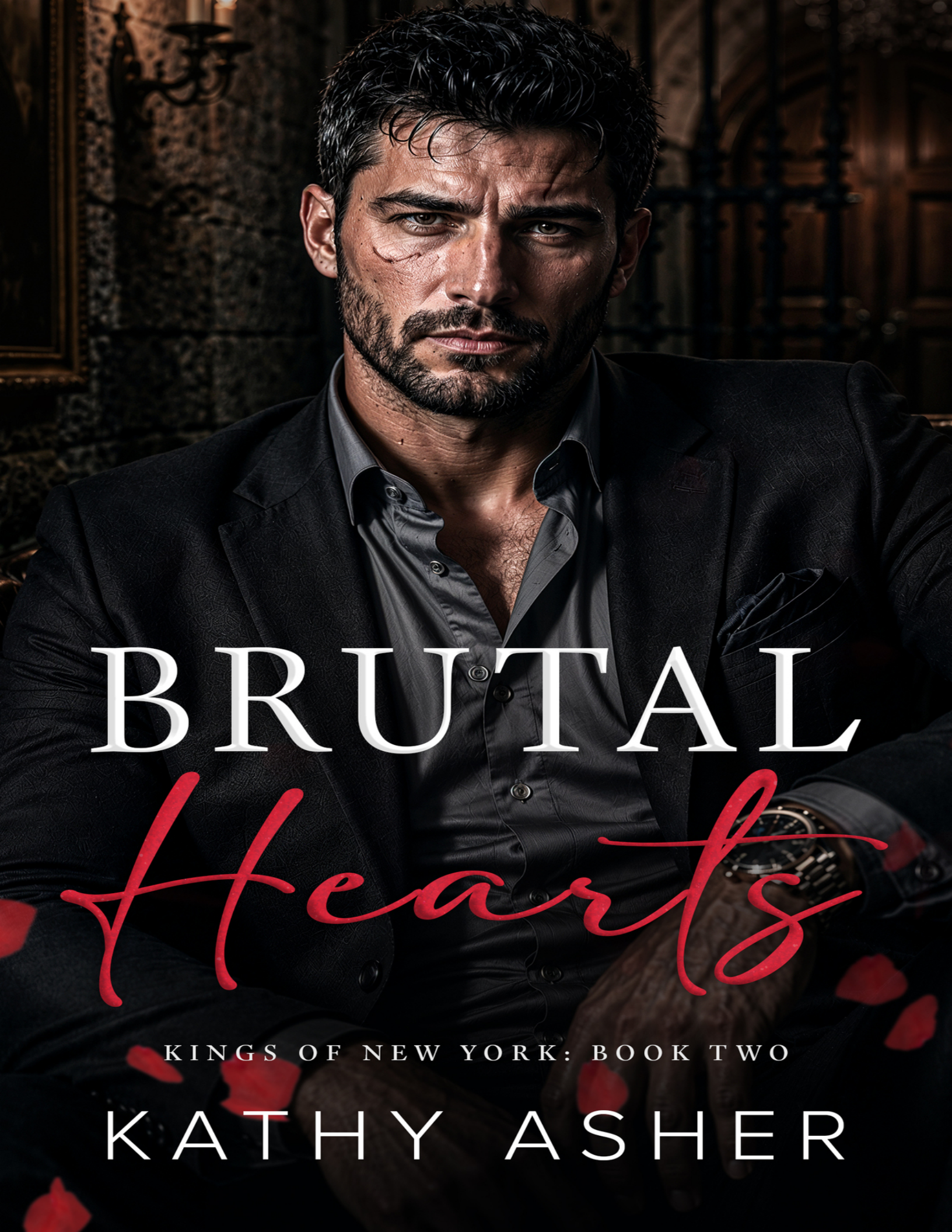

BRUTAL
Hearts
KINGS OF NEW YORK: BOOK TWO
KATHY ASHER

Brutal Hearts

Kings of New York

Book 2

Kathy Asher



RoseHarbor
PUBLISHING

OceanofPDF.com

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Warning!

Please be aware of the following content before reading. The story includes some dark and potentially upsetting themes, including scenes that feature or reference rough sex, graphic violence, organized crime, torture, murder, abduction and captivity, human and organ trafficking, drugging, and profanity. This book also may contain other darker themes or elements that are emotionally challenging, such as pregnancy and pregnancy loss, grief, childhood abandonment, death of a family member, controlling/possessive romantic behavior, psychological manipulation, mental health struggles, and panic attacks. The story also contains depictions of medical trauma and hospital emergencies, abuse of power or corruption, child illness and suffering, substance abuse, and trauma symptoms such as nightmares and PTSD. Please read with care and prioritize your mental health and well-being.

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Contents

Description

1. Lucia
2. Marco
3. Lucia
4. Marco
5. Lucia
6. Marco
7. Lucia
8. Marco
9. Lucia
10. Marco
11. Lucia
12. Marco
13. Lucia
14. Marco
15. Lucia
16. Marco
17. Lucia
18. Marco
19. Lucia
20. Marco
21. Lucia
22. Marco
23. Lucia
24. Marco
25. Lucia
26. Marco
27. Lucia
28. Marco
29. Lucia
30. Marco

31. Lucia
32. Marco
33. Lucia
34. Marco
35. Lucia
36. Marco
37. Lucia
38. Marco
39. Lucia

Epilogue

What's Next?
Series Reading Order
Join the Community
More by RoseHarbor Publishing
Books by Kathy Asher
Acknowledgments
About Kathy Asher

OceanofPDF.com

Description

Lucia

I felt the primal pull to Marco Santori the moment he landed in my ER with a stab wound to the abdomen.
He's mafia. Violent. Dangerous. A bad decision with a whiskey-laced voice as smooth as his charm.
Yet I can't stop thinking about him...or stay away once I realize he's the key to unlocking the truth behind my brother's death.
I intended to use Marco Santori to find the man who killed my brother. But soon I'm involved in something far more personal—and far deadlier—than I imagined.
Now I've become the target.
Faking an engagement to the devastatingly handsome mafia enforcer was supposed to keep me safe.
Instead, it's put my heart in danger.

Marco

As a champion kickboxer and the enforcer for the Benedetti *famiglia*, I'm used to pain.
The ache I feel after Dr. Lucia Romano stitches me up has nothing to do with my injuries, though...and everything to do with wanting to touch her. Kiss her. Make her mine.
I should stay away. I'm built for violence. Not a beautiful, fiery woman who looks at me like I'm her salvation and damnation.

But when the Russian bratva marks her for death after she overhears their organ-trafficking scheme, I have no choice.
To make her untouchable, I’m going to make her my wife.
I quickly learn the only thing more dangerous than creating a fake future is wanting it to be real.
She’s my vulnerability. My everything.
And I’ll burn the world to keep her safe.

*__Brutal Hearts__ is a full-length mafia romance novel with no cheating and a guaranteed HEA.

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Chapter 1

Lucia

The air in the emergency ward of Ashford County Hospital runs cold, the way all hospitals do. Outside, Washington Heights thrums, as it usually does at this hour. Sirens compete with booming bass from car stereos, light shines from the windows of the bodega across the street, and somewhere a few blocks north, the George Washington Bridge hums with the last of the late commuters heading into Jersey.

My sneakers squeak against the linoleum as I head toward Room 14. I'm walking as fast as I can, and the two people beside me struggle to keep up.

On my left is Jenna Chase, a trauma nurse and the only person nosy enough to be considered my best friend both in and out of the hospital.

Intern and hospital heartthrob Dr. Noah Webb hovers on my right side, a tablet tucked under his arm as he rattles off vitals. He's 6'2, sandy-haired, and has a chiseled jawline. He always seems to inspire glances and whispers among the nursing staff whenever he passes through, but he's too much of a workaholic to take advantage.

"Next patient is male, mid-thirties, with a single gunshot wound to the left shoulder." Noah pumps his legs to keep up. He's been around the block for a while now, but he hasn't lost that earnest attitude that makes him triple-check labs and ask follow-up questions most residents stopped caring about six months in. "Entry wound anterior, no exit. Stable for now. Pressure dressing's holding. He's not talking to police."

Jenna swings her ponytail to the other shoulder, her brown eyes already narrowing with the curiosity she disguises as professional concern. “He refuses to give any details about what happened.” She rolls her eyes. “Cops think it’s mafia related.”

Of course they do.

She glances at me sideways. “So, you gonna call your cop boyfriend? He seems to love patrolling right at the end of your shifts so he can trail after you in his car.”

A dry laugh slips from my lips. “Mason isn’t my boyfriend. He’s my ex.”

“Well,” Jenna tucks a clipboard under her arm, “exes can be useful, especially if they dote on you like Mason does.”

I respond with a little snicker as I snatch back the cubicle curtains. The cutting, metallic stench of blood assaults my nose before my eyes even register the patient. He reclines on the propped up gurney, his jaw tight, his eyes flat, and his shirt gone. The gauze taped to his shoulder reddens with seeping blood.

A strange black geometric tattoo sits on his skin, carrying the weight of a brand. Though it looks familiar, I can’t quite place where I’ve seen the mark.

“Lu?” Jenna murmurs, close enough that only I can hear. “You okay?”

After I drag a breath in through my nose and exhale it from my mouth, the room snaps back into focus.

“Fine.” I yank on a fresh pair of gloves. “Let’s get started.”

The words come out crisp, clipped, and professional, though an ugly sensation coils low in my gut.

The only place I could’ve seen that symbol was in Matteo’s notebook. My brother’s ghost has been haunting me for a while, but this could be yet another false connection.

I’ve had a few of those over the years. I’ll see something or have an epiphany that I believe might shed light on the real reason behind Matteo’s death, then I’ll hop down the rabbit hole of trying to dig into that link only to come up empty. And every time this happens, it feels like I’m ripping the band-aid off a wound that’s still festering.

My fixation often leads to so much irritability that it’s a miracle I’ve not made huge errors at work…*I probably couldn’t because Noah asks questions and for clarifications with almost every breath he draws, and it*

would be hard to miss out on something when you have to explain the whats and whys to a personal barnacle.

"Dr. Romano?"

There he goes again. I let Noah's quiet rumble pull me back to the present and the man on the gurney.

The patient watches me with narrowed eyes, pale but alert as I poke and prod around his injury and probe him to describe his pain.

When I peel back the edge of the gauze to assess the wound, my eyes lock on the full scale of all that black ink.

If my curious itch was the size of a papercut, now it's widened into a whole damn midline laparotomy. I have to fight to keep my fingers from trembling because I'm now positive that I've seen that mark before. I've combed through Matteo's belongings enough in the last two years for that body art to be burned into my mind. Grief can't possibly delude me into second-guessing a truth I already know.

A series of images hit my mind like a freight train.

I'd been a first-year resident sprinting down this same corridor of this same hospital after Mason had called to tell me my brother had been shot.

Matteo arrived at the ER on a gurney, blood soaking through his shirt. A pained smile creased his face, the same expression he used to wear when comforting me during harsh times. He was the one bleeding, but sympathy pain pumped through every artery, spreading through the smallest atom in my body as I grabbed his hand. He felt so cold to the touch, his pulse faint.

When his lips moved, I bent down to listen, though my ears barely picked up his raspy, broken whispers. I could only catch the initials he mentioned. "B.C."

Then life drained from his eyes.

As a doctor, I knew from the moment I saw him that it was too late. Even in my first year of residency, I'd already witnessed death come for scores of other patients, but this was my brother.

Raving, I went against every bit of common sense from medical school, grabbed his body, and shook it while screaming at him to wake. I had to be pulled off him by a fresh-faced nurse and put on compulsory leave to deal with my grief.

After burying my only family member, I locked myself in his apartment, scouring through his notes for those initials. I never found them, but what I did find—documents, research, surveillance logs—made it clear

that Matteo had been digging into some very dangerous people. The kind who roll into hospitals with gunshot wounds and carry tattoos like insignias.

My teeth sink into my lower lip before I peer into the patient's eyes and flash the fakest but hopefully still convincing disarming smile I can manage.

"Cool tattoo. What does the design mean?" I keep my voice neutral and ignore my heart rate, which rises too fast and thuds loudly in my ears.

The man's eyes go cold, and he mumbles in gravelly Russian. Thankfully, Noah's high-society upbringing makes him fluent in a number of languages, including Russian, so I turn to him and raise an eyebrow. The young doctor looks from my face to the patient's and then back again before he clears his throat. "He says you're a curious little doctor. And that curiosity killed the cat."

"Tell him this isn't a back alley. He's in my ER, and I don't scare easily."

Noah's eyes widen with worry, but he translates. The man barks out a bitter laugh—sharp, humorless, and meant to make the other person feel small—then sputters in surprisingly articulate English, "Interesting."

Interesting indeed.

"You speak English? That should help with your statement to the police about the shooting." I scan his bandage. "You want whoever did this to you arrested, don't you?"

He shakes his head before baring the upper row of his sparkling-white teeth. That grin shoots cold tingles down my spine. "Stop asking and do your job."

The warning in his tone rings clear, so I decide to back off. Asking him too many questions would only cause him to clam up more, and though I told him I don't scare easily, I know a lethal man when I see one.

After a nod, I let Jenna and Noah finish the checkup and retreat back into the hallway. My legs don't stop wobbling until I get to the ladies' room. I grip the cold porcelain of the sink, staring at my bright-eyed reflection in the mirror, my mouth set in a hard line.

I drag in a couple of heavy breaths, willing myself to get it together. Matteo was clever, and he still ended up in a casket with a closed case file. I'm a doctor in a public hospital with no plan, no contacts, and apparently, no sense of self-preservation.

Just as this calming routine starts to work, a soft knock rattles the bathroom door.

“Mason’s here!” Jenna’s cheery voice filters through the door, snapping me back to reality.

Once upon a time, the mention of that name would fill me with some semblance of hope. I would’ve rushed out of the bathroom to share my new findings with him, but I no longer trust him or anyone else.

Grief has a way of hollowing a person out until friends and lovers have to give up a part of themselves to try to fill you up. Every time they want to go on a date with you or laugh with you or have any sort of fun, they have to go the extra mile, watch for pitfalls, and walk on eggshells around you. The problem is, the gap doesn’t get filled, and you only take more and more from others until they become miserable, realize they can’t give anymore, and start asking you to forget or deaden your grief.

I’m not ready to do either of those, so I’ve come to the chilling realization that no one’s coming to save me. And the only way I know how to save myself is to piece together my brother’s mystery.

I didn’t need to keep dating Mason to be able to do that, and it was better to let him go than to keep him in the constant pits of misery with me anyway.

“Tell him I’ll be right out.”

I cup my hands, cradle some water in my palms, and splash my face. My hands tremble, but I tell myself I’m just being paranoid. Mason already said my brother’s case was closed.

Matteo was caught up in gang violence. A simple instance of him being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It would be easier if I could accept that. I can’t, though. Every time I remember Matteo’s last moments or read through his journals, the world seems so fundamentally complicated.

I slip out of the restroom and hasten past the nurses’ station to my office, where I find Mason leaning against my desk. He studies my face. “You okay?”

“Define okay.”

He hesitates. “With all the chaos going on…want me to walk you to your car?”

“I’m fine.”

The words barely leave my lips before chaos erupts in the corridor. Mason startles at the blaring alarms, but I'm already waving my goodbyes while hurrying out. We dated for three years before we broke up, so he knows the drill.

A black SUV stops hard under the emergency awning, and before the doors finish opening, our nurses rush a gurney out to meet it. Two men in dark suits flank the stretcher, and a pregnant woman hurries alongside, her hand pressed to the patient's shoulder.

Our team's voices overlap as they wheel him in. "Stab wound to the flank. Pressure dropping. Major blood loss."

The man on the stretcher reminds me of a brick wall. His broad shoulders strain the seams of his blood-soaked clothes, his platinum blond hair is plastered to his forehead, and a thin scar cuts through his left eyebrow like a permanent question mark, almost touching the edge of the dark beard scruff shadowing his strong jaw.

"It's a scratch," the man on the gurney mutters, pale beneath the bravado. "You should see the other guy."

One of the nurses doesn't miss a beat. "Sir, the other guy isn't bleeding on my floor."

The suited man and the pregnant woman follow us as far as the trauma bay doors, close enough that I feel their attention on him like a second set of hands.

His eyes flicker open as we wheel him into Trauma Bay One, and my chest stutters.

"Two large-bore IVs." My hands move in rhythm with my orders. "Type and cross. Prep for FAST."

We transfer him to a bed, cut away his leather jacket, and then the cotton shirt beneath it. My gloved fingers graze his bare chest as I assess the injury. Heat radiates off his skin, and his muscles harden under my touch.

His eyes—deep and intense and half lidded with pain—lock onto mine. His mouth quirks like he finds his brush with death amusing.

"Careful, *Dottoressa*," he croons in a smooth, silky baritone marred only by a staggered breath that signals his pain. "I bruise easily."

At the doors, the taller of the two men in suits loops his arm through the pregnant woman's and steers her back toward the exit. "Let's get home," he says, low. "He'll be okay." Then they're gone, and it's just me and the bleeding stranger with the reckless mouth.

My pulse jumps.

“Please do your best not to flirt while bleeding out,” I advise before resuming my examination. “Time and place.”

He leans his head back slightly, a faint smile curving his lips. “If I’m going to bleed out, *Dottoressa*, I might as well spend my final minutes doing something I enjoy.”

Something buzzes in my stomach, and I strive to convince myself I’m just hungry and not taken by his gravelly voice and wicked smile.

Gritting my teeth to draw more willpower, I focus on the wound. Though the knife bit deep, it left behind a clean wound. No major organs damaged. Lucky bastard.

Jenna hands me fresh gauze and leans close to my left ear. “He’s hot.”

I shoot her a pointed look, and she shifts away. But I can tell from the crinkling corners of her eyes that she’s grinning behind her mask.

She’s not wrong. This man has a magnetic pull and a predatory awareness of his attractiveness. I press the gauze in place, already bracing for the fallout of whatever storm he’s carried in with him.

“Your injury needs to be sutured. We’ll place you under general anesthesia and begin surgery.”

“No!” He shakes his head, his throat flexing for a second. Then he winces softly, and his next words come out steadier. “I would rather keep my wits about me, thank you.”

My mouth drops, rage simmering in my belly. “You’re bleeding through *three* layers of gauze. I’m not testing your masculinity.”

A pair of deep-set eyes the color of a rich espresso flick up to mine. They’re calm. Assessing. Those of a fighter sizing up an opponent rather than a man with a knife wound. “I can handle it.”

“That’s not bravery.” I draw up a full syringe of lidocaine. “That’s stupidity.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Go ahead and start, *Dottoressa*. Without the sedation.”

A hot flicker runs through me. Irritation, maybe. Defiance. Or the lingering hum of nerves he lit under my skin the second his eyes met mine. I set the syringe down with a *clink* on the cold metal table.

“Fine.”

The first stitch—sharp and swift—pierces his skin. I might have added more gusto than necessary. The expected whimper of pain doesn’t come.

His jaw tenses, but no sound escapes him, not even when I pull the suture snug, perhaps firmer than necessary. My precise, practiced hand sews with enough malice to prove a point.

"You enjoy hurting me?" He watches my fingers work. "Not the mood I usually encounter when a woman has her hands on me."

To keep myself from laughing at his audacity, I tug the next stitch tighter.

"Sounds like those women have poor judgment."

His deep, rich chuckle rumbles through my fingertips, which are still pressed to his skin. Heat blooms low in my stomach.

Focus.

"Tell me your name."

I don't glance up, but my suddenly heightened senses pick up on the warmth of his gaze. "Doctor."

"Not what I asked."

"Doctor-patient boundaries." I tie off another suture. "Learn them."

His hand whips up in a blink, catching my wrist. He's controlled but not rough as he draws me close, his jaw two inches from my cheek, his breath warming my collarbone and sending a buzz down my spine.

"Let me go!" I wiggle my hand, but it's no use in his vise-like grip.

He reads the badge clipped to my scrub top. "Dr. Lucia Romano. Beautiful name for a woman with ice in her veins."

My gaze flicks to his, and I have to remind myself that I'm a professional in order to keep my tone cold and steady. "And you are?"

He flashes a grin and finally lets go of me. "Marco. Just Marco."

I snort. "Well, Mr. Just Marco, this is the last time I'll be—"

"Wait, Marco…Santori?" Jenna gasps from the corner of the room. "The kickboxer?"

He tips his head toward her. "Formerly."

I glance over at Jenna. "Should I know him?"

Her eyes brighten with excitement. "He was huge. A title contender. Then the doping scandal hit, and he became a public disgrace. The news was everywhere."

Ah. That explains the confidence.

He hides the shadow that crosses his face with a chuckle. "I'm flattered that you remember my many accomplishments. Unfortunately, my autograph doesn't hold much weight these days."

My lip curls. “From sports hero to… Well, what exactly brings you into my ER with a stab wound?”

“Happened on the job. A wrong place, wrong time kind of situation.” He shifts on the bed.

“And your job now is?” I slide another suture through his skin. “What work involves the possibility of being stabbed?”

He stares at me for a long moment before smirking. “A cliché, perhaps, but if I tell you, I might have to kill you.”

Though his tone is simple, there’s no hiding the edge of danger. He might be joking, but this man won’t hesitate to kill if he needs to. I can see that much in his eyes.

That realization crashes over me.

Tonight must be some buy one get one free special on encountering terrifying men.

Of course he’s not a victim. He’s the kind of man my brother went chasing after into the dark, all charm, smug menace, and the assurance that comes with being untouchable.

My hand tenses, and the next stitch into his skin earns me a sharp inhale.

“*Cristo*… That was more painful than the others.”

I bend closer, my voice low and meant for his ears alone. “You refused the anesthesia. It’s only right you should feel some of the pain you opened yourself to.”

“What kind of a man would rather be loopy or unconscious while a beauty like you tends to him?” His intense brown gaze pins me in place, and the air between us crackles.

I grit my teeth as I tie off the final suture and reach for the non-adherent gauze. His scar-covered body is warm and alive. The musky scent of his cologne invades my senses.

For good measure, I spread a thin coat of petroleum jelly atop the bandage so it won’t bond to the fresh stitches and rip open the incision during a dressing change.

“You mend wounds well, *Dottoressa*.”

The compliment breaks the spell, and I snap back to the moment, ripping off my gloves with unnecessary force.

“Yes, I do my job well, thank you. And I’m done.”

He watches me like a predator tracking prey. “Have dinner with me.” His voice drops. “Let me thank you for saving my life.”

A nervous laugh spills from my lips. “If I went to dinner with every patient I treated, I wouldn’t have another free Saturday night until I’m well in my eighties.”

He grins, showing off perfectly set incisors. “I’m not like other patients.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“I bet none of them have managed to look this good while bleeding out on your table. I know you sense the same connection I do.”

I roll my eyes and gag out my next words as dramatically as possible to convey my disgust. “The only thing I feel is contempt for having to save the life of another criminal.” I pivot away, my hands shaking as I scribble the procedural entries. “I’ll have another doctor take over. You’ll be settled in a room soon enough.”

The farther away I get from him, the better.

Marco lifts his head. “I won’t be staying.”

“Just what I thought.” I cap the pen with a click. “Men in your line of work usually skip bed rest to avoid police questioning.”

He hums. “You know my line of work?”

I start ticking off the evidence on my fingers. “Custom leather Armani suit. A Patek Philippe watch. That’s eighty thousand dollars on your wrist alone. Just the fact that you look like a businessman except for the knife wound tells me a lot about you.”

His eyes gleam. “So you think you know me?”

“I don’t. And I’d rather not.” I shove the paperwork in his face. “If you insist on leaving, please sign this AMA form so I can discharge you. We’d appreciate having the bed for someone with real need.”

He takes the forms and scribbles his signature several times. “Eager to see me go?”

“Desperately.”

A shuffle in the doorway pulls my eyes to the curtain partition. Two men loom just outside Marco’s bay, close enough to see inside but with no intention of entering. One is tall with a blond buzz cut. The other sports a bald head and a full, thick beard. Their hard eyes and powerful builds suggest a profession that involves inflicting damage. Matching heavy coats

further emphasize their similarities, though the garments appear out of place in a hospital corridor.

Their eyes slip right past me to fixate on Marco, and they begin a low, rapid, and guttural exchange in…Russian, I think, though I can't be sure.

I can't follow most of the words, but two Italian names cut through their Slavic cadence like foreign objects in a wound.

Santori and Benedetti.

I place the first name from Jenna's breathless identification twenty minutes ago. The second means nothing to me—not yet—but the way it's spoken conveys importance.

Marco sits up on the gurney, and the man I stitched up vanishes. The charm, the flirtation, the lazy amusement, all of it dissolves, replaced by a cold, lethal stillness that transforms him into someone I haven't met yet.

He props himself on his elbows, the action sharp and immediate. The sutures strain, and his bandage darkens at the center where the petroleum-smothered gauze wicks away the fresh blood. He doesn't flinch, but his eyes grow frigid and deadly. The men in the doorway spot him reaching for the forceps, and they leave fast.

My stomach twists as I drag the tray away from him, muttering about supplies before slipping out of the room.

He's mafia. That's not just a guess anymore. That little show solidified the truth. However, the weight that sits in my belly continues to confuse me.

An hour later, I'm still stumped. What should I think of a man like Marco?

I'm pushing open the door to the doctor's lounge when my phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number. When I open it, I find an address and confirmation for a restaurant reservation.

Ten o'clock. Don't be late. See you there, Dottoressa.

My thumb hovers over the delete button and stays there.

A flutter rises in my chest, and it dawns on me that for the first time in years, what I felt around a man was a mix of anger and irritation, yes, but also excitement and curiosity. Not the deep yawning ache and black void of disinterest that seem to swallow every other emotion since Matteo's death.

For the first time in a long while someone asks me out, and a part of me wants to go.

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Chapter 2

Marco

She doesn’t show up for the dinner reservation.

So fifteen hours later, because I’m not a sane man, I’m sitting in Nico Ferrante’s car with blood seeping through the dressing on my side, heading to the one hospital in Washington Heights I have no business returning to.

Nico notices my discomfort before I even say a word.

“You look like shit.”

“I’m fine.”

“I see a red splotch right there.” He glances pointedly at my side. “You’re leaking through the bandage *and* your clothes, man.”

As I glance down to confirm the pooling blood, the stab wound throbs, sending spasms through my side.

I dab at the wound with a handkerchief. “Just get me back to the hospital.”

