let me into your old room," she says, nodding at the case. "I grabbed your winter coats, your good knives, and that hideous lamp you love."

"It's vintage."

"It's a fire hazard, Gia." She kisses my cheek on her way past and sniffs the air. "Please tell me there's bread."

"Ten minutes."

Nella dumps the bags on the table and sinks into Nonna's chair. She's still in her scrubs under her coat, which means she drove straight up after a night shift, and it's only when she pulls her knees to her chest that I notice she hasn't smiled once since she arrived.

I start unpacking the groceries. Coffee, eggs, a bag of oranges, and a wedge of the good parmesan she always brings because she knows I can't

afford it right now.

“Go on,” I tell her. “Whatever it is, spit it out.”

“I saw Mamma yesterday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” She presses the heels of her hands to her eyes. “She was on the phone with a lawyer when I walked in, and she didn’t even bother to hide it. She and Mia are going after Dante for everything he’s got. The house, his savings, the joint accounts. According to Mamma, he ruined Mia’s life, so now he has to pay for it.”

An orange rolls out of my hand and across the counter. I catch it before it hits the floor.

“And here’s the best part,” Nella goes on. “Pa cut Mia off. Not a single euro until she finds a job.”

A snort escapes me. “Mia? Working?”

“I know. Apparently he told her he’s paid for her life for twenty-seven years and he’s done. So she’s shopping for a new bank, and Dante’s the closest one.”

I put the oranges in Nonna’s blue bowl and lined them up so they wouldn’t roll, because my hands needed something to do. I tell myself not to ask the next question, and I ask it anyway.

“What did Dante say?”

Nella watches me carefully. “From what I heard, he said they could take it all, as long as Mia signs away her rights to the baby and never comes back.”

I stand very still at the counter.

So he’s keeping her. I knew he would the moment I learned Mia wouldn’t even hold her, but hearing that he’s willing to lose every last thing he owns to keep that little girl safe does something to my chest I’m not ready to think about.

The oven timer goes off, and I’m grateful for the excuse to turn away. I pull out the loaves and set them on the rack, and the kitchen fills with that warm, yeasty smell that always reminds me of being small.

“I lay awake most of the night thinking about it,” Nella says behind me, softer now. “Maybe the divorce isn’t worth it.”

I turn around. “Excuse me?”

“Just hear me out.” She plants her feet and leans forward. “Half of that marriage is yours. Your salary covered the mortgage on that house, and his

career too. Every hour you spent in Pa's office went into those accounts. If you file now, while Mia's picking him clean, you walk away with nothing. Maybe you wait. Get a lawyer, fight her for your share, make them come through you first."

"She can have it."

Nella stares at me. "What?"

"Every last bit of it." I pick up the bread knife and start slicing a loaf that's still far too hot, and it squashes under the blade. "The house, the bank accounts, the wedding silver. I don't care."

"That's years of your life, Gia."

"I'm aware."

"And you're just handing it to her?" She shakes her head, getting worked up now. "God, you were always so soft. When we were kids, Mia took your doll and you gave her your dress too. In high school she wanted your boyfriend, so you told him to ask her out. Now she's got your husband and she's about to get your house, and you're standing there acting like none of it matters."

For a second she's right, and it stings. I'm eight years old again, watching Mia walk off with the doll Nonna made me, the one with the red yarn hair, and keeping my mouth shut so Mamma won't shout. I'm fifteen, telling Marco Ferri my sister liked him, then going home to cry into my pillow. My whole life, I've stepped aside so Mia could have whatever she wanted, because it was easier than fighting.

But this is different, and I need Nella to understand why.

I set the knife down and face her properly. "This isn't me being soft. It's the opposite."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I don't want any of it." I say it slowly so she can hear what I mean. "I can't walk through that front door again and see the table where I lit all those candles, or sleep in the bed where he said her name. If I fight for my share, I'll spend that time arguing with her, and Mia will make sure that I hurt even more than I have done so far."

Nella opens her mouth, then shuts it again.

"Mia's paying for that new life with her own daughter," I go on, and my voice wobbles, but I push through. "One day she'll figure out what she traded away, and it'll be too late. That's her problem, not mine. I'm not

wasting another minute fighting over the scraps of my marriage. This time I'm getting out, and I'm staying out."

The kitchen goes quiet except for the sauce popping on the stove. Nella studies me like I'm somebody she's only just met.

"So you're finally filing," she says.

"I'm opening my restaurant."

She blinks. "That's not what I asked you."

"I'll do it, I promise." I let out a shaky breath. "But lawyers and papers and money, that's his world, and it's me tidying up after everybody else again. I'm talking about something of my own." I pull the folder out of the drawer under the counter, the one I've been scribbling in every night for weeks, and drop it in front of her. "Benedetti's place is still empty. I called him on Tuesday. He'll hold it until spring if I can put down a deposit."

Nella flips it open. There are sketches of the dining room, three drafts of a menu, a list of every farmer and supplier in the valley, and page after page of sums in my tiny handwriting.

"How are you paying for it?" she asks.

"With my own money. The bakery's doing better than I expected, and the Rinaldis want me to cater their granddaughter's christening. I've got Nonna's gold bracelet, and the diamond earrings Mamma gave me for my eighteenth that I've always hated." I shrug. "It'll take months, maybe longer. But every euro in that place will be one I earned, and not a soul gets to walk in and claim I owe them. Not Mamma, not Papa, not Dante."

Nella closes the folder, and when she looks up, her eyes are wet.

"You said this weeks ago, when Mia had the baby," she says.

"I wasn't ready then." I sit down across from her. "I kept waiting for something. For him to fix it, maybe, or for someone to drive up that track and announce it had all been a terrible mistake." I glance out the window at the empty road and the chestnut trees heavy with blossom. "The letters have stopped, and I'm okay with that."

Nella reaches over and grabs both my hands. Hers are still cold from the drive.

"Who are you?" she says, "and what have you done with my little sister?"

"She's making sauce for retirees."

"I can't fucking wait." She squeezes so hard my knuckles crack. "Do you hear me? I'm claiming to be the first customer. I'll eat until they have to

roll me out the door, and every Sunday I plan to sit in the front window, right when Mamma walks past after Mass, and wave.”

That sets me off, and I laugh so hard I have to wipe my eyes with the back of a floury hand, and then she's laughing too, and for a minute we're kids again, giggling under the covers at Nonna's while the grown-ups argue downstairs.

When we finally calm down, I cut her a thick slice of bread and spread it with butter and a sprinkle of sea salt, the way she's liked it since she was six. She takes a bite and groans like it's the best thing she's had in ages.

“You're wasted on this mountain,” she says with her mouth full.

“Signora Bianchi and her sister would fight you for that.”

I stir Fiorenzo's pot, sample it off the wooden spoon, and add a little more salt. Outside, the wind picks up and rattles the shutters on the porch.

For the first time in months, Dante isn't on my mind. Neither is Mia, or the baby, or the house on the hill. I'm picturing tablecloths, wondering whether the walls should be white or cream, if Benedetti's old espresso machine is worth saving, and what on earth I'm going to call the place.

DANTE

The law offices of Moretti and Sons take up the whole top floor of a building on Via Garibaldi, all glass and marble and a receptionist who looks at my scuffed shoes like they might stain her carpet. My own lawyer, Signor Conti, meets me in the lobby. He's sixty-something, rumpled, with reading glasses pushed up on his bald head, and he charges a third of what the Morettis do. I found him in the phone book, which says a lot about where my life is right now.

"Last chance," Conti says quietly as the elevator climbs. "You don't have to give them everything. Any judge would laugh at half of what they're asking for."

"I know."

"Then let me fight it."

"No." My eyes stay on the floor numbers as they tick up. "I just want it over."

Rosa's with my mother this morning. Ma snuck over at seven, told Pa she was going to the market, and practically ripped the baby out of my arms on the doorstep. It's the first time I've been apart from my daughter for more than an hour, and my hands don't know what to do without her. I keep reaching for the diaper bag that isn't on my shoulder.

The conference room has a view over the city stretching out to the hills. Mia and her mother are already seated on the far side of a long glass table, with Avvocato Moretti between them in a suit that probably cost more than my car. Mia's wearing a cream coat, with big dark sunglasses pushed up

into her hair like she's stopping by on her way to the airport. My *suocera* is in black, pearls at her throat, her back ramrod straight.

Mamma and Mia stay seated when I walk in.

"Dante," Mamma says, nodding at the chair opposite her like she's granting me permission to sit.

I sit. Conti lowers himself into the seat beside me with a small groan and opens his briefcase.

"Shall we begin?" Moretti says, sliding a thick folder over the glass. "My clients have reviewed your offer."

Conti taps his pen against his notepad. "We've offered the full proceeds from the sale of the marital home, which is considerably more than any court would award in..."

"That's not enough," Mamma cuts in.

Conti peers at her over his glasses. "Signora, I don't think you realize how..."

"I understand perfectly." She folds her hands on the table, her rings clicking against the glass. "The house, the savings, every euro in the bank, and the royalties from his books for the next ten years. My daughter's life has been destroyed. She can't show her face in this city. A settlement is the least she's owed."

I glance at Mia. She's studying her manicure.

"Half of what's in that account belongs to Gia," I say slowly. "She worked six years in your husband's office to put it there."

Mamma doesn't even blink. "And?"

"And she's your child too."

"She stopped being my daughter," Mamma says, "the day she stood in my garden and humiliated us in front of everyone we know."

She says it calmly, like she's ordering lunch, and something in my chest goes cold. I've heard her be cruel to Gia a hundred times over the years, sharp little comments about her hair and her weight and her clothes, and I always told myself that's just how Italian mothers are. This is different. She's cut her own child out like a bad stitch, and she doesn't even pretend to be upset about it.

"What about your granddaughter?" I ask.

Mamma's mouth tightens. "What about her?"

"Rosa. Mia's baby. Do you want to see her? Be in her world at all?"

"Dante." Moretti clears his throat. "Perhaps we could stay focused."

“This is the point.” I turn to Mia. “Look at me.”

Mia sighs and lifts her eyes to mine, bored and a little annoyed, like I'm a waiter who's brought the wrong order.

“She's two months old,” I tell her. “She's got your nose. She hates having her socks put on, and she falls asleep every time I sing to her, even though I'm tone-deaf. You haven't asked me one single thing about her since she came into the world.”

“Because I don't care.” Mia's voice is flat. “I've told you that already.”

“Then sign the papers.”

Moretti slides a second, thinner folder toward Mia and uncaps a pen for her. She doesn't read a word. She goes straight to the tabs where someone has stuck little yellow arrows and signs at every one, quick and neat, the way she used to sign for packages at Pa's office. It takes less than a minute. When she's done, she caps the pen and pushes the folder back like she's returning a menu.

Just like that, my daughter has no mother.

I stare at the signatures. I thought I'd be angry, or sad, or relieved. Instead my stomach turns. One day Rosa will ask me about the woman who gave birth to her, and I'll have to find a way to explain that she was signed away in a conference room by someone who couldn't be bothered to read the paperwork.

Conti leans toward me. “Dante,” he murmurs, “you can still back out of the rest.”

I shake my head.

Because here's the truth, the one I've been circling for months. I cheated on Gia. I lied to her face for a year. I let her sister carry my child and told her it came out of a lab. I stood in that garden and let her relatives tear her apart, and I didn't say a word. Gia lost her home, her family, her marriage, and her dream of a baby, all because of me.

Losing a house and some money isn't punishment. It's barely a start.

“Give them what they want,” I tell Conti. “All of it.”

“Dante...”

“All of it. Then they leave, and we never have to see them again.”

Conti studies me, sighs, and pulls out his own pen.

It takes another twenty minutes of signatures and initials, and by the time we're finished, my hand is cramping. Moretti gathers everything into a neat pile and taps the edges straight.

Mia is the first to crack. She lets out a squeal and throws her arms around her mother's neck.

"Paris, Mamma! Didn't I say he'd fold?"

"You did, cara." Mamma pats her back, beaming, and for once the smile reaches her eyes. "We'll have lunch at Da Vittorio to celebrate. I've already booked the corner table."

"And then shopping." Mia jumps up and grabs her handbag. "I need a whole new wardrobe. Nothing I own is right for Paris."

They're talking over each other now, about apartments in the Marais and a dress Mia saw in a magazine, and I sit there listening to them spend my daughter's future like a lottery win. Conti shoves his papers back into his briefcase so hard the clasp snaps.

Someone knocks.

Moretti's assistant, a young guy in gray, leans in apologetically. "Excuse me, Signora. There's a courier downstairs. He says he has an urgent delivery for you, and he was told you'd be here."

Mamma frowns. "For me? Nobody knows I'm here."

"He was very insistent. He says it's from your husband's lawyer."

A minute later a thin man in a motorcycle jacket is shown with a helmet under his arm. He checks Mamma's face against a photo on his phone, hands her a large brown envelope, has her sign his tablet, and leaves without another word.

Mamma slits it open with one long red nail. She reads the top page, and I watch the blood drain out of her face until her lipstick is the only color left on it.

"Mamma?" Mia says. "What is it?"

Mamma doesn't answer. She turns to the next sheet, then another, flipping faster, her fingers starting to tremble.

Mia grabs the papers from her and reads them herself. Her mouth falls open.

"Pa's divorcing you?"

"Keep it down," Mamma hisses.

"He's leaving you!" Mia gets louder, not quieter. "It says here there's a prenup. That you walk away with nothing but what you owned before the wedding." She raises her head, confused. "What did you own?"

Mamma rips the papers back. "Not a thing," she says through her teeth. "My mother was a seamstress."

Mia skips to the end, and her jaw drops. "Who's Chiara?"

Mamma turns her face to the window.

"He's moving into the apartment on the lake," Mia reads, "with a Signorina Bellini." Her head jerks up. "Chiara from accounts? Mamma, she's twenty-nine. She's younger than me."

"I'm aware of how old she is," Mamma snaps.

That's when it clicks. I sit back and study my *suocera*, the pearls and the perfect lipstick and the hands still shaking in her lap, and everything falls into place.

"You saw this coming," I say quietly. "That's why you pushed so hard."

Her eyes flash at me, and, amazingly, she has no comeback ready.

Mia goes very still. "Mamma. Is he right?"

Mamma lifts her chin. "Somebody in this family has to plan ahead."

"That money is mine," Mia says slowly.

"And who do you imagine got it for you?" Mamma raises her voice, something I've never once heard her do. "Who hired the lawyer? Who sat in this room and made him sign? You'd have settled for a pat on the head and a plane ticket if I hadn't been here. The least you can do is split it with your mother."

"Half?" Mia laughs, high and nasty. "You're dreaming."

"I have never been more serious in my life."

Everyone shoots up on their feet. Moretti is gathering his files and edging toward the exit. Conti looks like he wants to buy popcorn.

I get up and button my coat.

"Congratulations," I tell them. Mamma and Mia are too busy screaming to hear me.

Conti follows me into the hallway, and the elevator doors close on the sound of Mia yelling that she's not paying for her mother's facelifts.

We ride down in silence. At the bottom, my lawyer whistles low.

"Thirty-five years I've been practicing," he says, "and I've never seen anything like that."

"Welcome to the Rizzos."

"You realize you've just lost everything you own."

"Yep." I pull out my phone. There's a message from Ma, a photo of Rosa asleep on her chest with one tiny fist curled around Ma's gold cross. I gaze at it until the screen goes dark. "But I walked out with the one thing I wanted."