I’m used to cracked ribs and jaws, which come with both the life of a kickboxer and the life of a mafia enforcer. My habituation to pain meant I jumped out of bed this morning without much thought about the knife wound, at least until a few minutes later in the gym. Now, new aches are lancing through my body.

The pretty doctor was right to have wanted me to stay at the hospital, but spending a night there with the Volkov Bratva walking around would’ve been foolish.

Nico clears his throat as he turns onto the road that leads to the hospital. “I don’t know why I have to drive you all the way to Ashford. You could see one of ours. Enzo pays the family doctors for a reason.”

“She did the stitching.” The words come out too fast. “She should look at it.”

Nico’s mouth twitches. “Really?”

I decide to lie. “Simple medical reasoning, right?”

He watches me for a second, his eyes sharp, then shrugs and waves me off. “Try not to bleed on the seats.”

The rest of the drive passes in silence. As I climb out of the car, I give Nico a nod of gratitude before turning and venturing inside. Just like last night, bleach and lime-scented cleaning agents assault my senses.

Lucky for me, the nurse behind the admissions desk was the same one glued to Dr. Lucia Romano’s side yesterday. As I approach, she eyes me warily.

“I need to see the doctor who treated me last night.”

She offers a wry smile. “I can guarantee you’ll see a doctor, just not the same one. Doctors have busy schedules.”

“I’ll wait for my original doctor.”

She pivots and whispers to a colleague dressed in similar scrubs before walking off. As the minutes stretch on, I settle in the waiting room. Just when I start to wonder if the nurse slipped out to avoid me and my request, Dr. Lucia Romano rounds the corner.

When her eyes land on me, she freezes.

“You.” Her shoulders lock, and her spine straightens.

I chuckle, and my side twinges a little.

“Miss me, *Dottoressa*?”

Rather than answer, she silently ushers me into the exam room behind her, a curtained bay with a gurney, a monitor, and the sharp, lingering scent of rubbing alcohol.

Lucia pulls the curtain shut behind us with finality, then sheathes her hands with gloves. She then peels back the bandage and inhales through her nose.

“You ignored the discharge instructions.”

“I’m not a man who sticks to the rules.”

The antiseptic burns as she dabs the wound a little too hard, her eyes glowing with what I could swear looks like malice.

A sharp hiss escapes my gritted teeth.

“Your vocabulary doesn’t include the word ‘gentle,’ does it?” I raise an eyebrow in challenge.

She keeps her gaze on the stitching. “A man who struggles to follow rules shouldn’t whine about the consequences of his actions.”

What a fiery woman.

After the two Bratva men poked their Russian noses into the room last night, she must have gleaned that I’m mafia. No doubt that played a large part in her absence from dinner.

Despite her conclusion regarding my profession, she exhibits none of the fear or nervousness I would have expected. Her chin is lifted, her weight settled back on her heels, and the faintest smirk tugs at the corner of her mouth. She wants me to know that she’s enjoying every second of having me at her mercy.

She pokes at the wound again, drawing another hiss from me. “Careful, *Dottoressa*. I might come to the conclusion that you’re a sadist.”

Her green eyes snap up to mine and narrow as she scoffs. “Trust me, Mr. Santori. If I were enjoying this, you’d know.”

A big grin immediately splits my face. “So, you remember my name.”

“I tend to do a little digging when I get text messages from a man I didn’t give my number to. If I’m going to get kidnapped and stabbed, I’d rather see the knife coming. Unlike you.” She offers a poignant nod to my unfortunate injury, and one of her eyebrows cocks upward in an undeniably charming way.

“Oh, really?”

I swear a grin flickers on her lips before her face disappears below my chin again. With her hair now directly in my line of sight, I spot the dark strand that’s escaped that severe high ponytail. That single strand rests against her cheek, and my fingers itch to reach out and tuck it behind her ear. I curl my hand into a fist on my thigh, my gaze zeroing in on the faint coffee stain on her scrubs.

“So, what did you find out about me?”

She raises her head to peer at me with clinical precision. “Marco Santori. The Lightning Fist. Three-time junior regional champion turned *Sports Illustrated* golden boy.” She presses a fresh square of gauze against the injury, again with more force than necessary, cuing a stinging ache.

“Then came the doping scandal. How far you’ve fallen, from magazine covers to organized crime.”

My jaw locks. “You treat criminals in an underfunded ER. You aren’t exactly saving the world either.”

Her hand slips. As antiseptic floods raw tissue, white-hot pain flares across my side. My hands fold into fists on the bed, but my eyes remain fixed on hers.

She observes my muted reaction. “You’re *that* type, are you?” Her eyebrows twitch. “You’re the kind of guy who thinks absorbing pain makes him strong. I’ve seen it before. Men like you get so used to being hurt by the people closest to them that, eventually, they stop flinching altogether.” Her eyes hold mine. “Your trainer taught you that, didn’t he? Hope it wasn’t that ideology to numb the pain that pushed you to cheat?”

A smile ghosts her lips, signaling that she thinks she’s scored a direct hit. My anger sparks a wildfire that spreads across my senses.

Enough of this.

I don’t let her finish. Instead, I grab the gauze bandage on her table, wrap it around my torso to cover the cleansed wound, yank my shirt down, and shrug into my jacket. As I stand to leave, the room feels smaller.

Men like me don’t allow women to give them lip.

Some insane part of me stops just before I pull open the curtain, wanting to confirm the source of her boldness.

“How long have you been working here?” I ask without turning.

“Three years.”

“Why emergency medicine?”

She hesitates for a fraction of a second. “I love being a doctor. The ER revolves around crisis management and decisive action, so you get to save more lives.”

“Any family?”

The air goes cold.

“None of your business.”

Bingo. Found her sore spot.

I nod once, filing that answer away and reaching for the curtain. Before I can, she strikes back.

“Why are you working for Enzo Ricci and the mafia? Need to prove yourself after the scandal?”

The derision behind the question is unmistakable.

“Careful, *Dottoressa*. I can enjoy a *tête-à-tête* with you, but don’t start to believe that you truly know me.”

She drifts closer, invading my space. Her hard emerald green eyes and uneven breathing do little to mask her frustration.

“And you know nothing about me. Let’s keep it that way. Now get back on the bed and let me finish my job.”

I don’t move away from her. Instead, I lean down, closing the distance between us until my breath grazes her cheek. The rest of her words die in her throat. Her gaze circles my face, and when it drops to my mouth, she stills, her lips parting on a breath she can’t quite exhale.

I remain rooted to the same spot for two seconds, maybe three. I’m near enough to count her eyelashes and sense the heat radiating off her skin. Then I pull back and quietly return to the bed.

As she unwinds and redoes the bandage, I assess her like a threat. She bites her lower lip as she concentrates on the wound, her fingers pressing deep divots into the roll of gauze. Fear and grief sit heavy in every line of her body.

“Did you lose someone important?”

She freezes mid-wrap. “Excuse me?”

“You work like someone who’s trying to save a ghost.”

A blank mask slams down across her features, but not before I catch the flash of hurt in her eyes.

“Complete your course of antibiotics.” She strips off her gloves. “And don’t come back.” Without waiting for a response, she spins and leaves.

The sharp spasm that runs through me has nothing to do with the injury twisting under my ribs as I follow her into the hall.

“That’s it? No hospitality? No courtesy for your patient?”

She whirls to face me. “You want hospitality? Stop exacerbating your stab wound. Stop showing up here. Your violence is a lifestyle choice. I’ve treated you because it’s my duty.”

I take a step closer, watching her pupils flare. She doesn’t back away.

“It *is* a lifestyle choice.” I shrug, my fingers trailing along the edge of the counter where her instruments sit in a neat, sterile row. “One I’m good at.”

“Being proficient at terrible things doesn’t make you admirable.”

“I never said it did. But you’re judging me from your moral high ground without understanding a damn thing about my life.”

“I know that you chose it.”

Her response cuts deeper than she realizes. Most people fear me. Desire me. Rarely does anyone challenge me.

An electric current races down my spine, straight to my groin.

“I own what I am. The world needs balance. Without people to hurt and be hurt, there wouldn’t be much value in people who heal.” My voice drops. “Sometimes people like you are tightly wound because they need release. Do you have a lover, *Dottoressa*, or should I offer my services?”

Her reaction comes faster than I’m prepared for. Her expression opens, her lower lip trembles, and then, her right hand strikes my cheek. The slap snaps my head sideways, and my face ignites with a sharp sting.

I bring my fingers to the surely reddening spot, my gaze never straying from hers, which is wet with either fury or hurt. Maybe both.

She growls like a raving lioness. “Get. Out.”

A dark, satisfied curl settles in my chest as I stride away, my face still burning.

I walk through the hospital’s automatic doors, my side throbbing in time with my pulse. A dull reminder of my poor decisions and even worse timing.

I have no plans to go back to the villa yet, so I sit on the hood of one of the cars in the lot and shoot Nico a text that I’m done.

He replies instantly, asking me to wait.

After about half an hour, a black Mercedes glides into the lot and stops near me. Enzo Ricci climbs out first, wearing a long dark coat. His eyes look nearly black as they sweep over me, cataloguing every detail the way a man does when assessing a problem.

Nico follows, smirking. “I told you he’d still be here, Padrino.”

Enzo nods, closes the distance, and grasps my shoulder. “You look like shit, *fratello*.”

A corner of my mouth lifts. “You should see the other guy.”

Enzo’s grip tightens a fraction. “I’m glad you’re still breathing. Come with me.”

We climb into Nico’s Mercedes, and as soon as the doors shut, a heavy silence settles around us.

“Why’s the boss here?” I ask no one in particular.

Enzo scoffs. “Can’t even come pick up one of my most important men from the hospital?” He continues before I can answer. “You took a blade

that was meant for me, and Sophia spent all night asking me if you were okay."

I snicker. "Tell her it's just a scratch."

"That scratch has you coming back to the hospital two days in a row, Marco." Enzo's gaze locks with mine. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

He holds the silence a beat longer than necessary, his dark eyes unblinking beneath heavy brows. There's no warmth in Enzo Ricci's face when he's working, only a stillness that strips you bare and waits for you to fill the quiet with the truth he already knows. "Found something here that you like?"

Nico shifts in his seat, clearing his throat. "He reopened the wound this morning."

"And no one could fix him up at the house?" That quip shuts down any additional help Nico might be looking to offer me. With my backup silenced, Enzo turns to me, his dark eyes boring into mine. "You said yourself that you saw the Volkov Bratva here last night. Can you explain the wisdom in my enforcer showing up here today with no backup? You might as well put a big fucking target on your back."

The padrino's clearly in no mood to suffer fools. Enzo gets like this when the safety of his men or family is at risk, which is often since our enemies are gathering to protest Enzo taking the Benedetti throne when he's not a blood heir.

I run a hand through my hair. "It won't happen again."

Enzo studies my face until understanding settles into his. "It's the doctor. I watched you flirt with her while you bled all over her trauma bay, so don't bother denying it. She must be something, to drag you back here two days running."

I don't have a response that won't further incriminate me, so I just clear my throat, but Enzo continues speaking.

"Women like that are dangerous for men like us. They either make you tougher or leave you sloppy."

Every Benedetti man recognizes the rarity of Enzo's love story. And this headstrong doctor marches to a more raucous beat than Sophia, a mild-mannered beauty with a caring soul.

Enzo steers the conversation to the man who tried to kill him before I stepped in. The man was supposedly hired by an insider, possibly a capo

who has enough access to bypass security.

Sitting in that car in the hospital lot, we brainstorm and bounce around names of suspects. One we all agree on is Tomas Greco, who used to be very loyal to the previous regime.

My eyes drift toward the hospital entrance. Through the lobby's glass double doors, movement catches my attention. I shift forward in the back seat, close enough to the drop-off lane that the fluorescent lights inside illuminate the scene.

Lucia's just beyond the reception area, visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows that line the front corridor. She stands tall, her hands on her hips and her posture rigid as she faces a taller man in a suit. A small gathering has formed around them. Even from here, I can read the blade-sharp set of her jaw, the same expression she wore while stitching me without anesthetic and daring me to flinch.

A battle rages on the other side of that glass as the doctor challenges a Goliath alone. Having faced a lifetime of similar experiences, I can't drive away and leave her to that fate.

I lean forward. "I'm with you, Enzo, but I need to go back in for a moment."

He glances at me. "We're not done."

"I'll be right back."

I jump out and rush toward the hospital's entrance. As the doors slide open, voices spill out. An elderly woman clutches her purse, and Lucia acts as her shield, defending her against the suited man.

I seamlessly merge with the crowd, then creep in so I can hear the argument.

"That boy is critically ill." Lucia's low, steady voice drops. "Moving him would be malpractice."

The man in the suit snaps back a clipped reply. "It's policy. We're not a charity."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not letting a child die because of absurd policies." She's waving her arms around as she speaks, every gesture a quiet act of defiance.

Before the nurse from earlier can breeze past me, I block her path.

"Hi, Miss…?"

"I'm Jenna. We've run into each other three times in just over twenty-four hours."

“All right, *Jenna*. What seems to be the trouble?”

She narrows her eyes, weighing the cost. Then she relents.

“One of Lucia’s young patients needs surgery, but he and his grandmother don’t have any insurance. Hartwick, the hospital’s administrator, wants to transfer the boy.”

My eyes return to Lucia, who still hasn’t budged. Though the admin turns to saunter away, she continues to argue with him.

A smile crosses my lips. “She fights like it truly matters to her.”

“Yes, she does.” Jenna nods, beaming proudly in Lucia’s direction.

I wrap a hand around Jenna’s arm and steer her toward me. “Take me to the financial services office. I’ll pay the bill.”

“What?” She blinks. “You mean that?”

A chuckle slips out. “You would rather me not?”

She shakes her head and leads the way, half jogging and half speedwalking as if afraid I’ll change my mind. Once we enter a room that smells like paper and toner, she points to a receptionist. I pull out a heavy black card and set it on the counter.

“The boy’s surgery.” I nod in the direction of the front desk. “Cover it anonymously.”

The receptionist’s eyes widen and flick from me to Jenna, who nods. “It’s forty thousand at least.”

I shrug. “Do it.”

She hesitates, glancing at the raised letters on my card. “If Dr. Romano asks, should I tell her you did this?”

“No. You don’t know who paid. And if she has other patients who need help, please call me.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Do you need it or not?”

The receptionist nods and runs the card.

When she slides the plastic back across the counter, I pocket it and walk toward the door, shrugging off my jacket to hang it across my left shoulder. My wound aches and my thoughts churn.

Lucia’s eyes flash in my head. I can still picture the green flames of her eyes when she fought for that boy. While I’ve known beautiful women, none of them have ever left an impression like this on me.

Che cazzo stai facendo? What the fuck am I doing?

The hell if I know.

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Chapter 3

Lucia

I’ve survived twelve hours of screaming monitors, bodily fluids in places they should never be, and an administrator who thinks of medicine as a subscription service.

Now that I can finally catch a break, I’m slumped in one of the lounge chairs and peeling the lid off a separated, watery yogurt. Jenna walks in with a grim face, looking like she’s about to confess to a crime.

“Lu.” She picks at her badge lanyard. “About the Delgado patient’s bill…”

My tongue rolls the spoon in my mouth to a corner. “What about it?”

She gently nibbles her lower lip. “Someone paid for it. Forty-three thousand.”

That gets my attention. My teeth unclamp from the little yogurt spoon, and it falls back into the cup. “By who?”

She looks everywhere but at me. The vending machine. The clock. The floor.

“An anonymous donor.”

A startled laugh slips out of me. “Anonymous donors don’t drop from the skies, Jen. You look like you already know the identity of our benefactor.”

“They requested anonymity.”

A buzz starts inside my skull as I stare her down. She refuses to release the doorknob she’s holding, and she looks as if she’s bracing to pivot and

run.

That sets off alarms. Jenna doesn't hover or fumble for words. Only guilt can dampen her bubbly personality.

Why would she feel guilty? My stomach tightens as the image of Jenna and the mafia man in the lobby flickers through my mind. "No. Tell me it wasn't him."

Her amber eyes widen. "What?"

My yogurt sloshes over the rim of its container as I shoot to my feet. "I saw him with you earlier in the lobby."

Jenna nods, miserable. "He told me not to tell you, but it's *your* patient. I think you have a right to know."

Confusion cuts through my exhausted brain. Marco Santori has shown up at my hospital twice in two days. *He left here yesterday as an infuriatingly obnoxious patient, and now he's left as a benefactor?*

That man gets under my skin. It's as if he was made in a lab to get a rise out of me, and that's saying something. I can always keep my cool around people, no matter how much I dislike them. It's different with Marco Santori.

I'd thought maybe I was done with him after he walked out earlier today, turns out he's not done with me yet. That's the only reason he paid for the surgery.

Men who earn their living hurting others don't pay for children's surgeries out of simple kindness. They do it for leverage. And it doesn't take a psychic to tell who he's trying to trap in a web.

"I'm going home." I peel myself out of the chair, grab my bag, and brush past Jenna, who stares at me with big, placating eyes.

"This isn't all that bad, ya know?" Her singsong voice chases me as I march off. "A kid gets taken care of with no strings attached. That's a good thing, Lu."

I pause at the door and shake my head. "Oh, there are strings attached, Jen. I just don't know what they are yet."

In my apartment, Matteo's photo peers down from the mantle. He's smiling like he knows a secret I don't.

I've searched Marco's name twice in two nights. The internet confirms his rise to kickboxing stardom, the doping scandal that ruined his reputation, and his disappearance from that world.

His social media went dark two years ago. But deeper in the results, I find an older video featuring a younger Marco with sweat-slicked hair. He's sporting a wide-toothed grin as he thanks his team after a fight. He waves at someone ringside who waves back, and I freeze the frame.

I zoom in on a man with a diamond necklace in the shape of two letters, and with every enlarged pixel, the jewelry seems to gleam in the light.

B.C.

My pulse stutters, and my feet carry me automatically toward my bedroom. Matteo's notebook sits where it always does, hidden behind old textbooks. I yank it out with shaking fingers and flip to the page with the torn corner. It's burned into my memory.

Supplier contact. High-level trafficking. Athletic medical background. Kickboxing trainer.

The room shrinks around me. I look from the notebook to the screen and back again.

Matteo's last words to me were those initials. B.C. My patient was once trained by a man named Bruno Caruso, who literally wears those initials around his neck.

I retrieve the manila folder that Matteo kept with the notebook, one I rarely sift through. The file contains large blown-up photos of people that I neither know nor can identify. However, tonight's query reveals two snapshots of the same Bruno Caruso. He stands in groups with other people in the pictures, looking larger than life, like he's someone to be respected.

I sink into my couch, air leaving my lungs in a rush.

I've never been much of a believer in fate or any kind of mumbo-jumbo that signifies that life is predestined or things happen for a reason. But right now, it's hard to make sense of what has just happened without linking some kind of aligned kismet. How do I freaking explain running into two people yesterday that seem to have some sort of connection with the one thing that's kept me up all night for the past three years?

Not a coincidence. A filthy, violent *thread* that connects my brother's death with the dangerous man who paid my patient's hospital bill.

My hands tremble in my lap. Matteo died because he wouldn't stop tugging at threads like this one.

Marco Santori might be the key to finding out why someone killed him…and who.

I pace in my room for half the night, then toss and turn for the other half until the sun rises. All the while, my mind tears itself to indecisive pieces.

My precise, clear reasoning indicates that I should stay away. Marco's a ruthless criminal and a symbol of what ripped my family apart.

Except, Marco also just paid forty-three thousand dollars to save a child he didn't know.

My mind churns as I throw on a mix of clothes and rush out for my next shift. Marco Santori could be the key to finally loosening this knot in my chest. I can use him to dig into Bruno Caruso. That means I'd have to go along, let whatever string he thinks he's attached to me with his charity pull us close, and then I'll have my chance.

It's a simple plan that makes simple sense, but that logic still doesn't explain why my pulse jumps when I think about looking into those mesmerizing brown eyes again.

He's a dangerous man, and I'd be playing a dangerous game, but I can't deny my excitement.

After my shift, I rip out the tie that holds my hair in a straight ponytail and head for the staff parking garage.

I always park on the east side of the hospital. The lot fills by noon, and the garage has better lighting after dark. That hasn't meant much to me until today.

Marco Santori's leaning against my little black Honda Civic like it belongs to him.

I almost don't recognize him in his casual dark jeans and that black leather jacket. His once Targaryen-like hair is now a shade of brown that matches the dark stubble on his chin.

As his predatory and unreadable coffee-colored eyes track me, all of my senses light up at once, and a deep buzz thrums just under my skin.

Wonderful.

I march straight toward him, willing my knees to hold steady.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He straightens, that infuriating smirk already in place. “Waiting for you, *Dottoressa*. We need to talk.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “About the hospital bill you paid? What’s your game, Santori?” My eyes flick to his hair again before I can stop myself. “And what happened to the blond?”

He runs a hand through the locks, and for a fraction of a second, he looks almost self-conscious. “The blond helped during a covert job. I’m relieved to have my original color back.”

“You dyed your hair blond for a *job*?”

“Bleached. And I’ve done stranger tasks for work.” The corner of his mouth lifts. “Do you prefer the blond, *Dottoressa*?”

“I prefer men who don’t show up at my car uninvited.” I keep my voice sharp, but I can’t help noticing how the brown color enhances his eyes. “Now answer my question. The hospital bill. Explain yourself.”

“No game.” He shrugs. “A kid needed help, so I helped.”

“Bullshit. Men like you don’t do charity.”

His amusement fades. “Men like me? Once again, you don’t know me.”

His gaze rakes down my hair to where some face-framing layers fall just above my breasts. I immediately flick them back and instantly realize two things.

I’ve never worn it down around him, and I’ve just exposed more of my cleavage to him.

“I know enough.” I clear my throat, angling my shoulder slightly away from him. “You’re a criminal working for a mafia family. A hospital bill can be used for leverage. Whatever you want from Rosa Delgado and her family, you’re going to hold that little boy’s well-being over their heads until you get it.”

His jaw flexes, and his eyes narrow. “You really think that little of me?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” My voice cracks.

“What if *you* are what I want?”

He steps closer, and my breath hitches as I look up at him. As a dizzying wave of heat envelops me, I stagger backward, running from the undercurrent he emits until my back hits my car with a dull thud. He uses the opportunity to crowd my space in an overwhelming but not threatening manner. As his frame consumes my vision, his warmth bleeds into mine.

This must be what gentle deer feel like when big bad wolves close in on them. For reasons I can’t explain, my eyes linger on his Adam’s apple for

half a second too long.

My pulse races, I draw in shallow, rapid breaths, and heat pools low in my belly.

His low murmur caresses my ears. “Are you shaking because you hate me and you’re scared? Or because you know what I want?”

He’s near enough that I have to crane my neck to glimpse his face. His thick scent of sandalwood and a hint of leather hijacks the sparse air between us. It’s unmistakably masculine, and it makes my head swim as I question if I’m getting drunk on another human being’s presence.

“You’re shaking because you want me, *Dottoressa*. And that terrifies you.”

I sneer as a flush burns up my chest and face. “What a staggering ego.”

“And what adorable denial.”

I smack my hands onto his chest and push, realizing my mistake too late. My palms flatten against solid muscle, and a current shoots through me like I touched a live wire.

“You arrogant bastard…”

When I raise my hand to slap him, he catches my wrist, and for a horrifying second, every cautionary tale I’ve ever heard fires through my brain.

I’m alone in a parking garage with a dangerous man I’ve managed to provoke. *No witnesses, and nowhere to run.*

But when he looks at me, I don’t find any anger burning in his eyes.

It’s raw, unfiltered *hunger*.

“No one strikes me twice without repercussions.” His grip tightens a fraction. “Want to know the price?”

My throat goes dry. “Tell me.” The whisper escapes my lips a second ahead of my better judgment.

Tiny flecks of humor dance in his eyes as he leans in. “This.”

His mouth clamps over mine with furious desperation. For one suspended moment, I don’t move. My breath hitches between my lungs and lips, and I freeze against him.

The warmth of his lips races through me, tingling just beneath my skin. A small, helpless gasp parts my mouth, and I welcome his teeth and tongue as my own fierce need detonates. His free hand cups my jaw, angling my head as he seizes control. I fist the front of his jacket and drag him closer, even as my mind screams about my spectacularly reckless impulse.

He tastes like coffee and mint. When he groans into my mouth, deep and unguarded, my chest floods with emotion. For exactly four seconds, I let myself drown.

Then reality crashes back in.

With all the strength in my arms, I shove him away.

He stumbles back, heaving through swollen lips and staring at me like I'm water and he's been lost in the desert.

My hand flies up again, to slap him, to push him away, to do something to quiet the sudden riot tearing through my body.

Before I can strike, Marco's arms encircle me, locking me in a tight but painless hold. Our faces are inches apart.

"I know why you're fighting this, Lucia. I just don't think it's a good enough reason to stop."

My name on his tongue sounds like a bewitching spell.

"Fighting what?" I barely manage the question through my gasp.

"Your attraction. Your want. And the fact that you haven't stopped thinking about me since I landed in your ER."

"I think about you because you're infuriating." I cross my arms, needing a shield, a wall, anything to help me stave off the tiny little sparkles beneath my skin caused by his proximity.

He leans in again, our lips once more dangerously close. "You think about me because you want this."

"No." I turn my head side to side, trying to escape the damned sway in his eyes that's tempting me to consider him an option. "No, this won't *happen*." I hate how my voice quivers. He doesn't lunge or press me. He just waits, his gaze traveling to my mouth, then up to my eyes, then dropping to my throat, where my pulse hammers away.

The silence stretches on.

"It just did, *Dottoressa*."

I shake my head, more to clear it than to argue. "That was a mistake."

"It didn't feel like a mistake." He tilts his head slightly, observing me with a calm, unhurried gaze, like he's already decided how this ends.

"Well, it was." I lift my chin and meet his eyes dead-on, because if I glimpse away now, I will have already lost. My fingers fold into a fist, my nails digging into my palm as I want to ignore the warmth still radiating from him from three inches away.

My free hand fumbles for my keys, but they slip from my trembling grip and clatter to the ground.

Marco lets me go, only to bend, pick them up, and hold them out.

Our fingers graze, and a vicious friction jolts through my skin. I quickly snatch my hands back, open the door, and throw myself into the driver's seat.

Before I can shut myself inside, he catches the top of the door. He knows that I could break his light grasp with one sharp tug. His hand rests on the door not to trap me but to ask me, wordlessly, to stay.

I glance at his hand, then at his face. "Let go, Marco."

"Lucia…"

"Don't." I jam the key into the ignition. "Don't contact me. Don't come to my hospital. Don't pay my patients' bills. Stay away from me."

Even as the words leave my mouth, I know I'm sabotaging myself. Ten minutes ago, I convinced myself to use this man to find Matteo's killers. Now he's got my senses so frazzled with the kiss that all I can think about is running away for my own sanity.

I slam the car shut so suddenly that he flinches before spreading his arms in surprise.

"You really want me to stay away from you?"

"Yes."

He pauses, his thumb tracing the doorframe before he steps back to give the car the berth I need to drive away.

As I peel out of the lot, I check the rearview mirror. He's still standing where I shoved him, rubbing his chest with his hand.

Two blocks later, I pull over, my hands shaking too intensely for me to keep driving. My forehead drops to the steering wheel.

I kissed him.

I wanted to do more.

He's a violent criminal. A man stitched from the same world that killed Matteo and hollowed out my family.

He shouldn't inspire this much fervor and passion. In fact, I should hate him. I should be able to say the reason I stitched Marco Santori up with malice in every suture was because I loathe what he represents, not because I can't even manage to uphold my Hippocratic oath around him.

The man is a cancer I must cut out quickly. I'm the kind of doctor who screams at a board member to get a child surgery. I don't lose all my

marbles at the sight of dark brown eyes.

That unsettles me more than the kiss. The hold he has over me—the unbelievable realization that for a moment, I wanted to push away the one person who might help me find justice for Matteo because I couldn't manage my emotions around him—sits heavy in my throat.

I know without a doubt that the police were wrong to dismiss Matteo's case as gang violence and my brother simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I can't throw away the years of work it's taken me to find those initials. Meeting Marco has given me a thread to pull regarding Matteo's unsolved death

The thought of what comes next churns my stomach.

My phone rings, and I stare at the screen built into the dashboard. An unknown number. I tap the Bluetooth to answer the call hands-free.

Heavy breathing fills the car, and then a voice—electronic, distorted, and cold—crackles from the speakers. "Dr. Romano. What's the relationship between you and Marco Santori?"

My spine stiffens.

"I have no business with Marco San… Wait, who are you?"

"A friend." The voice pauses. "A friend who wants you to know that smart girls don't get involved with Benedetti dogs."

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

"Be smarter, Doc. You don't want to end up like your brother."

The line goes dead.

Before me, the quiet, unlit road stretches on, every shadow twisting and growing longer.

Is someone watching me?

My foot stomps on the gas, and I steer into the patchwork of rush-hour traffic to blend in.

I can't shake the sinking suspicion that whatever I've stumbled into is bigger, bloodier, and far more personal than I ever imagined.

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Chapter 4

Marco

I shouldn’t have kissed her.

I basically poured gasoline onto a roaring fire, and now that she’s rejected my advances once again, I’m responsible for extinguishing those flames.

Which is why I’m engaging in my usual coping mechanism, which always calms me when my mind threatens to spiral out of control.

I’m in the Benedetti villa’s gym, slamming my fists into the largest, hardest bag available because no one ever wants to face me in the ring when I’m in this mood. Most of the men training in the gym slinked out when they caught wind of my attitude, so I’m alone.

The stitches pull on my side, and the wound seeps under the bandage.

Good. Pain keeps the thoughts quiet.

Sweat trickles down my spine and plasters my tank to my skin. My knuckles have split, and tiny drops of blood dot the canvas of the bag like punctuation marks.

Training with a half-healed stab wound is reckless. But sitting still only means memories of Dr. Lucia Romano and the sweet, sexy taste of her lips would invade my mind.

So, I hit with even more force.

Because I’m built for violence. Not women with green eyes who peer at me like I’m both salvation and damnation.

“You’re bleeding through your bandage again, Santori.” The unmistakably female voice contains a teasing lilt.

Although a crimson stain seeps through the fabric of my shirt where the gauze underneath has soaked through, I don’t stop punching.

“I’m aware.”

Isabella Benedetti ventures closer with crossed arms and a holstered Glock strapped to her hip atop her designer leggings. Izzy is currently a sensation both in the Benedetti family and the underworld at large. Most people can’t seem to wrap their head around why she would betray the old padrino, her own brother, just to hand Enzo a throne that’s been in her family for years.

While many mafia heiresses live sheltered, pampered lives, Izzy’s got zero tolerance for that. She’s a total badass who can shoot and fight better than a lot of foot soldiers.

I lift the edge of my tank to find that the blooming red patch is spreading.

“Sophia’s going to be pissed when she sees you’ve reopened that wound.”

“Then don’t tell her.”

She snorts. “Oh, I’m telling her. Watching you get lectured by our new padrino’s wife is about the only entertainment I get around here.”

The punching bag swings back to me. I catch it, hold it steady, then drive my knee in.

Izzy’s expression shifts. “I hear Tomas is talking. Says Enzo’s distracted by Sophia and making the *famiglia* weak. He believes you’re also distracted. By some civilian doctor?”

I slam my fist into the bag with enough force to rattle the chain. “Tomas can say whatever he wants to my face.”

She chuckles. “He won’t. He’s a coward. But he’s poisoning the capos against the new regime. Is there any plan to curtail him?”

“Enzo won’t act without proof. You know how he is about familial bloodshed.”

She sighs just as the door opens behind us.

Sophia Ricci shuffles in like the embodiment of calm, her hair pulled back and a cardigan over her gym clothes. Her hand rests briefly on the prominent curve of her abdomen. She’s carrying Enzo’s heir, and though

she’s midway through the second trimester, pregnancy has done nothing to slow down the former kindergarten teacher.

Once she notices the bloodied bandage, her eyes narrow. She pins me down with her stare like I’m a student who’s injured himself on the playground.

She exhales. “Exam room. Now.”

I open my mouth, but her withering look shuts it. Who could have guessed that kindergarten teacher authority holds more weight than guns in this villa?

“Marco, you either let me handle that, or I’m telling Enzo you’re too hurt to perform your duties.”

From any other person, the tame threat would have caused me to dig in my heels, but I’ve come to understand that Sophia’s mothering and obsessive nature stems from her caring personality and also her pregnancy hormones.

Izzy’s laugh follows us down the hall as she trails behind us. “Whipped by the padrino’s wife. How the mighty have fallen.”

The compound’s medical clinic is spotless. Cabinets are stocked with supplies to treat everything from a stubbed toe to a stubbed kidney—à la surgery—because we don’t usually visit hospitals for our injuries. Well, we aren’t supposed to.

The only reason I was taken to one was that Sophia wouldn’t hear of anything less after I took the knife meant for Enzo. With our regular doctor away, Enzo caved too.

Once I’m on the stool, I lift my shirt, and Sophia cuts away the soaked gauze with practiced hands. She’s always said a big part of her tenure as a kindergarten teacher involved kids running to her with cuts and scrapes.

“You’re reopening it every time you train.” She starts cleaning the wound, her touch soft as she concentrates on swabbing the damaged skin.

“Occupational hazard.”

She hums. “I called the doctor yesterday to ask about your medical status.”

My jaw drops. “Why would you do that? And how did you know you contacted the right doctor?”

She stops cleaning for a moment and stares me down. “I did it so I could stop you from doing stupid things like this and lying about being

okay. And yes, I got the right doctor. Lucia Romano, right? From Ashford County Hospital? She seemed angry with you."

My heartbeat stutters. "She's always angry."

Sophia's lips quirk. "Well, beneath the anger…she also sounded concerned."

"You're reading too much into it."

"Now I know you're bleeding through and reopening wounds because a woman got under your skin," Izzy adds from the sidelines. She's been sitting on another stool in the corner, watching the entire scene unfold.

I roll my eyes and stare at the ceiling while Sophia tapes fresh gauze in place. I'd rather not go down that road with the astute, ruthless Izzy.

"You can want a life beyond your job, Marco. Enzo did."

I swallow hard. The words land heavier than they should.

"Dr. Romano left me her personal cell number." Sophia keeps her tone casual, like it doesn't matter. "Asked that we ensure you're following her post-care instructions."

My head snaps up. "She gave you her number?"

"Mm-hmm. And requested that we give her regular updates."

She and Izzy share a look, but I ignore them. Why would Lucia leave her number with Benedetti channels to check on me after demanding I stay away?

Sophia clears her throat. "You should call her."

"She told me to stay away."

"And you always do what women tell you, right?"

Before I can respond, Nico appears in the doorway, his tablet in hand. He glances from one woman to the other and grumbles. "Marco, we need to get to Padrino."

I thank Sophia, slip off the stool, and follow the consigliere out. "What's the problem?"

He pauses to put a hand on my shoulder. "About your doctor… Here, check this out."

He turns his tablet toward me and taps play on a clip of security footage. An apartment building fills the screen, but my gaze locks on the dark sedan with Russian plates across the street.

Volkov.

My stomach drops. "Does this mean they're watching her?"

Nico nods. “It might be nothing. She treated Viktor Volkov for a gunshot wound the same night she treated you, so it could just be a random check.”

Porca miseria.

I shake my head. “But if they know she and I have a connection, then they can use her to get to me.”

“That’s why I think you should make your mind up about this woman.” He meets my gaze. “If you want her, bring her under your protection. Otherwise, cut things off.”

A pause settles between us as Nico locks his tablet.

“Mull it over on the way. We’ve got somewhere to be.”

I meet his ice-blue eyes. “Where?”

“I’ll tell you during our drive.” He strides toward the door, his brisk pace conveying the urgency of the matter.

My hands fold into fists by my side as I follow Nico to the garage. As we climb into a car, he explains that we’re going to see Enzo, who has an assignment for a few of us.

Throughout the ride, I stare out the window. My mind keeps circling back to Nico’s words and what they might mean.

Why are the Volkovs watching her? Is she in danger? And if so, why should I care?

She declined my dinner offer by simply not showing up, shoved me away when I kissed her, and couldn’t have been clearer about keeping me at arm’s length.

It should be easy to ignore her. The only issue is that, while she pushes me away, I keep finding reasons to stay close.

Interrupting my thoughts, Nico brings me to a backroom in a lounge that reeks of a mix of cigar and rich bourbon. Vito Moretti and Rocco Benedetti wait inside. Vito is a tall, lean Sicilian with hooded eyes and a trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. He used to be a simple soldier called *‘killer bean’* but was promoted by the previous padrino. Everyone had expected him to leave with Gabi Jr., but for some reason, he’d stayed back with his friend. As for Rocco, he’s a cousin to both Izzy and the former padrino, but he’s always been glued to Vito more than anyone.

Given how close both men were to the exiled padrino during his toxic reign, they’ve been considered as possible spies for him.

I wonder what use Enzo has for them. It must be something important if the look Nico gives me is anything to go by.

Watch your words. Give nothing away. Let them fill the silence.

In the dim lounge, a single lamp throws amber light across a heavy oak table scarred with cigarette burns and ring stains from glasses no one bothered to place coasters beneath. The leather chairs creak as Nico and I slide in across from the other men.

I peer across the table. Rocco sits with his arms folded and his mouth in a hard line. Vito's smile stays polite.

I don't bother with pleasantries. "You two have been talking to Tomas."

Rocco bristles, but Vito simply lifts his palms and says, "We talk to everyone."

"Careful." I cross my arms over my chest. "That's how people end up choosing the wrong side without realizing it."

Rocco leans forward. "Your regime is new. People are nervous."

He's right. The sudden power shift—and Enzo's lack of Benedetti blood—results in an unusual dynamic. Over the past few months, we've had to play our cards just right. It's been like weaving through a field of landmines.

"That's why I'm here."

We all fall silent as Enzo enters the lounge. He must have caught the tail end of Rocco's response. The padrino waves a hand as we rise to our feet, then takes his chair at the head of the table. We all follow suit.

Once he settles, Enzo sweeps his gaze over Rocco and Vito. "Family doesn't fracture because of nerves."

Vito studies Enzo, then locks his eyes on mine. "Greco says you're distracted."

"He can say it to my face." My stare is unwavering.

Rocco stiffens. "Greco also says the Volkovs are offering protection."

Nico glances around the room. "The Volkovs offer chaos and weapon deals and more bodies in alleys than necessary."

A loaded silence descends as Enzo stands and drifts closer to us. His voice stays steady. "I don't want blood between cousins. I want loyalty. If Tomas is scheming, I need eyes where he *thinks* he's safe."

Rocco gulps loudly, and Vito's gaze flicks to him. He shakes his head, warning his friend not to give anything away. Smart of Vito. The job Enzo

has for them isn't for the lily-livered, and if Enzo suspects neither of them can pull it off, he'll probably ship them off to the hinterlands somewhere.

Vito folds both hands into stacked fists and rests his chin on them. "What exactly do you need us to do, boss?"

"You'll pretend you hate me." Enzo walks around the table toward the pair. "You'll complain. You'll drink with him. You'll listen. And then, you'll tell us everything."

Rocco nods. "And if he suspects?"

Enzo suddenly halts before he spins toward me with a wide grin. "That's where Marco comes in."

Their attention shifts to me, and I let a small smile show. "You call me. Day or night. I'll get you out of danger and take you to one of the safe houses."

After Rocco and Vito agree, Nico sends them off with instructions and burner phones. A few moments later, Nico and I head out too.

On the ride back, Lucia returns to my mind, as she does every time I stop moving long enough to think.

Her palm cracking against my cheek. Her mouth yielding against mine. The way she told me to stay away, though her body screamed for more.

My life so far has taught me to compartmentalize. I have a box in my mind for almost every problem, but unfortunately, Lucia doesn't fit into any of them.

I want to explore more of the feelings she triggers, but the Volkovs sniffing around her means that whatever exists between us could get dangerous fast. As always, every instinct I have leans one way. She's a complication, and men like me don't do well with liabilities.

Soon, we arrive back at the villa, and I walk the corridor that leads to my quarters while rolling the tension out of my shoulders. Before I can enter my room, though, Sophia and Izzy corner me.

The friendship between these two has been almost as big a change as Enzo taking charge of the family operations in the last six months.

Izzy used to be Enzo's lover, and even though they broke up years before he met Sophia, I'd have sworn there was always that tension between them, especially before Enzo fell in love with Sophia, when the other woman was a prisoner in the villa. It was the risk of Sophia being pawned off to her death by Gabi Jr. that started Enzo's coup, but in the end

it was Izzy finally letting go of her feelings for him that secured him the throne.

Izzy had been ostracized after that, as even capos and dons who chose Enzo's side didn't want her in a seat of power. Sophia had glued herself to Izzy during the crisis and they'd become best friends…*and a constant thorn in my flesh*.

Sophia smiles too sweetly, and Izzy appears entertained.

Trouble.

"We spoke to Dr. Romano again." Sophia smooths her cardigan, her voice a singsong croon.

My chest constricts. "And?"

"We booked you a house call."

My gut tightens into a hard knot, and the breath catches halfway inside my chest. "What do you mean?"

Izzy grins. "Congratulations, Santori. Your doctor will be visiting your quarters personally."

"Wait…" I wheel away from them, trying to ignore the cold flush spreading through my torso. "That wasn't necessary."

Sophia tilts her head. "You reopened your wound."

"And you bandaged it."

"Marco, you need proper medical care before it gets infected."

Izzy folds her arms. "Also, it's about time I get to enjoy the sight of you falling for a woman who scares you a little."

"I didn't fall for anyone."

Sophia laughs. "Sure."

I keep my face neutral, but internally, my heart beats at a sprinter's pace.

Lucia's coming *here*. As my thoughts spiral, I leave the two women in the hallway and rush to my quarters.

I take a quick shower and change into fresh clothes, then straighten the bed, tidy up some loose belongings, and ensure that my weapons are locked in the wall safe. I also rearrange the few framed photos from my fighting days that line the shelf. As I wait for Lucia to arrive, I distract myself by sitting at my desk and reading through files on the Volkovs.

Time dissipates into an undefined stretch until a knock raps me back to reality.

Lucia Romano stands in the doorway in wrinkled trousers and a beige button-down blouse. Her medical bag hangs over her shoulder, and her eyes carry equal parts exhaustion and stubbornness. Her hair has escaped whatever discipline she tried to impose on it with the ponytail. Those green irises, deep and vivid as uncut emeralds, lift to mine.

For what seems like a long second, neither of us moves, not until I shake my head free of the cobwebs that have snagged my thoughts.

"What are you doing here?"

She shrugs a noncommittal shoulder. "Your…boss called me. Said you reopened your wound." She brushes past me without waiting for permission.

I close the door, hyperaware that we're alone in my bedroom.

"You didn't have to come."

"I'm a doctor." She sets her medical bag on the kitchenette counter and unzips it, removing gloves, gauze, and a small antiseptic bottle. She lines them up with the practiced efficiency of a woman who could set up a trauma bay blindfolded. Then she spins back around and nods toward the bed. "Over there. Sit on the edge. I need the natural light from the window."

I cross the room and lower myself onto the edge of the mattress. She follows, snapping on gloves as she walks and stopping between my knees.

"So you now care if I live or die, *Dottoressa Ghiacciata*?"

Her hands still.

"*Dottoressa* what?"

"Ice Doctor. It suits you. All that cold professionalism."

She levels me with a look so astringent it could sterilize. "You're insufferable."

"And you're beautiful even while you're annoyed."

She grits her teeth and *accidentally* presses her fingers to the stitches until I hiss.

"Is this care or torture? I thought there would be a warmer side to you now that you're in my territory."

"If you behave, I might show you warm," she warns, though the corner of her mouth betrays her.

She finishes in silence, taping fresh gauze with efficient hands. Then she peels off the gloves and drops them into the bin, the professional armor going with them. She suddenly feels different, more vulnerable and maybe more human.

“Care for a drink?”

She hesitates, her gaze sweeping the room like she’s calculating exit routes. “One glass.”

I’m surprised by the yes, but I hide it. When I walk over to pour her a glass, I sense that she’s standing at my desk, where highly confidential files are still scattered all over the wood. The Volkov Bratva logo is stamped boldly on the top folder.

I spin back around, but seeing her tense body causes me to realize that the damage is done.

“These files…”

Though it’s already far too late to erase what she’s seen, I step in front of her.

“They’re none of your business.”

She tries to peer around me. “The men who have that geometric tattoo… You’re investigating them?”

How does she recognize the symbol?

“Why do you care about the Volkovs, Lucia?”

She goes still. “I don’t. I just asked because I’m curious. Between these files and what you seem to do, it’s a logical conclusion.”

I take her shoulders in a gentle but firm grip and force her to meet my eyes.

“You’re a terrible liar. You bite your lip when you’re nervous or hiding something. In fact, you’re doing it now.”

Her hand flies to her mouth. “I don’t.”

“You do. So, tell me why a civilian ER doctor cares about the Russian mafia.”

Her eyes flash for a moment.

“My brother.” Her voice catches, exposing a crack she can’t quite seal. “His name was Matteo. Two years ago, before someone killed him, he was investigating an important case. I saw that symbol in his notes, and the night you came to the hospital, I saw the same mark tattooed on a Russian gang member that came in with a gunshot wound. I think those men were involved in his murder.”

The room tilts. If her brother was involved with the Volkovs, then their surveillance of her must not be random.

“*Cristo*, Lucia. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I don’t know you!” She pulls away, her voice breaking. “Why would I trust you with this, especially since you’re…mafia?”

She’s right.

My world eats people like her. Asking for her trust would be stupid. Reeling from what she’s revealed, my mind races through scenarios, timelines, and consequences.

If the Volkovs think she has intel, or if they connect her to me, then she won’t last long.

“Listen to me.” I grab her medical bag off the coffee table and press it into her hands. “You need to leave. Now.”

“What? Why are you suddenly kicking me out? I think you owe me an explanation—”

“Because of your brother’s investigation and because of me, you’re in danger. Now go.”

I try to steer her toward the door, but she plants her feet.

“Stop manhandling me.”

“The Volkovs have eyes on you, and if what you told me about your brother is true, then staying away from this mess is the right thing to do. I’m trying to protect you.”

Her face drains of color so fast that she sways. “They’re *watching* me?”

“Think of this as me doing a favor for the doctor who saved my life. Even if you are annoying, I believe I would be doing the world some good by keeping you alive. Now, if you value your life, get out.”

She studies me for a moment, gritting her teeth. Her phone sits face down on the desk next to my files, right where she must have placed it while my head was turned. She picks the device up without a word and leaves.

A weight that feels dangerously close to respect settles in my chest.

Back at my desk, the Volkov file is open, and the pages have shifted.

Fuck.

She must have used her phone to snap photos.

Three minutes later, my own cell buzzes with a text from her.

One more thing I didn’t tell you. Bruno Caruso, your trainer, is somehow related to this case. My brother mentioned his initials to me with his dying breath. I think we need to talk.

My heart stops. The name Bruno Caruso hits like a fist beneath my ribs, knocking loose a decade of buried rage.

Madonna santa.
This just became personal.

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Chapter 5

Lucia

On Tuesday evening, I'm working through my shift in the ER, which has been filled with strange cases, like two separate elderly ladies with angry hemorrhoids, suppositories gone wrong, and a belligerently drunk person who broke their wrist after getting into a fistfight with their reflection in the bar's bathroom mirror.

I'm gloved up and attending to a man who, after what I can only assume was a catastrophically misguided bet, managed to wedge his penis through the center hole of a five-pound weight plate. He came to the hospital with the plate still attached.

He refuses to meet my eyes. His friend in the waiting room, who apparently filmed the whole thing, can't stop laughing. I've already requested a ring cutter from maintenance and made a mental note to never ask how this happened.

As I tear my eyes away from the spectacle, they catch on an interesting figure striding down the hall. Through the glass partition that separates Trauma Bay Two, beyond the reflection of the fluorescent lights and my own exhausted face, the tattooed Russian patient I treated for the gunshot wound struts past like he wasn't flat on one of our gurneys days ago and bleeding into the sheets.

He's a towering man, with gray, distinguished streaks in his beard. He appears fine now, and I would've ignored this foray as an inconsequential

night stroll if not for the visitor's lanyard that clearly belongs to someone else hanging off his neck.

My hand goes absolutely still.

"Dr. Romano?" Noah draws up beside me, bright with the eagerness that first-year residents wear like a badge of honor. "Everything okay?"

I don't answer. I'm too busy watching the man shuffle down the back corridor with deliberate nonchalance and steal glances over his shoulder to check if anyone is following him.

Is there trouble? How did he get past security?

A cold knot of dread tightens in the pit of my stomach. I don't need to debate the thought in my head…*something is going on*, and this is my chance to find out what.

I press my gloved palm flat against my patient's arm, then turn to Noah. "Please finish the examination."

His head snaps toward me. "I don't usually do that…"

I steer Noah out through the curtain and lower my voice. "I know you can handle this one. Assess blood flow to the appendage, check for warmth and degree of swelling, and ask if he can urinate. You need to rule out urethral compromise. Once you've assessed, apply lubrication and manual technique to remove the weight, then a cold compress to bring down the swelling. Refer him to Urology for follow-up."

I squeeze his shoulder once. "And Noah? Maintain a straight face. That man is embarrassed enough without his doctor looking rattled."

He watches me strip off my gloves, his brow furrowed in confusion. I almost never hand off a case mid-procedure, but Noah will take good care of the patient.

I drop the gloves into the biohazard bin as I waltz past the bay. Before I've gone even ten feet, Jenna falls into step beside me, matching my pace with ease.

"You have your worried face on."

"Go back to the nurses' station." My voice is firm, and I don't break my stride.

She snorts. "Hard pass until you tell me why you ran out of there."

"You're not my supervisor, Jen."

"I'm your emergency contact, though." She crosses her arms. "That's basically a legally binding right to tag along."

Despite everything, a hysterical voice in my head wants to laugh. Instead, I round the corner into the back corridor and level her with a glare sharp enough to cut glass.

She stops, holding my gaze while her own eyes narrow. But then she sighs and retreats with an *I'll-find-out-later* expression.

Relief crashes through me as I continue into the administrative wing. At this hour, this part of the hospital is deserted except for a maintenance cart left in the middle of the hallway like its driver clocked out mid-thought and a janitor snoring like a bear by the fire exit.

The lights of the Cross Bronx Expressway bleed through the high window at the end of the hall, a river of ceaselessly flickering red and white even at two in the morning.

Tracking the Russian is easy when he has six inches and fifty pounds on every other man around here. I trail him at a careful distance, cataloguing details like I would for a patient presentation. I note that his right hand hovers low near his hip. Could he be carrying a weapon?

He gets all the way to the far end of the hall, then he stops outside the supply room. The room's only accessed during shift changes for restocking, so at this hour, it's dead space. When a second man opens the door from the inside, the logic of this location choice clicks.

No foot traffic. No reason for anyone to stumble upon them.

The second man is younger, with a thick neck and a buzz cut. When my former patient ducks inside, the door doesn't fully close, so I rush forward to stick a toe in.

I press my body against the wall outside, straining to hear the voices drifting through the gap, but they're mostly speaking in Russian. My brain scrambles through the thick, unfamiliar vocabulary until I grab my phone, pull up a translator app, and raise it toward the crack in the door.

The app identifies a few words, transforming the Russian into English on my screen. *Shipment. Harvest.* And then they switch to clear-as-day English that needs no translation.

"…the Romano problem."

My last name strikes like a defibrillator to the chest. I'm already pressed sideways against the wall, one shoulder flat to the plaster, and now my knees buckle. I slide down until I'm crouching. The wall against my back is the only solid surface left in a corridor that hasn't started to tilt.

Romano. The name could refer to Matteo and his investigation into the trafficking ring, which would mean these men are connected to my brother's murderers.

However, the name could also refer to me. I treated their soldier in the ER and asked him stupid questions about his tattoo, a mark apparently important enough for Marco to have it in his file. Also, the Bratva men saw me treat Marco.

He said they must be watching me. So they may know that the doctor who kept asking questions about their insignia has crossed paths with one of their archenemies.

I could be *the Romano problem*, a loose thread they want to cut before it unravels further.

I'm not sure which possibility terrifies me more.

They're back to speaking in rapid Russian, too fast for my app to process.

As I push off the wall to leave, my hip clips the maintenance cart. In the silence, the clanging of metal as cleaning items roll onto the floor sounds catastrophic.

The supply room door swings open, and the tattooed Russian looks straight at me with a flat calm while the younger one reaches for his hip.

I force on a smile I've manufactured a thousand times for difficult patients. "Hi. Sorry. I came to the supply room for gauze. We're running low in Trauma Bay Two."