Outside, it's started to rain. I sold the car last week to pay Conti's retainer, so I turn up my collar, walk to the bus stop, and head across the city to pick up my daughter.

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GIA

The divorce papers sit in my kitchen drawer for months, beside the folder with my restaurant plans in it.

Avvocato Ferri drew them up for me in October, in his little office above the pharmacy in town. He charged me for two hours and gave me a discount because his mother buys my muffins every Sunday. Everything's ready. All I have to do is sign, pay the filing fee, and hand them over. But the fee is more than I make in a month, and every euro I earn goes into the tin above the fridge marked *RESTAURANT* in Nella's ugly handwriting.

So I call it being practical. A woman with nothing in the bank can't afford to be sentimental about paperwork. And that's true, mostly. The rest of the truth is that every time I open that drawer and see my married name typed at the head of page one, my hands go cold.

Winter comes up the valley fast. I bake through all of it. Christmas panettone for half the village, a christening, two first communions, a funeral lunch for old Signor Pace that runs until midnight because nobody wants to go home. In January I finally carry Mamma's diamond earrings to the jeweler in the city. He offers me less than they're worth, and I accept anyway, and I walk out onto the street feeling lighter than I have in years.

By the first week of March, the tin is full.

I count it three times at the kitchen table. Then I take the papers out of the drawer, sign my name on every line without letting myself dwell on it,

and drive down the mountain to Ferri's office with the whole lot on the passenger seat.

"No second thoughts?" Ferri asks, looking at me over his glasses.

"I've been ready for ages. I just couldn't afford it."

He smiles and stamps the top sheet. "Then congratulations, Signora. It's filed. He'll be served within the month."

I step into the square and stand in the thin spring sunshine with my empty purse, waiting for tears, or relief. Instead I look across the cobblestones at Benedetti's old corner unit with its dusty windows and faded green shutters, and all I want is to get started.

Weeks later, the place is a disaster.

The builders have ripped out the old counter and half the back wall, and there's plaster dust on every surface, including me. I'm on my knees on the floor in a pair of Nella's old overalls, scraping forty years of grease off the tiles by the window with a putty knife, when she comes through the door with two coffees and a paper bag of cornetti.

"Breakfast," she announces. "Or lunch. What time is it?"

"No idea." I sit back on my heels and push my hair out of my face with the back of my wrist. "What do you think?"

Nella turns in a slow circle, taking it all in, the exposed brick, the wires hanging from the ceiling, the pile of rubble in the corner.

"Honestly? Like a bomb went off," she says. "A pretty one, though."

"The tiles are original. Look." I rub a clean patch with my thumb, and the pattern shows through, faded blue and white. "They go all the way to the kitchen. I'm keeping every single one."

"Of course you are." She gives me a coffee and sits down on an upturned bucket. "You've got your Nonna face on."

"My what?"

"Determined look." She bites into a cornetto and talks with her mouth full. "It suits you."

I laugh and go back to scraping. We work like that for an hour, Nella sweeping the dust into piles while I do the tiles, the radio playing old Mina songs on the windowsill. My knees ache, and my hands are raw, and I don't think I've ever been happier.

The bell over the door jingles.

"We're not open yet," I call without looking up. "Try again in June."

Nobody answers. Nella's broom stops.

I look up.

Dante is standing in the doorway with a baby on his hip and a cardboard box tucked beneath his other arm.

For a second I forget how to breathe. He looks terrible. He's lost weight, a lot of it, and his coat hangs off his shoulders like it belongs to someone bigger. There are dark bags under his eyes, thick stubble on his jaw, and his hair has grown out past his collar. He's a man who's forgotten what a full night's sleep feels like.

And still my heart does that stupid little skip it's been doing since I was sixteen.

It infuriates me that my body is still lagging behind my head.

"Gia," Dante says quietly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to just show up. I went to the cabin first, and your neighbor said you'd be here."

Nella sets her broom against the wall with a sharp clack. "You've got some nerve."

"I know. I won't stay long." He doesn't take his eyes off me. "I've sold the house. The movers come on Monday. I found some things of yours in the attic, and I didn't want them going to a stranger." He holds up the box. "Your Nonna's recipe tin is in here. And her rolling pin. And the photos from the kitchen wall."

I get to my feet slowly, wiping my hands on the overalls. My knees crack.

And then I make the mistake of looking at the baby.

She's a little over a year old, round and pink-cheeked, with a mop of dark curls sticking up at the back where she's slept on it. She's wearing a little yellow sweater with a duck on the front, and she has one fist wrapped tight around the collar of Dante's coat.

Something cracks open inside my chest.

All at once I'm back in that clinic, lying on the table with my feet in the stirrups, gazing up at the ceiling while the nurse told me, kindly, that it hadn't taken this time either. I'm in our spare room, painting the walls a soft green because it would work for a boy or a girl. I'm in the bathroom at three in the morning, sitting on the edge of the tub with another negative test in my hand, crying without making a sound so Dante wouldn't wake up. All those years of praying for this, for her, so badly I could taste it.

And here she is, in my ruined restaurant, in Dante's arms.

"This is Rosa," Dante says softly.

Rosa kicks her feet and lets out a squeal, and then she leans toward me, arms out, like she's decided I'm worth investigating.

"Hi, Rosa," I whisper. My voice doesn't sound like mine.

I reach out before I can stop myself. She grabs my finger in her hot little fist and holds on hard, and then she giggles, a big gummy grin that shows off four tiny teeth.

My chest is too tight to breathe. All I can do is stand there and let her hold on.

"She's usually shy with new people," Dante says.

"I'm her aunt." It comes out before I can stop it.

Something moves across his face, and he looks away quickly and clears his throat.

Nella's phone buzzes in her jacket pocket. She glances at the screen and swears under her breath. "It's the ward. I have to take this." She points at Dante as she heads out. "Five minutes. Then you're gone."

The bell jingles behind her, and suddenly it's just the three of us, left in the plaster dust with the radio murmuring in the background.

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Dante sets the box down on the sawhorse, then the diaper bag beside it, and shifts Rosa higher. He looks around the room, at the brick and the tiles and the cables dangling overhead, and whistles low, like he can't quite believe what he's seeing.

"It's going to be something special, Gia," he says. "I mean it."

Why did he just turn up like this?

As much as my heart is melting seeing her, I don't need this type of distraction right now.

"You have some nerve just showing up like this..."

Then, Rosa tugs at his collar and babbles something to herself. Neither of us looks away from the other.

"There's one thing that's bothered me since you got caught," I say.

I take a deep breath. Because that's the part I can't get past, the part that keeps me awake at night even now. He got caught. If I hadn't heard him say her name in the dark that night, we'd still be living in that house on the hill like one big happy family, and every day of it would be a lie.

"If I could have had children," I ask him, "would you still have done what you did with Mia?"

His eyes slide away from mine toward the glass. His mouth opens, and I want to stop him, to put my hand up and tell him I don't need to know, because I already know that whatever he's about to say will cut like a fucking knife.

"Maybe." He lifts one shoulder, and the shrug is so small and so honest that it's worse than any lie. "I don't know what I was thinking back then. But that doesn't mean it isn't on my mind all the time. I know one thing for sure, though." He swallows. "You not being able to have kids changed us, that's a fact. There's no denying it. But that doesn't mean what I did was right." He chokes. "Far from it."

I wish I could tell him that isn't true.

"S-E-X turned into part of a routine," he goes on quietly. "Calendars and temperatures and injections. Trying for a baby instead of wanting each other. And then, when it couldn't happen, when it kept not happening..." He stops and starts again. "It hurt me more than you. If that makes any sense."

"It doesn't."

"I couldn't give you the one thing you craved so badly." His voice cracks. "Every month I watched you come out of that bathroom with another test in your hand, and it was my failure too. I couldn't fix it. So I stopped really seeing you, because it hurt too much."

I cross my arms tight over my chest, as if that could hold everything in. "And what did you want, Dante? Did you ever really want to be a father?"

He gazes down at his daughter, and his whole face changes. It softens, and opens, and something in it lights up that I haven't seen in years.

"Not until I saw her," he says. "I didn't realize how much I wanted it until she was lying on my chest."

Jealousy crashes over me, so hard and so hot that I have to grip the sawhorse.

He got what I prayed for every night for three long years. He gets to be the parent I desired to be.

And she's so beautiful it hurts to look at her. Those eyes are mine, even if biologically they're my twin's. The curve of her mouth, the dark curls, the stubborn little chin, all of that is his. She's the child I used to picture in the small hours, lying in bed with my hand on my empty stomach, a mix of the two of us with the best of each. And she's right here in front of me, reaching for me, and she isn't mine.

I ache to take her out of his arms, to hold her against my heart and cover her soft little face in a thousand kisses and never let go.

But I can't. It hurts too much. And it doesn't seem fair for a child this innocent to be dragged into the middle of all this mess, passed between the grown-ups who broke everything before she was even born.

So I keep my arms folded and my feet where they are.

The door opens again. Nella is back, phone in hand, and one look at my face is all it takes.

"Time's up," she says flatly, holding the door open. "Out."

Dante nods. He looks at me, and there's so much in his face that I have to turn away.

"I heard in town that you were doing this," he murmurs. "I'm really proud of you, Gia."

I open my mouth to tell him about the papers. That they're filed. That some man in a suit will be knocking on his door with an envelope any day now. The words are right there on my tongue.

I don't say them.

"Goodbye, Dante," I say instead.

He holds my eyes for one more second, and then he turns and goes out, the bell jingling behind him. Through the dusty window I watch him cross the square with Rosa bouncing against his chest. She's twisted around, still looking back at the restaurant, one hand reaching over his shoulder.

I don't realize I'm crying until Nella passes me a paper napkin from the cornetti bag.

"Gia," she says. "Look at me."

I wipe my cheeks and turn to her.

"She's gorgeous. I've held her. I know what she does to you." Nella's voice is gentle, but she doesn't let go of my eyes. "But don't you dare forget what he did. He lied to you. He slept with our sister and came home to your bed smelling of her. That baby is sweet, and she's innocent, and he is neither of those things."

“I haven't forgotten.”

“Good. Because I saw your face when he walked in.”

I don't have an answer for that. I turn away and pick up my putty knife, and that's when I see it.

The bag is still there, slumped against the box. Navy blue, with a little white elephant on the side and a teething ring clipped to the strap.

“He forgot the bag,” I say.

Nella glances at it. “He'll manage. There are shops.”

I go over and pick it up. It's heavier than it looks. I can see a packet of wipes through the open zipper, a tiny pair of socks, and a bottle with a pink lid. It smells faintly of baby powder and his cologne.

“I should run after him,” I say.

“I can give it to him. You don't know where he lives now.”

But she does? Fuck! I want to ask where he's living? Is he writing again? How does it feel to wake up to Rosa? So many things are flying in and out of my head right now, but I can't. Nella's right. I need to stay focused.

“No!” I blurt out.

“Gia don't do this.” She has a twinkle in her eye. “You should leave it on his doorstep with a note.”

I look out the window. The square is empty now, just pigeons and the old men on the bench by the fountain. Dante's gone.

I tuck it under the sink in the back kitchen, out of the dirt, and tell myself I'll send it back tomorrow.

DANTE

The apartment I'm renting now is one room at the top of a building behind the train station, with a mattress on the floor, a secondhand crib I bought off a woman at church, a two-burner stove, and a window that looks straight into the kitchen of the family across the alley. Every night at seven their nonna yells at the television, and Rosa thinks it's the funniest thing she's ever heard.

Right now she's in her high chair, smearing mashed banana over the tray with both hands and singing a long string of "ba-ba-ba" that she seems very proud of. I've got my laptop balanced on the only seat in the kitchen and my phone pressed to my ear, listening to Franco Galli, the man who produced my last two shows, find a polite way to tell me to go to hell.

"It's not personal, Dante," Franco says. "You know how much I respect your work."

"Then give me a job. Assistant, stage manager, anything. I'll sweep the floors if I have to."

"I can't. The investors read the papers." He sighs down the line. "Your name's poison right now. The twin thing, the baby, the family pulling strings to make sure you never work again. Nobody wants to be the guy who hires you and has Aldo Rizzo calling him the next morning. Give it a year, maybe two, and we'll see."

He says he's sorry before he hangs up, and I think he means it, which makes it worse. I put the phone face down and listen to Rosa sing while I tally it up. I've called every producer, director, and theatre manager I've ever

shared a drink with, and some of them said no straight away and others promised to call back and never did. One guy I helped out of a hole three years ago had his assistant tell me he'd moved to Argentina.

The story broke in the tabloids two months ago, and I have a pretty good idea who leaked it. *RIZZO SON-IN-LAW FATHERS CHILD WITH WIFE'S TWIN*. They ran a photo of me leaving the hospital with Rosa in her car seat, right next to an old one of Gia smiling at some charity dinner in a blue dress, and underneath it, in smaller letters, *Heartbroken wife flees to mountain retreat*. I read it in the checkout line at the supermarket, then left my groceries on the belt and walked out.

Rosa shrieks and flings a fistful of banana at the wall, so I grab a cloth.

"Nice aim," I tell her.

She beams at me with mush in her eyebrows, and I laugh in spite of myself.

While I'm scrubbing the tiles, my eyes land on the pile of envelopes by the door that I've been avoiding for a week. Electricity, gas, the phone bill, and something from the bank with *FINAL NOTICE* stamped across the front in red. My stomach sinks lower with each one I flip through, because in all the years we were married, I never had to open an envelope like this.

Gia handled all of it. She kept a little notebook with a green cover where she wrote everything down, and on the first of the month she'd sit at the kitchen table with a cup of chamomile and pay the lot before I'd even noticed anything was due. She booked my dentist appointments and remembered my mother's birthday. She read my contracts before I signed them and caught the clauses that would have screwed me, and whenever a show fell apart, she was the one who sat up with me until three a.m. working out which investors we could still call.

All that time I thought I was the one keeping us afloat, the big shot with the plays and the reviews and the opening nights. What a joke. She was the foundation of everything, and I was just the paint on top, and now that she's gone I can't even keep the lights on.

I toss the envelopes aside and lean against the door with my eyes closed. I'm so tired my bones ache. Rosa still wakes twice a night, so I haven't slept more than four hours straight since she was born, and my jeans are held up with a belt I had to punch two new holes in. I can't remember the last meal I ate that didn't come out of one of her jars.

It's Sunday, and it's eight in the morning in New York, which means my brother will be home. I scroll to his name and hit call before I can talk myself out of it. Carlo picks up on the third ring, his voice thick with sleep.

"Dante? Jesus. Is Ma okay?"

"She's good. Pa too. Nobody's sick."

Not that I would know. I'm not allowed back into our family home, but Ma does come and help with Rosa sometimes. I'm sure Pa knows she does, but turns a blind eye to it, more for Ma's sake than mine. He probably says nothing, because he knows it makes Ma happy to see Rosa.

"Then why are you calling me at the crack of dawn?"

"Because I'm in trouble, Carlo."

There's a long pause, and then I hear a door slide open and the rush of traffic far below. I can picture him out on the balcony of his apartment in Manhattan in his bathrobe, barefoot, an espresso in his hand, the way he always is when he calls Ma.

"Okay," he says, and his voice goes soft. "Talk to me."