The lie sounds reasonable enough and the delivery solid. I can only hope it works.

The tattooed Russian's gaze drops to my badge. His eyes dart across my name once, then twice. When he glances back up, dark recognition overtakes his expression.

"You know what? Never mind." I nod at him and start retreating, attempting to keep my shaky feet from accelerating into a run. I maintain a sharp pace toward the ER, my heart hammering as I pray they don't follow.

The nurses' station is close, and I rush around the long desk, grabbing Jenna by the arm violently enough to slosh her coffee. I pull her toward the corner and quickly swipe my badge to unlock the medication room.

"Call hospital security." My voice is impressively steady. "Right now, please. We need them immediately."

She grabs for her phone with wide eyes as I stand by the narrow window in the medication room door and monitor the corridor.

Nothing.

Security arrives two minutes later. When we step out to meet them, I explain that I spotted two strange men in a restricted area.

We rush in and find the back corridor empty, but the supply room's endless boxes of gauze and IV bags are now lined up to perfection. A hospital is never that neat, so this tells me that the men straightened up before leaving. Aside from that, the men left behind no evidence. Whatever info they met up to exchange they took with them.

Of course.

George Rogers, the gray-haired head of Ashford County Hospital security, peers at me. "You certain about what you saw, Doctor Romano?"

"I wasn't hallucinating, George."

After security leaves, I wander over to the staff backroom to make myself some chamomile tea, hoping its warm floral steam will soothe my frayed nerves. I slump into a hard plastic chair in a quiet corner, my mind raving with how close I'd come to danger.

I'm still sipping the tea I can't taste when Marco Santori saunters through door like he's the president of the Ashford County Hospital Board. Today, he wears deep brown trousers and a gray shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his forearms. A protruding vein under the skin of his tense jaw trips up my pulse.

He finds me in approximately forty-five seconds. Either he memorized the hospital's layout for fun—which is on-brand for him—or one of my colleagues sold me out. Given the way Jenna reacts to tall, handsome men with expensive watches, I have a working theory about which one.

He stops just inside the doorway of the break room and stares at me.

This isn't a glance or a casual look. He assesses me fully, from the top of my messy bun to my white-knuckled grip on the tea mug. Whatever he sees exacerbates the tension in his jaw.

"I'm fine."

Clearly sensing the lie, Marco closes the door behind him, crosses the room, and then, unexpectedly, crouches in front of my chair until we're on the same eye level.

He sits forward, his forearms resting loosely on his thighs. Being this close to him scrambles my mind. It's hard to grasp a coherent thought while

those dark brown glints in his eyes hold me.

I drop my own gaze to the mug, tracing the rim with my thumb.

“Lucia.” In his gruff tone, my name carries weight.

My fingers curl tighter around the mug until the ceramic bites into my palms. In four seconds flat, I cave and start to tell him what happened, as if I were at confession with a dangerously attractive priest. I describe how I followed the tattooed mafia man to the supply room and how I overheard the Russian-language conversation and then my surname.

When I finish, a charged silence descends. He sets his hand on the arm of my chair, stopping just short of my scrub sleeve. The tiny gap between us feels heavy.

He drops his voice. “You’re a target now.”

I swallow. “That seems dramatic. What aren’t you telling me?”

“It isn’t dramatic. I know these men. They aren’t going to leave it to chance or assume that you didn’t hear anything important.”

Every word triggers a landmine of fear.

The Volkov Bratva has had eyes on me ever since I treated their man with the gunshot wound. That sets off alarm bells in my head. The questions I asked that night about his ink and who had shot him didn’t go unnoticed. Now, after being caught eavesdropping, escalation is inevitable.

Escalation.

In medicine, escalation means more intervention, more risk, and the possibility of things going wrong.

“You need protection.” Marco’s tone leaves no room for debate. “My protection.”

I’d have burst into laughter at the offer, but this situation is far from funny. “No.”

His features don’t change. “You understand what happened in that supply room.”

“I understand better than you might expect.” I set my tea on the table with a quiet clink. “You don’t need to worry about me. I’m a grown adult with a medical degree and a working relationship with some of the NYPD. I’ll handle this through the appropriate channels.”

Marco watches with that galling, immaculate composure that suggests he’s several steps ahead. “The appropriate channels include a detective named Mason Dellinger, I believe.”

That was a statement, not a question.

The name hits like cold water. I don’t even bother to ask how he knows about Mason. At this point, nothing surprises me.

“Yes, Detective Dellinger.”

“Dellinger can’t protect you from the Volkov Bratva.” Marco keeps his voice even and soft. “Calling him would be a significant mistake.”

Not knowing what else to do, I shoot to my feet. Sitting feels too much like I’m stuck. He moves back, his eyes never leaving mine. My heart pounds against my ribs in a way that has me sick with worry, my body yearning to surrender while my mind still resists.

“I appreciate the concern.” I scowl, aiming for clinical detachment and landing somewhere too brittle. “However, I’m not getting involved in whatever serves as ‘protection’ in your book. I can already tell I’d regret it.”

I inch toward the door, but his hand closes around my upper arm. The hold isn’t rough. His warm, steady fingers wrap around my elbow and slide down to my wrist, causing my pulse to jump against his rough palm.

“I need you to let me handle this.”

Though subtle, I note the plea in his voice. This man’s entire identity is built around control, strategy, and never needing to ask for permission. But here he is, asking.

My chest flutters as I glance at his hand, then up at his face. Though his expression is composed, I glimpse the tightness beneath. He would never admit this, but he’s worried.

“Handle it how?”

He doesn’t answer immediately, and the heavy pause stretches for several seconds until I realize his answer is in his silence.

“Marco.” I wrench my arm free and pivot to face him fully. “If you send men to confront the people from the supply room and they end up injured, well, I need you to understand that I’m a doctor. My profession has no off switch.” My hands press together. “I can’t stand in this building knowing I was the reason someone died. Even someone who threatened me. That’s a line I won’t cross.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, his eyes firing the same look at me but not betraying his thoughts.

“I hear you.” He draws a sharp breath through his nose.

“You’re a man who probably works alongside these same men you’re warning me about. You share their world and rules. So why turn on your own kind for a stranger?”

His eyes flicker. “Like you said, you don’t understand. You don’t know my world.”

“Why do you suddenly care about the safety of one civilian ER doctor? Is there something you’re not telling me?” I regard him directly. “Does keeping me close serve some hidden purpose for you?”

Caught between what he wants to say and what he can afford to reveal, Marco’s jaw tightens. His eyes grow tortured for an instant before he buries all the emotion.

“I’m just offering help. If you don’t want it, then that’s all right.” The words come out clipped, stripped of the softness he’d offered seconds ago. The man who crouched to meet my eyes vanishes as he straightens to his full height. In his place, I find the guarded and untouchable Marco Santori the rest of the world sees. Frustrated, he stomps out without another glance.

I return to the ER moments later. All of the beeping monitors, stretchers wheeling past, and scattering laughter from the nurses’ station proves the world stands exactly where it’s always been, and I’m the only one whose reality is shifting.

It feels like I’m stuck on a Ferris Wheel that keeps whirling round and round, never knowing when I’ll get off.

I shove the worries aside and lose myself in work, pushing my body toward exhaustion so my mind won’t think. Jenna notices the expression on my face, and for the first time, she refrains from asking me questions.

As soon as my shift ends, I jump in my car and head straight home. I’ve barely staggered in and locked the door when my phone vibrates in my pocket with a text from the unsaved number that invited me to dinner.

I just confirmed that the Bratva are staking out your apartment in unmarked cars. Where are you, Dottoressa?

The next text contains an image of two black SUVs and a blue sedan. I pull the curtain aside and press my face close to the glass, scanning the street below. None of the SUVs are on the road, but the sedan sits down the block. No one in this neighborhood drives that car.

My heart flips in my chest as I type a reply.

I just got home. The blue car is still here, but the others are gone.

His response comes almost instantly.

Pack a bag now. I’m getting you out of there before the Volkovs decide to break down your door. Be ready when I get there.

I stare at the screen while my heart performs what can only be described as an inappropriate dance.

I'm an ER doctor who treats other people's emergencies. Apparently, I'm now also an emergency myself.

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Chapter 6

Marco

The Benedetti *famiglia* runs on loyalty the same way a syndicate runs on cash flow. Cut it off, and everything dies. We all know this. Our ability to fend off our enemies and operate our businesses boils down to our faith in each other.

These aren't trusting times. Eight months ago, we seized power by ousting Gabi Jr., and the fear of his retaliation has hung over us ever since.

The formal dining room in the Benedetti compound, built to intimidate visiting guests and rival crews, does its best work on nights like this. Dark wood paneling climbs the walls, a table long enough for fourteen men stretches beneath a chandelier that has probably witnessed more dead bodies than most city morgues, and portraits of dead Benedetti patriarchs stare from their gilded frames, their expectant expressions carved in oil paint.

I'm settled on Enzo's right. Less than a year ago, he was an out-of-favor enforcer under Gabi Jr.'s reign. Now he rules over the table, and I manage his security.

I'm grateful for the role and his favor, at least for now. Nothing stays stable long in our world, and my luck runs out eventually. So I'll just enjoy the position while I can.

From here, every hand on the table and every twitch of a jaw is visible. Eight capos are seated, plus Nico at the far end. The glow of his tablet screen illuminates his face, his eyes half lidded with feigned boredom.

Tomas Greco, the most untrustworthy man in the room, sits across from me, positioned so we're directly opposite each other.

That's not an accident. Tomas does nothing without calculating first, which makes him dangerous but also transparent.

When Enzo nods for me to speak, I keep my hands flat on the table and my posture calm, open, and controlled.

"Dr. Lucia Romano witnessed a Volkov Bratva conversation regarding organ trafficking." My voice carries without effort. Years of ring announcements and press conferences drilled that into me before the scandal stripped everything else away. "Her name was mentioned specifically. That elevates her from an incidental witness to a potential liability."

No one reacts. They never do at first.

"If the Volkovs decide that she's a risk, they'll remove her. A dead ER doctor attracts unwanted NYPD attention. The fact that she treated me a few days ago also puts us on their radar. We have two options. Bring her under our protection or tip off the cops that the Volkovs have a problem with her."

I don't mention the way she looked in that break room, struggling to hold herself together with a mug of tea. I keep to myself that, when I picture her hurt, my chest clenches like a fist.

Nico speaks before Tomas or anyone else can. "Ashford County is just three blocks from a Volkov-owned front." He scrolls through his tablet without glancing up. "A doctor with access to that facility isn't simply a civilian. She's proximity, and proximity is leverage."

At his declaration, the men exchange looks, their shoulders shifting as their minds begin to analyze.

Then Tomas opens his mouth. "The Romano woman is a civilian complication in a war we can't afford to escalate." The smooth rhythm of his words conveys that he's rehearsed this. "Offering protection invites retaliation. We'd be taking a huge risk for mere sentiment."

His gaze flicks to me before he continues.

"Enzo kept Sophia safe at enormous cost to this family. We're still paying for that decision. Do we really want our new enforcer to commit the same sentimental mistake?"

The room goes quiet.

It takes discipline to not curl my hands into fists. The scar above my eye tingles as my jaw tightens.

Greco's words carry the phantom weight of all the knockout punches I've taken in the ring. He's verbally assaulting me, and I'm itching to launch back with words or violence.

Enzo says nothing for twelve seconds. I count meticulously to prevent myself from speaking out of turn or clocking Tomas's face, though the second option makes for a satisfying fantasy. I want everyone to know what I think about the argument he spent the last few minutes constructing in that whiny, oh-so-reasonable voice.

I'm about a hairsbreadth away from shouting that I'll protect Lucia whether this room approves or not, which I already know is exactly what the padrino does not need to hear in front of these people.

I continue to count the seconds, stay in my chair, and wait impatiently for Enzo to speak.

When he finally does, his tone is measured. He urges caution and insists on gathering more intelligence before committing to a protection arrangement.

His response really means, "Not with Tomas watching" and "She isn't one of ours, and I won't let my family bleed for her on your word alone."

I accept this verdict with a nod because I have no other choice. But acceptance and agreement aren't the same thing, and Enzo knows that too.

The meeting dissolves into controlled murmurs as the chairs scrape the floor. One by one, the capos file out until the long table sits empty. Tomas leaves last, his satisfaction clear in the set of his shoulders. He carries himself with the obvious quiet pleasure of a man who got exactly what he came for. He doesn't glance back on his way out.

I watch the doorway for a while once he disappears, the unease of being outmaneuvered settling in my chest. Tomas didn't argue against Lucia's protection tonight. He simply cautioned the other players in a subtle warning that did the job for him.

I linger alone in that room long after it's been emptied, running scenarios in my head and turning over how to keep Lucia safe without handing Tomas the ammunition he wants. Every option I consider has the same flaw. None of them are enough.

I'm still lounging in my chair and considering possibilities when Izzy appears in the doorway in her workout clothes. Her hearing protection is

still hanging around her neck, so she must have been practicing her aim at the shooting range again. Izzy's nothing if not relentless. While patriarchy and ego might blind most of the capos from taking advantage of her prowess, I doubt any of them doesn't know she's one of the most brutal operatives Enzo has.

I'd have loved to have her in that meeting today to have my back and challenge Tomas's bullshit with no care in the world. But her action in the coup still makes the dissenting capos twitchy, so Enzo is keeping her in a non-active role.

Izzy hates being sidelined, but Enzo assuming the throne suddenly has already rocked the Benedetti world too much, and if we don't keep the capos happy now, the whole mafia structure will come crashing down.

She's sneering as she leans against the doorframe. "So it went well."

"It didn't."

I brief her, and she listens without interrupting. When I finish, she studies me.

"Make your doctor untouchable."

The words hit my chest like a bomb. I stare at her. "Explain."

"A target is a target until she becomes something else." She crosses her arms. "Make her your *fidanzata*. Turn her into the woman Marco Santori will spend his future with. Nobody touches the head of security's woman, whether it's the Volkovs, Tomas, or anyone else. Not if they want to keep their hands attached to their bodies. That's what Enzo did by marrying Sophia."

The idea hits me with a hard clarity. *She's right.* An engagement changes the board and forces the capos to choose between challenging me directly or falling in line.

For that plan to work, though, I'd need Enzo's approval.

"I've got to go." I jump to my feet, rushing past a chuckling Izzy to seek out Enzo.

I find him in his study, his desk lamp casting long shadows across the documents he's engrossed in. Sophia's curled in the armchair behind him, reading a book.

I give him no preamble because Enzo doesn't like preamble.

"I want to propose a fake engagement to the doctor."

He sets down his pen and surveys me. Sophia's book lowers an inch.

"You're asking me or telling me?"

“Asking. Izzy suggested the tactic. It renders Lucia untouchable, neutralizes Tomas’s argument that she’s a liability, and gives us cover to investigate Bruno Caruso through her brother’s case files.”

Enzo silently weighs the strategy against the risk. Then he glances at Sophia, and an agreement that I’m not privy to passes between them.

“Do it.” He picks his pen back up. “But Marco, if this blows up, it’s on you. And if you hurt that woman, Sophia will deal with you before I ever get the chance.”

Sophia smiles from behind her book and doesn’t deny it.

Now I have to talk to Lucia. Bringing her over and snapping the Benedetti tag on her like a brand should work in theory, but it also binds her to a world she didn’t ask for. She’ll probably say no to that world. I’ll lead with the case files. If protection won’t sway her, the chance to hunt her brother’s killers will. The only thing more dangerous than offering her a fake, life-saving future would be admitting I want it to be real.

Calling ahead would give her time to build an argument before I reach her building. She’s the kind of woman who can dismantle a man with logic and a raised eyebrow. If I’m to convince her, I’ve got to meet her in person, but I still need to give her some sort of warning.

I pull out my phone and shoot her a text.

Pack a bag now. I’m getting you out of there before the Volkovs decide to break down your door. Be ready when I get there.

The clock reads eleven forty-seven at night when I pull up outside her apartment. Rain slides down the windshield in steady lines, blurring the city into streaks of red and white. I usually drive myself when I need to think because the rhythm and control let me focus.

Tonight, even that doesn’t help. Tomas’s voice keeps replaying in my head. He’s right that Lucia is a complication. Ever since a 5’3 ER doctor with sharp green eyes told me to let her finish stitching and to get out of her trauma bay, my focus has been shot.

The engagement should be a purely strategic act meant to shield her. It should have nothing to do with the fact that my body stirs whenever I’m within a few feet of her.

Just like it’s doing now as my knuckles rap on her door. She answers before I can knock a second time.

Over her shoulder, my eyes catch the mid-size, practical suitcase sitting on her bed. Her laptop bag is by the door, and a bundle wrapped in a t-shirt

sits on top of the pile, a corner of a wooden frame peeking out.

That must be something important to her.

For half a second, I wonder what it is, then I push inside without waiting for permission. The small apartment is unmistakably hers. Medical journals stack up like an uneven Jenga tower on the wall, right under a windowsill that holds a dying succulent. The scent of coffee fills the air, and a hint of jasmine lingers just beneath.

This is the most civilian space I've entered in years, and I become aware of how much of my life leaves marks that no amount of scrubbing can erase.

"I got your message." She fidgets with the edge of her curtain, barely meeting my eyes.

"I know."

"So where are you taking me?"

I lay out the proposal the way Izzy suggested, telling her how a clean and efficient fake engagement can offer her Benedetti protection. That will give us the cover we need to investigate Bruno Caruso and the men who killed her brother.

After I finish, she stares at me. Then she laughs. Not the dry or sarcastic huff I've heard her give a few times but a real laugh, sharp and a little wild.

"You're crazy." She covers her mouth and shakes her head. "You're actually clinically insane, and if you want, I can write you a referral to a really good psychiatric care facility."

My lack of a smile earns a double take from her as she wonders how serious I am. I let the offer sit between us until her laughter thins and dies before nodding toward her suitcase.

"Do you think the two men you overheard discussing your name are joking as well? They're still down the street in that sedan."

I slowly cross the room toward her as she glares. I'm about an inch away from her when her tongue darts out to wet her lips, leaving them shining in the dim light.

I don't plan to kiss her.

The desire crashes over me unexpectedly, a dawning moment that I respond to the way I was trained to respond in the ring. I read the opening, close the distance, and plant my mouth on hers before either of us can think.

The shock of contact spreads warmth across my skin as I drag my lips across her soft, full mouth. Our breaths mingle until the heady scent of

jasmine consumes my senses entirely.

Her hands fist in my shirt, tugging me toward her instead of pushing me away. I brace one hand against the wall beside her head and wrap the other around the curve of her jaw to tip her face closer. She kisses me back with the same force, like she's been holding this desperate urge in as long as I have.

For a few seconds, the world narrows to just her breath and the heat of her mouth.

Then she finally shoves me back.

I let her. We stay here, breathing hard, the air between us so charged that I can taste it.

"I saw a car circle my block three times after I came home today." She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, smudging her lipstick. Some of it must be on my lips. "And that's the only reason I'm agreeing to this. That, and while we're playing this game, you *will* help me dig into the people responsible for Matteo's death." She delivers the line as if she had drafted the terms of the contract mid-kiss.

"It's good that you're accepting this." I raise my eyebrow. "Earlier today, you were wondering about my motives. No longer interested in why I'm offering you my family's protection?"

Her chin lifts, her eyes narrowing as she recalculates. "I figure I'll find out your angle soon enough. Just need to stay alive long enough." Her breath is unsteady as she murmurs. "And I can offer my services by treating your injuries, no questions asked, while we track down Bruno Caruso. Sound good?"

I nod and stretch out my hand. "Okay."

She accepts it with a firm grip, but her pulse jumps against my thumb, sparking tingles across my skin.

I inhale a gulp of air. "I'll make arrangements to distract your tail."

I'm already at the door when she calls out my name.

"Marco."

She stands in the center of the apartment, one hand resting on the wrapped frame. The defiance in her posture can't fully disguise the tremors running through her fingers.

"If you use me or this arrangement for a selfish reason and renege on our deal to find my brother's killers," Lucia doesn't blink, "I will make your life significantly more difficult than the Volkov Bratva ever could."

I hold her gaze. “I believe you.”

It’s the most honest thing I’ve said in months.

The moment I step outside her apartment building, rain hits my face. I quickly duck into the car and call Nico.

“It’s done,” I tell him. “She’ll be coming with me.”

He exhales. “Tomas called Viktor Volkov. I need you to know that before you bring her here.”

The engine ticks in the quiet. It almost feels like the dread inside my body is ticking with it, like a timebomb.

Tomas has always been careful, always precise. And it occurs to me that he’s now thrown all caution to the wind because he’s desperate.

Desperate men are dangerous. If Tomas is feeding rival gangs, a war is brewing, and I just dragged Lucia into the cross fire.

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Chapter 7

Lucia

I’m sitting in the passenger seat of Marco’s car with my suitcase in the trunk and Matteo’s photo in my lap. I have the distinct clinical awareness that I may have committed the worst mistake of my adult life, and I once told my surgical residency director that his methodology was outdated in front of twelve second-year residents and a visiting trauma fellow.

The George Washington Bridge swallows us in a rush of steel and suspension cables as Manhattan shrinks in the side mirror until it’s just a smudge of light behind us. Twenty minutes later, the city scatters, replaced by tree-lined roads, ivy-covered walls, and the quiet wealth of northern New Jersey.

The Benedettis are clearly the embodiment of old money.

We arrive past one in the morning to a compound lit so well that I can barely spot any shadows. Floodlights wash the stone walls in pale gold, throwing sharp shadows across manicured grounds. Iron gates gleam under lamps mounted to pillars, and security cameras sit tucked into ivy, the tiny red dots of their indicator lights blinking like trapped fireflies.

This kind of surveillance would earn a respectful nod from a Secret Service agent, while a real estate agent would likely develop a stress rash.

Outside the car, the gate slides open with a low mechanical hum.

I mentally catalogue our entry so I can construct an exit plan. I seek out blind spots, noting the compound’s outline in a way that I didn’t bother to the last time I visited.

If someone fires from the tree line, where do I run? How far to the nearest stone column for cover?

When we come upon a kitchen garden along the eastern wall, I lose focus. The aromas of rosemary, tomatoes, and leafy greens with warm herbal scents entice my nose. A large German Shepherd trots parallel to the fence with the deeply affronted expression of an animal whose entire life's purpose is built around being hostile to strangers.

Marco drives through the compound, dashboard lights carving shadows along his jaw and the open collar of his shirt. He's got just one hand on the wheel, and his forearm flexes as he drives. I can't stop watching the tendons ripple beneath his olive skin, and my eyes trace the veins from his wrist to where they disappear under his rolled sleeve.

I glance away, hoping he didn't catch me staring.

He parks near the detached stone structure that I visited a few days back and cuts the engine.

"My quarters."

I take in the building, then turn to him.

"I've seen your 'quarters,' Marco. One room. One bed. Please tell me you've made other arrangements."

His pause confirms my dread. Before I can spiral into the logistical horror of square footage and mattress dimensions, the door to the main house opens.

Sophia Ricci, who I recognize from my last visit, carries out a casserole dish covered in foil. Her apron, which says "Al Dente or Nothing" in hand-embroidered letters, doesn't match my mental profile of the Benedetti padrino's wife. Her belly bump doesn't slow her down much, and she seems radiant and energetic for a woman in her second trimester.

She waves us into the house, and her gaze finds mine the moment I step through the door. Without breaking eye contact, she passes the casserole sideways to Marco, who instinctively accepts it.

"I could tell from your text that you didn't eat today, so I made enough lasagna for two." Her next words are warm, unhurried, and entirely for me. "I figured you'd be hungry and that he wouldn't think to ask."

I anticipated suspicion and even veiled threats. I thought the women here would look down on me or hate me for not being a typical crime lord's wife.

Instead, I get lasagna.

“Thank you.” My words feel both insufficient and dangerously sincere.

She smiles like she knows that.

The side door swings open, and another woman I met at my first visit to the compound strides in from what looks like the gym. Isabella’s workout clothes are damp with sweat, and a Glock’s strapped to her hip like an accessory. She offers none of Sophia’s easy-going welcome as she circles me, her eyes sharp and assessing.

“I half-expected you to not show up.”

“With men camping outside my apartment, I didn’t think I had much choice.” I release a dry chuckle. “I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

A flicker of what might be approval crosses her face.

“You’ll do.” She grins and addresses Marco. “She’ll need range time and hand-to-hand training. Don’t wait on that.”

Izzy sweeps out of the room before I can ask whether I’m undergoing onboarding or hazing.

In her wake, a lean man with shaggy blond hair and a heavy beard appears at the doors, a tablet tucked under his arm. He extends his hand while sizing me up in a single glance.

“Nico Ferrante. I handle strategy for the *famiglia*.” His grip remains firm as his ice-blue eyes trace over me. “Welcome to the compound, Doc. Marco talks about you more than he’d like me to mention.”

Marco shoots him a look that could curdle milk. In response, Nico grins and disappears.

Later, I’m posted up on the couch in Marco’s quarters when a tall, ruggedly handsome man strides into the space with Sophia beside him. Framed in the lamplight, the two of them radiate an effortless aura of power and warmth.

When the man comes forward, Marco steps in front of me and gives a nod.

“Meet the padrino, Lucia.”

Enzo Ricci towers over me. Silver strands weave through his dark hair at the temples, and he wears his authority like a holster for a myriad of weapons.

He studies me, and I meet his gaze because glancing away from a man like this would be a costly mistake. “Thank you for having me, Mr. Ricci. I understand the unusual nature of this arrangement.”

His expression doesn’t change, but I catch the faintest softening before he shrugs. “Any friend of Marco’s has a place here.” He turns to Sophia. “We should let them settle in.”

Sophia squeezes my hand once. “Please join us for dinner tomorrow evening at the main villa. We’d love to get to know you properly.”

Once they leave, the room shrinks to just Marco and me.

Marco carries my suitcase inside and sets it down. For the first time, I take in the full scope of the open-concept space. A bed sits against the far wall, a desk by the window. Closer to the center, a matching leather couch and armchair face a low rug, creating a small living room zone. A walnut bar separates the area from the narrow kitchenette along the back.

I stare at the huge mattress topped with a cloud-thick dark gray duvet, the kind of bedding that swallows you whole the moment you sit down. After months of sleeping on a hospital break room cot and a lumpy apartment mattress, it’s disturbingly inviting. I still can’t stop thinking about how it’s the only *bed* in the room.

“I’ll take the couch.” Marco waves toward the leather sofa by the armchair, reading my face before I can speak.

I look at the couch, then at him. Though a generous size by most standards, the sofa falls short by about three inches and can’t contain the 6’2 man currently offering to fold himself onto it.

“Fine.” I place my plate on the kitchenette counter and claim the bed, pulling back the duvet with the territorial efficiency of a woman establishing borders.

He opens a drawer, selects a gray t-shirt, and tosses it over to me. “For sleeping. Unless you packed your preferred pajamas.”

I did, in fact. A perfectly reasonable set of pajamas waits in my suitcase three feet away. Instead, I pick up his shirt, the cotton soft and worn and carrying his scent in every fiber. I convince myself it’s a practical choice. If I must sleep in an unfamiliar bed, then I can at least enjoy the comfort of an oversize shirt.

In the bathroom, while changing, I refuse to examine why I chose his shirt over my own pajamas.

For the next two hours, I lie in the dark listening to him shift, grunt, and shift again. The leather creaks every time, so no nighttime hush ever gets a chance to fall. A man built like Marco Santori can’t sleep on a couch designed for reading and afternoon naps.

At some point, the medical professional in me overrides my petty satisfaction.

"Marco." My voice cuts through the dark.

The creaking stops. "Yeah?"

"Get in the bed. You're going to wreck your spine, and I don't want to be treating another injury."

A pause. "You sure?"

"I'm a doctor. I'm not going to let you destroy your lumbar vertebrae out of chivalry." I reach for the throw pillow from the couch that he'd tossed aside and place it firmly down the center of the mattress. "There. I'll be on this side of the pillow. The other side is yours. You don't have a problem with boundaries, do you?"

The mattress dips as he lowers himself onto it. "I've respected boundaries my entire life. You shouldn't worry about the pillow."

"Good. Stay on your side."

"I am."

"Good."

In the settling silence, his presence beside me pulls like gravity in a way I'm not prepared for. I stare at the ceiling, reminding myself this is a purely medical decision. For the sake of spinal health and nothing else.

I almost believe it.

I'm a grown woman with a medical degree and a working understanding of difficult situations. Well, that's what I tell myself. Then I think about this king bed, the thick walls, the armed men outside, and the man who kissed me like the world was ending a few hours ago, and I falter.

Slipping out of bed, I head to a window near the corner of the room. I open it and hang my head outside, foolishly hoping the smooth breeze will sweep the thoughts about the kiss out of my mind.

The next evening, I'm sitting at a Benedetti dinner, unsuccessful in my attempt to convince Marco I'd rather be alone.

The main villa's dining room, clearly designed for a large family, features a table that seats twelve. Tonight, nine people have settled in around the table.

Enzo sits at the head, with Sophia to his left. Across from me, Izzy lounges with a relaxed posture and active eyes. Nico Ferrante occupies the far end. With his tablet tucked beneath his chair, he somehow manages to appear both bored and vigilant. Three capos—older, as yet unintroduced men with weathered faces who glance at me with disciplined curiosity—fill the remaining seats.

The candelabras between us are tall enough to double as medieval weaponry if the meal goes poorly.

I'm seated at Marco's right, and not by accident. In rooms like this, proximity to power sends a message.

Waiters pour wine into crystal glasses and deliver immaculate dishes arranged on heavy silver plates that probably have ancestral importance.

I smooth my hands over my dark green wrap dress, the only dinner-appropriate piece I packed, which I originally purchased for a hospital fundraiser and have since repurposed for two funerals and one awards ceremony where I pretended to enjoy rubbery chicken. Though a suitable design for this dinner, the outfit doesn't exactly scream "mafia fiancée."

Marco glances my way for a beat. His gaze starts at my face, dips, then returns with an unreadable heat that kicks my pulse into a deeply inconvenient stutter. Wordlessly, he reaches out to hold my hand, and my heart thuds loudly.

Though his closest allies might know the truth, playing his loving sidepiece to the other eight at the table turns out to require more physical contact than anticipated. The moment we entered the room, his hand settled at the small of my back, the placement a calculated, deliberate chess move designed to draw the capos' attention. And while I knew the gesture meant nothing, my hammering heart rate would beg to differ.

Marco leans toward me, staying close all night. That emboldens me to engage in conversation. I ask Sophia about her school, then I question Nico about the *famiglia* while also partaking in some small talk with the capos.

All night, Marco's body is tilted near mine. *He's good at this.* He plays the role so well that I have to remind myself it's not real.

It's a performance, Lucia.

No matter how gently he brushes crumbs from my lips, or how genuine his smile looks when he peers into my eyes, I must consider the pretense.

He doesn't make it easy, though. He's so sensitive that when the conversation moves past me and I start to unravel, he suddenly reaches for

me under the table, his thumbs tracing one slow circle that I know he means to be reassuring. Instead, it fills me with wild, feral heat.

Focus, Lucia. Focus.

As the night wears on, I become more and more tense. Aside from being the pretend partner of an enforcer in a top crime family, I'm not accustomed to someone so touchy and attentive. Still, I manage to keep my smile on as I wonder how many people at this table actually buy this facade.

At the start of the second course, the air shifts.

I can feel it like a sixth sense. Too much time spent in the ER, with souls lingering between life and death, has sharply honed my perception. All the tension built throughout the night snaps taut as the Russian man from the hospital strolls into the room.

He looks younger under these lights, and I'm frozen in my seat as Enzo rises and introduces him as Viktor Volkov.

Tonight, he wears a suit like it was sewn onto him. He carries himself with relaxed confidence, a strange quality for someone supposedly among enemies. Perhaps his two men—who stand guard at the door behind him—have him covered.

Enzo greets him with a warmth so carefully measured that it could be weighed on a gram scale. Then Viktor's eyes find me and narrow. When Enzo identifies me as Marco's *fidanzata*, Viktor bares all his teeth.

"I heard that Marco was keeping company with a doctor." The faintest trace of a Russian accent curls around his words. "How charming that a man in Marco's line of work would choose someone who heals for a living."

The entire table settles into silence. Everyone has turned my way, but my attention stays locked on Viktor. Though he doesn't say the words aloud, I can almost read his mind.

I know who you are, Doctor. I know what you saw. And I'm reminding you that I know.

Marco lifts his hand from my thigh to rest it over mine on the table.

"Thank you, Viktor." Marco offers a pristine smile. "Variety is the spice of life, no?"

Viktor nods, his grin widening again as he raises his glass. "To variety and love."

Once the whole table responds to his toast, he takes his seat.

For the rest of the evening, Viktor talks business with Enzo as though we're at a corporate retreat, and the rest of the table chatters on.

I catalogue Viktor's tells like I do symptoms. His left hand, which stays flat against the table, never fully settles. I detect a fractional pause in his speech before statements that come out too smooth, as though he carefully selects which version to serve with the wine.

Under the table, Marco's fingers lace through mine. When Viktor's gaze slides toward us, Marco's thumb presses against my knuckles, the gesture timed perfectly.

When a set of flutters buzz in my belly, I give myself another reminder.

He's doing this for the scrutinizing audience. It's all a protective, possessive performance.

When I squeeze his hand back, I add a mental note that I did it only because the role demands it, but I can't ignore how much steadier I feel with my hand in his.

Toward the end of dinner, Viktor pivots in his seat and fixes his eyes on me, staying conversational and pleasant. "Have you been enjoying your new accommodations? Found anything interesting to keep yourself busy with? I presume that you're on leave from the hospital."

The room stills, and I don't need to turn my head to know that ten pairs of eyes are locked on me.

I meet his gaze over a sea of candlelight and crystal. "I've been taking the time to catch up on some reading I've been putting off."

It's technically true. I was researching organized crime mortality rates and the average life expectancy of seemingly invincible mafia men all afternoon.

"Amazing." Viktor chuckles. "How industrious." He lifts his glass and tilts his head in my direction. "To the doctor. May she stay safe and happy in her new home."

If Viktor's plan is delivering the most threatening toast in a warm tone, then the chill crawling down my spine is proof he's succeeded.

No one says anything more, and everyone drinks. So do I, because the alternative would be letting him see that his threat landed.

Back in Marco's quarters, the silence is different and less performative. I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the pillow boundary I established earlier while imagining a geopolitical border rather than a decorative cushion on a mattress.

Somehow, I've found myself fake-engaged to a mafia enforcer. I now live in a compound that hosted a Russian crime boss for dinner. My life might be in danger. And yet, my brain keeps circling around how Marco's hand felt in mine.

The bathroom door opens, and he steps out with damp hair and a towel slung low on his hips. His arrogance should infuriate me, and to a degree, it does. I refuse to acknowledge how irritatingly handsome he looks fresh from the shower.

He doesn't ask about my concerns, but he studies my face for a long time. Then he nods toward the bed where my pillow barrier still holds the center line. "Get some rest. Whatever your worries, they'll keep until morning."

With that, he switches off the overhead light. Only the lamp on his side of the bed stays illuminated. He lies on top of the covers with his hands folded over his chest, his gaze fixed above him.

I want to ask him why he didn't warn me about Viktor Volkov joining us for dinner—and ask how he personally knows the man—but a part of me understands that it was all done to show the Bratva I'm under Benedetti protection.

Instead of arguing, I slip into his gray t-shirt in the bathroom, keeping both my bra and panties on. The fabric carries Marco's scent, clean soap with cedar woven underneath, and it wraps around me like an embrace.

Wordlessly, I climb into bed. As I'm drifting off, Marco's voice cuts through the stillness.

"Viktor plans to test us within the week. He'll stage a confrontation or lob a genuine threat at you to see if I respond like a man working a job…or a man protecting the woman he loves."

I open my eyes wide. "What should I expect?"

His lengthy pause frays my nerves. When he speaks, his voice is akin to boots on gravel. "A test."

I don't ask how he knows. I've learned that Marco Santori doesn't make declarations like that without first preparing for them.

Somewhere beyond these stone walls, while I wait for sleep, a dog barks once and falls silent.

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Chapter 8

Marco

I wake up at five fifteen in the morning.

Lucia lies asleep on the left side of the bed, her dark hair loose across the pillow with an abandon she would never allow if she thought anyone was looking.

I cross the room soundlessly, a habit that's been drilled into me for years. At the dresser, I pause to gaze again at her sleeping form, and my jaw tightens.

I slip out to the gym, and minutes later, I'm working up a sweat by lifting the bar I've loaded to one-eighty. Nico finds me here at six thirty, as he always does when he wants to deliver some news in a controlled environment.

He holds two cups of coffee from the compound's kitchen. As I've told him more than once, the brew tastes like a cross between motor oil and cyanide.

Even so, Nico drinks his without complaint. Nico can handle a lot without complaint, a fact I've always found mildly unsettling.

After handing me one of the cups, he pulls up surveillance videos of the Bratva on his tablet. I watch between my reps, noting their increased activity around the hospital district before Nico drops the real reason he's here.

He tells me the word on the street is that the Volkovs are expecting an important shipment in two days. That makes the number of men they have

watching Lucia's hospital strange. If they're gearing up for a major operation, then wasting soldiers on surveillance duty suggests they rank Lucia as a higher priority than we realized.

I set my coffee down as Nico offers one last detail. He found ties between Bruno Caruso and a Volkov shell company holding a registered address two blocks from Ashford County Hospital.

I stop mid-rep, and the bar hovers at my chest for half a second before I rack it. "We need to check this out."

Nico watches me, unsurprised. He knew exactly how I would react to this. He nods once. "That's why I brought it to you so early."

Before Nico goes, I tell him to put Gio's crew on the shell company address. Gio's always been someone I want at my back. He runs his own outfit now, legitimate contracts and clean money, but when I need someone I trust, I call him.

Nico doesn't argue. He knows what Gio and I are to each other.

After thanking him, I towel off and head back to my quarters to shower. The next part of my day involves what I hate most. Hours of sitting at my desk going through documents, reports, and the other paperwork that Enzo insists comes with enforcer duties and managing security lies ahead of me. In the padrino's words, the job requires as much brains as it does brawn.

Brawn has always been my currency, and the only time I tended to use my brain was to outwit an opponent in the ring. Before this promotion, my mental gymnastics rarely included decoding encrypted business jargon.

I'm chewing on the end of my third pencil of the day—I have no actual use for it because I communicate digitally, mostly through text—and at eight forty-seven, in the midst of my mental breakdown, Lucia walks into our quarters. I'm at my desk by the window, files spread everywhere.

Her worn jeans hang low on her hips, and her soft gray sweater has grown thin at the cuffs. She has her hair pulled into a low ponytail, some strands already loose, and she carries a notebook under her arm like an extension of her spine.

Lucia sits across from me and opens to a page with folded edges. She glances up, her gaze direct and assessing.

"I found a clue this morning." She tilts her chin up defiantly. "When you were in the bathroom, I went through Nico's file."

I hold her gaze. "You did?"

"Yes. The one you left on the desk. And I'm not sorry."

Considering she accessed restricted information without clearance, her admission should irritate me. Instead, I'm impressed by her single-minded motivation.

We cluster around the coffee table and spread out documents, hoping we can somehow connect something Matteo left behind to any detail in my Volkov file.

With her laptop, we search for the version of "Bruno Caruso" I never met. I know the trainer, the mentor, and the man who brought pasta to the gym. But we're looking for the criminal who used his athletic medical credentials to engineer a trafficking pipeline and hid these facts from me for years.

As we begin digging into that, I notice how Lucia processes information faster than I do. She works in a precise and systematic way, ruthlessly discarding the irrelevant, just as she does in the ER.

We quickly strip away the dead ends, discarding Bruno's early boxing contacts, gym affiliations that predate the trafficking timeline, and medical licenses that lead nowhere. That leaves us with a narrow corridor of names, dates, and shell companies, all converging on the same eighteen-month window.

Eventually, she points to a date in Matteo's notes. "Here."

The notebook entry references the same shipment date and address Nico flagged this morning.

Her brother wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. Someone silenced him because he got close enough to start piecing together secrets.

And my former coach and father figure seems to be the one behind it all.

Not many people know the extent of my relationship with Bruno Caruso.

Still, I want to tell Lucia.

I keep my eyes on the desk, tracing a scratch in the wood with my thumb. "He wasn't just my trainer."

Lucia shifts closer, waiting, her forearms resting on her knees.

"Bruno was there when I didn't have anyone." My jaw tightens. "He looked at me like I was anything but fragile. He took me into that gym where he used to work with my dad, tossed me gloves, and said, 'Show me what you've got, Santori.'"

I breathe out a chuckle as I continue. “He decided I was worth his time. Do you understand what that does to a kid?”

Lucia’s fingers curl against her palm. “It makes him loyal.”

I nod once. “And grateful. He trained me for ten years. Ten. Under his guidance, I fought in and won competitions. He told me I was the real deal and that I could be great. And when a man like him, the one who shapes the first version of yourself you actually respect, says that, you take it as gospel.”

A sudden silence settles. I look at her and find her composure has cracked. Her lower lip catches between her teeth, and her eyes shine bright with unshed tears. Her knuckles are white as she clutches a forgotten pen. This emotion doesn’t stem from pity, which I would have shut down immediately, but from recognition or perhaps understanding. She lost Matteo just as I lost my father.

She trusted the system to find justice as I trusted Bruno to build my future. And we both learned that the people you believe in most are the ones best positioned to destroy you.

That look on her face sends gratitude blooming in my chest.

“The doping scandal…it’s not what you think.” My hand flattens on the desk. “I never took food, drink, or pills from anybody else. He handed me the performance enhancers himself…said they were for recovery. I never questioned him.”

Lucia’s eyes darken. “And when the news came out?”

“I couldn’t make sense of it. I’d never touched anything that didn’t come from Bruno’s own hands, so how could I have failed a test?” My jaw tenses. “By the time I understood I hadn’t made a mistake, that I’d been set up, it was too late. Bruno’s training had become popular by then, so he had other boys with potential, and I was the disgraced athlete. All of a sudden, I had no endorsements and no future.”

Her breath catches.

“I didn’t see it then. A rising champion is visible. But a fallen one? He can disappear and be repurposed.” I force myself to look at her. “It took me years to piece the truth together. The timing of the scandal, the way he kept tabs on me after, the job offers that came through people connected to him… He dismantled me, planning to remold me into a useful tool. He only failed because I met Enzo and Nico first and joined this *famiglia*.”

When I finish, my fist presses hard against the desk, the tendons standing out under my skin.

Lucia reaches for me without hesitation, her warm and steady palm settling over my knuckles.

Fifteen seconds pass in the quiet.

“He’s going to pay for both of the people he ruined.”

Her quiet, certain words strike a place inside my chest I didn’t know was still exposed.

I wonder if she feels the same heavy buzz around me that I feel around her. Right now, her eyes are softer than I’ve ever seen them. Those emerald green irises glitter intensely, compelling me to close the distance and lean in.

Nothing in her expression suggests she would stop me. I’m pulled toward her with a gravity I don’t entirely trust myself with.

I straighten my spine and clear the lump of emotions from my throat. “We’re going to the gym.”

She gives me the look I’ve come to recognize as argumentative. But logic always threads through her words, too, and I respect that more than I should.

“Why?”

“Because you’re in a situation where knowing how to incapacitate someone could mean the difference between you living or dying.” I meet her eyes. “And you can’t rely on me to be there every time.”

Her chin lifts. “Is that a subtle way of saying that you plan to eventually *not* be there?”

“No.” My response comes out too fast, and she notices, holding my gaze a moment longer.

The resistance in her expression gives way to resolve. Not agreement, but a decision to stop fighting me.

She disappears into the bathroom to change. Ten minutes later, she returns and laces up white sneakers. She wears black skintight leggings that cling to her hips and the round curve of her ass. They fit so well that it takes me a full thirty seconds to notice the faded athletic tank top. I drag my eyes north, because if I don’t force the effort now, I never will.

Soon, I’m back in the compound gym for the second time today, trying to see it through her eyes. The old training pit still sits in the villa basement,

all concrete and cracked mirrors and buzzing fluorescent light, where Enzo breaks in his knuckles when he wants to be left alone.

But this is the space the rest of us claimed, carved out of what used to be a long, narrow stable annex with exposed brick walls and a concrete floor that swallows sound. Training mats line the far end in neat squares beneath a row of pull-up bars bolted to the ceiling joists.

A heavy bag hangs dead center, its leather darkened with years of sweat and impact and flanked by two speed bags that sway faintly whenever someone breezes past. Free weights rack along the side wall in precise ascending order, dumbbells to kettlebells, and a bench press sits beneath the only window, where morning light cuts a single bright stripe across the floor.

A boxing ring takes up the far corner, its ropes already frayed from the hours we've put in, the canvas scuffed and honest.

The whole place smells of chalk dust and old leather, the kind of scent that seeps into concrete and never leaves. Nothing about this room exists to impress. Every piece of equipment earns its place through function, not appearance.

Izzy works out in front of one of the speed bags, landing punches at a rapid, rhythmic pace. She doesn't glimpse over when we enter, and she speaks without breaking her cadence. "Don't train her like one of your fucking boys. Watch her hips, not her hands. Her power needs to come from her core."

She leaves before I can ask for further guidance.

Lucia glances at me. "Does she always do that?"

"She does it less around people she likes."

That earns me an expression I can't fully categorize before we settle into her first lesson, where I teach her about stance, balance, and how she can hold her center of gravity taut, which grants a smaller person the leverage to redirect a larger adversary.

She listens the way she might to a patient's medical history, her eyes fixed on the task as she files the information away. I adjust my instructions, giving her short and precise explanations followed by clear demonstrations.

When I grip her wrist to show the first redirect, I expect hesitation. Most people freeze the first time a bigger body closes in, but she doesn't.

She twists into the redirect with her whole frame, pivoting like I described. For a fraction of a second, I have to shift my weight to stay

upright. Pure delight lights up her face once she realizes she almost knocked me down.

I look away before my mouth betrays me.

We continue, and I correct her stance by placing both hands on her hips in a standard position. There's nothing suggestive about it, yet the warmth of her through the thin fabric is immediate and inconvenient. She adjusts herself before I finish, and my hands remain on her for a couple of seconds without any logical reason.

I step back. Lucia avoids my eyes, obviously trying to hide her reaction to my touch.

"Show me again." She spreads out her arms and legs and settles into a balanced stance.

We run through three more techniques while I fight to maintain my concentration. We're both ignoring that shift in the air. Before we started, she checked the wound on my flank, prodding the tissue adhesive with clinical fingers and declaring it "closed enough for light contact, but if you tear this open again, I'm stapling it shut." I took that as permission to proceed.

In the fourth round, I decide to demonstrate a counter-grab. My hands are on her ribs, so near her breasts that my timing slips a fraction.

Taking advantage of that opportunity, she drives a sharp elbow into my solar plexus, well clear of my healing side and precise enough that I know she aimed deliberately.

The impact drives air from my lungs, and I stagger backward, a bit winded. She stares at me, hovering between being horrified and deeply satisfied.

I straighten and suck in a slow breath. "Again."

Her brows knit. "I hit you."

"I know. Try it again. This time, do it on purpose."

She hits cleaner this time, with more force. The strike catches exactly where I've told her it should, reverberating up through my rib and punching a sharp wheeze from my lungs.

A short, surprised laugh escapes her, and my chest tightens for reasons completely unrelated to the hit.

I show her how to escape a chokehold. She reads the reversal mid-move, and her twist knocks us off-balance, causing us to crash to the floor. Her back hits the mat, and my forearm braces across her collarbone. I pin

her to the floor, though not roughly enough to hurt her. We're both breathing heavily.

Three very, *very* long seconds that pass.

Dark green flecks I haven't noticed before appear in her eyes, and her hands rest on my forearm where it crosses her chest.

Not pushing. Not pulling. Just present.

"You're dangerous." The words come out as intended, but my tone doesn't.

"Don't act surprised."

That's a classic Lucia Romano response.

I push off the mat and offer her my hand, which she accepts without hesitation. Her hair has come loose from its tie and fallen around her face. She looks entirely herself, and the room shrinks around us.

I pull a small folding knife from the equipment drawer by the door and press it into her palm. The surgical-grade blade has a titanium handle and is light enough that a person could forget they're carrying it.

"Marco, I'm a doctor. I don't carry weapons."

"Think of the knife as more of a tool. You have tools at the hospital, yes? Equipment to help get the job done? Same idea." I close her fingers around the handle. "For when I'm not around."

She stares at me, then at the knife, her teeth grinding into her lower lip as she works through an argument she assembles and dismantles in real time. Heaving a sigh, she slips it into her pocket without a word.

I tell her to cool down with stretches and run through the first three redirects on her own until the movements feel automatic. She nods, already resetting her stance. I leave before the sight of her, flushed and focused, undoes what remains of my discipline.

My phone buzzes on the shelf, and I pick it up to find several messages from Nico.

Caruso has resurfaced. We've had feelers out for months, but he's been a ghost. No financial footprint, no travel records, nothing. Until now.

A contact in Naples spotted him meeting with a known Volkov agent on the ground. Whatever they're planning involves a shipment, and the timing is no coincidence. This started the same week the Bratva began surveilling Lucia. I think she's connected to this, Marco. Either as leverage or as a loose end they want tied off.

Apparently, the threads of this case are all unraveling simultaneously.

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Chapter 9

Lucia

The fluorescent lights of Trauma Bay One glare overhead, and the sharp scent of antiseptic burns the back of my throat.

Matteo lies on the gurney, blood soaking through several layers of packing that bloom red no matter how much pressure I apply. My hands slide across his skin, slick and sticky. I'm pressing, pressing, pressing against a wound that won't stop seeping his essence, and somewhere beneath the panic, I already know it will never stop, that no amount of pressure in the world can prevent the inevitable.

"Get me another unit!" My dream voice shouts hoarsely.

This time, I'm both the attending and the sister, feeling like I'm split down the center and neither half can do enough to save my brother.

Though Matteo's lips move, his eyes are already losing their light.

You should have been faster, Lu.

I wake up gasping.

In the dark room, my lungs draw in air like I've surfaced from underwater. The pillow border I constructed with such stern diplomacy has been knocked askew.

Marco leans against the headboard on top of the covers, wearing jeans but no shirt, his boots kicked off onto the floor as if he'd just come back from wherever he goes at these hours and flopped onto the comforter without bothering to get ready for bed. Faint light spills from a table lamp

and catches a scar that curves across his left side. My eyes linger on this memento of the wound I stitched.

His disheveled hair falls messily across his forehead, almost obscuring the look in his eyes. He doesn't appear startled, which means he was already awake. He probably watched my nightmare unfold.

I sit up, cover my face with my hands, and then begin a calming breathing exercise. In for four, hold for four, out for four. I picked up the tactic in med school back when my panic had sharper teeth and I still needed to learn how to appear unaffected.

The sheets are cool against my legs, and the room smells like cedar, soap, and the gym. Like Marco.

He says nothing, just stays still beside me. That simple act reassures me more than any words could.

"I dream about it at least twice a week." My voice vibrates against my palms.

Even when I lower my hands and stare at the ceiling, he remains quiet. "I was there when Matteo died. They brought him to my ER, and I failed him both as his doctor and as his sister."

My explanation comes out flat and uninflected, like I'm delivering lab results. But I can't keep my tone together on the last few words, and a sob overwhelms my voice.

He moves then, his hand closing on my shoulder and drawing me toward his body in one unhurried motion. I relinquish control and allow him to tug me close until my face presses into the curve of his neck, where his pulse beats against my cheek. I relax into his warm skin, solid muscles, and the comforting rise and fall of his breathing.

The contact rips away a blockage behind my sternum, like a door held shut for too long finally coming off its hinges. He settles his arm around my shoulders, and I let his heartbeat calm me.

Nobody has cradled me like this since Matteo died.

But now, Marco carves out space, deliberately and without conditions, for me to fall apart.

He doesn't try to fix the void or fill it or talk me back from the edge. He pulls me close, his thumb brushing one long, slow caress across my shoulder. The small gesture breaks the damn inside me.

I close my eyes.

The clinical labels won’t stick, not with the slow buzz his thumb sparked. Not with the warmth of his bare chest bleeding through my thin shirt. Not with his breath stirring my hair and the tingles now going amok on my scalp.

Heat builds low in my belly, and no amount of medical terminology can reclassify what I’m actually experiencing. I move against him, my cheek sliding from the curve of his neck to rest against his chest.

“I had this terrible feeling.” My voice sounds muffled against the fabric. “The week before it happened, he texted me a message that didn’t make any sense, but I was on a double shift with three critical patients, so I told myself I’d look closer at it on the weekend.”