So I tell him everything. The rejections, the tabloids, the money. How I gave Mia every cent I had and sold the house and the car, and how I'm living in one room with a baby and a stack of final notices. It all comes pouring out, and by the time I'm finished my voice is shaking.

Carlo's quiet for a while.

"Ma told me some of it," he says finally. "Not all. She said you'd shut everyone out."

Ma obviously never told him about what happened with Pa.

"Yeah, I've been a fool."

"At least you know it." He sighs. "How much do you need?"

"I didn't call to ask for money."

"Dante. A number."

I rub my forehead. "Enough to cover the rent and the bills for a few weeks, until I can find something, can you stretch to five thousand?"

"I'll wire it to you tomorrow. That should get you through the summer."

My throat tightens. "Carlo, I can't take..."

"Let me finish." His tone shifts into the one he used when we were kids and I'd screwed up. "I'll help you get back on your feet this time, but I can't bail you out forever."

"I get it," I say, swallowing hard. "Thank you."

"Don't. Just fix it." He pauses. "How's my niece?"

I look over at Rosa, who has found a chunk of banana in her curls and is trying very seriously to eat it.

"She's perfect," I say. "She's the only thing I've ever done right."

"Send me regular photos." There's another pause, longer this time. "And Gia? Have you seen her?"

"Last week. She's opening a restaurant in the square down in her valley. She sold her own jewelry to pay for it, and she's doing the renovations herself." My voice goes rough without my permission. "She was glowing, Carlo. Covered in plaster dust, wearing a pair of old overalls, and she was the most beautiful sight in the world. She seemed happier than I'd made her in years."

"You really were an idiot," Carlo says.

"I know."

"That woman would have walked through fire for you." He sighs. "You never realize a good thing until it's gone. Pa used to say that, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"He had a point."

We talk for another ten minutes about his job and the heat wave there and the girl downstairs who keeps leaving notes on his door, and when we hang up, I feel lighter than I have in weeks. I snap a picture of Rosa's sticky face and send it to him, and he replies with three crying-laughing emojis and a heart.

Rosa's getting fussy, so I lift her out of the high chair, wipe her down, and carry her over to the window. The old woman opposite is hanging out her laundry, and when she lifts a hand to us, Rosa waves back, opening and closing her whole fist like she's trying to grab the air.

That's when someone bangs on the door, three sharp raps, official and impatient. I settle Rosa on my hip and go to open it.

A man in a gray suit is waiting in the hallway with a clipboard and a large manila envelope. He's in his fifties, with a mustache and tired eyes, and he looks at me, then at the baby, then at the room behind me, and something like pity crosses his face.

"Dante Ferraro?" he asks.

"That's me."

"You've been served." He hands over the envelope. "I'll need you to sign here to confirm receipt."

I already know what's inside. Maybe I've known ever since I left Gia's restaurant last week and kept replaying the look on her face when I told her I was proud of her.

I shut the door, then I sink onto the edge of the mattress with her in my lap. She keeps grabbing for the envelope, trying to get it into her mouth, so I hold it out of her reach and tear it open with my teeth. Then let her crawl over the floor. She's trying to walk. But every time she does, she gets a little scared as if she's expecting to fall, which she does.

PETITION FOR DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE. Gia Rizzo Ferraro, petitioner. Dante Ferraro, respondent. Filed on the fourth of March.

That was months ago, which means she'd already filed when I stood in her restaurant with my daughter in my arms, telling her how proud I was, and she looked me right in the eye and said goodbye.

For a long time I just sit there holding the papers. I keep waiting for the anger to come, but it never does, because deep down I'm not even surprised. She's doing what she should have done the day of the baby shower, when I let her family tear her to pieces without saying a word. She's getting free of me, and I can't blame her for that.

What I didn't expect was how much it would hurt. Now it's over, officially.

Rosa yawns and I grab her, as she wrestles me wanting to be free again. I set the papers down on the mattress and hold her close, rocking her until she drifts off.

"It's just you and me now, kid," I whisper into her hair.

She sighs in her sleep and curls her fist around my finger, and in the fading light, with the nonna next door shouting at her game show, I finally let myself cry for the first time since the disastrous baby shower in the garden.

GIA

At half past five on opening night, I'm hiding in the walk-in fridge, and I'm not even a little bit ashamed of it.

It's the only place in the building where nobody can find me, and the cold is the only thing stopping my hands from shaking. I'm wedged between the crates of zucchini flowers and the tubs of fresh ricotta, breathing in basil and damp stone, trying to remember what on earth made me think I could do this. Through the door I can hear the waiters setting places and Nella arguing with the florist, who's convinced twelve candles on a table for two is romantic and not a fire hazard.

Three months of plaster dust and splinters and fourteen-hour days. Every euro I own, plus a few I've borrowed from Nella that she swears I don't have to pay back. In ninety minutes we flip the sign, and the whole valley gets to decide whether I'm a real chef or a woman who got her heart broken and lost her mind.

The fridge door opens and Matteo pokes his head in, grinning.

"Gia, what are you doing in here? I've been looking all over for you," he says. "Come taste the ragù before I ruin it. I think it needs something, and I'm not touching your Nonna's recipe without permission."

Matteo came up from Naples in April, after a friend of Fiorenzo's told him about a crazy woman opening a restaurant in a village with more goats than people. He's six foot three, with tattoos running down both arms and a laugh you can hear from the other side of the square, and he cooks like his own grandmother is standing behind him with a wooden spoon. I hired him

the day he made me a plate of cacio e pepe so good I had to sit down on an upturned crate to finish it.

"I'm coming," I tell him. "I just needed a minute."

"You can hide after service. Right now, I need you."

He holds the door open, and warm air rushes in around my ankles as I follow him out. It's loud and bright and full of steam, all six burners going and the dishwasher humming, and my blue-and-white tiles are gleaming under the lights like they were laid yesterday instead of forty years ago. Someone has taped the menu to the wall above the pass, and seeing my own dishes printed there in black ink makes my throat go tight.

Matteo hands me a spoon. The ragù is rich and dark and slow, with the sweetness of the onions coming through right at the end. It's Nonna's recipe, from the tin Dante brought back in that cardboard box, and I've pinned her card above my station where I can see it all night. It's stained with fifty years of her fingerprints, the ink faded to brown, her handwriting running off the edge where she ran out of room. I rest my hand against it for a second, the way you'd touch an old photograph.

I can almost hear her. *You see, cara? People always come back to the ones who feed them.*

"It needs salt," I say, and my voice only wobbles a little.

"That's what I thought, but I wanted you to say it." Matteo winks and reaches for the jar. "Go wash your face. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Nella comes in through the back, then stops beside the stove and takes one look at me in my new whites, with my name stitched in blue thread over the pocket, and her eyes fill up.

"Please don't cry," I beg her. "Because if you go, I'll go, and then we'll be a pair of wrecks with the whole village watching."

"I'm not crying. I've got something in my eye." She sniffs and fans her face with her hand. "Both eyes, actually. It's the onions."

"Nella, you've been out front all afternoon."

She laughs and pulls me into a hug so tight it squeezes the air out of me, and then she straightens her dress, squares her shoulders, and goes out to open the doors.



By eight o'clock, every table is full, and I don't have a second left to be nervous.

The tickets come in faster than I can read them, and I plate and wipe and taste and shout out orders until my voice goes hoarse. Whenever I glance through the pass, I catch a glimpse of the dining room glowing with candlelight, packed with faces I know. Fiorenzo has brought his whole family, all eleven of them, and they're tucking napkins into their collars in the corner. The Bianchi sisters have grabbed the table by the window and are fighting over the last piece of focaccia. Avvocato Ferri is there with his mother, and old Signora Pace is weeping into her tiramisù, telling anyone who'll listen that it tastes exactly like the one they served at her husband's funeral, which I choose to take as a compliment.

Around nine, Nella rushes back with an empty tray on her hip and her cheeks bright pink.

"Gia, come here," she hisses. "There's a man at table six from the newspaper in Bologna, and he just ordered a second plate of your ravioli. Critics never do that."

My heart does a somersault. "Did he say anything about it?"

"He asked me who taught you to cook like this." She grabs my face in both hands and kisses my forehead so hard she leaves a lipstick mark. "I told him God and your grandmother, in that order."

She's gone again in a flash, and I'm laughing so much that Matteo has to take the pan from me before I drop it.

The rest of the night passes in a blur. Plates come back scraped clean, and people send their compliments through the waiters and then turn up at the kitchen door to shake my hand anyway. Somebody's great-uncle asks me to marry him. When the final dessert leaves the pass at eleven, the whole restaurant starts clapping, and Nella drags me out in my stained whites to take a bow while Fiorenzo's grandchildren bang their spoons on the tables.

I stand there in front of everyone with sweat running down my back and flour in my hair, and I don't think I've ever been prouder of anything.

And yet, right in the middle of all that clapping, I catch myself glancing at the entrance.

I know it's stupid. His lawyer would have given him the divorce papers weeks ago, and since then I haven't heard a single word from him. I kept

saying that was what I wanted. That was the whole point of filing, to cut him loose, and that means he doesn't get a place in nights like this.

But some foolish corner of my heart thought that tonight, of all times, he might send something. A card, or a single flower, or just a text saying good luck. Anything that showed he knew how much this meant to me.

He doesn't. So I smile and wave at Fiorenzo's family and go back into the kitchen before anyone can see my face.



I t's nearly one a.m. when the stragglers finally leave.

The waiters stack the chairs and mop the floor and head out across the square in twos and threes, shouting goodnight. Matteo hangs his apron on the hook by the back door and wraps me in a hug with one huge arm.

"You're a genius and a slave driver," he says into my hair. "I'll see you at ten. Go home and sleep, boss."

When he's gone, it's just Nella and me and the hum of the dishwasher. I pour us each a glass of the good red and slide hers across the steel counter, and we clink them together in silence.

"You really did it," Nella says after a while. "I could burst, I swear."

"I couldn't have done any of it without you."

"Oh, please. All I did was carry plates around and flirt with the critic."

I nearly choke on my wine. "You flirted with him?"

"Only a little. He had very nice hands." She grins at me over her glass. "Don't worry, your ravioli did most of the work."

I laugh and lean my head back against the shelves, and as soon as I close my eyes, every muscle in my body starts to ache at once. My feet are throbbing, and there's a burn on my wrist from the grill that I didn't even notice until now. I've never been this tired, or this happy.

When my eyes drift open again, I find myself staring at the counter by the sink.

The diaper bag is still under there, tucked behind the bucket of cleaning rags where nobody will trip over it. Navy blue, with that little white elephant on the side. I've been meaning to send it back to him for two months now. Every Monday I take it out and leave it by the register, and I

promise myself I'll drop it at the post office, and by Friday it's back under the sink again.

Nella follows my gaze and sighs. "You still haven't sent that back to him."

"I will."

"You told me that at Easter, Gia."

"I've been busy." I take a big gulp of wine. "Anyway, it's not like he's come asking for it."

"Sweetheart." Her voice goes soft. "He didn't send you anything tonight, did he?"

I don't answer, and she lets it go. She just reaches over and squeezes my hand.

"That's a good thing," she says quietly. "I know it doesn't feel like it now, but it is. You wanted a clean break, and that's what this is. So stop waiting on him."

I open my mouth to tell her I wasn't, and that's when the bell over the front door jingles.

Nella and I stare at each other.

I locked up after the waiters left. I'm almost sure I did. But it rings again, softer this time, and a cool draft blows through the kitchen and rattles the tickets on the rail.

For one wild second, my heart leaps into my throat, because I'm convinced it's him, that after everything, he's come, late and sorry and holding some ridiculous bunch of flowers he picked up at a gas station, and he's out there in my restaurant this very minute.

I put my glass down so fast the wine sloshes over the rim, and I push through the swinging doors.

But it isn't Dante waiting in my dining room.

It's Mamma, in a black coat with a fur collar, her gloves in one hand, looking around at my tables and my tiles and my candles like she's trying to work out what they'd fetch at auction.

And next to her, in a cream silk dress and heels far too high for the cobblestones, her hair cut short and sleek and big dark sunglasses pushed up on her head at one in the morning, is my sister.

Mia smiles at me with my own face.

"Surprise," she says. "We saw your lights were still on, so we thought we'd drop by. Aren't you going to offer us a drink?"

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GIA

All the air goes out of me at once. One minute I'm floating on the best night of my life, and the next I'm standing in my own dining room in a stained apron with a burn on my wrist, staring at the two women who taught me to cry quietly so nobody would hear.

Of course Mia looks wonderful. Paris has been good to her, and her skin is glowing, and there are diamonds in her ears that I'm fairly sure Dante's savings paid for, which means I paid for them too. She peels off her gloves a finger at a time and drapes them over the back of a chair, just like at Mamma's parties when she wanted everyone to notice her hands, and she looks around my restaurant like she's already measuring it for new curtains.

"You really should lock up at night," she says, as if we'd seen each other last week. "Anybody could walk in off the street."

I hear Nella come up behind me before I see her, and then she's right there at my shoulder, close enough that I can feel how angry she is without even turning my head.

"It's one in the morning," she says. "We're closed. Get out."

"Hello to you too, Nella." Mia's smile doesn't so much as flicker. "I didn't come to see you."

Mamma still hasn't said a word. She's wandering along the nearest table, running one gloved finger over the wood like she's checking for dust. She won't find any. I scrubbed every one of those tables myself this afternoon while the bread was proving.

"What do you want, Mia?" I ask.

I'm too tired to be scared of her, and somewhere under all that exhaustion, a small part of me realizes with real surprise that the fear I've carried around my whole life is simply gone.

"I'm here on business." She pulls out a chair and sits without being asked, crossing her legs so the silk slides over her knee. "Well done, by the way. The whole valley's talking about you. I read all about tonight in the paper on the train."

"So you came all the way from Paris to congratulate me?"

"Not exactly." She tips her head, and those diamonds catch the candlelight. "You and Dante are still legally married."

My stomach drops, because I can already see where she's going with this, and I hate that I can.

"And anything a married couple builds together," she goes on, smooth as cream, "belongs to both of them. My lawyer was very clear about that. Half of all this." She waves one manicured hand around my dining room, at the tiles and the tables and the candles guttering in their little glass jars. "And when Dante signed his settlement with me, he agreed to hand over everything he owned. Which, as it turns out, includes his share of your restaurant."

Nobody says anything. I can hear the dishwasher finishing its cycle out back, and the pipes ticking as they cool, and the old clock over the bar that Benedetti left behind, counting off the seconds like it's got somewhere better to be.

"You're insane," Nella says.

"I'm informed. There's a difference."

"I bought this place with my own money." My voice has started to shake, and I can't stop it. "I sold Nonna's bracelet and the earrings Mamma gave me. I baked muffins for eight months to pay for these tables. Dante never put a single cent into this building, and you know it."

"Apparently that doesn't matter. The law isn't interested in who paid." Mia shrugs. "Only whose name is on the marriage certificate."

Before I can stop myself, I look at Mamma. It's an old habit, one I thought I'd finally broken, that little glance toward her whenever Mia's being cruel, still hoping after all these years that she'll say *basta*, enough, the way other mothers do.

She lifts her eyes from the table at last and meets mine.

“Your sister has a point, Gianna,” she says. “Legally, she's correct. You can't pretend otherwise just because you don't like it.”

It's the first thing she's said to me in almost a year. Not *how are you*, not *the food smelled wonderful from the square*, not even *I'm sorry*. Just that. The words sink into my chest like cold stones dropped down a well, and I feel each one hit the bottom.