The weekend came too late.

I pause and sniffle. Except for an increase in his heartbeat, Marco still doesn’t respond.

“I was tired and thought the message could wait.” My throat closes up. “If I had called him more often or paid him more attention or even suspected that he was involved with dangerous people, then…”

The guilt’s had two years to calcify, and it’s wedged under my sternum like a foreign body.

By this point in my tale, most people interrupt me with reassurances or insist I’m not to blame. Marco does neither. He just cradles me, and after a long moment, his voice comes from above my head, deep and rough with truth.

“When the charges first came in, I tried to fight them.”

I grow still against him.

“I hired lawyers with the money I had saved for five years. I sat in rooms and listened to men describe me as a cheat and a fraud. I told them the truth as I understood it then, that I’d never knowingly taken anything, that the only supplements I used came from my own trainer. I kept thinking that if I explained it clearly enough, they would understand.” He exhales. “They didn’t. And I couldn’t explain the one thing that mattered, because I didn’t understand it myself yet.”

His chest rises and falls under my cheek.

“There was a version of me before the disgrace who I believed in. But by the time the trial was over, the old me felt like someone I had read about instead of someone I’d been.”

I curl my fingers in the denim at his waist. For the first time in two years, I don't feel as if I'm bearing my grief alone in a sterile, brightly lit room. In this darkness, we share our sadness.

I can't pinpoint the moment the tension changes.

His hand strokes the back of my neck, and his fingers slide through the loose strands of my hair. My cheek still rests against his chest, but when I tilt my face up, the blackness envelops me, thicker, closer, and heated with passion.

His eyes soon find mine, every guard he usually carries gone. His lips part, but nothing comes out. He just peers at me like I'm the answer to a question he's been afraid to ask. Marco's many things—controlled, observant, and occasionally infuriating—but I never would have imagined him like this, completely unguarded.

"Lucia." He says just my name in that deep, serious tone. "I want to kiss you. If you don't want that, tell me to stop."

I don't refuse him. I don't say anything at all.

I lift my hand to the back of his neck and pull him down to me. His lips settle on mine in a soft, tentative, barely-present brush, like he's bracing for me to change my mind.

I need this because I'm tired of keeping it together and following the thread of Matteo's death down every dark corridor. I've been alone, always alone, and I forgot I was allowed to want things.

Warm, present Marco can help me temporarily forget my pain. Perhaps my selfishness runs deeper than I'm willing to admit, but I can't bring myself to care.

My fingers twist into his hair, and I let out a small, desperate whine against his lips when I feel a tremor coursing through him. His arm bands around my waist, and he tugs me closer until I'm half in his lap with no space left between us.

I feel *everything*. The solid wall of his chest. The rough denim of his jeans against my bare thighs. The unmistakable press of his growing arousal against my hip.

His urgent mouth brazenly bites, nips, and grazes mine. His unmistakable desire mingles with the restraint corded in his shoulders and the strain in his hand that spreads across my lower back. His fingers dig in just shy of bruising as he struggles to hold back.

I don't want him to.

“Marco.” I whisper his name against his lips, and he shudders like the noise unwinds part of him. His composure cracks, just a fraction, and the hunger beneath surfaces.

His mouth trails down my jaw, my throat, and the sensitive crook of my neck. With the enthusiastic way he nibbles me, I’ll surely have hickeys tomorrow. I tip my head back and let him explore. His lips, tongue, and teeth kiss and scrape my neck, overloading my senses until I let out a low, wanton moan, shift my hips into his, and grind against his already stiff length.

“If you want to stop, tell me.” Marco murmurs similar words as before against my skin as his hands slide under the sleep shirt. His rough palms climb up my sides, and when his thumbs brush the undersides of my breasts, I gasp.

“I don’t want you to stop.” My voice isn’t my own. It’s broken, already pleading.

He lifts his head and gazes at me. Even in the dark, the intensity of his hungry eyes causes my stomach to flip and my cunt to clench with anticipation.

“You’re sure?”

Instead of answering, I lean back and pull my shirt over my head. His breath hitches. I hear it and feel it at once. His chest stops moving for one suspended second, his caress freezing on my ribs. Then his calloused hands are on me again, cupping my breasts through the thin lace of my bra. His thumbs drag over my nipples through the fabric, and they pebble instantly, aching for more.

“*Dio mio*. You have no idea what you do to me.”

“Show me.”

A moment later, he lowers me onto the bed and settles over me. His cock nudges my thigh, and my body responds before my brain can catch up. As my back arches and my legs part, a soft whimper escapes my throat. His abs flex as he holds himself above me, drowning me in that sea of sensation and heat.

He unclasps my bra, watching my face as my breasts fall free and then closes his mouth over one nipple. His hot, wet tongue circles the peak before he sucks gently. I cry out, my hands fisting in his hair to keep him in place. He switches to the other breast, worshipping that one too. I feel the

pull of it deep in my belly and then between my thighs, where I'm already soaked and throbbing.

His mouth traces a path down past my stomach, grazing each inch. He stops at the waistband of my underwear and peers up at me, his dark eyes questioning. I nod, breathless, and he hooks his fingers in the soft fabric before drawing it past my hips and ass until I'm completely bare before him. As he strips them from my legs, he kisses my knees, calves, and ankles.

I'm trembling with need and wearing nothing but the damp evidence of my desire. I instinctively close my thighs, attempting to generate any bit of friction, but he pushes them gently apart with his knees.

"Look at you." He trails one finger down my sternum, between my breasts, and over my stomach before stopping where I need him most. He hovers just above my clit, drinking in the pure heat radiating from me. "So beautiful. *Così dannatamente bella*. And already so wet for me."

I can feel my arousal slicking my thighs.

I manage a pleading whisper. "Please."

He dips that finger farther, parting my folds, and I gasp as he glides through my slickness, circling my entrance but not plunging inside. He's driving me crazy with his teasing.

"Please what, Lucia? Tell me what you need."

"You," I manage. "I need you inside me. I need to feel you. All of you. Please, Marco. I'm dying without it…"

"We wouldn't want that, *cara*." He leans down and kisses me, softly and deeply, his tongue sliding against mine as his finger finally pushes inside. Just one. I moan into his mouth, my hips rising off the bed to meet him. He adds a second finger, stretching me and curling them forward until he finds the spot that sends my vision flashing white. I growl and rake my nails down his back.

His lips murmur against mine, and more shudders chase down my spine. "You are so incredible. I can't wait any longer."

I fumble for the button of his jeans. He helps me by shedding the last of his clothes in quick, efficient motions, and then he's naked above me.

He's beautiful in a brutal way. Hard lines, sharp angles, and scars lend him the look of a man built to outlast everything that tries to break him. His thick, rigid cock curves up toward his belly, the glistening tip causing my mouth to water. My inner walls contract around nothing.

As he climbs over me, I raise a hand to trace the hair at his temples, the lines beside his eyes, and the scar that runs along his ribs. He catches my wrist, plants a kiss on my palm, then places my hand against his heart. I feel it pounding, fast and uneven in a rhythm that matches mine.

“I need to be inside you now.” It’s a statement of fact, delivered in that deep voice that clenches my thighs and stutters my heart. “But you must know that this isn’t just—” He pauses, his jaw flexing. “I haven’t felt need like this in years. Maybe ever. Once I start, I won’t be able to stop.”

My chest aches. I cup his face with both hands and brush his cheekbones with my thumbs.

“Then don’t hold back. Give me everything. I want all of it. All of you.”

He opens the nightstand drawer to pull out a condom, the sharp tear of foil cutting through the quiet before he settles between my legs and positions himself.

“Lucia.” He says only my name again, which sets off fireworks beneath my skin as he pushes inside.

He replies to my resulting gasp with a groan that vibrates through his chest into mine. My nails dig into his shoulders as he fills me, stretching me until my eyes roll back and my mouth falls open in a silent scream. He’s so thick, so deep, and every one of my nerve endings catches fire. He moves with aching patience, giving me time to adjust and pausing when he’s fully seated inside me.

“Look at me.”

I do. His eyes, nearly black, glimmer with every emotion. Hunger. Tenderness. Fear. Hope.

“You feel that? You feel how your body was made for mine?”

Unable to speak, I simply nod. Moans escape my throat again and again as his girth stretches and overwhelms me with every thrust, reaching places I didn’t know were empty.

“More.” My demand slips out between breathy whimpers. “Please, Marco. More.”

He gives me what I ask for. He pulls out slowly, dragging against every sensitive inch of my inner walls, then drives forward again, deeper this time. I clamp around him, begging for even more, and the careful rhythm dissolves into wild desperation.

His mouth finds mine, and we kiss like we’re both drowning, like the only air in the room exists between our lips. His hips slam into me over and

over, each stroke channeling a shock wave through my body, and I meet him beat for beat. I wrap my legs around his waist, digging my heels into the solid muscle of his ass, pulling him closer and urging him on. Harder. Faster.

"You feel amazing—" He cuts himself off with a groan before dropping his forehead to mine. Sweat slicks his skin and drips onto my chest. "*Cazzo*, you feel incredible, like your pretty little cunt truly was designed just for me."

His words—dirty, raw, and unlike anything I expected from his guarded exterior—jolt pure heat through me. I moan, tightening around him, and he curses again.

"You like that?" He thrusts with even more intensity. "You like when I talk to you like this? Tell you how good you feel? How fucking perfect you are?"

"Yes." I gasp. "Yes. Don't stop!"

"I won't."

He keeps that promise by reaching between us and finding the spot where we're joined. The pad of his thumb circles my clit in time with each plunge of his cock. The dual sensation of his dick stuffing me while his thumb maintains a devastating rhythm hurtles me toward my orgasm. The slide of skin against skin, slick with sweat and goosebumps, lights up every cell in my body.

As his weight pins me into the mattress, the mounting pressure low in my belly coils. Every thrust, every circle of his thumb, catapults me toward bliss.

"I can feel you getting close." His voice breaks between ragged breaths. "Your pussy is squeezing me so tightly. You're going to come for me, aren't you, Lucia?"

The rough way he moans my name at the end tips me over. I yell out, my back arching off the bed, and he watches me fall apart with those black, hungry, unblinking eyes, enjoying every second of my unraveling like he's committing it to memory.

"That's it. Let go. I've got you. I'm right here."

I shatter beneath him, my climax crashing through me in waves that steal my breath and liquefy my bones. My vision whites out, and my mouth opens in a silent scream. I clench around him, milking him, and the tingles of my orgasm trigger his.

“Lucia…fuck…Lucia.” He groans my name like it’s the only word he remembers and then goes rigid, his cock twitching inside me. I feel every throb of his climax, and it drags another tremor through me.

His weight rests on my chest as the throes shudder through us. He’s still buried in my heat, still heavy on top of me and pressing me into the mattress.

He lifts his head to gaze at me with soft eyes, the hunger burned away and exposing tenderness.

“Lucia.” He says my name again, and this time it’s not a command or a question. It’s an admission.

I draw him down and kiss him, softly and slowly. When we finally split apart, he rolls onto his side and tugs me along with him, keeping me wrapped in his arms. He doesn’t pull out. He stays within me, as if letting go isn’t an option.

“I meant what I said.” His breath tickles my hairline, and his arms tighten around me. He opens his mouth, closes it, then tries again, as if the right words keep slipping past him. “You make me feel. That’s all. After years of nothing, you make me feel.”

I bury my face into his chest, inhaling sweat and sex and his woodsy scent. My heart still races, and my body hums. But beneath the physical satisfaction, this feels almost akin to coming home.

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Chapter 10

Marco

“Mornings after” don’t exist for me. All of my hookups and flings follow this staunch rule.

That rule has one problem, though. I must be able to walk away from the woman I slept with.

Lucia Romano, however, lies asleep in my gray t-shirt, her hair spread across the pillow like she fell onto it mid-thought. Her mouth hangs open almost comically, yet the sight hits me in the chest. One of her hands has migrated across the formerly demilitarized zone and rests against my ribs as if it belongs.

I extract myself, get dressed, and check my phone.

Nico’s last message about Bruno’s threat sits at the top of my notifications. Enzo’s request for a nine o’clock follow-up meeting is right beneath it.

By now, I should be up and running, so I can’t explain why I’m still sitting on the edge of the bed memorizing the rhythm of her breathing.

She wakes under my gaze, quick and alert. Her eyes assess the room, the door, the window, and finally me.

“Good morning.”

“Morning.”

She pushes herself upright, dragging her hair back from her face, and I can sense her mentally setting herself up to appear unaffected. If I hadn’t spent the past several days watching her, I might believe the act.

After gathering her clothes, she heads to the bathroom.

I give her ninety seconds, long enough to offer the illusion that she's regained control, before I follow.

Steam fills the bathroom as she stands under the showerhead, her face tilted up and her eyes closed. When I slide the glass door open, she gives a startled jump then instantly tries to mask that reaction.

"What are you doing?"

"You're going to tell me it was nothing."

She doesn't switch off the water. "It *was* nothing."

"You're biting your lip again."

Her hand flies to her mouth before she can stop herself.

As I drift closer, water soaks into my shirt. With steam curling between us, I brace one hand against the tile above her head.

"You bite your lower lip when you're lying. And you've been doing that since the moment you woke up."

Silence stretches between us.

"It was one night." Her argument contains a defiant edge.

"Was it nothing?"

Most people cave to my demands when I stare at them this long, but she holds my gaze for five unflinching seconds before she finally blinks.

"It complicates everything."

"I know."

"Marco?"

"I *know*."

I retreat before the part of me that doesn't follow rules decides to further test our shared willpower. I slide the shower door mostly closed and hand her a towel through the gap.

"I have a meeting in forty minutes." Our fingers brush as she takes the towel, and a zap shoots through me. "I'll leave you with Sophia so you aren't here alone."

She shakes her head slowly, her alluring hair bouncing with the motion. "You think I can't handle being alone?"

"I think *I* can't handle you being alone. I'd prefer if you had company." As I back out of the bathroom, I can almost swear she chuckles.

Later, around a quarter to nine, she enters the main house with her damp hair pulled back into her usual ponytail. Dressed in her own clothes, her professional composure looks fully reconstructed.

Sophia already waits in the kitchen for her. When I reach the door, Padrino's wife glances at me from over Lucia's shoulder. She leans against the counter with a cup of herbal tea, the small of her back curved to accommodate the extra weight she's been carrying. She gives me a serene, unhurried look, the kind only women who've seen right through you can manage. However, she doesn't mutter a single word.

I push the door open and step out into the hallway, then pull it mostly closed behind me.

I'm four paces down the corridor when I hear Lucia laughing. It's surprisingly not the short, polite laugh I've come to know. This is a loud, full, and unguarded sound that carries through the gap in the door, filling me with an urge to go back in just to watch her face light up.

I keep walking until I get to the meeting room, which smells of leather and espresso. Enzo enthrones himself at the head of the table, Tomas sits to his right, and Nico hovers along the wall with his tablet open.

I claim my usual position, locking whatever happened last night into a dark box in my mind. Lingering in that memory will only fuck up my focus, and it's a dangerous time to allow that to happen. Besides, I'm already realizing that this meeting won't go as expected.

Tomas's excited expression and smug smile are easy to read, and that means trouble for me.

He sits two chairs down from Enzo, responding to the unfortunate intelligence like a concerned advisor. He hasn't called the meeting himself. That would be too obvious. Instead, he's delivered the information that necessitates the meeting, which is his preferred way of doing things. Be indispensable to the problem, then indispensable to the solution.

"When I took this position, I discussed reducing overall bloodshed. I needed the *famiglia* to be strong without being ruthless, so we're to listen to offered alliances and determine whether they're worth taking. The Volkovs have proposed a direct negotiation." Enzo speaks calmly as his eyes roam the table. "Territory arrangement. They want to meet a representative at Red Hook."

Although we haven't used the Red Hook warehouse in eight months, I've successfully run three operations out of that space in the past two years. I know the rust on the loading dock doors, the blind corners, and the way the afternoon light slants through the high windows.

I also know the sight lines from the neighboring structure.

Tomas clears his throat. “We should send Marco.” He says this as if the thought has only just occurred to him. “Sending your main enforcer should represent enough good faith. Besides, there’s no need to expose Padrino personally.”

He frames it as loyalty and goes ahead to compliment my negotiation skills. Ironic, considering that most of my negotiations end with someone bleeding on concrete.

I study him the way I once studied opponents in the ring, tracking weight distribution, breathing patterns, and micro-hesitations before a strike. The best traps always look like opportunities, and the best betrayals feel like favors.

When Tomas finishes, Enzo looks not at him but at me.

“Do you want to go?”

Enzo won’t order me. Instead, he makes his trust in me explicit. Going will be my decision. If things go awry, the cost becomes personal, not procedural.

I nod. “I’ll go.”

Tomas exhales, disguising his satisfaction as relief.

After that, Enzo adjourns the meeting, and Nico stops me in the corridor before I reach the stairs. He treads with purpose, his tablet already in his hand.

“Look.” He pulls up images of the adjacent building and points to the fourth-floor window. The spot offers a clean view of the warehouse interior from four separate angles, and there are no structural obstacles or real shadows once the lights are on. “It’s a perfect location for an assassination.” He delivers this detail with the casual tone of a weather report.

I assess the angles for four seconds, maybe five, calculating trajectory and response time. Then I hand the tablet back.

“Tell Vito and Rocco where I’m going,” I say. “Nobody else.”

Nico’s mouth flattens into a hard line as he dips his chin once.

When I return to the main house, I find Lucia standing in the kitchen doorway with a coffee cup clutched against her chest as if it can anchor her. The door to the corridor must have been open because her eyes are wide, and her expression shows that she’s heard enough.

“Are you walking into a trap?”

“You shouldn’t listen in on private conversations.”

Her eyes narrow. “Tell me I’m wrong. It sounds like a trap. And what’s worse, it sounds like you already know that and are going anyway.”

I hold her gaze but remain silent.

She steps close enough that I catch the faint scent of jasmine under the coffee and the starch of her shirt. The first button on her white blouse is undone, showing off her smooth clavicles.

Her voice drops, urgency threading through it. “Marco. Don’t go.”

The two words pack more of a punch than they should and burrow under my ribs.

So, I give her the truth that has governed my life since I was eighteen and too proud to admit I had been set up by the only man I trusted.

“I have a job to do.”

The warmth in her eyes dies out instantly.

“Fine.” Her flat tone stuns me, and without another glance, she spins and marches back into the kitchen.

I linger for a moment longer, then head outside into the biting morning air. My car waits at the curb like a patient animal, but before I can open the door, my phone rings.

“Nico.”

He offers no preamble. “Tomas contacted one of the kitchen staff in our compound. He was asking about Lucia’s daily schedule.”

I grab the door handle, tightening my grip until the metal bites into my palm.

On the other end, Nico pauses. “An insider is feeding Tomas information. The meeting was one thing, but he’s asking questions he shouldn’t know to ask.”

A cold caused by a subject more sinister than the weather settles in my chest, prompting me to glance up at the kitchen window.

Lucia stares through the glass, the light casting her in a warm glow, her coffee still in hand. From this distance, I can’t read her expression, but she can certainly read mine.

We’re taking a calculated risk by going to Red Hook, but leaving her here has now become a different kind of gamble.

I know how to take a hit, but I don’t know which hit is worth the scars.

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Chapter 11

Lucia

I have no reasonable justification for why I'm currently sitting in the main atrium of St. Catherine's Children's Hospital wearing a four-dollar pair of sunglasses I bought at a gas station.

If anyone strolls up to me and questions my presence, I'll say that I'm a physician with a professional interest in pediatric care facilities. But actually, I'm stalking Marco.

Three days ago, he returned from the Red Hook warehouse with a kind of calm silence that carries the weight of a traumatic event. He deflected most of my questions and answered none of the ones that mattered.

Since then, he's been operating on four hours of sleep a night, espresso, and the vitamin supplements I left on his nightstand. He swallows them without complaint, as if he's worried that fighting me on it would open the door to more sensitive queries, like where he's been going every morning at six since Tuesday. He always leaves with Nico and returns every evening smelling of strange chemicals.

I've told myself repeatedly that I'm not concerned, but then I caught his schedule on the screen while he took a shower and discovered something even stranger than his current, obviously shady business. He has a recurring Thursday appointment. He regularly visits St. Catherine's Children's Hospital, labeled in his calendar only as a personal matter.

What gangster visits a children's hospital like it's part of an itinerary?

Because that question latches onto my mind and wouldn't let go, I decided to follow him.

Now that I'm here, I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb in these halls. This hospital is a far cry from the cash-strapped Ashford County that's been my world for a number of years now. Here, they host charity galas and manage numerous foundations created by people with deep pockets. I've seen some doctors and events from this hospital get a center spread in *New York Magazine*, and I know most of the donors have zip codes in the West Village and Tribeca.

The money part connects with Marco's presence here. The underworld and obscenely rich people seem to always find a way to link up…*but why do it in a children's hospital?*

Surely they can't be running this place as a front for crime. There's no doubt that Marco is unscrupulous, but I'd have thought him better than that, or else I don't know the man at all.

I get the sense that I'm about to find out as I walk on, searching for any sign of him. Unlike the county hospital's walls, which have needed a repaint for years, St. Catherine's pediatric corridors bloom with murals of smiling giraffes and cartoon astronauts. Lavender diffusers soften the usual hospital astringency.

I wouldn't associate this place with Marco Santori.

If I want to go deeper into the hospital, I need to look like I belong, so I pin my Ashford County badge to my jacket. It's visible enough to survive a passing glance and too small to read from a distance.

I wait by the interior door, checking my phone like a doctor between pages until a nurse pushes through from the other side. I catch the door before it closes and slip through. The security guard at the desk glances up, his eyes flicking to the badge on my chest, and returns his attention to his monitors after a curt nod in my direction. He's too far away to see that the name belongs to a doctor who works at a hospital fifteen miles away.

The corridor opens into a quiet waiting area, and a small placard beside the doors reads Pediatric Oncology. I take a seat among the scattered chairs, far enough from the nurses' station to go unnoticed, close enough to watch the hallway Marco would have to use.

I find him in a rec room about ten minutes later.

I stop at the window, my heart skipping several beats. Marco stands in the center of the room wearing athletic shorts and a black t-shirt that reads

“Future Champions” in bold white letters. Five children in varying stages of cancer treatment crowd around him. One has an IV line taped to her arm, and another sits in a wheelchair. Two of them carry that gray, hollow exhaustion I remember from my oncology rotation.

Marco demonstrates a kickboxing combination in exaggerated slow motion. While four of the kids laugh, the girl with a bald head and the IV taped to her arm stares at him in mild disapproval—the kind kids use when they’re mature beyond their years—then shakes her head.

He crouches to her eye level, grinning at her and whispering. In the two weeks I’ve known Marco, I’ve seen him bleeding, flirty, furious, silent, and dangerous. But I’ve never seen him like this. That open, boyish grin on his face is something that I’d never be able to imagine.

At the sight of his happy, simple expression, a crack ripples right through my chest and straight to my heart.

The buzzing phone in my pocket interrupts the moment. I ignore it, but it buzzes again, and with an exasperated breath, I drag it out to read a text preview from Jenna.

WHEN ARE YOU BACK?

Jenna is clearly worried that I’m not at the hospital, and I can’t blame her. In the years we’ve known each other, I’ve never missed a day, never taken a leave.

This isn’t the time to satisfy her curiosity.

I silence the phone and glance up in time to see Marco pull a foam training pad from a duffel bag and help the boy in the wheelchair position his hands.

He says a few words, holds up the pad, and nods at the boy, who punches the pad with unshaking concentration. Marco rocks back like he’s been struck by a heavyweight kickboxer. The boy’s face splits with laughter, and the others, including the girl with the IV in her arm, join in.

I should leave. I have what I came for, and even though it’s the last outcome I expected, the evidence of this version of Marco pins me in place.

Why would he spend time with them?

Common sense says it’s some kind of front for mafia business, but he looks genuinely committed, and the easy rapport he has with the kids can only be developed over time, not in one or two visits.

I’m still trying to make sense of it all when a hospital administrator enters the room carrying a clipboard, so I edge closer to the door to listen.

“Thank you, Mr. Santori.” She tugs the clipboard from under her arm and hands it to him. “We’ve ordered the new equipment for the occupational therapy suite.”

Marco signs without looking and gives it back. “Don’t put my name on anything.”

“We never do.” She smiles, pivots, and exits.

I follow a few steps behind, hoping to catch her with a question about the program, when motion at the opposite end of the corridor stops me. Two men round the corner from the stairwell and head in my direction. The rec room sits between us, its windowed door still open, the children’s laughter spilling into the hallway. I’m roughly ten feet away and exposed, with nowhere to go but forward or back.

They have blank expressions that I now recognize. Most of the mafia soldiers wear that same cold look of violence. They move together like trained robots in their matching coats, full beards, and twin sets of piercing blue eyes. One has a blond buzz cut while the other’s bald. That’s the only physical difference.

A chill drops down my spine. It’s the same Volkov duo I saw back at Ashford.

My stomach drops. Marco, who’s too busy flopping around from roundhouse kicks that would barely dent a pillow, doesn’t see them or sense the danger.

I ease back and crouch behind the nearest pillar, keeping out of their line of sight as I pull out my phone to call Marco. He answers on the second ring.

I speak as quietly as I can. “Two Volkov men. Corridor outside the pediatric wing. Heading your direction.”

He goes silent for half a second, then his voice cuts sharply. “Where are you?”

“In the hospital. I mean St. Catherine’s. I followed you. Now I’m hiding behind a pillar in the hallway that leads to the rec room.”

The silence returns, and I can picture the burning frustration from the other end of the phone. He’s probably going to make me pay later for tailing him.

“Go down to the lowest level of the parking structure, where the employees park. Ask if you can’t find it, and wait for me there.”

That instruction falls on deaf ears because the men continue walking toward the rec room, and I would never allow armed men to approach a room full of immunocompromised children.

So I pivot and hustle down the corridor in the opposite direction, ensuring they notice me, and then I start running.

If they're stalking Marco, it's probably to find me. Now that I've been identified, they'll come after me instead.

When I hear the men chasing after me, I pick up my pace.

My body doesn't know this hospital, and right now, I'm wearing sneakers not designed for sprinting.

My hammering pulse nearly rattles my teeth as I scan the wide hallways, the clear signage, and the helpful arrows directing people toward elevators.

I need to get on one of them, but the thought of these men getting into one with me, with other people present, is terrifying. So I head for the alternative instead. After two wrong turns, I finally locate the glowing red "Stairwell" sign.

The stairwell door gives under my shoulder, and I take the steps two at a time. Five minutes later, I burst into the parking structure on the second level, my lungs struggling to pump enough air and my heart conducting a percussion solo against my rib cage. Before heading to the lower level, I take a breather.

The air smells of oil and hot concrete. A few cars idle nearby, and a woman unloads a blanket from the back of a minivan.

Witnesses. Good.

I bend at the waist and drag in a breath that feels about two sizes too small for my chest. Below me, the stairwell door slams open.

I peer over the metal railing as Marco calls out for me. When he spots me, he dashes up from the first level. He must've run quite fast to have gotten here this quickly, but he's not breathing hard or showing any sign of fatigue. Frankly, I find his cardiovascular conditioning offensive.

He reaches my level of the structure in seconds.

"Marco!"

I barely even finish yelling his name before his whole face transforms . The softness from a moment ago vanishes, replaced by the cold focus I've only glimpsed in his old fighting footage. His jaw locks, his eyes go flat,

and the man I knew disappears behind a mask of tactical precision as he catalogues every car and shadow before his gaze locks with mine.

"Are you okay? Why the hell did you follow me here? I told you to stay at the villa—"

He stops mid-sentence. His posture changes in an instant—shoulders squaring, weight shifting forward, one hand reaching behind him to push me against the wall—and then he steps directly in front of me, transforming his body into a barrier.

Before I can process what's happening, time fractures.

The suppressed shot's muffled crack amplifies into a boom in the parking structure. Marco's shoulder jolts. His body rocks backward into mine, and the momentum slams my spine against the concrete.

An instant later, I feel warm fluid spreading against the hand I have pressed to his back. *Blood*. His blood is soaking through fabric, slick against my fingers.

My mind flips like a switch, and both my training from hundreds of trauma calls and a terrorizing fear from this situation take over. I've never had to hold a bleeding man who just put himself between me and a bullet.

"Marco…" His name tears out of me, raw and desperate. My hands are already searching for the wound. "Talk to me. Where did it hit?"

"Get down." He grabs my shoulder, pushing me lower against the wall as another crack rings through the structure. He speaks in a tight, controlled tone, but the clear effort still bleeds through. "They'll keep shooting, so stay behind me."

Footsteps echo somewhere below us and then, like a miracle in human form, Nico materializes from between two parked SUVs.

"Car." Nico throws Marco's arm over his shoulder. "I've got a first aid kit."

Ten seconds later, we're in the back of a black SUV, peeling away from the hospital. Marco leans against the upholstery beside me, his jaw set tight. I strip off his jacket to examine the wound. Part of my mind replays the haunting image of him shielding me with his body, while the other half guides my hands off my muscle memory as a trauma doctor.

My stomach drops at the sight of the crimson oozing through his shirt.

"Hold still."

He grins. "Not planning a dance routine."

I ignore him and push the fabric aside.

The wound sits high in his shoulder, with a clean entry point and no major arteries or muscles torn. I check his back, and relief knocks air out of my lungs when I spot an exit wound.

I confirm it to him and perhaps myself. “All the way through.”

Then, I press two fingers to the exit wound and guide his hand over it. “Maintain pressure.”

I reach under the seat, where Nico tells me he keeps a first aid kit. I pull the kit out and open it, which is stocked with an impressive level of competence that makes me wonder how often these men get hurt.

Marco watches me with an intensity I’m not used to when I’m stitching someone in a medical setting. “I said this before, and I need to say it again. You were stupid for coming. You should have stayed at the villa.”

His scolding grates as my hands thread the suture needle and tie a knot. But when I look at him, relief washes through me again. My next actions are unplanned and impulsive.

I grab his face with both hands and squeeze his jaw between my palms. Stubble rasps against my skin as I kiss him.

The raw, irrational want hits before I can suppress it. I’ve barely even desired another man since Mason, but Marco fries my brain.

I kiss him desperately, needing proof that the worst-case scenario didn’t actually come to pass.

Marco kisses me back, bringing his good hand to cover both of mine against his jaw. In the front seat, Nico coughs and switches the radio on, and I immediately pull back, my face flushing as TLC’s “Creep” drifts through the speakers. The slow bassline fills the silence in the car, taking away the need for awkward conversation.

Though Marco’s still applying pressure, his shoulder oozes blood. His eyes meet mine, and I read two emotions at once. A quiet fury, undoubtedly over my reckless decision to trail him, and devastation, as if that kiss ruined him as much as it did me.

I rest my forehead against his good shoulder, count to three, and then straighten.

“Nico, can we go somewhere sterile so I can examine his injury, like a hospital you guys work with?”

Nico glances back with a smirk and nods. “We’ve got a medical clinic at the compound.”

Again, given how they live, that shouldn't surprise me. Regular brushes with death makes a clinic essential. That and maybe a cemetery.

"Take us there." I steal a glimpse of my patient and realize his eyes are closing in agony. "I need proper equipment."

"Already on the way, Doc."

Twenty minutes later, Marco's phone rings. He fumbles before I help him pull his hand out of his pocket. He gives me a little smile and answers the call on what must be the fourth ring. His face freezes into a blank look as he tries to keep me from deducing the contents of the report he's receiving.

"How many men?" He pauses for a couple of seconds. "I'll call back."

He hangs up and stares out the window for a moment. Then, he turns to me.

"The two in the parking structure…" He takes a deep, pained breath. "Tomas sent them. Not the Volkovs."

The car goes quiet as we all process that. That confirmation changes everything. I picture the face of the snaky man I must have walked past at least twice since I arrived at Marco's.

"Tomas Greco sent killers to a *children's* hospital?"

Marco's jaw tightens. "I was wondering how they knew I'd be there."

I glance down at my hands. They're perfectly steady, but my insides churn as I wonder if this roiling world I stumbled into will ever slow to a simmer.

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Chapter 12

Marco

I’ve been shot twice before, and I have the scars as mementos.

A man *could* get lucky three times.

Lucia discussed my luck too. In the SUV, she articulated that the next shot would likely be fatal with the calm, clinical precision of a doctor presenting a case study. She sounded nothing like the woman who had grabbed a bleeding man’s face in the back of a moving vehicle and kissed him like she was confirming he was still alive.

Her gaze drifts to my mouth and then snaps back to the wound. I can tell that the kiss is circling her mind. I can’t stop thinking about it either. If the first kiss was just an impulsive mistake made from running emotions, she had enough time to calm down before the second one in the car.

That raises questions that I don’t know how to answer yet. All I can do for now is lie on the bed on her orders and try not to let the thoughts rattling in my head consume me.

Thankfully, the visitors I get keep my mind in check. Sophia and Izzy bring food and water for both the patient and the caretaker. Sophia enters carefully, her gait slowed by her bulging belly. One hand rests briefly at her side as she navigates the doorway, and she sets a plate of bread and a bowl of broth down on the nightstand.

Izzy only glances between me and Lucia, who’s stayed beside the bed through it all with her feet tucked under her. Matteo’s notebook lies open in her lap, and dark circles hang heavy beneath her eyes.

She says nothing, but the small smirk is enough to rattle me. Nico appears in the doorway and starts announcing updates in a quick and economical way. He clearly reads the room well enough to know to keep it short as he informs us that Tomas has gone quiet since the shooting, which means he's either regrouping or waiting for news about his men's failure. Nico's people are watching for both.

I doze off and on from the painkillers that must have been slipped into my food or drink. Every time I come to, I find that Lucia hasn't left. She's beside the bed, and when I try to mumble that she should take a break, she responds with a raised eyebrow. That's her stubborn side, the one who's decided that she belongs and will deal with all other issues later.

Seeing her still waiting on me loosens a knot in my chest that I didn't realize was there. She closes Matteo's notebook and meets my gaze.

"I followed you yesterday because I couldn't fully trust you."

We're finally addressing the elephant in the room. Both of us have avoided this topic since yesterday because it either seemed insignificant among other things happening, or we had company, but we're finally alone, and I'm stable. Now's as good a time as any.

She doesn't offer an apology, just holds herself straight-backed in the chair, with her hands resting on her knees like she's about to present a diagnosis she knows the patient won't like.

"I've been wondering where you've been going all week, and then I found your schedule on the calendar. It's the first day that I knew where you were headed. Did you leave it there intentionally? Did you want me to find out?"

I keep my eyes on her, trying to choose my next words carefully.

Of course I left it on the calendar deliberately. I'd wanted her to have an idea of where I was going—at least on the single day of the week my destination wasn't Red Hook—because I could see the worry as each day passed.

I didn't expect my hospital visit to land *me* in the hospital.

"What do you think?" I raise my brows.

"It doesn't matter if you did. I'm not sorry for trailing you." She pauses, her chin lifting. "And before you lecture me again about being reckless, remember that you had your guard up when the shot came because of my phone call. Without it, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

I’m happy to know she doesn’t blame herself for me getting shot, but her framing of the situation irks me.

“So it’s my fault?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

She brushes her hair back with both hands. “You laid the crumbs, Marco. What did you expect would happen?”

“You could have asked me.” My fingers twist in the sheet as the frustration I’ve been holding back surfaces in my hands. “You didn’t have to stalk me.”

“I know. Still, you have to agree that a mafia enforcer visiting a children’s hospital is bound to strike a doctor’s nerve.”

She’s right about that. I know her enough to be certain she wouldn’t be satisfied with just knowing my location, especially with children involved. The fact that she probably worried about the safety of the little ones niggles my insides. I haven’t earned her trust yet, and that, for some reason, almost feels as painful as my wound.

I shift against the pillow, wincing at the pull in my shoulder. “The kids are fine, by the way.”

She blinks once. “I know. I called the ward nurse this morning.”

I hold her gaze for a long second before I nod. “Of course you did.”

She leans forward in the chair. “Can you tell me about them? Why are you volunteering there?”

I regret adjusting my shoulder against the pillow when pain lances through the joint like a hot-wire. Lucia notices and shoots up to assist, but I raise my hand to stop her, and she eases back into her seat.

“The program started six months ago, after Enzo took power.” I keep my eyes on the wall. “It was one of Sophia’s initiatives. When they went looking for someone to handle it, I volunteered. I needed another task for my hands that—”

She finishes for me. “Didn’t involve hurting anyone?”

I blink. Those aren’t exactly the words I would have used, but they feel right.

“The kids have lost hope, and they needed someone by their side. The feisty one throwing punches is Leo. He’s been in treatment for sixteen months, and he still hasn’t lost his mischievous streak.” I smile. “The boy’s tough.”

Lucia nods and tilts even closer.

“After the third month, his father stopped visiting. Leo told me once that, if he got strong enough, maybe his dad would come back.”

I let out a heavy breath, reliving that awful memory.

“Some of the kids have families who show up every day, sit with them, and bring them things. Others have parents who can’t handle watching their child fight a disease they can’t fix, so they just stop coming.”

After a pause, I admit, “Those situations break my heart the most because the kids blame themselves. They believe that if they can just get strong enough, their people will come back. So I teach them to fight. Fighting is what I know, and the only way I can convince the kids that they’re gaining strength.”

Lucia watches me, her eyes giving none of her thoughts away.

“How did your father die?”

The abrupt subject shift slams straight into my chest. It crosses my mind that, in talking about the kids, I described myself when I lost my parents and then my career. The realization tightens my jaw, and my attention drops to the sheet between us.

Lucia waits for me to continue.

I shouldn’t tell her anything more, but my lips open of their own accord.

“I was a kid.” My voice catches on the number, dragging against a wound much older than the one in my shoulder. “My mother was never in the picture, and my father ran a boxing club which I later found out was a front to recruit foot soldiers for the Benedetti family. My father died during an attack on the estate…caught up in the cross fire…and the police called it a tragic accident.”

I shift my good arm against the sheet.

“But it…wasn’t an accident?” Her gaze stays on me.

“My father saw betrayal in the Benedetti leadership that he was not *supposed* to see. They made sure he couldn’t warn the padrino. I found out ten years later when a man tracked me down in a bar in Palermo, proved he used to work with my father, and said he had to find me because he thought I deserved the truth.”

Lucia’s head tilts. “Did you find the people responsible?”

I huff. “By the time I learned what happened, they were all already dead. I was twenty-six, still at the peak of my career, and Bruno told me not to worry about it. He said pain belongs in the ring, that I could pour it into every punch, and I did until he betrayed me and set me up for a doping

scandal. I was devastated and couldn't understand how the only other man I saw as a father could do that to me. I don't know what would have happened if Enzo hadn't saved me and brought me to work with him here."

Lucia's hand slides over the bed and finds mine so naturally, like she's been doing it all day. I fold my hand into hers, welcoming her warmth against my palm.

We stay this way until I hear a knock at the door.

Nico appears, tablet in hand, his expression killing Lucia's protest about rest before she can even finish it.

"I've got specifics on Bruno." He taps the tablet and turns it toward me. The screen shows a satellite photograph of a white stone structure built into a hillside. He swipes to a letterhead with an Italian medical registry beneath it. Below that is a name.

Clinica Caritas, Naples.

"We believe he runs an organ harvesting operation through this facility. It's been active for eighteen months, but we believe it's been run with a legitimate license and a legitimate staff. It lets him do his completely illegitimate stuff with a perfect cover."

The words hit like an uppercut. As I shoot up to a sitting position, the lancing pain barely registers.

Nico's last sentence lands heavily. "If we dig deeper, we may find confirmation linking him to Matteo Romano's murder."

I give him a look that says we'll discuss that later. Lucia has gone rigid. Without a word, she crosses to the window, her arms wrapped around herself as she stares out through the dark glass.

"How did you find this out?"

"My contact in Interpol says they're building a case. Their window closes in about three weeks."

Three weeks sounds like enough time to act before the global police agency turns this whole thing into a diplomatic incident.

I exhale to clear my mind, feeling a dull heat as my wound presses against the bandage. There's only one choice left here, and I'm not going to let it slip away. "I'm going to Naples."

Nico starts to speak, but I cut him off. "Billy's been hammering Bruno's network from here for three days and can't get in. It's geofenced, locked to a router inside the clinic. The only way into his system is a device on his own Wi-Fi, on his own soil. That means someone on the ground."

Nico’s eyes flick to the bandage across my shoulder and back to my face.

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. Debating the physical limitations of Marco Santori has a poor success rate.

Lucia, however, has none of that history to restrain her. She has no restraint in general.

“You can’t go to Naples in your current condition.” Surprise threads through her tone. “You were *shot* less than twenty-four hours ago.”

“I’ll manage.”

“That’s not medically advisable.”

“This mission isn’t optional.”

She studies me before walking over, plopping back into the chair beside the bed, and nodding. “Fine, but I’m going with you.”

I couldn’t be more caught off guard if she grabbed a fork and stabbed my fresh wound.

“No.”

“I wasn’t asking. And you can’t expect me to wait here and slowly go out of my mind when I don’t even have work to keep me busy.”

“You’re a civilian.”

She tilts her head, letting me know that yes, I’m technically correct but also ridiculous for thinking that way. “As opposed to what? You being a five-star military general?”

“Lucia…”

“I’m the only person in this room who’s read Matteo’s full case file. I speak enough Italian to pass in a medical setting, and I have the credentials to get into a private medical facility without raising flags.”

She pauses to allow the information to settle.

Despite her valid points, I still can’t accept the idea. “You aren’t coming, and that’s final.”

She’s shaking her head before I’m done. “You don’t make the final call, Marco.”

I turn to Nico for some help, but he’s barely managing to hide his delight. His mouth twitches at the corner. “She makes some sense, Marco.”

“What—” Before I can let loose on him, he picks up his phone and heads outside.

My blood is boiling when my cell rings soon after and the caller ID reads Enzo.

Damn Nico to hell.

"Marco."

"Padrino."

He doesn't waste time on pleasantries. "I'm told we're discussing Naples."

I glance toward Nico, who's walked back inside and at least has the decency to appear mildly apologetic. Lucia crosses her arms and waits.

"She wants to come."

"I heard." The line goes quiet as Enzo considers. Then he speaks with the calm authority that's kept half of New York from tearing itself apart for the past several years. "She stays close to you. If anything dangerous happens, you pull her out first. Nonnegotiable."

Enzo isn't quite finished. "And Marco…"

"Yes?"

"She followed you to the hospital and called you first when she spotted the threat."

I can guess what's coming next.

"Stop treating her like a liability."

The call ends.

I stare at the phone for a second before lowering it. Lucia gazes at me with the composed expression of someone who's won an argument but is trying not to visibly celebrate.

From my medical bed, I attempt an authoritative tone. "In Naples, you don't make any decisions without running them by me first. We're a team."

She lifts her left eyebrow in a perfect arch. "I'll take that under advisement."

Nico clears his throat and sets the tablet on the foot of the bed. "All right. If we're doing this, we're doing it properly."

He pulls up a map of Naples.

"You two will travel as a wealthy American couple. Marco's a private investor exploring medical tourism options for a family member. Lucia, you're his wife and the physician overseeing the case. Your medical credentials give you hospital access, while his money gives you legitimacy. Together, you give each other cover."

Lucia bends toward the screen, studying it with the focused attention she probably brings to patient charts.

“You’ll stay at a rental villa about twenty minutes from the facility. Close enough to maintain credibility but far enough to maintain distance.”

Lucia nods repeatedly. “What kind of intake protocol are we dealing with?”

“Basic medical documentation and financial verification.”

“So they’re looking for patients with money who want procedures done no questions asked.”

“Exactly.”

She fires off more questions in quick succession—one about surgical staffing, another about referral documentation—and Nico answers both with visible approval.

Lucia fits into this conversation with a natural ease I didn’t expect. Does that mean she’d fit into this world as well?

Later in the evening, I’m still mulling over this question. As we cement our backstory, Nico considers discrepancies that could get us caught.

“You need to look like you’ve been together longer than a couple weeks.”

Lucia glares at Nico and crosses her arms. “We do.”

“No, you don’t. Not physically.”

He gestures toward me. “Marco, show me how you’ll hold her in public.”

I stand, the effort straining the stitches. I ignore the small noise of protest Lucia lets out as I step behind her and place my hand on the small of her back.

She jerks away.

“Look at that reaction.” I sigh. “This will never work. Maybe we need to rethink this whole thing.”

“I *didn’t* flinch.”

When I try again, her body tenses in the same manner.

Her clinical side kicks in with a hasty excuse. “That’s a *medical* startle response. Not an emotional one.”

“In Naples, it will be evidence that we aren’t comfortable with each other.”

She squares her shoulders. “Do it again.”

This time, when my hand rests at the small of her back, she holds still, breathes, and eases into my touch. I leave my hand in place longer than

necessary, but she doesn’t waver. Her chest rises and falls while she flashes a bright smile and keeps her gaze on my face.

Over the next few hours, we iron out the logistics, our cover documents, contingency plans, even sleeping arrangements at the Naples villa and how to approach things if we’re attacked. Nico finally leaves well past midnight, and when Lucia and I break apart, we scarcely glance at each other for the rest of the evening.

Back in my quarters, Lucia sits cross-legged on the bed with the printed intel Nico compiled on Clinica Caritas. She thumbs through the pages with quiet concentration.

I’m sitting at the desk going over transport details when my phone buzzes with a message from an unsaved number. It’s a single photograph of the pediatric ward at St. Catherine’s, taken from inside the building.

The message—which just contains that picture—hits me like a knockout punch I didn’t see coming.

Going to Naples now might be a good thing, because it’s clear that these men have their eyes on us and aren’t going to stop. Maybe Naples is even safer for Lucia right now, since at least I’ll be able to keep an eye on her.

Across the room, Lucia flips another page, then looks up.

“Did you find anything useful?”

I lock the phone and set it face down on the desk. “Nothing important.”

Divulging that information to her would mean admitting that the children’s ward—the only place where my hands help instead of hurt—now belongs to this war.

I’m not ready to watch that realization spark in her eyes.

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Chapter 13

Lucia

I tell myself the Naples trip is a simple action I must take to dismantle an organ-trafficking network and bring my brother's killers to justice.

The fact that I'm doing it alongside a man I've slept with—a man I think about at a frequency that my medical school professors would describe as "a significant cognitive intrusion"—is entirely incidental.

When I informed Jenna that I was leaving town with Marco for a personal matter, she didn't believe me.

"Girl, this is definitely not you. What's happening?"

Since that conversation with her, the question has been reverberating in my mind. The last time I rearranged my life around a man, it was for Mason. What started as attentiveness curdled into him controlling me by tracking my location and vetting my friends. He framed every act of possessiveness as protection. Jenna was the one who sat me down and forced me to see the truth clearly enough to leave.

I swore I would never do this again. Yet here I am, currently living in a compound with armed guards at every gate.

The difference is that Marco's danger is real. Mason invented his.

Asking for an extension of my hospital leave is easily the most reckless thing I've ever done professionally. My work is my whole world, and a month ago, before any of this started, I never could have asked for so much time away.

I place the call from the compound's main kitchen while Marco studies a tablet across the table. Due to the furtive glances he keeps shooting in my direction, I'm half hoping my request won't go through.

He's against me going to Naples because he's trying to keep me away from trouble, but one thing I haven't confessed to him yet is that I feel safer in his presence. I also don't trust him to pace himself and not exacerbate his injury. For those reasons, I have to be with him.

Dr. Job answers my call on the second ring, his voice carrying a wary tone.

"Lucia?"

"I need to extend my leave of absence."

He goes silent for a second before he asks. "You okay?"

He knows me well enough to understand that what I'm going through must be important, but I can sense his worry. For years, he warned me about rejecting his offered breaks because overworking leads to burnout.

"I'm fine."

The short pause returns before he talks again.

"Noah Webb has been asking for guidance on that complex suture case. Think you could share your notes?"

"Yeah, of course. Whatever Noah needs. He can check the literature on interrupted sutures for mobile tissue. That should get him started."

"And Lucia? Whatever this is," Dr. Job hesitates, "I hope you take care of yourself."

"I will. Thank you." I end the call before he can say anything more.

I try not to think too much about work and Dr. Job's warning. The next morning, after Marco and I have packed our bags, I send my notes to Noah from the back seat of a Benedetti car while the driver navigates from Holland Tunnel to Newark Airport. Beside me, Marco has his face buried in operational documents. He only spares me the occasional unguarded sideways glance, his dark eyes often lingering a second too long before dropping back to the page. Each time his eyes land on me, they feel like a fingertip tracing a soft line across my skin, sparking tingles all over me.

While we're checking bags at the terminal, my phone rings, Mason's name flashing across the screen. My thumb hovers over the decline button for approximately three seconds before muscle memory betrays me and I answer.

"Lucia, I heard you took leave from the hospital."

“How?”

“I have a CI at the intake desk. She mentioned it.” The pause stretches long enough for me to hear him exhale. “I may have also driven past your building once or twice this week.”

The hair on the back of my neck rises. “Mason.”

“I’m just concerned.”

I close my eyes. “I’m visiting family in Italy.”

“You have family in Italy? You never mentioned that.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Mason.”

He pauses, and when he speaks again, his voice takes on the careful, measured tone of a man who believes he’s delivering an important message. “I heard you’ve been seen around with one of your patients…Marco Santori. Watch yourself with him. I know things about his operation that you don’t.”

My stomach knots, and I clench my teeth at the possessiveness draped in concern. “Did you hear that from the hospital grapevine, too, or have you been keeping tabs on me, *Detective*?”

He lets the silence drag a beat too long. “I only want to make sure you’re okay.”

The sincerity in his voice scrapes against a part of me that remembers when those words would have been enough. My throat tightens. “I have to go.”

“Lucia!”

Marco’s gaze flicks to mine before dropping to my phone, but he hands me my boarding pass without pressing. As we walk in silence toward the gate, the weight of his unspoken question hangs over us like an anvil.

It continues to hang over us throughout our nine-hour flight, which I survive in the same manner that I survive my overnight shifts. I lean into my neck pillow, pull on my noise-canceling headphones, and listen to a downloaded medical journal. The information is dense enough to distract me from the well-fitted shirt stretching across Marco’s broad chest. He reads an Italian newspaper in a pose that draws glances from several women in our row.

We arrive at the Naples International Airport and disembark without saying much to each other. Marco gets us a silver sedan that drives us up the hills to the villa overlooking the Bay of Naples.

The place looks like a breathtaking ad from a travel magazine, with perfect scenery. The terracotta floors are worn smooth, the limestone walls have absorbed a century of Mediterranean light, and long windows frame the bay like a painting someone has decided to live inside.

I walk to the open window, inhaling the salt-laced air. After New York's exhaust, breathing here feels almost offensive in its loveliness.

The living room is a generous size, and as expected, the bedroom has only one bed. The enormous mattress arranged with white linens is positioned directly in front of a window that frames the Bay of Naples like a postcard.

I turn to Marco, who's leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed. I trail a finger along the wooden post, curling my lips into a teasing smile. "Couldn't find it in your heart to request two beds, hm?"

He shrugs, a dangerous spark in his eyes. "One bed is more convincing for the cover. We're supposed to be madly in love, *Dottoressa*. Remember?"

"I thought that was only for when we're in public." I lift an eyebrow, taking a slow step toward him. "Are we going to need to play lovers inside the house as well?"

Marco sticks his tongue in his cheek, his gaze dropping to my lips for half-a-second before returning to my eyes. "We don't know what might happen. But I'll take the couch if it makes you more comfortable." He turns around immediately and starts walking away.

"You don't need to," I call after him, rolling my eyes, slightly irritated at him for killing the teasing vibe. To give myself a distraction, I toss my suitcase on the bed and begin to unpack.

Later, he suggests cooking dinner. He insists that couples who travel together tend to cook together, that couples who cook together demonstrate domestic familiarity, and that couples with domestic familiarity are naturally less suspicious.

I follow him into the kitchen, not mentioning how catastrophically bad I am at cooking. We're making a simple *cacio e pepe*, and I prove my incompetence within minutes by dumping the dry pasta into a pot of water that hasn't come close to a boil, reaching for a jar of pre-grated cheese I found in the cupboard, and then grabbing a spoon to stir.

He shakes his head. "You're ruining it."

"I'm a surgeon, not a chef."

He plucks the wooden spoon from my hand like he's removing a scalpel from an unsteady resident. Then, he starts to teach me.

"Increase the heat. Salt first, then the pasta."

I hang at his elbow as he breaks down each step, but my mind is more entranced by hearing his soft baritone and watching the homey, husband-like version of Marco Santori.

There are just so many layers to this man, and all of them leave me wanting him. Our eyes meet for a second, and he raises an eyebrow in an unspoken question.