“So you're on her side,” I say. “Again. And no one has called me by my full name. Not since the shower.”

“The law is the law, Gianna.”

“You're backing whoever's paying your bills,” Nella snaps, stepping out from behind me. “Don't insult us, Mamma. We know all about Papa and his little accountant. The whole valley knows. He's divorcing you, and you're terrified you'll end up with nothing, so now you're trying to bleed Gia's restaurant dry to keep yourself in pearls.”

Mamma's face goes hard as marble. “Mind your tongue, Nella.”

“No. I'm done minding it.” Nella's cheeks are flushed, and her hands are balled into fists at her sides. “Fuck off, both of you. You're vultures, circling the one good thing anybody in this family has managed to build, just waiting for it to fall over so you can pick at the bones. Gia worked her fingers raw for this. What have either of you ever done except spend other people's money?”

Mia laughs, high and bright, with nothing behind it. “Charming. Is that how they teach you to talk at the hospital?”

Nella doesn't even glance at her. She's looking straight at Mamma now, with a hard, knowing look on her face that I don't recognize, and something about it makes the hair on my arms stand up.

“I've got a question for you, Mamma,” she says. “When Papa cut Mia off last year, why didn't he have to pay her a penny? He just closed his wallet and walked away, and you let him. And now he's leaving you for a girl half your age, keeping everything else, and you've kept your mouth shut the whole time.” She takes a step closer. “So why is that? What does Papa know about you that keeps you so quiet?”

Mamma's lips part, and then she presses them together again.

Her hand drifts up to the pearls at her throat, the way it always did when we were girls and one of us had asked something she didn't like, and for a moment she looks old in a way I've never seen before. Her eyes flick toward the street like she's measuring how far it is, then settle back on the

table. She says nothing at all, doesn't even try, and the longer the silence goes on, the heavier it gets, until I realize with a slow, sick feeling that Nella has hit a nerve, a secret buried so deep that my mother would rather lose everything she owns than have it dug up.

"Mamma?" I say softly.

She won't look at me.

It's Mia who breaks the silence. She's on her feet in a rush, her chair scraping back across my tiles, and she comes right up to me, so close I can smell her perfume, the same orange blossom she's worn since we were sixteen.

"Stop changing the subject," she hisses. "This isn't about Mamma. It's about you, pretending you're some kind of saint because you can make pasta. You always thought you were better than me, didn't you? The good twin, the sweet one, Nonna's favorite." Her lip curls. "Well, guess what, sister? I got Dante and his money and had his baby. Something you never could do."

"Get out of my restaurant, Mia."

"Make me."

The slap cracks through the empty dining room like a plate hitting the floor. Her head snaps sideways and her sunglasses go flying off her hair, skittering under a table, and for a heartbeat she just stays like that, turned away from me, one hand rising slowly to her cheek.

My palm is on fire. I've never hit anyone in my life, not even when we were kids and she pulled my hair or broke my dolls or told every boy at school that I stuffed my bra. I'm shaking from head to toe, and the strangest part is that I'm not sorry. Not one bit.

"I never want to see your stupid face again," I tell her. "Do you hear me?"

She turns back slowly. There's a red handprint blooming on her cheek and tears shining on her lashes, but she's smiling, and it's the worst smile I've ever seen on her, bright and brittle and cold right through.

"Too bad," she says softly. "You see my face every time you look in the mirror."

And then she slaps me back, so much harder than I hit her that my head whips around and my ear starts ringing. I taste blood where my teeth catch the inside of my cheek, and I stumble against the nearest chair and grab it to keep from going down, and somewhere behind me Nella shouts my name.

By the time I get my balance back, Mia is already bending to scoop her sunglasses off the floor. She shoves them back into her hair with her fingers trembling, then she gathers up her gloves, and walks out with her chin in the air and her heels clicking across my grandmother's tiles. The bell over the door jingles, horribly cheerful, and she's gone into the dark square without a single glance back.

Mamma lingers.

She stands there in her fur collar and looks at me properly for the first time all night. My cheek, which must be swelling by now. At the dining room I built out of nothing but sweat and stubbornness, and the menu propped in the window. Something flickers in her eyes that might almost be regret, and I hold my breath and wait for her to say something, anything, that could mend even a corner of this.

She pulls on her gloves instead and follows Mia out into the night.

I lose track of time after the bell goes quiet. The candles burn down another inch, and at some point Nella slips her arms around my waist from behind and rests her chin on my shoulder, like she did when I was little and woke up crying from a nightmare.

"You okay?" she asks.

"She hits harder than she used to."

Nella lets out a laugh that's half a sob. "You got her first, though. That was the best thing I've seen all year."

"Even better than the critic's hands?"

"Oh, by a mile."

I turn around in her arms, and that's when the whole night comes pouring out of me, the applause and the silence and Mamma's face and the sting of my sister's palm. I cry great big ugly sobs that rattle me right down to my toes, and Nella just holds on and lets me.

When I finally pull back, I catch my reflection in the dark window by the door. My hair's falling out of its knot, my eyes are swollen, and there's a bright red mark on my cheek the same shape as the one I left on hers. For one awful second, it isn't my face looking back at me at all. It's Mia's.

I turn away from the glass and sniff hard.

"Could she really do it?" I ask. "Take half the restaurant?"

"First thing tomorrow, we're calling Ferri." Nella dabs at my face with the corner of her sleeve. "If she's got a case, we'll fight her. And if we lose, we'll burn the place down and collect the insurance."

“Nella.”

“I’m kidding.” She kisses my forehead, right where she left that lipstick mark hours ago. “Mostly. Now come on, let’s get some ice on that face before it matches the tablecloths.”

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DANTE

Rosa's been screaming since six, and by nine I'm pretty sure the whole building hates me.

Two teeth are coming through at once, her cheeks are red and hot, and nothing I do makes any difference. I've tried the frozen teething ring, the cold washcloth, the drops the pharmacist sold me that cost more than dinner. I've walked her up and down this one room so many times I could do it blindfolded, eleven steps from the crib to the window and back again, bouncing and humming and begging her in a whisper to just close her eyes for me.

Around half past nine she finally gives up, more out of exhaustion than anything I did. She falls asleep slumped on my shoulder mid-sob, her fist knotted in my collar, her breath still hitching. I lower her into the crib so slowly my back screams, and then I stand over her holding perfectly still, waiting for those eyes to snap open again.

They don't. Thank God.

I slide down onto the floor with my back against the wall and look at the mess I call a life. There's a basket of laundry I washed two days ago and still haven't folded, and a sink full of bottles. On the counter, weighted down with a jar of baby food, there's the stack of bills I've been pretending isn't there. Carlo's money went faster than either of us expected. Rent swallowed most of it, the electric bill ate the rest, and then Rosa got an ear infection and the pediatrician wanted cash up front. Tomorrow I'll spend the

last twenty euros in my wallet on another tin of formula, and after that I don't know.

I've spent my adult life telling myself I could handle anything. Turns out I'd been handing it all to Gia and taking the credit.

I'm just working up the energy to stand and tackle the bottles when someone knocks. It's soft, only two taps, as if whoever it is knows there's a sleeping baby inside.

I figure it's the old woman from downstairs coming to complain about the screaming again, so I drag myself up, rake a hand over my face, and open the door ready to apologize.

It's Gia.

For a second I think I've dozed off down there and I'm dreaming of her. She's standing on the dim landing in faded jeans and a soft blue sweater, her hair pulled back in a loose knot with a few strands falling around her face, holding the diaper bag I left in her restaurant two months ago. She looks tired and lovely and like the only thing I've wanted since I was sixteen years old.

"Your ma told me where you live."

She explains, but I'd already guessed that must have been the case. Nella knows where I live, but I couldn't imagine her giving that information to Gia, so the only other person would be Ma.

Then she tips her head into the light from the doorway, and I see her cheek.

There's a bruise along the bone under her left eye, faded now to yellow and violet, and it's the unmistakable shape of fingers.

Everything in me goes hot and cold at once.

I close the door behind her as she slips in.

"Who did that?" My voice comes out low and rough. "Gia, who the hell hit you?"

"It's nothing."

"Don't. Somebody put their hand on you."

"It was Mia." She says it flatly, like she's reading off a grocery list. "She came into the restaurant on opening night with Mamma. I slapped her first, if that makes you feel any better. She just hits harder than I do."

I grip the doorframe so tight the wood bites into my palm. "What did she want?"

“Half of my restaurant.” Gia hitches the strap higher on her shoulder. “Apparently, since we were still married when I opened it, your share counts as one of your assets, and you signed every last one of those over to her. Ferri says she hasn’t got a leg to stand on, because I bought the place after I filed, but she wanted to make sure I knew she’d taken a shot.”

The anger that rips through me is so strong I have to shut my eyes against it. Mia walked into the one dream Gia has ever built for herself, and tried to take it, and she used my name to do it.

“I’ll fix it,” I tell her. “I’m calling Conti first thing tomorrow. I’ll sign whatever he hands me, a statement, an affidavit, anything that says I have no claim to that restaurant and never will. You shouldn’t have had to face any of that alone.”

“I’m getting used to handling things by myself.”

She aims it right under my ribs, and it hits.

She holds out the bag. “You left this. I kept meaning to mail it back to you, but there’s a teething ring in there, and I thought you might want it.”

I take it from her, and our fingers brush, and even that small touch goes up my arm like a current. “You have no idea how much. She’s been in agony all night. She only stopped crying twenty minutes ago.”

“I heard her from across the street. I’ve been standing out there for half an hour, trying to make myself knock.” Gia’s eyes drift over my shoulder toward the crib, and something in her face softens so much that it’s hard to watch. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. Just teething.” I move aside. “Do you want to see her?”

She hesitates, and I think she’s going to say no, but then she slips into the apartment and crosses the room on quiet feet. She looks down at Rosa sleeping with a fist against her mouth and her curls stuck to her damp forehead, and for a long time she doesn’t say anything. She just stands there with one hand resting on the rail.

I watch her take it in. The mattress on the floor, the unfolded laundry, the bottles in the sink, the bills pinned under that jar. I wait for the pity, or worse, the satisfaction, and it never comes.

“You look terrible, Dante,” she says quietly, still watching Rosa.

“Thanks.”

“I mean it. When did you last eat something that wasn’t toast?”

“I don’t remember.” I set the bag on the kitchen chair. “I saw the review in the Bologna paper, by the way. He said your ravioli was the best thing

he'd eaten all year and your ragù made him call his mother. I walked past on Thursday and there was a line out the door." I swallow. "And you look beautiful. Even with the bruise. You always did."

She turns around slowly, and her eyes are bright and furious.

"No," she says. "You don't get to say that to me."

"It's the truth."

"I don't care whether it's true. You lost the right to call me beautiful the first time you went to her bed." Her voice cracks, but she keeps going. "Do you know how long it has taken me to be able to look at my reflection in the mirror? She's my twin. I hated seeing the other person that tried to break me. The idea of the pair of you knowing Rosa was conceived....I can't. I didn't come here for this," she says then turns to walk away.

"I never told her she was beautiful. Not once."

Now, I just sound desperate. In a way, I am. Being poor doesn't matter, as much as thinking about how much I hurt her.

"Oh, that's so much better."

"That's not what I meant to say." I take a step toward her and stop myself. "What I'm trying to tell you is that whatever was happening with Mia had nothing to do with how I saw you. You were never the problem. I was. I was a coward and a liar, and I wanted to be the kind of man who deserved you without doing any of the work, and when I couldn't manage it, I took it out on the one person who never gave up on me."

She stares at me, her chin trembling.

"Then why didn't you wish me luck," she asks, her voice cracking. "I opened my restaurant, the biggest night of my life, and I kept watching that door all evening like an idiot, waiting for something from you. A card, another letter, anything."

"Because you'd finally let me go." It comes out raw. "I figured the kindest thing I could do was stay out of your way and let you be happy for once, without me hanging over it."

"Well, you were wrong."

She says it so quietly I almost miss it. And then she's looking at me the way she used to across the kitchen table when we were kids with nothing but each other and a pot of pasta, and the whole room shrinks down to the three feet of floor between us.

I don't think so I close the gap and kiss her.

For one terrifying heartbeat she goes rigid against me, and I'm sure I've just wrecked whatever was left. Then she makes a small, broken sound in the back of her throat, grabs two fistfuls of my T-shirt, and kisses me back like she's been starving for it.

It's nothing like the careful, polite pecks we traded in the last years of our marriage. It's desperate and messy and hungry, all teeth and breath and months of wanting. Her fingers slide up into my hair and pull hard enough to sting, and I back her up against the counter and she hits it with a gasp into my mouth. I can taste salt on her lips, tears, hers or mine, I can't tell anymore. My hands find her waist and slip beneath the hem of her sweater to the warm, bare skin of her back, and she arches into me with a sound that nearly takes my legs out from under me.

"Gia," I breathe against her jaw, her throat, the soft spot below her ear that always used to make her tremble.

She shudders, head tipped back, her nails digging into my shoulders, and I lift her up onto the counter without a thought. The jar goes rolling and the bills scatter everywhere, and she wraps her legs around my hips and drags my mouth back to hers, and for a few blind, burning seconds there's nothing in the world but her. The heat of her, the sound of her breathing, my name coming out of her like she's forgotten every other word.

Then her palms flatten against my chest.

She barely presses. She doesn't need to. I let go the instant I feel it and step away with both hands raised, my heart slamming so violently I can hear it in my ears.

Her lips are swollen, and she's breathing as if she's just run up all four flights of stairs. Neither of us moves. Then she slides off onto her feet, tugs her sweater back into place, and looks at me with tears running down her face.

"You don't get to do that anymore," she says, and her voice breaks right in half.

"Gia..."

"No." She's already backing toward the door, one hand held out between us like a wall. "You can't kiss me like that and expect me to forget. I've spent nearly two years learning how to breathe without you, Dante, and you nearly undid all of it in two minutes."

She fumbles behind her for the handle.

"Tell Rosa goodnight for me," she whispers.

She shuts the door behind her, then she's gone. I hear her footsteps on the stairs, fast and uneven, and then the street door slamming four floors down.

I stand in the middle of the room still tasting her, feeling the warmth of her skin under my palms, and I press the heels of my hands against my eyes so hard I see stars.

Behind me, Rosa stirs in the crib and lets out a small, sleepy whimper. I go to her on autopilot and lift her out, and she settles the second I hold her close, her hot little face tucked into my neck.

“I know, sweetheart,” I whisper into her curls. “I miss her too. And I don’t deserve her love, but I want it.”

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GIA

I'm an hour and a half late for prep, and I haven't run behind on anything since the third grade.

I didn't sleep. I lay on top of the covers in the little apartment above the restaurant with the window open and the church bell counting off every hour, one, two, three, reliving that kiss until I wanted to scream into my pillow. Whenever I closed my eyes I was back on his counter with his hands on my skin and my name in his mouth, and when I opened them I remembered the bills scattered across his floor and the crib by the window and the look on his face when I said he couldn't have me anymore.

Around six I finally dozed off. At nine-thirty I woke up with my cheek stuck to the sheet and the sun blazing through the shutters, and I've been running ever since.

I slip in through the back door with my hair still wet from the world's fastest shower, wearing yesterday's jeans and a shirt I pulled off the chair without looking. I haven't put on a scrap of makeup, so the bruise Mia gave me is on full display, fading now to the color of old tea. My eyes are so puffy from crying that I look like I've been stung by bees.

Matteo is at the big steel table, breaking down a crate of artichokes with the radio murmuring beside him. He's already got the stocks going. I can smell them, veal and chicken simmering next to each other on the back burners, and the bread dough is proving under damp cloths by the oven. He's done half my morning as well as his own, and he hasn't called once to ask where I was.

He glances up when I appear, and his knife stops mid-cut.

"Madonna," he says softly. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing. I overslept." I grab an apron off the hook and start tying it with fingers that won't cooperate. "I'm sorry, Matteo. I'll take over the pasta, and you can..."

"Gia."

"I'll stay late tonight to make up for it, I promise, I'll do the whole thing by myself..."

"Gia, stop." He sets down the knife, wipes his palms on the towel at his hip, and comes around the table. "Look at me."

I can't. If I meet his eyes I'm going to fall apart, and I've already done enough of that since midnight to last me a lifetime. So I keep my eyes on the apron strings, and I get the knot wrong, and I have to start again, and on the third try my hands just give up and drop to my sides.

Matteo reaches out and ties it for me, quick and neat, like he's done it for a hundred line cooks.

"Sit," he says, nudging a crate toward me with his foot. "Two minutes. The artichokes aren't going anywhere."

I sit. He pours me a coffee from the moka pot, black with too much sugar, the way I like it when I'm in trouble, and puts it into my hands. Then he leans against the worktop, big tattooed arms folded, and waits.

"I went to see Dante last night," I say.

His eyebrows go up, but he doesn't interrupt.

"I only meant to give him back the diaper bag. That's all. I was going to hand it to him at the door and leave." I wrap my fingers around the mug to stop them shaking. "But I stood across the street from his building for half an hour first, hearing the baby scream, and when I finally went up, he looked so awful, Matteo. He's lost so much weight. He's living in one room behind the train station with a mattress on the floor, and there are bills everywhere, and he's doing everything for her all by himself. And she was asleep in her crib with her little fist in her mouth, and I just..." My voice cracks down the middle. "Then he told me I was beautiful, and I yelled at him, and then he kissed me."

"Ah," Matteo says.

"And I kissed him back." I press the heel of my hand against my eyes. "I was like a crazy woman. I was all over him. If I hadn't stopped, I don't know where it would have ended. Actually, that's a lie. I know."

Matteo is quiet for a moment. I can hear the stocks bubbling on the stove behind him, and the radio playing some old song about the sea.

“So you stopped,” he says.

“Yes. I told him no more, and I ran down four flights of stairs, and I cried all the way home.” I laugh, but it comes out soggy. “It’s pathetic. He cheated on me with my twin sister. He lied to my face for a year. I filed for divorce, I built a whole restaurant, I’ve spent months telling everyone I’m fine, and one kiss in a crummy apartment and I’m right back where I started.”

“You’re not divorced, Gia,” Matteo says gently.

I look up at him. “What?”

“You filed. You haven’t signed anything final yet. On paper, you’re still his wife.” He shrugs one enormous shoulder. “And from where I’m standing, in here, too.” He taps two fingers against his chest. “You can’t sign your way out of that. Nobody can. It takes as long as it takes.”

The way he says it, so plainly, without any judgment at all, undoes me. My face crumples, and the coffee sloshes over the rim of the mug, and before I know it Matteo has taken the cup out of my hands and pulled me up off the crate and into his arms.

He’s so tall that my head fits under his chin. He smells like garlic and woodsmoke and clean laundry, and he holds me the way my Nonno used to when I scraped my knees, with one big hand spread across my back and the other cupping the back of my head. He doesn’t tell me not to cry. He just lets me.

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“It’s okay,” he says into my hair. “Let it out, boss. Better here than in the ragù.”

I laugh into his shirt, a wet, hiccupping sound, and I sob harder, and he rocks me very slightly from side to side like I’m one of his little nieces.

“What the hell is this?” Dante snaps.

I jerk out of Matteo's arms so fast I nearly knock over the crate. Dante is standing just inside the swinging doors with a manila envelope in his hand, dressed in the same wrinkled shirt he had on last night. He's clearly had even less sleep than I did. His eyes are bloodshot, his jaw is dark with stubble, and he's staring at Matteo like he's about to walk straight across the kitchen and put him through the wall.

"Dante," I say. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you that I'll go and see Conti." He raises it without taking his eyes off Matteo. "It's a signed statement. I waive any claim to this restaurant, now and forever. He had it drawn up by eight. I came straight here to give it to you." His voice goes low and dangerous. "And I walk in and find you wrapped around some other guy."

"He's not a guy. He's my head chef."

"Do you hug all your staff like that?"

"Hey." Matteo steps forward, not aggressively, but not backing off either. He's got a good four inches on Dante, and he plants himself between us with his arms loose at his sides. "Easy, my friend. She was upset. I was comforting her."

"Why? What happened?" Dante's eyes finally swing to me, and I watch the anger in them flicker when he sees my face, the swollen eyes, the bruise, the tear tracks. "Gia. Was it last night? Did I do this?"

"That's none of your business."

"The hell it isn't." He takes a step forward, his knuckles white around the envelope. "You're still my wife."

"Don't you dare." The words come out of me like a whip, and all three of us go still. "Not in my kitchen. You can't do that, Dante. You don't just barge in here acting jealous and territorial, like you've got some kind of claim on me, like I'm your property. You threw that away the day you went to Mia's bed."

He stares at me, breathing hard.

"You don't get to decide who holds me when I cry," I tell him, and my voice shakes, but I don't stop. "Especially when you're the reason I'm crying in the first place."

His shoulders drop. The anger drains out of his face, and what's left underneath is so raw and so sad that I have to grip the edge of the steel table to keep from going to him.

"You're right," he says quietly. "I'm sorry."

He crosses the kitchen, slowly, giving Matteo a wide berth, and sets the envelope down on the counter beside my coffee.

"It's all in there," he says. "Signed and notarized. Mia can't touch this place. Nobody can." He looks at me. "I just wanted you to have one thing I didn't wreck."

Then he nods to Matteo, stiffly, man to man, and turns and walks out. The bell over the entrance jingles, followed by his footsteps crossing the cobblestones, and then nothing.

The radio has moved on to the news. One of the stocks is starting to boil over, and neither of us moves to turn it down.

Matteo lets out a long, low whistle and reaches past me to lower the flame.

"So that's the husband," he says, wiping his hands slowly on the towel at his hip.

"That's him." I let out a shaky breath. "In all his glory."

"He looks like he hasn't slept in a while with those shadows under his eyes."

"He probably hasn't." I rub my sore eyes with the heel of my hand. "Neither have I."

"He's also still in love with you." Matteo picks up his knife and goes back to the artichokes, not looking at me. "For what it's worth."

I pick up the envelope with trembling fingers and hold it close, and I don't open it. I don't need to. I stand there in the middle of my kitchen with Dante's promise pressed over my heart while the stocks bubble and the bell tower across the square strikes eleven, and the tears start all over again.

Then it dawns on me, Dante came over only to stop Mia getting her hands on this restaurant, but he still hasn't signed the divorce papers. He's not letting me go, whether I want him to or not.

DANTE

Saturday nights are the best to drive Uber.

The company gave me a silver Toyota with a cracked cupholder and a pine-tree air freshener that stopped smelling of anything years ago, and I've put twenty thousand kilometers on it since summer. I start at nine, when the restaurants are emptying, and I finish around four, when the last of the clubs spit out their stragglers and the bakeries on Via Roma fire up their ovens. In between, I ferry drunk students and tired nurses and businessmen who don't want their wives to know where they've been. I've had three proposals of marriage, two people throw up in the back seat, and one old man who cried the whole way to the cemetery because it would have been his fiftieth anniversary.

It isn't theatre. Nobody's ever going to write a review. But when the rent's due, I pay it on time, and every other Friday I wire Carlo a little more of what I owe him, and it's been ages since I've seen an envelope stamped FINAL NOTICE.

Rosa's nearly two now. She's walking badly, like a tiny drunk sailor, and she says three words: Nonna, ball, and no. The last one she uses constantly, mostly on me.

We've been living with my parents since July. It was Ma's idea. She saw one of the final notices, and packed our things into boxes herself while I was out at the pharmacy. When I got back, there was a taxi idling outside with the crib already strapped to the roof.

Pa didn't speak to me for the first three weeks. He'd come into the kitchen, see me there, and turn straight back around. Then one morning I came down and found him sitting at the table with Rosa on his knee, letting her smear jam all over his newspaper while he pretended to read the sports page. He looked up at me, his face bright red, and said, "She was crying. You were sleeping." And that's how we got talking again.

Ma looks after Rosa on my shifts. I leave at nine, once Rosa's down for the night in the room I grew up in, and I come home at dawn to find Ma dozing in the armchair by the crib with her rosary tangled in her fingers. It isn't what I planned. But it's a life, and it's mine, and I'm not ashamed of it anymore.

At twenty past one, a new job flashes up on my phone. Pickup outside Bar Pellegrini on Via del Moro, going to an address in San Vitale. I know that neighborhood. It's where Nella lives, but so do half the nurses in the city, and it doesn't strike me as strange.

The bar is packed when I arrive, music spilling onto the sidewalk and a crowd of women laughing and hugging goodbye under the fairy lights strung across the entrance. I flick on my hazards and check the name on the screen.

Gianna.

My hands go cold on the wheel.

There must be a thousand Giannas in this city. I tell myself that, and I believe it right up until the back door opens and she slides into the seat behind me, still laughing at something someone said, her cheeks flushed pink from the wine and the cold.

"Hi, sorry, I'm going to San Vitale, it should be on the..."

She meets my eyes in the rearview mirror, and her voice dies.

Neither of us moves. Outside, one of her friends bangs on the window and blows her a kiss, and Gia lifts a hand to wave back without looking away from me.

"Dante," she says finally, like the name has been knocked out of her.

"Hi, Gia." I try to keep my voice level and don't quite manage it.

"You're driving an Uber?" Her eyes flick from the cracked cupholder to the pine-tree air freshener and back to my face.

"Every weekend since July." I try for a smile and don't quite manage it.

"Do you want me to cancel? I can call you another car. It won't take five minutes."

She's considering it. Her hand hovers over the door handle, and I brace myself for the click of it opening.

Instead she sits back and fastens her seatbelt.

"Just go," she says quietly.

So I pull away from the curb.

The streets are slick with rain from earlier, and the traffic lights stretch in long red and green streaks across the wet cobblestones. For several blocks the car is dead silent. I keep my hands at ten and two like I'm taking my driving test, and I try not to steal glances at her, and I fail.

She's wearing a black dress with a little knit cardigan over it, and her hair is loose around her shoulders the way she wore it when we were kids, before her mother told her it looked messy. There's a silver bracelet on her wrist I don't recognize. The bruise is long gone. She looks rested, and happy, and so beautiful that it physically hurts to sit this close to her and not be allowed to say so.

"How's Rosa?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"She's walking now. Well, sort of. More like falling forward and hoping her feet catch up." I glance up at her reflection. "She's got about three words, and one of them is no."

That surprises a laugh out of her, soft and real. "Sounds like a Rizzo."

"That's what Pa says."

Gia frowns. "I thought your father threw you out."

So, she must have been checking up on me. How did she know that piece of information? Ma. She really has a big mouth.

"Ma can look after Rosa while I work. Better than where we were living." I turn onto the river road, where the old stone bridges arch over the black water. "We've been there since summer. I'm in my old bedroom with the soccer posters still on the wall, Rosa's crib is squeezed in next to my bed, and Pa grunts at me over breakfast. Ma babysits when I'm out on the road." I shrug. "It's annoying as hell. I'm a grown man, and Ma still tells me to wear a scarf. But Rosa has her grandparents now, and a real home, and somebody who loves her waiting in the next room whenever she wakes up. I'd put up with a lot more than Pa's grunting for that."

Gia goes quiet. When I risk a look back, she's staring out at the river, and her jaw is tight.

"I wish you'd felt that way about our marriage," she says.

She doesn't raise her voice, and there's no anger in it. It's just true, and that's what makes it hurt.

"So do I," I tell her. "Every day, Gia. I'm so sorry."

She doesn't answer. She just keeps watching the water while the wipers squeak back and forth across the glass.

"You know what I still see when I close my eyes?" she says eventually, so quietly I almost miss it under the rain. "You at the baby shower, with your hand on her stomach, smiling for that photographer like it was the happiest day of your life."

My grip tightens on the wheel. "I wasn't smiling, Gia. I was a coward trying to make myself out to be the innocent one in this mess."

She twists in her seat to look at me properly. "That's not how it looked from where I was standing."

"I believe you." I swallow hard. "Nothing about that day looked the way it felt."

Neither of us speaks for a while. Then she lets out a long, unsteady breath and turns back to the river, and I can't tell whether I've made things better or worse.

We stop at a red light by the old fish market. The road is deserted, just the rain and the lamps and the two of us.

"You look happy," I say carefully. "Were you out on a date?"

She snorts. "No. God, no."

"Who were all those women, then?"

"Nurses from Nella's ward. They adopted me this spring." A small smile tugs at her mouth. "Every few weeks we go out and drink too much wine and complain about men and dance to terrible music. Tonight was Paola's birthday. She turned forty, and she made us all sing to her twice."

"That sounds nice."

"It really is." She turns from the glass and finds my reflection, and there's something steady and calm in her face that I never once saw there while we were married. "For the first time in my life, Dante, I'm doing things for me. I go dancing. I read books in the bath. I wake up on Mondays, when the restaurant's closed, and at times do nothing." She lifts one shoulder. "I didn't know life could feel like this."

The light turns green. I don't move.

Somebody behind me honks, and I jerk the car forward too fast and have to brake hard at the next corner. My hands are shaking on the wheel.

“Gia,” I say, and my voice comes out rough. “Could we ever be friends?”

“Never.”

“Especially, because we’re still married,” she says, softer now. “I can’t sit across a table from you every so often and make small talk about the weather and pretend my heart doesn’t do what it does whenever I see you. I’m not built like that.” She turns her face back to the glass. “I spent too many years turning myself into whatever everyone else needed. I refuse to spend the rest of my life as your friend when I used to be your wife.”

We turn onto Nella’s street. It’s narrow and quiet, the shutters closed, a single light burning in a window on the third floor. I pull up at the curb and put the car in park, and we both just sit there.

“This is me,” Gia says, and I nod.

She unbuckles her seatbelt, gathers her bag, and puts her hand on the door. Then she stops and looks at me one last time.

“You still haven’t signed the divorce papers,” she says. “Ferri has called your lawyer four times, and Conti keeps stalling.”

I grip the wheel. “I know.”

“Sign them, Dante.” Her eyes are shining in the glow from the dashboard, but her voice is steady. “Please. If you ever really loved me, even a little, sign them and let me go.”

Then she climbs out into the rain. I see her run up to Nella’s building with her cardigan pulled over her head, fumble with her keys, and vanish behind the heavy wooden door.

She doesn’t look back.

I realize that she lied to me. She doesn’t owe me an explanation, she must have been on a date. If she was out with Nella’s friends then Nella would be with her.

I should let her go, find happiness with someone who would treat her right. But when it comes to Gia, that selfish bastard in me who broke her heart refuses to let go.

My phone lights up with another fare, some kid across town who wants a ride home from a club. I stare at it until the screen goes dark. Then I switch off the app, put my head down on the steering wheel, and sit there in the rain outside Nella’s building for a very long time.

GIA

The driver's name is Lucia, and she has a picture of her grandchildren taped to the dashboard and a rosary swinging from the mirror, and I'm so disappointed I could cry.

I don't, of course. I smile and say *buonasera* and climb into the back of her little blue Fiat with my bag of cheese samples on my lap, and I listen to her chatter about her daughter-in-law all the way across the city. I make the proper noises at the right moments. I even laugh once. But for the entire ride I'm looking out the window at the lights sliding past, thinking about a silver Toyota with a cracked cupholder, and a pair of dark eyes in a rearview mirror, and the way he said my name like it hurt.

It's been a year since he drove me to Nella's, almost to the day.

Also, I lied to him that night. I was on a date, after I went out with Paola to celebrate her birthday. I told my date I needed the bathroom, then hid in there calling an Uber. He just kept going on about how much money he had and how he liked big girls. Big fat girls, as if that was an open invitation to sleep with him.

Lucia drops me outside Nella's building a little after ten. I thank her, give her five stars, and stand on the sidewalk for a moment in the warm September rain, looking up at her lit window and feeling like the biggest fool in Italy.

Nella buzzes me up before I even ring. She's in her pajamas with her hair in a towel and a face mask smeared across her cheeks that makes her look like a very angry avocado.

“You're a wreck,” she says, pulling me inside. “Wine?”

“Please.”

Her apartment is tiny and warm and smells like the lavender candles she buys in bulk from the market. There are nursing textbooks stacked on every surface, a half-finished jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table, and a fat orange cat named Garibaldi asleep on the radiator, who opens one eye at me and closes it again in disgust. I sink onto the couch while Nella pours two enormous glasses of red, and she drops down beside me and tucks her feet under her.

“So,” she says. “How was the cheese man?”

“Good. His pecorino is incredible. I'm going to put it on the menu in October with the fava beans and some of Fiorenzo's honey.” I take a long swallow of wine. “And I took a car there and back.”

Nella gives me a look over the rim of her glass. “Your supplier is in Borgo San Pietro. That's a short stroll from the train station.”

“I know.”

“You hate taking Ubers. You'll either take a train, metro or even a bus. There's only one time you took an Uber and that was to get away from your horrible date. I'm not fixing you up on a blind date again.”

“I know, Nella.”

She sets her glass down, careful not to knock the puzzle, and turns to face me properly. The avocado mask is starting to crack around her mouth.

“Gia,” she says slowly. “How many Ubers have you taken this month?”

I stare into my wine. I can feel my cheeks going hot.

“Eleven,” I mumble.

“Gia!”

“Twelve, if you count the one last week that I canceled when I saw it was a woman.” I bury my head in my free hand. “Oh my God. Don't look at me. I'm a lunatic. A grown woman who does Uber rides to bump into her almost ex-husband.”

“Husband,” she corrects me. “He still hasn't signed the divorce papers.”

Nella stares at me for a split second.

“How long?” she asks.

“I don't know.” The words tumble out in a rush, like I've been holding it in for months, which I suppose I have. “At first I told myself it was because it was about to rain. Then I started ordering them on purpose. I check who's driving every time, and my heart does this stupid little jump. Then I made it

until Christmas before I admitted to myself what I was doing. And I still haven't stopped."

"Have you called him?" Nella asks gently.

"No." I pick at a loose thread on the cushion. "I wouldn't even know what to say."

"Give me a divorce!" I mimic.

Nella takes my wine glass out of my hand and sets it next to hers. Then she scoots over and wraps her arms around me, green mask and all, and I press my cheek into her shoulder and let myself cry the way I haven't since opening night.

"I don't want to love him," I sob into her pajamas. "I've tried so hard not to. I built a whole life without him. I've got the restaurant, and Matteo asked me out last week, and I should want that. I should be falling over myself to accept it."

"But?"

"But every time I shut my eyes, it's Dante." I pull back and look at her, my face a mess. "It's always been Dante. I've met a hundred men over the years, Nella, and none of them come close. Not even a little. It's pathetic."

Nella goes quiet. She reaches up and peels a strip of the dried mask off her cheek, and underneath it her skin is pink and her eyes are wet.

"Stop it. There's nothing sad about it," she says. "I hate saying this, I really do, because I've spent two years wanting to put that man in the ground. But I think he's your soul mate, Gia. Maybe he always was."

I gape at her. Of all the things I expected her to say, that wasn't one of them.

"You hate him," I say. "Soul mates don't hurt you the way he hurt me."

"I can't stand what he did to you. That's not the same thing." She sighs and tucks a wet strand of hair behind my ear. "I also saw him give away everything he owned to protect that little girl, and wreck himself trying to be a father. I know he's been driving nights for a year and paying back his brother, and living with his parents. This Dante is not the one you married." She shakes her head. "I hate to admit it, because I think people can't change but maybe he has. Maybe now he's the Dante you really fell in love with."

I shrug, why isn't he chasing me? Not the other way around.

"And I think he comes to the restaurant at times, and just sits there watching you."

"What? How do you know?"

She takes a deep breath. "One time after opening night, I stepped outside, and I saw him. I never told you, because I thought it would only hurt." She squeezes my hands. "Maybe I was wrong."

I sit there with my mouth open, and I think about the night I kept glancing at the door. He was right there the whole time. It was never my imagination, about wanting him to be there.

"So what do I do?" My voice is very small.

"I have no idea." Nella offers a watery smile. "That's the part I can't decide for you. Maybe you give Matteo a chance, or call Dante, or tell them both to go jump in the lake and adopt six cats and become a mad old woman who makes the best pasta in the valley." She nods at Garibaldi, who is now snoring like a drunk. "I'll lend you one to get you started."

I laugh, properly this time, and it cracks something loose in my chest.

"But whatever you choose," Nella says, her voice turning serious, "I'm with you. I mean that. If it's Dante, I'll bite my tongue until it bleeds and be civil to him at Christmas. If it's Matteo and a candlelit dinner by the water, I'll do your makeup and lend you my good earrings. And if you'd rather be on your own forever, I'll bring the wine and the cats." She cups my cheeks. "You don't have to have the answer tonight. You just have to stop pretending you don't know the question."

I lean my forehead against hers and let my eyes drift shut.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Save it. Just stop spending your whole salary on Ubers." She kisses the tip of my nose. "If you're dying to see him, go find him. Rosa will be in the park on Sunday mornings with him. Everyone in the city knows that."

I sit up straight and stare at her.

"How do you know about Sundays?"

Nella picks up her wine glass, takes a long, innocent sip, and suddenly finds the jigsaw puzzle very interesting.

"Nella."

"I'm her aunt too," she says to the puzzle. "Somebody in this family has to keep in touch with her."

GIA

Matteo asks me again on Monday, while we're breaking down the walk-in.

He doesn't make a big production of it. He just hands me a crate of lemons, holds on to his end a second longer than he needs to, and says, "Friday. The place by the lake. I called ahead, and they're keeping a table by the window." Then he winks and carries the empty crates out to the alley, whistling, like the answer's been decided.

I'm left clutching the lemons. Nella's voice is still in my head from the other night, *whatever you choose, I'm with you*, and so is the picture she painted of Dante standing alone by the fountain on opening night, watching my windows. I remember the eleven Ubers, and how pathetic I felt sobbing into my sister's pajamas over a man who hasn't called me in a year.

When Matteo comes back in, I tell him yes.

His whole face lights up. He sweeps me off my feet, lemons and all, and spins me around the cold room until I'm laughing and shrieking at him to put me down before the dairy delivery arrives. It's lovely and easy, precisely the sort of uncomplicated happiness I told myself I deserved.

The rest of the week feels like being sixteen again, in all the good ways. He leaves a sprig of rosemary tucked into my knife roll on Tuesday. But then he does other things I don't like. For instance he moves the basil from my station to his because he says my side runs too hot from the salamander. He's right, probably, but he never mentions it; I just walk in and find it gone. At lunch service he sends a plate of my ravioli back from the pass

with the words “too much butter” and adjusts the sauce himself before it goes out. I decide it's a kitchen thing. Every head cook I've ever known has an ego the size of a cathedral.

That night, after service, I mention I'm heading over to Nella's on Saturday to help her paint her bathroom.

He frowns. “Saturday? I thought we'd have dinner.”

“We're having dinner on Friday.”

“And the next night as well. I was going to cook for you.” He shrugs, casual, wiping down the steel. “You see Nella constantly, Gia. She's always in your business. Don't you think you're a little too dependent on her?”

I laugh, because surely he's joking. “She's my sister.”

“I know. I'm just saying.” He kisses my temple. “You've got me now.”

I go home and lie awake for an hour, turning that sentence over and over in the dark, unable to decide whether it sounded romantic or like a door being locked.



On Friday afternoon, my phone buzzes while I'm getting ready.

Wear the green dress. The black one's too much for that place.

I'm at the wardrobe in my slip with the black dress over my arm. I bought it last spring on a whim and it's still unworn, because until now I had nowhere to go. It has a low back and a slit up one side, and when I tried it on in the shop I felt, for the first time in years, like a woman somebody might want.

I have no idea how he even knows I own a green one.

I don't move. Then I hang the black silk back up and reach for the green, since it's our first evening out and not worth a fight, and because some old, well-trained part of me still reaches for the easy thing.

He picks me up at seven in a borrowed Alfa Romeo, handsome in a crisp shirt open at the collar, and his eyes go straight to my dress.

“Perfect,” he says, like I've passed a test.

The restaurant on the lake is beautiful. There are candles on every table, starched linen, a terrace hanging over the dark water with lights strung along the railing, and a waiter in a white jacket who pulls out my chair. Across the water the hills are shadowed, dotted with the lamps of little

villages, and the air smells of pine and woodsmoke. It should be the most romantic night of my life.

I pick up the wine list, and Matteo gently takes it out of my hands.

“Let me,” he says. “I know this place.”

He chooses a white from Campania without consulting me. Then, when the waiter turns to take my order, Matteo answers for me. The branzino, grilled, no sauce, a green salad on the side.

I open my mouth. I'd had my eye on the pappardelle with wild boar ragù since we sat down, the way you look at an old friend across a room.

“You taste rich food all day,” Matteo says, smiling, closing the menu. “You'll feel better with something light. Trust me.”

The waiter glances at me. I could speak up. I'm a grown woman who owns her own restaurant, and I'm more than capable of ordering my own dinner.

“The sea bass is fine,” I hear myself say.

It arrives perfectly cooked and forgettable, and I push it around my plate while Matteo talks. He's always been funny, and he tells a story about a fire in his old kitchen in Naples that has the couple at the next table laughing along. But when I start to tell him about the pecorino I found in Borgo San Pietro, he talks right over me, correcting me on the aging process, and by the end of it, putting it on the menu has become his idea.

When the bread arrives, I take a piece. His palm covers my fingers on the linen, warm and heavy.

“You've already had one,” he says softly, like he's doing me a kindness.

I pull away and tuck my hands beneath the table. My face is burning, and I can't tell if it's embarrassment or something closer to rage.

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Halfway through dessert, which he also ordered, my phone lights up on the table. It's a photo from Nella: Garibaldi asleep in a paint tray with a

stripe of blue across his tail, and underneath, *This is your fault for abandoning me.* I snort with laughter and start to type back.

Matteo picks up my phone, flips it over, and slides it across to his side.

"We're on a date, Gia," he says. "No phones. Your sister can survive one night without you."

"I was just..."

"I know." He squeezes my wrist. His thumb presses into the bone a little harder than it needs to. "Tonight's about us."

He smiles at me across the candle. And for one strange, cold second, sitting on that beautiful terrace in my safe green dress, I'm not there at all.

I'm eighteen, at the long table in Mamma's dining room, and she's sliding the bread out of my reach while the aunts nod along. *A second helping, Gianna? You'll never fit into your wedding dress.* I'm twenty-four, at Pa's office, and he's shutting my laptop in the middle of a sentence because the numbers are his job and I only need to type them. I'm every girl I've ever been, sitting very still and very small so the person across from me stays happy.

And then, out of nowhere, I'm nineteen, in a trattoria in Bologna with paper on the tables, and Dante is stealing a forkful of my carbonara and making me laugh so hard I snort wine up my nose. He's grinning at me, a smear of sauce on his chin, saying, *Get what you actually want, amore. Life's too short for sensible fish.*

Dante lied to me. He broke my heart into pieces so small I'm still finding them in the corners, and he betrayed me in the worst way a man can.

But not once did he tell me what to eat, or what to wear, or how often I was allowed to see my own sister. When I talked, he listened. If I wanted something, he wanted it for me. Whatever else he did, he never tried to make me smaller.

Dante would never do that.

"Gia?" Matteo is watching me. "Where did you go?"

"Nowhere." I force a smile. "Sorry. It's been a long few days."

He drives me home along the lake road with the windows down and his hand resting heavy on my knee. When we pull up outside the restaurant, he leans across and kisses me. I return it and wait for something to happen inside me, the way it did in Dante's apartment that night, like a match catching.

Nothing does.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven," he murmurs against my mouth. "I'll cook. You'll love it."

It isn't a request.

"I promised Nella I'd help her tomorrow. Remember? I told you." I pull back a little. "And Saturday's our busiest night. We can't close."

"We can, and we will. I've already told the staff." He brushes my hair back from my face and tucks it behind my ear. "Go to Nella's on Sunday instead. Seven. Wear your hair down, okay? I like it down."

I wait for him to laugh, to tell me he's joking. He doesn't. The old saying about never mixing business with pleasure springs to mind, and I wonder why I ever agreed to date him. He presses his lips to my forehead and waits, engine running, while I climb out and cross to my door. I can feel him watching me the whole way.



Upstairs, I don't turn on the lights.

I kick off my shoes, pad to the bathroom, and stop before the mirror, and the streetlight through the little window catches my face. My lipstick is smudged from his kiss. My hair is pinned up, the way I wore it tonight, the way he apparently doesn't like. This dress is soft and pretty and just what a sensible woman wears to a sensible dinner, and I don't recognize myself in it at all.

The black one is still hanging in the wardrobe with the tags on.

My hands folded in my lap. My phone flipped over out of reach. The fish I didn't want. How quickly, how easily, I said yes to every bit of it. How the old habits came back so smoothly, like they'd only been sleeping. Smile. Agree. Don't make a fuss. Keep the peace.

I spent my whole childhood being a good girl for Mamma, and a decade after that trying to be the perfect wife for a husband who wasn't paying attention. I left my whole life behind and built a new one out of flour and stubbornness and nerve, so that I would never have to shrink for anybody again.

And here I am, one week into something new, already folding myself up to fit.

“Am I doing it again?” I whisper to myself. “Am I repeating every mistake I swore I'd never make?”

The woman in the mirror doesn't answer. For a second, in the orange light from the street, she looks like Mia, and I have to grip the edge of the sink.

A text chimes on the counter.

It was a beautiful night. See you at seven. Hair down. M x

I stare at it for ages, my thumb hovering. I could type *No*, or *I'm going to Nella's*, or *Don't tell me how to wear my hair*.

Instead, I write *Okay* and turn the phone over.

It was only a first date, I remind myself as I climb into bed. Everyone has flaws. He's under pressure at work, and he's protective, and some women would call that romantic. He's sweet to me in the kitchen. He held me when I cried. Give it a few weeks, and give him a chance. Don't be the woman who runs at the first sign of trouble and ends up alone with six cats.

But when I finally drift toward sleep, it isn't Matteo's face I see.

It's Dante's, in a rearview mirror, telling me to get the pasta.

DANTE

“Higher, Daddy! Push me up to the sky!”
“Any higher and you'll end up in orbit, principessa.”
“What's orbit?”

“Space. Up with the moon and the stars and the astronauts.”

Rosa considers this for about half a swing, her curls blowing back from her face and her pink sneakers kicking at the clouds. “Okay,” she decides. “Do it.”

I laugh and give her another push, and she shrieks with joy, the sound bouncing off the old plane trees and making an elderly man by the fountain lower his newspaper to glare at us.

Sunday morning is park day. It's the one rule I've never broken, not when I was driving until four and could barely keep my eyes open, and not when Rosa had chickenpox and sat wrapped in a blanket on a park bench eating gelato with calamine lotion on her nose. Every week, rain or shine, we walk the six blocks from my parents' house to the Giardini, and we throw bread to the ducks and ride the carousel and play on the swings until my arms ache.

She talks from the moment she wakes until the second she falls asleep. She wants to know why the sky is blue and where the ducks sleep and whether Nonno's mustache is real or pretend. She's got my stubbornness, her grandmother's laugh, and a temper that could strip paint off a wall. She looks a little more like the Rizzo twins with every week that passes, and I love her so much it frightens me.

Plenty has changed. In January, after six months of driving nights, Franco Galli finally called me back. It's not a big job, just a children's theatre workshop three afternoons a week in a church hall, teaching eight-year-olds to project their voices and not fall off the stage. It pays less than Uber, and I've never loved working more than I do now.

Pa and I have reached a kind of peace, built mostly around Rosa and the soccer scores. Ma still tells me to wear a scarf.

And I still haven't signed the divorce papers.

They're in the drawer of my old desk at home, under a pile of Rosa's crayon drawings. Conti calls every few weeks to nag me, and I keep putting him off. I tell myself I'm not sure what I'm holding out for. That's a lie. I know, and it's never going to happen, and I still can't make myself pick up the pen.

"Daddy, stop! Stop!"

I catch the chains and bring her to a halt, thinking she's scared, but she's twisting around in the seat with her whole body, pointing with one chubby finger.

"Who's that, Daddy?"

I look up.

Gia is standing at the edge of the playground beside the carousel in a yellow sundress and a straw hat, a paper bag from the bakery on Via Farini clutched against her chest. She's frozen mid-step, like she's been arguing with herself about whether to come closer or run, and her gaze is fixed on Rosa.

It's been so long since she came into my Uber that night, I had to look twice to realize it was her. I've walked past her restaurant twice, both times late at night when it was closed, and I didn't let myself slow down. I stopped reading the reviews and gave up asking Nella about her. I did everything she wanted, except the one thing that really counted. Signing the papers.

And now here she is, in my park, on my Sunday, gazing at my daughter like she's the most precious thing she's ever seen.

"Daddy?" Rosa tugs at my sleeve. "Who's that lady?"

"That's Gia," I say, and my voice sounds strange in my own ears. "She's your Zia Gia."

Rosa squints over at her with great suspicion. "Zia Nella's my zia."

"She's got a sister. So you've got two aunts."

“Oh.” She mulls it over. “Does she have candy?”

“I have no idea, principessa. Why don't we go find out?”

I lift her down, and she takes off at a run, sneakers flashing pink and curls flying. I follow more slowly. My heart is pounding so hard I can feel it in my throat.

Rosa skids to a stop right in front of Gia and tips her head all the way back.

“Hi,” she says. “I'm Rosa. That's my daddy. Do you have candy?”

Gia makes a small sound, part laugh and part sob, and kneels down there on the lawn in her pretty yellow dress so they're eye to eye.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she murmurs. “No candy, I'm afraid. But I've got cornetti with chocolate in the middle. Would that do?”

Rosa's eyes go huge. “Yes.”

Gia opens the paper bag and holds it out, and Rosa plunges her whole arm in and comes out with a pastry nearly as big as her head. She takes an enormous bite, smears chocolate all over her chin, and beams through the crumbs like she's just made a friend for life.

“Rosa,” I say as I reach them. “What do we say?”

“Grazie, Zia,” she mumbles with her mouth full.

Gia's face crumples, just for a moment, and then she pulls herself together, smiles, and wipes Rosa's chin with a napkin from the bag, gently, the way she used to brush flour off my cheek in our kitchen a lifetime ago.

“You're welcome,” she says, her voice catching.

Rosa has already spotted a duck. She shoves the rest of the cornetto into my hand, sticky and warm, and races off toward the water, yelling at it to wait for her.

Gia gets up slowly and brushes the grass off her knees. Then she faces me, and for a while neither of us says anything at all.

Her skin is golden from the sun, there's a small silver locket at her throat I've never seen before, and tiny lines have appeared at the corners of her eyes from laughing. She seems strong and at peace, like a woman who has finally made a home inside her own life.

“Nella told me you'd be here,” she says at last. “I hope that's all right.”

“Of course it is.”

“She claims Rosa needs another aunt to fix her swinging.”

“Nella's been teaching her to do it with her legs out straight. It's a disaster.”

That gets a small laugh out of her, but it fades quickly, and she turns toward the pond, where Rosa is crouched by the water having a very serious conversation with a mallard.

"I keep going over what I said in your car," she says quietly. "When you asked if we could be friends, I told you never."

"You had every right."

"Maybe. But it was too hasty." She twists the strap of her bag around her fingers. "I was so angry, Dante, and so scared of what I still felt, that I slammed every door I could find, and one of them shut her out." She nods toward Rosa, and her voice wobbles. "She's my niece. She's my sister's child and yours, and I've spent two years pretending she doesn't exist because it hurts too much to look at her. That isn't fair to her. She never did anything wrong."

I don't trust myself to speak, so I just wait.

"So I was hoping," Gia says, finally meeting my eyes, "you'd let me be part of her life. Not all the time. Just Sundays, maybe, or the odd afternoon. I could teach her to cook. Let her pick out the ugliest tomatoes, the way Nonna used to with me." She swallows. "I'd like her to grow up knowing she has an aunt who loves her. If that's okay with you."

I can't get a word out. All I can do is stand there holding a squashed pastry, staring at Gia, whom I hurt so badly, who's out here in the sun offering to love my daughter, and wonder how on earth I was ever lucky enough to marry her.

"Okay?" I finally manage. "Gia, she'd be the luckiest kid in Italy."

Her face breaks open into the old smile, the real one, the one that hasn't been aimed at me in years, and I have to look down at the grass for a second.

"Thank you," she says, and her voice wobbles.

"You look good," I blurt out. "Really. Happy."

"I am." She hesitates, and I watch something shift in her face, a small, careful decision. "I'm seeing someone, Dante. I wanted you to hear it from me first, not from Nella or the whole valley."

I knew it was coming. It still knocks the air out of me.

"Matteo," I say.

She nods. "A couple of weeks now. He's charming, and he makes me laugh, and he takes care of everything. Saturdays are our busiest nights, but last week he had us close for the evening so we could spend some time

together.” Her fingers tighten on her bag. “Being with someone who thinks of me like that makes me feel special.”

She's smiling, but there's sadness in her eyes. And since when did her restaurant become ours? Is this what I did to her? Made her feel wanted, while I put my own needs first every single time?

She's twisting the strap of her bag around her fingers, and her eyes slide away from mine toward the pond. “He's good to me.”

The words are out before I can stop them. “We're still married.”

“Dante, don't.” She closes her eyes for a second. “I don't want any tension. I just want...”

“What, my blessing? To be with someone who makes you close your own restaurant so he can take you to dinner?” I keep my voice low, because Rosa is only a few yards away, but I can't keep it steady. “That restaurant is yours, Gia. Not his. Don't ever forget that.”

“You have some nerve!” she snaps, and then I see the tears welling in her eyes.

“I wouldn't want any man to do to you what I did to you.”

Her chin trembles. “And what's that?”

“Take you for granted,” I whisper.

Then I lean in and kiss her cheek. She doesn't move. She doesn't pull away, either. She just stands there with her eyes shut while the tears spill over and run down her face.

“Daddy! Zia! The duck bit me!”

We both turn. Rosa is stomping back toward us, clutching one finger and looking outraged rather than hurt, while the mallard waddles smugly off behind her.

Gia laughs, but she's still crying, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand and trying to fight back the tears before Rosa sees them. I watch her, and I know. I'm not letting her go. Not now, not ever, and maybe one day she'll realize that. I'm not the same man she married. I've learned my lesson the hardest way there is, and I want my wife back.

GIA

The restaurant is closed on Mondays, and today Matteo has decided to teach me how to make his grandmother's sfogliatelle.

I've been trying not to notice how much time we spend together. Nella doesn't say anything, but she doesn't like him. I can tell. It's written all over her face every time he walks into a room. I think the feeling is mutual, because Matteo never makes the effort to talk to her, not even a hello. It's a red flag. I know it is. But I'm ignoring every warning sign, just so the one person I swore I'd keep out doesn't find his way back into my life.

Matteo is the wall I've built to stop myself from running straight back into Dante's arms.

"No, no, no," he snaps, taking the rolling pin out of my hands for the third time. "Thinner. You should be able to read a newspaper through the dough. Like a bride's veil."

"It's already see-through."

"Like a bedsheet, maybe. I need it thin as a prayer."

I laugh and flick flour at him, hoping to break the tension, but he doesn't laugh back. He brushes it off his shirt, catches me by the waist, and kisses me against the steel table, firm and certain, the way he does everything now, as if the matter has already been settled.

We've been dating for weeks, and he decides where we eat and what I order. He rearranges my walk-in and rewrites my specials and calls it helping. He sulks when I spend an evening at Nella's, then forgives me so beautifully when I come home early that I find myself coming home early

every time. He has never once raised his voice. I've made myself small enough that he never has to.

And every time he kisses me, some small, stubborn part of me is somewhere else entirely.

Behind us, the back door creaks open.

I pull away, a little breathless, and wipe my floury hands on my apron. "We're closed," I call over my shoulder. "Come back tomorrow."

"I know. I'm sorry. I won't stay long."

My stomach drops right through the floor.

Dante is standing just inside the back door in a dark blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, holding a thick manila envelope in both hands. He must have seen us the second he stepped in. I can tell by the set of his jaw and by how carefully he's keeping his face blank.

Matteo's hand slides off my waist. He stays silent, but I feel him still beside me.

I turn around properly, dusted in flour from my wrists to my elbows. "Dante. What are you doing here? Is Rosa okay?"

"She's fine. She's with Ma." He glances at Matteo and gives him a small nod. Then he holds out the envelope. "I wanted to give you these in person."

His eyes don't leave mine. He could have handed them to me in the park with Rosa. I've seen him enough Sundays now for him to have done it a dozen times. But he chose today, when Matteo is here.

Matteo steps forward, wiping his hands on a towel. "We're closed, man. You shouldn't be here."

"Gia." Dante doesn't even look at him. "This is your restaurant. If you want me to leave, I'll leave."

"I said we're closed."

I take a deep breath as the air in the kitchen goes tight. Dante came in through the back, the door I once told him I always leave unlocked. It's one of a hundred little details I used to tell him when we were married, and he never seemed to take any of it in. Now, for the first time, I realize he's started listening.

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“No, Matteo.” I set the rolling pin down on the table. “I need to talk to Dante.”

“After everything I've done for you?” His voice stays low and reasonable, which is so much worse than shouting. “I fixed your kitchen. Your menu. You. You were a wreck when I met you, crying into your ragù over a man who slept with your sister. And now you want to run straight back to him?”

I shift away from Matteo, putting the corner of the table between us.

“Oh, I see what's going on.” His lip curls. “He cheats on you, and now he wants you back because your twin dumped him. I knew you were a waste of time. Maybe I should go look up Mia, like your husband did!”

He yanks off his apron, throws it on the counter, and spins on his heel. He doesn't give me a second to answer, but he's already said everything I need to hear.

The back door slams so hard the pans rattle on their hooks, and I jump.

For a moment neither of us moves. Then I turn to Dante, my hands still shaking. “Why did you bring them to me today?”

“Because he's no good for you.” He sets the envelope down on the steel table between us. “Even Nella came to see me. She told me to talk some sense into you.”

I shake my head, feeling like a fool. “I can't trust you.”

He nods slowly, like he expected that. Then, right there on my kitchen tiles, he goes down on his knees.

“All I'm begging you to do is try,” he says, looking up at me. “Because I know one thing for sure. I will never hurt you again. Never.”

He stays there for the longest time, flour on his knees, waiting. I think about everything we've been through, and who we've both become since.

The same question keeps circling back.

And I realize I haven't changed, even after everything. I let a man walk into my life and turn me into the woman I swore I'd never be again.

“I thought, if you're willing, we could start with therapy sessions,” Dante says.

I laugh, I can't help it. “You? Therapy?”

His voice catches. “I'm serious, Gia. I want you back.”

I pick up the envelope and slide the papers out. There isn't a single signature on them. He never signed. He's not letting me go, no matter what I tell him or what I do. Dante still wants me as his wife.

“But, Dante, if the therapy doesn't work out,” I say, “you sign these papers, and we're officially done.”

He holds out his hand. “Deal.”

I shake it, and then I keep hold of it and help him up off the floor.

“Now,” I say, wiping my eyes with my wrist, “I've got a kitchen to clean.”

“I'll help you.”

We clean the kitchen together in silence. I throw away every trace of Matteo, his apron, his knives, the list of specials he pinned over my station, knowing that tomorrow I'll be interviewing for a new head chef. And I need to stop being the person I used to be, because if Dante can change, then so can I.

DANTE

Dr. Bassi's office is on the third floor of an old palazzo behind the cathedral, up a staircase so steep that I'm out of breath by the second landing. Gia climbs it ahead of me without slowing down.

I'm so nervous I've already checked my phone four times to make sure Ma hasn't called about Rosa.

The doctor opens the door before we can knock. She's somewhere in her sixties, small and neat, with silver hair cut close to her head and reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She speaks slowly and warmly, like someone pouring honey.

"Come in, both of you. Sit wherever you like."

Her office is smaller than I expected. There's a ficus in the corner that's lost half its leaves, a box of tissues on every flat surface, and a tall window looking out onto the cathedral roof, where a few pigeons are huddled against the cold. A worn leather sofa faces a single armchair. Gia takes the far end of the couch and tucks herself into the corner of it with her bag on her lap. I sit at the other end. There's a whole cushion of cracked brown leather between us, and it feels a mile wide.

Dr. Bassi settles into the armchair, crosses her ankles, and opens a notebook on her knee.

"I always start the same way," she says. "I'm not here to decide who's right or who's to blame. I'm here to help you understand each other, and maybe yourselves. So let's begin with something simple. Dante, why are you here?"

I open my mouth, and for a second nothing comes out. I've rehearsed this. I lay awake half the night going over it while the house slept, with Rosa snoring in her crib beside my bed. None of it feels right now that I'm sitting here.

"Because I wrecked my marriage," I say finally. "And I need to understand how I turned into the man who could do that."

She writes something down. "And how do you think that happened?"

I look at my hands. There's still a little flour ground into the creases of my knuckles from helping Gia clean her kitchen yesterday. I rub at it with my thumb while I try to find the beginning.

"I grew up with nothing," I start. "Ma was a cleaner; she would work for rich folks like Gia's family and Pa worked in a factory until he retired."

Gia shifts beside me, a cushion away. I can feel her listening.

"Then I met Gia, and her family was everything I'd grown up hating. The big house, the cars, the parties. Her mother eyed me like something the cat dragged in. And I married into all of it anyway." I swallow. "When my books started selling, and then the plays, people suddenly wanted to know me. Producers, investors, journalists. They'd laugh at my jokes and buy me drinks and save me the best table. Nobody had ever treated me like that before, like I mattered."

"And how did that feel?"

"Like a drug." The word comes out rough. "I loved every second of it. I'd walk into a room and feel the heads turn, and I'd forget I was ever that kid with holes in his shoes."

The doctor waits. She doesn't fill the silence, and so I have to.

"There was a party. An opening night at the Teatro Comunale. Gia came with me in this beautiful red dress she'd saved up for, and I spent the whole evening working the room with the money men. At one point I sent a young waiter back to the bar three times because my champagne wasn't cold enough. He was maybe nineteen. His hands were shaking." I press my thumb hard into my knuckle. "And Gia was standing by the coat check on her own for over an hour, because I'd forgotten she was there. I didn't even notice until she found me and asked if we could leave."

I risk a glance at her. She's staring at the window, but her jaw is tight.

"That waiter was Ma's friend. One of the women she used to work with," I say quietly. "And I was the man snapping his fingers. I became the kind of person I'd sworn as a boy to hate, and I never saw it happening. I

was too busy enjoying the view.” My voice cracks. I don't try to steady it. “I hate myself for that, and for how long it took me to see it.”

The cathedral bell strikes the half hour.

Dr. Bassi turns to Gia. “How is it for you, hearing that?”

Gia doesn't answer right away. She takes a tissue from the box beside her, folds it in half, and folds it again, and when she finally looks up, her eyes are wet.

“I remember that night,” she says. “The red dress. I'd been saving for it since the spring, and I wanted you to look at me the way everyone else was looking at you.” She shakes her head slowly. “I stood there telling myself it was fine. That you were busy, that it was important for your career.”

“What made you do that?” the doctor asks gently.

Gia twists the tissue between her fingers. “Because I didn't think I deserved more. I never have. Mamma spent my whole childhood telling me I was the wrong size and the wrong shape, the twin who'd come out slightly off. Mia was the pretty one. I was the useful one. So when Dante picked me, when this beautiful, clever boy chose me over my sister, I thought that was the most I'd ever get. I thought if I stayed useful and quiet and never asked for too much, he'd keep choosing me.”

Her voice breaks on the last word, and I have to grip the arm of the sofa to stop myself from reaching for her.

He pauses, as if she's thinking about how to word our painful past. “Even after I built my own restaurant, and had people queuing out the door to eat my food, I still didn't believe it. A man came along who told me what to wear and what to eat and how often I was allowed to see my own sister, and I let him. Because some part of me still thought being wanted by somebody, anybody, was more than I had a right to expect.” She presses the tissue to her eyes. “I'd built a whole new life, and I was still that girl at the coat check.”

“And now?” the doctor prompts.

Gia lowers the tissue. Her face is blotchy and her mascara has run a little at the corners, and she lifts her chin anyway.

“Now I'm learning,” she says. “Slowly. Nella makes me write one thing I like about myself on a sticky note every morning and stick it on the bathroom mirror. The first week, I couldn't think of anything except my ragù.” She laughs, wet and shaky. “Yesterday I wrote that I'm brave. I

remember when I fired my head chef and threw his knives out. That's something, isn't it?"

"It's a great deal," the doctor says, and smiles.

"I have to love myself first," Gia says, quieter now. "Whatever happens with us. Whether we make it or not. I can't keep waiting for someone else to tell me I'm worth it."

I ache to tell her she's worth everything, that she always was. But it isn't my place to hand her that, not anymore. She has to find it for herself, and all I can do is sit here and let her.

The doctor flips to a fresh page. "Let's talk about Rosa. Gia, she's your niece, and she's also the child your husband had with your sister. That's a lot for anyone to carry. How do you feel about her?"

I hold my breath.

Gia looks down at her hands for a long time. When she answers at last, it comes out soft.

"She's beautiful," she says. "It used to hurt just being near her. She's got my eyes, and his smile, and she was all I'd ever prayed for, and she wasn't mine." Gia's mouth trembles. "I hated myself for feeling that way about a baby. She hadn't done anything wrong."

"And now?"

"Now she climbs into my lap on Sundays and makes me read the same book about a duck four times in a row." A small smile breaks through the tears. "She calls me Zia Gia, and she holds my hand when we cross the road, and she told me last week that my cornetti is better than Nonno Bruno's. I love her so much it frightens me." She turns, finally, and looks straight at me. "She's the best thing to come out of the worst part of my life."

My eyes sting. I don't bother hiding it.

Dr. Bassi lets the silence sit for a moment, then closes her notebook halfway, keeping one finger on the page.

"I want to ask you both a harder question," she says. "Not about the affair. Before that. What went wrong in your marriage? Not the moment it broke, but the cracks underneath, long before Mia."

Gia and I trade a look across the cushion. The same answer is written on her face that's sitting in my own chest, and neither of us wants to be the first to say it out loud.

So I go first. I owe her that much.

“We got married for the wrong reasons,” I say. “At least, I did. I loved her, I swear I did, but I also wanted what came with her. The name. The family, and marrying a Rizzo was the fastest way in.” Shame burns up my neck. “I pretended it was all about her. Some of it was about getting out of my village.”

Gia nods slowly. She doesn't look angry, only tired and sad.

“I did too,” she admits. “I said yes to get out of Mama's house. To be chosen by somebody who wasn't my family. I thought being picked was the same thing as being loved.” She lets out a breath.

“So why,” Dr. Bassi asks, looking between us, “are you both sitting on this sofa today?”

I turn toward Gia properly. The light from the tall window falls across her face, and I can see every freckle and tear track, all the stubborn bits of her I took for granted for ten years.

“Because I married you for the wrong reasons,” I tell her. “And I want to stay married to you for the right one.”

Then I hold out my hand, palm up, across that empty cushion between us.

She stares at it for what feels like forever. I can hear the clock ticking above the doctor's head and my own heart slamming against my ribs. I've held my hand out to her like this before, in clinic waiting rooms and once across a kitchen counter scattered with unpaid bills, and I had no idea whether she'd take it.

Gia reaches across and slides her fingers into mine.

Her palm is warm and damp, and her grip is stronger than I expect.

“Me too,” she says.

Dr. Bassi sets her notebook on the little table beside her chair.

“Same time next week?” she says gently.

We don't answer her straight away. We're still gazing at one another, Gia's hand in mine on the cracked old leather, and for the first time since that night in the dark when I said the wrong name, I'm not afraid of what she'll see when she looks at me.

EPILOGUE

Gia

One Year Later

The smell of coffee wakes me up.

For a moment I lie there with my eyes closed, listening to the Monday quiet. No clatter of pans from the kitchen downstairs, no delivery van grumbling in the square, no small feet thundering down the hall demanding pancakes. Rosa's at Nella and Angelo's for the night, probably still asleep in a nest of blankets on their couch with Garibaldi draped across her legs like a fur stole. My sister married him at the town hall in April, a big, quiet paramedic she met across a stretcher in the ER, and I've never seen her so happy. The restaurant is closed. The whole long, lazy day stretches out ahead of me, and there isn't a single thing I have to do.

The mattress dips beside me.

"I know you're awake," Dante says. "Your nose twitches when you're pretending."

"Does it?"

"Yep!"

I crack one eye open. He's sitting on the edge of the bed in nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants slung low on his hips, holding out a cup of coffee, and the late autumn sun pouring through the window is doing unfair things to his back. He's put a little weight back on this year. Not much, just enough, the hollows gone from his cheeks and his shoulders filled out again from hauling crates of tomatoes up from the cellar every morning. There's flour on his forearm from something he was up to downstairs before I woke. His hair is a mess. He hasn't shaved.

I have never wanted anyone more in my life.

"Is that for me?" I ask, sitting up and letting the sheet slide down to my waist.

His eyes drop, and stay there, and he forgets to answer.

"Dante. Coffee."

"Hmm?" He blinks. "Right. Yes. Coffee." He hands it over, and his fingers linger on mine around the warm cup. "Black. Two sugars. Just how you like it when you're about to be difficult."

"I'm never difficult."

"You threw a wooden spoon at the fish supplier last Tuesday."

"He sold me cod that had been dead since the Renaissance."

He laughs, then leans in to kiss my bare shoulder while I drink. His mouth is soft. His stubble scratches. He works his way slowly along my collarbone to the hollow of my throat, and my pulse jumps up to meet his lips, and suddenly I'm not thinking about coffee at all.

I set the cup aside. Then I hook my fingers into the waistband of his sweatpants and tug.

"Come here," I tell him.

He crawls over me slowly, and then he braces himself on his forearms and kisses me properly, deep and unhurried, tasting of espresso and sugar and something sweeter underneath.

There was a time, not so long ago, when I would have lain here while he did all the work. When I would have worried about the light, and the softness of my stomach, and what he saw when he looked at me. That woman seems like a stranger now. She spent so many years making herself smaller for everyone else.

I plant my hand in the middle of his chest and push, and he goes over onto his back with a surprised laugh, and I swing my leg across and settle on top of him in the bright morning light, the sheet falling away completely.

His laughter dies. He looks up at me like I'm the first sunrise he's ever seen.

"Gia," he breathes. He reaches for my hips, then slides his palms slowly up my sides, my ribs, my breasts, like he's memorizing me. "God. Look at you."

"I'm aware," I reply. "Now hush. I'm busy."

I take my time. I have all day, and I intend to use every minute. I kiss him slowly, then less slowly, rolling my hips against him until his head drops back on the pillow and his grip tightens on my thighs and he's cursing softly in two languages. I push his sweatpants down and out of the way. I tease him until he's begging, until his stomach is trembling and he's saying my name like a prayer, and only then do I sink down onto him, inch by inch, watching his face the whole time.

He groans, low and broken, and grips my hips so hard I'll have bruises later. I don't care. I want them.

I decide the pace. Slow and deep, then faster, then slow again, just to watch him fight for control. The sunlight pours over us, warm on my back. The old bed creaks and groans and bangs against the wall, and for once there's no small person across the hall to wake, so I don't have to swallow a single sound. I let myself be loud. I let him hear what he does to me.

He sits up, one arm locked around me to hold me tight against him, and buries his face in my neck. We move together like that, chest to chest, skin slick with sweat, his breath hot against my throat, my fingers knotted in his hair. It's messy and breathless and nothing like the careful, polite lovemaking that slowly strangled our first marriage. This is something new. Something we built ourselves.

"Tell me," he gasps against my ear.

"I'm yours," I whisper. "I've always been yours, you idiot."

He laughs, a cracked, desperate sound, and then he kisses me hard and rolls us over, pressing me down into the mattress, and he stops teasing and stops holding back. I cling to him and let the wave lift me higher and higher until it breaks, and I cry out his name loud enough to rattle the windows, and a moment later he follows me with mine, buried deep, shaking, his forehead pressed to my shoulder.

For a long time afterward, neither of us moves.

The sun has shifted across the floor by the time I finally stir. Dante is sprawled on his back with one arm flung over his eyes, breathing like he's

just sprinted up the mountain. I prop myself up on one elbow and look down at him, and something warm and golden fills my whole chest until it aches.

He grins, hauls me into his arms, and kisses the top of my head. His heart is still pounding under my ear. I spread my left hand over it and watch the light catch the thin gold band on my fourth finger.

He gave it back to me in June, beside that same pond, with Rosa hopping up and down holding the tiny velvet box and shouting that it was a secret. It's the ring he slipped on my finger on our wedding day. I'd taken it off the night I fled to the cabin and kept it wrapped in one of Nonna's handkerchiefs ever since. In May he asked if he could borrow it, and he wouldn't tell me why. He had it cleaned and polished and waited for the right moment.

The divorce papers are gone too. I burned them myself in the bread oven downstairs. Dante stood behind me with his arms around my waist and didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

Mia never came back from Paris. The money ran out before the spring, Nella heard, and the last anyone saw of her she was standing behind the perfume counter at Galeries Lafayette, spritzing tourists with orange blossom. I don't say her name anymore. Some days I almost manage not to think about it.

The same way, I don't know what secret Pa has on Mama, but I'll find out one day. Secrets always have a way of coming out in the open.

The good thing is that I got a new head chef, and Matteo left to work in some restaurant, which I hear is having troubles. He seems to have that effect on restaurants. When I told the other staff he had left, they were happy. They said if he hadn't left, then they would have walked out. Apparently, when I wasn't around, he was an ass. How could I have been so blind?

"What do you want to do today?" he murmurs into my hair.

"Nothing."

I trail my fingers down his stomach, lazy, meaningful. "Except maybe that again. After breakfast."

"I'm making breakfast?"

"You're always making breakfast now. That's the deal."

"I don't remember agreeing to that."

"You did."

He laughs, and it rumbles under my cheek, and I close my eyes and listen to it.

Beside the bed, my phone buzzes. I groan and fumble for it without lifting my head, expecting a supplier, or a staff emergency, or Signora Bianchi wanting to know if there are any muffins left.

It's Nella.

Are you awake? Can I come over later? I need to talk to you about something.

A second message arrives before I can answer.

It's big, Gia. I've been thinking about it for months and I haven't told anyone. It's about a baby.

I sit up so fast the sheet goes flying.

"What?" Dante says, alarmed. "What is it? Is Rosa okay?"

"Rosa's fine." I stare at the screen, and a strange little chill runs down my spine, the kind Nonna used to call a goose walking over your grave. "It's Nella."

I read the message again, and then again, and somewhere far off in the back of my mind, a door I thought was closed forever creaks quietly open.

"Tell her to come for lunch," Dante says, sitting up behind me and pulling me close. He kisses my shoulder. "I'll make carbonara."

I lean back against his warm, solid chest and type out my answer with fingers that aren't quite steady.

Come at one. Whatever it is, we're here.

Then I put the phone face down, turn around in Dante's arms, and let him kiss me until I forget about everything else for just a little while longer.

AFTERWORD

Hi,

I hope you enjoyed my book.

This is part one in a four-part series.

I love hearing from my readers.

If you loved the book or if you hated it, then please let me know my email address is: emiliaswane919@gmail.com

I am developing an ARC team too, so I will update the book with the details on how to join my team.

Emilia

OceanofPDF.com

BROKEN PROMISES

She hired a surrogate to complete her family. Not to take her husband.

Nella Rizzo didn't want to repeat the same mistake as her sister, Gia, so she made sure the surrogate was a stranger through a licensed clinic, and that every contract was signed. Yet little by little, the surrogate learned how her husband, Angelo, took his coffee, which chair was his, what made him laugh, until Nella felt like a guest in her own home.

Now the surrogate is six months pregnant, and Angelo has to prove he finally understands what he nearly threw away before his wife walks out the door.

Tropes

Marriage in Crisis

The Other Woman

Emotional Infidelity

Surrogacy

Ticking Clock

Grovel, Grovel, Grovel

Trigger Warning: this story contains infertility, surrogacy themes, and emotional manipulation.