To ignore the rapidly climbing heat inside me and the matching desire to ask him to kiss me or do even more, I shift toward the window overlooking the bay, pretending that I'm studying the sunset until he announces that the food is ready.

The pasta is perfect, and the good meal gets even better when Marco conjures up a bottle of wine and pours out two glasses. He leads the way to the terrace, where we both settle under the golden Italian twilight while sipping our wine.

A voice in my mind whispers that it's unfortunate that this romantic scene is just a facade. It'd have been perfect for a honeymoon.

Get a grip on yourself and your raging horniness, Lucia.

I focus on the sky, on the wine…on everything but him as we watch the sun slip lower over the water. Then he suddenly drapes an arm across the back of my chair, and my pulse jumps as I fix my eyes on nothing over the bay, trying to keep the words in until I can't any longer.

"Have you ever thought about this?"

His arm falls from the back of my chair and settles around my shoulder.

"Thought about what?"

"This." I gesture between us. "About whether it's…real."

He's quiet for a beat before asking a question of his own in an even tone. "What do you think it is?"

I angle my head enough to look at him. "From a man who's usually so direct, that's a very irritating nonanswer."

He snorts. "You asked me a question. I'm just asking you to ask it properly."

My throat constricts. "I already did."

"You asked *around* it. There's a difference."

"Some of us don't have your gift for bluntness."

“You have it.” His eyes hold mine. “You use it every day with patients. You’re choosing not to use it now.”

The air between us hums with the weight of things neither of us has admitted. His expression is unguarded, like the one he wore with those kids at the hospital.

“Ask me a real question, Lucia.” He tucks a wayward strand of his hair behind his ear. “And I’ll give you a real answer.”

While I know exactly what the real question is, I’m not brave enough to ask it tonight. My desire clashes with my fear of want, tangling into a knot I can’t undo when I’m this close to him. So instead, I shake my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He studies me like he’s memorizing my face, then he smiles slyly and nods. “I hope you figure it out.”

I shoot to my feet. “I’m going in.”

He waves me away, and as the wine rushes to my head, I stagger. I want to lie in the quiet as the night air drifts through the open windows.

I stare at the ceiling, thoughts racing through my mind until jet lag drags my eyelids closed.

When I wake, the light shifts through that particular gray-black predawn that belongs to neither night nor morning. Marco’s asleep beside me, one arm sprawled across the space between us. A buzz of excitement dances low in my stomach. I roll onto my side and take in the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

I feel like there’s an electric charge in the small space between us. The desire is almost like a physical chord, pulling us to each other, but I can’t give in. I shouldn’t *dare* to, because then I’d be losing myself. As I give pieces of myself to him, I chip away at who I am. This is textbook situational attachment. As a doctor, I’m well aware of how stress bonds form. I need to shut this down before it becomes a bond I can’t walk away from.

Marco stirs in his sleep, and his hand closes around my wrist. *He’s finding me in his sleep now?*

My belly flutters. I pull my hand from his and leave the bed for the kitchen. Then I attempt to brew coffee, hoping to douse the flutters with caffeine.

The machine hisses for a while, until something resembling coffee emerges.

After one sip, I almost spit it out. The black sludge has the acidity of vinegar, and when it hits the back of my throat, it spreads like a caustic wave. It's immediately apparent that I'm better suited to instant coffee machines. Just push a button, and the brew comes out perfectly.

My phone buzzes on the counter, and after taking another gulp of the acrid liquid, I pick the device up to find a text from an unknown number. Frowning, I open it.

It contains the address for the facility we're scheduled to visit tomorrow, with a single line of text below.

Hope you're having fun in Naples, Dottoressa. Give Marco my regards.

My stomach hits the floor.

The real game has begun. Maybe, after all these years, I can get to the bottom of my brother's story and make his killers pay.

I set the coffee down before my trembling hands can spill the godforsaken excuse for caffeine. Then I run back to the bedroom to shake Marco awake.

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Chapter 14

Marco

Two hours after Lucia wakes me with a message she received from an unknown number, we sit two streets away from the facility in a silver sedan —rented anonymously—that I chose specifically because it wouldn't stand out on Neapolitan streets.

Nico created our cover identities two days ago. We are Jason and Jennifer Smith, a wealthy American couple seeking a discreet medical consultation for a family member. We have clean documents and identities that can't be traced back to who we are back home.

The facility, twenty minutes outside Naples, is built into the hillside with the kind of unique architecture—white stone and glass walls—that screams money. It's easier to let underworld activity pass unnoticed in a place that deflects attention. Simple misdirection at work.

We get out of the car and walk the final stretch along a quiet road that smells of citrus trees and sea air. I keep my pace steady, with one hand resting against the small of Lucia's back, guiding without appearing to guide.

The reception area is designed to reassure rich clients that they're in capable hands. The lighting shines with soft, neutral tones, and arrangements of expensive white orchids bloom around the space.

Two cameras hang near the entrance, with the one above reception angled toward the hallway. Three staff members are visible from the lobby, as well as one security guard who tries hard to look like a concierge.

The tension in the air reminds me of locker rooms before championship fights, where every man pretends he can end the match before he bleeds.

Lucia matches my stride with composure, her arm linked with mine. We drip money, ease, and the particular, unhurried confidence of people accustomed to being accommodated. She doesn't fidget or search for exits. If she's also cataloguing every camera in the room, she's doing it behind eyes that appear only mildly interested in the orchids.

I continue to rest my hand against the small of her back as we approach the desk, and Lucia doesn't flinch.

A woman greets us with a smile and professional warmth, her Italian quick and polished as she confirms our appointment. The moment I respond in English, she switches without missing a beat.

"Of course, Mr. and Dr. Smith. Please take a seat in the waiting area."

"Thank you." I return the smile, easy and magnanimous. Our aliases fit like a borrowed coat, close enough to wear but loose enough to shed.

"And would you mind if I connect to the facility's Wi-Fi? I'm expecting an email, and the reception here is spotty."

The intake coordinator nods and gives me the password.

Once I'm connected, Nico and Billy attempt to access the facility's systems. This is what the whole trip hinges on. Billy's three days of hammering the clinic's network from New York got him nowhere, the server walled off behind geofencing and strict MAC-address filtering that rejects any connection not originating from a router inside the building.

No amount of hacking from across an ocean can spoof a device that isn't on-site. So here we are, operating under fake names because the only way into Bruno's system is through his own Wi-Fi.

We head to an elegant waiting area and take a seat on plush beige couches. A few minutes later, a young coordinator arrives and introduces himself as Dr. Leonardo. He's polished and stylish in his white coat like a costume. When prompted by his intake questions, we offer the insurance information we fabricated two days ago without hesitation.

Dr. Leonardo leads us to a small consultation room with sterile white walls, a desk, and a frosted-glass window. He begins explaining the program in a calm, controlled voice that could convince almost anyone of his feigned legitimacy.

Lucia asks the right questions about recovery timelines and referral documentation, her voice carrying the practiced authority of a physician

overseeing a family member's case. She plays the role Nico built for her like a second skin.

Fifteen minutes in, Lucia lifts her hand to her forehead and sways. She moves fast enough that Dr. Leonardo starts rising from his chair.

"Jennifer?" I'm already standing, and I have to catch myself before the wrong name slips out.

"I… I'm fine," Lucia wheezes.

Her act could have fooled me if I weren't well acquainted with the plans.

"I think she needs some air." My words come out frantic as I put on a show of being a protective and concerned husband.

Dr. Leonardo retrieves a bottle of water from the mini-fridge beneath the credenza. "Should I call one of our nurses?" I help Lucia steady herself, and she leans into my side as I steer her toward the door.

"I'm so sorry." I heave a dramatic sigh. "We may need to continue this consultation another day."

Dr. Leonardo nods, sympathetic and accommodating, and walks us back toward the lobby. On the journey, my phone vibrates once in my pocket with Nico's signal that they've breached the facility's servers.

We've successfully hacked into their system and secured everything we came for.

We're ten steps from the front entrance when a door at the far end of the corridor opens to reveal a restricted area clearly not meant for patients.

Bruno Caruso walks through the threshold, and my view of the world compresses to a pinhole.

I knew the facility was Bruno's. What I didn't know—what Nico didn't expect and none of us anticipated—was that Bruno would be here today, in person, waltzing through that corridor in a white coat with his name embroidered above the pocket.

He looks older than he did twelve years ago. He's in his late fifties now, though he carries it well. His hair has thinned and gone silver at the temples, but the wire-rimmed glasses and white coat lend him a distinguished air. If I didn't spend most of my life beside this man, I would consider him a respectable doctor.

A tablet has his attention as he stands about forty feet away, oblivious to the two people heading toward the exit.

My feet stop. Every muscle in my body locks into a taut string of pure tension, and the world goes silent.

Going by the way Lucia's hand tightens on my arm, she's clearly seen him too.

Her expression cycles through recognition, shock, and then a tightly controlled fury that could pass for calm. She's seen his photo in Matteo's files a hundred times. That face—the face of a man who destroyed someone she loved—is seared into her mind.

Her fingers dig into my forearm, and I can feel the tremor running through her. I can tell from her eyes that her instincts are screaming for her to rush over and demand answers.

"Don't." I barely mouth the word. "Not here."

She offers the smallest dip of her chin.

Bruno glances up then, his gaze sweeping the corridor in a routine, absent manner. He scans the space without perceiving anything, and his eyes pass over us without stopping. We're merely two people on our way out.

He doesn't know who I am. Or if he does, he's better at this game than I gave him credit for.

Bruno pivots left and disappears through another door. The corridor is empty again, the overhead lights buzzing. Just like that, the man who destroyed my career and murdered Lucia's brother is gone.

We walk out into the sunlight. Neither of us speaks until we reach the car. Even then, it takes me thirty seconds to trust my voice.

As soon as we close the sedan doors, I call Nico and tell him about seeing Bruno. He hits me with news that the hack worked and that they managed to harvest most of the encrypted files.

He runs through his questions—what Bruno looked like, whether he clocked us, how many staff members were on the floor—then offers me a "Good work." In the short pause that follows his praise, I can hear him typing. "The financial records we've looked into so far are cleaner than we expected. He's been running two books for years. Billy's still pulling threads, and we'll hopefully find something more useful soon." I hear more tapping on his end. "Rest. We'll reconvene tomorrow."

With that, the line goes dead.

The rest of our ride back to the seaside house is silent, and for a second, I wonder what's going through Lucia's mind and why she hasn't said

anything. I want to ask her, but I know in times like this, I usually prefer being left alone.

Seeing Bruno obviously threw her off just as much as it threw me.

I focus on driving, and when we get back to the house, she heads to the bedroom. I want so badly to follow her and wrap my arms around her warmth, but I have enough self-awareness left to understand that I'm not the one she needs right now. I shouldn't crowd her while she processes the day's trauma.

So I wander into the kitchen, ready to deal with my own emotions. I stand here with both hands flat on the table and nowhere to put twelve years of betrayal.

For a second, my palms press into the wood grain like I'm testing whether it will hold my weight. Outside, the sounds of waves crashing against the shore only heightens the stillness in the kitchen.

The image of Bruno Caruso's face is etched vividly in my mind, triggering unwanted memories.

I open the fridge without thinking, and the sight of the leftover pasta from last night undoes my composure. Bruno used to hand me my lunches in containers like this one after grueling training sessions. For a moment, my mind winds back the years, and I can almost smell his sauce reheating in the gym's microwave. He'd leave containers on the bench without comment, a silent offering for a hungry kid.

I struggle to separate the two faces of the man I once thought I knew. The one who stood across from me today in a white coat organizes horrific crimes for profit. But the Bruno I first met would bring pasta to the gym when I was starving after practice.

Bruno was the only adult in my life who seemed to care, so I learned what he taught me. Every instinct I have—to absorb pain, to present nothing, to control what a room sees—came from him. For years, I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

Now I'm nothing more than a passing stranger, close enough to strike but forced to walk away, and the idea that he didn't even recognize the man whose life he destroyed stings worse than any hit he ever taught me to weather.

My fingers tighten and every muscle in my back fires as I pick up the nearest chair and drive it through the wall. The wooden chair splinters, and the plaster-covered wall gives way with a dull, satisfying crunch. My

shoulder also flares with a sharp pain that breaks open the dam of anger I've been clinging to for years.

My fury takes over after that, burning with the need to smash things.

The lamp goes next. I sweep it off the counter, and it shatters across the tile, the bulb popping with a dry snap. The fruit bowl follows, exploding against the opposite wall in a spray of white shards. A framed map of Naples hangs above the sink, delicate glass over a thin wood backing. I rip it off the wall, rendering it to pieces.

I don't shout, the wrath inside me too dense for sound. It can only leave my body through impact.

When my rage passes, I stand in the midst of the debris, my chest swelling and heaving with air that feels too cold in my lungs. My shoulder throbs with a dull, wet pulse. The bullet wound has reopened beneath the dressing, and blood trickles from my hands from fresh cuts where shards of ceramic slashed through my skin.

At this point, my knees give out. I collapse onto the tile, and for a while, I stay here, my palms resting on my thighs as I watch crimson droplets hit the floor.

Lucia rushes in. I didn't hear the bedroom door open, nor do I sense her until she lowers herself onto the tile beside me. She doesn't touch me or speak but sits with her back against a cabinet and her hands folded in her lap.

I realize, while sitting here on the tile with bleeding hands, that no one has ever given me this kind of companionship before. She offers no judgment, just quiet understanding.

"I'm afraid of what I am," I confess through clenched teeth. "I'm not sure how to go to war with the man who made me. The anger, the discipline, how I survive, all of it comes from his training. Destroying him means dismantling the foundation I'm standing on."

The heavy, irreversible admission hangs in the air between us.

"For three years, I've been Enzo's enforcer. I keep telling myself that by repaying my debt to him, I can redeem my soul. I flex the fingers of my injured hand, and a sharp sting of pain shoots across my skin. "But when I pummel a man, it feels right."

The truth tastes bitter.

"I tell myself I'm doing this for redemption, but I'm not sure a man who thinks violence feels right *can* be redeemed. Maybe you should leave now

before you get stained by all the blood on my hands."

Lucia listens to all of my concerns. She doesn't interrupt. When I look up, she's regarding me with the same focus she must use when diagnosing a difficult case.

"You might not be the most righteous or moral man I know," Lucia leans closer, "but you're a good man."

Her voice is quiet and raw.

"I've been in this world long enough to notice the difference between men who are violent because they enjoy it and men who are violent because it's the only tool left to protect what they care about." Her eyes fixate on mine. "You are unambiguously in the second category. And the fact that you're afraid of being in the first is the clearest evidence that you're not."

The reassurance burrows under my ribs and settles there, in a crevice where nothing has ventured for years.

I reach for her hand, the contact stabilizing a fracture inside me that's been threatening to split open since the clinic. She grabs my other hand and turns both of them over, palms up, checking the cuts with soft touches.

"The shoulder needs a fresh dressing, but nothing needs stitches." She finally heaves a sigh of relief.

"Nothing?"

"Nope. I'm glad." She clutches my hands a moment longer, then releases them. "Help me clean this up."

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Chapter 15

Lucia

It feels anything but normal to wake in a villa in Naples and wander into the kitchen to find Marco making pasta at seven forty-five in the morning.

He hovers at the counter near the stove with his back to me, his sleeves pushed up, his broad shoulders working in a quiet rhythm as he kneads the dough. Morning light spills through the tall Italian windows and casts the kitchen in a golden glow.

My brain—traitor that it is—notes the obvious. Marco Santori looks amazing in the kitchen.

I pour myself coffee that he brewed, which tastes way better than my abysmal attempt. Leaning against the counter, I linger a moment longer than necessary.

"You cook like you fight."

He glances over his shoulder. "What does that mean?"

"Decisively." I gesture with my mug. "No wasted effort. Like you're very sure of the outcome."

He frowns, trying to decide whether I'm teasing him, then nods toward the table. "Sit down before you hurt yourself struggling to compliment me."

"It's my fault for trying to sweet-talk you." I roll my eyes and push away from the counter. "And there's no need to sit when I can help."

The look he gives me shows he'd rather the earth combust. "I don't think you should bother. I've got it covered."

“C’mon, give me a job.” I set my mug down and fold my arms over my chest.

He sighs like a long-suffering chef forced to tolerate a child in the kitchen. “Measure the flour.”

“I can absolutely measure flour.” I lean across him for the measuring cup, and my elbow connects with the open bag, causing it to tip over.

A white cloud erupts, drifting through the sunlight. It blinds me for a split second, and as the air slowly clears, we’re left staring at the disaster around us.

Nearly every inch of the kitchen slab is covered in white, along with much of Marco’s face and clothes. His stunned expression—complete with side-eyes and a gaping mouth—is so strange that I start laughing, the rumble raking through my chest.

Marco goes very still before looking down at the flour coating his shirt, then back at me. After a dumbfounded pause, he reaches calmly into the bag, and before I can react, dumps a deliberate handful of flour onto my head.

“Oh my god.” I gasp, and my laughter dissolves into surprise as I slap at the bun I’d tied my hair in last night in an attempt to shake out the flour.

An undignified but wildly satisfying battle ensues. Flour ends up everywhere—on the counter and the floor, in my hair and in his eyelashes—and by the time we’re done, we’re both breathless and grinning.

This, without a doubt, is the most fun I’ve had in years.

We clean up in a loose, clumsy way, still chuckling. Marco moves past me to wipe the counter, and I turn at the same moment. We’re close enough that the tiny scar above his eyebrow comes into focus. His hand braces against the counter beside my hip.

Rough palms clamp my waist and hold me against him as his mouth takes mine like he’s been starving for it. I grab the front of his shirt and drag him deeper into the kiss.

A startled sound breaks against my mouth, and a primal instinct inside me answers it. My hands slide into his hair, where the flour coats my fingers like powdered sugar. He tastes like coffee with a bitter edge underneath.

“We shouldn’t.” I huff a breath against his lips.

“We shouldn’t,” he agrees.

Then he kisses me again.

He backs me into the kitchen island. The corner digs into my hips through my jeans, but I don't care. His hands roam across my ribs, then my waist, then the curve of my ass. Each touch leaves a trail of heat that obscures my reason.

He pulls back enough to look at me, his chest heaving and his lips parted. Flour patches are on his eyebrows, his neck, and his forearms.

His gaze scans over me. "You're covered in flour."

"So are you."

One corner of his mouth twitches. "We should shower."

My heart stutters.

"Separately." He pauses. "Or not."

My heart flips.

"Not," I insist, though I don't recognize my own voice.

His eyes darken.

"Lucia—"

"If you're going to talk me out of it, don't." I erase the distance between us. "I've already spent every hour since we arrived trying that. I'm tired."

He studies me for a long moment, and the silence is filled only by our breathing and the distant waves.

"You're sure."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yes."

He moves faster than I expect. One arm slides behind my knees, the other curls around my back, and then I'm suddenly in the air, cradled against his chest. His wounded shoulder bears my weight, and a hiss slips through his teeth.

"Your shoulder—"

"Is fine." His arms tighten around me.

As he carries me toward the bedroom, white powder drifts down around us like we've wandered into a snow globe.

The hallway is short, and the door is already open, so we make it to the mattress in no more than a few blinks. After he sets me down on the bed, his hands come up to frame my face, his palm rough against my cheek and warm through the powder still coating his skin. I lean into his caress without meaning to.

His hand slides from my cheek to the back of my neck, his fingers threading into my hair. He kisses me again, slowly this time. His mouth

grazes mine, almost like he's memorizing the shape of my lips. I find the hem of his shirt and drag it up, needing his skin on mine.

He steps back long enough to pull it over his head, and the flour that was on the fabric sprinkles onto his chest, his shoulders, and the dark hair that trails down his stomach. I place my palm flat against his sternum.

His skin is hot, and his heart is pounding.

"You," I gently squeeze his left pec, his pulse throbbing under my hand, "are very intimidating."

One dark brow lifts. "Is that so?"

"Stunning. Unfairly devastating."

A shadow crosses his expression, gone too quickly for me to identify.

"And you," Marco leans in, "are the one who threw nearly a whole bag of flour at my head. I'm not the dangerous one."

I laugh, and the tension between us becomes warm and safe.

He reaches for the buttons on my shirt with steady, deliberate fingers, unfastening each one like he has all the time in the world. When the shirt falls open, he pushes it from my shoulders and lets it drop to the floor.

His eyes travel down. Up. And down again.

"Lucia."

Hearing him say my name in that rough, quiet tone floods heat across my skin.

He cocks his head. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

I open my mouth to argue that I probably look like a frantic miller who's just lost a fight with a windmill. My hair tangles wildly, and I'm in nothing but my jeans and an ordinary bra, but Marco kisses me, eroding everything else but the taste and heat of him.

His mouth isn't gentle but hungry, devouring me like he's been starving for days. His hands slide up my back to undo the clasp of my bra, and when the fabric falls away, he draws back to admire his work. I can almost taste the way the air in the room thickens on the tip of my tongue. He stares at my breasts, and the way his breath hitches makes my stomach flip.

"You're perfect." His voice drops to a whisper. "Flour and all."

Then his lips connect with my collarbone, and he kisses and laps lower until he takes one hard nipple into his mouth. My knees buckle instantly. His arm banding around my waist is the only thing that holds me upright. I clutch his shoulders, my nails digging in as I try to remember how to

breathe. The heat of his tongue and the gentle scrape of teeth shoot straight through me as arousal pools low in my belly.

I gasp. “Marco.”

He hums against my skin, and the vibration nearly shatters my patience.

I can’t wait any longer. My jeans are soon gone, tossed to the floor, and his are half undone and hanging off his hips. He lays me back against the pillows and kneels beside me, gazing down at me like I’m sacred.

I’ve never desired anyone more.

“I want to taste all of you.” The smile that crosses his face is rare and unguarded. I file it away, feeling like I’ve earned a piece of his soul.

He trails kisses down my stomach and over my hip, until he settles between my thighs. His firm, relentless tongue presses against me and circles, and I stop thinking entirely.

Sensation drives the moment, and I rasp out his name like coarse gravel. He keeps my thighs open, and when he moans against my core, the vibration has me spiraling. I come apart on his lips with a cry dredged up from a place deep inside.

Only then does he rise up and over me, covering my body with his. As his hard cock presses against my thigh, my heart clenches.

“Marco?” His name is the sole word I can conjure, and it carries every admission I can’t yet voice.

“I know.” His composure is wrecked and rubbed raw. “I know.”

He stands long enough to shove his jeans and boxer briefs down his hips, kicking them off without ceremony, and the sight of him fully bare in the morning light, flour streaked across his chest, his cock stiff and straining, nearly undoes me.

Kneeling on the bed, he catches my ankle and tugs me toward him until my hips meet his. No reach for the nightstand. No pause for the practicalities of protection. Either he doesn’t have anything or he doesn’t want a barrier. I don’t want one either. I’m desperate to feel all of him.

“Sit up.” His voice is a croaked command cloaked in desire. He draws me upright and into his lap, my thighs straddling his, our chests flush. In this position, we’re eye to eye, with nowhere to hide.

“Stay with me.” He slips a finger under my chin. “Don’t go anywhere else.”

I nod, breathless. Then he grips my hips, lifts me, and eases me down onto him.

The stretch is familiar now, but no less devastating. A low moan spills from my mouth as I sink lower, taking him deeper, my body remembering what my mind spent weeks trying to forget. His head falls back, the cords of his neck taut as he releases raw, loud groans that vibrate through my chest.

"*Dio*." His fingers press into my hips hard enough to leave prints. "You feel like the only thing I have ever needed, though until now, I didn't know to ask for."

Then his careful tenderness burns away. I raise one hand to grasp his good shoulder for leverage, and I begin to roll my hips in a rhythm he matches from below with upward thrusts that steal my air. The room fills with the wet, urgent smacks of our bodies meeting, and flour drifts from the sheets around us like snow shaken from a branch.

His mouth finds my throat, my collarbone, the swell of my breast. He bows his head to take a nipple between his teeth, and the resulting jolt arches my spine, changing the angle of his cock inside me until he pushes against a spot that whites my vision at the edges.

"Right there." I gasp against his hair. "Don't stop."

He drives into me harder, one arm banded around my waist, the other fisting in my hair to tilt my head back. His mouth covers my exposed throat, and the combination of being held open and filled completely sends me past the edge.

The orgasm rips through me in a single, blinding wave. I clench around him, my nails raking down his back and his name breaking apart on my tongue. Moments later, the tension in his body crests and snaps. Warmth floods me as he moans into the curve of my neck, his breath hot and shuddering against my skin. His lips move against my pulse, shaping a word I barely catch—"mine"—and I cling to him tighter.

He eases us down onto the mattress, careful to land on his uninjured shoulder, though a wince still flickers across his face before he buries it against my hair.

"Your shoulder." I reach for it.

"Worth it." He catches my hand and presses it to his chest instead.

I relax against his side, my fingers tracing lazy lines across his stomach.

The kitchen's a mess, the sheets are ruined, and I've never felt more seen.

"I should warn you…" He chuckles. "I'll never be able to forget what we did today whenever I see a speck of flour."

I laugh against his skin.

“No regrets.”

He pulls me back against his side and rests his injured shoulder against the pillow to keep my weight from aggravating the injury.

After a few minutes, buzzing from the nightstand breaks the spell we’d cast together. Marco’s arm tightens for a fraction of a second before he reaches for his phone. I keep my eyes closed and my breathing even, giving him a polite moment of privacy.

“Yeah?”

His voice slurs, rough and thick with the remnants of what happened between us. His gravelly tone vibrates through his chest where it presses against my shoulder blade.

A pause. “Enzo?”

Enzo Ricci calling Marco right now can’t mean good news, so I stop pretending to sleep.

Marco doesn’t pull away from me, but his body stills and he grows alert, like a wolf catching the scent of blood on the wind.

“When?”

The next pause is long and tense, punctuated only by the muffled crackle of a voice on the other end.

When Marco replies, his voice has become colder. The man who was inside me mere minutes ago has retreated somewhere I can’t follow.

“Tomas Greco.”

The name hits instantly. I heard it in Nico’s SUV with Marco’s blood still on my hands. The traitor. The reason we nearly died in that parking garage. Marco spits the name with flat finality.

More crackling from the phone indicates that Enzo’s still giving orders.

“I understand.” Marco’s voice is quiet and controlled. “I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

The conversation ends, and he sets the phone back on the nightstand. For a long while, he doesn’t move.

“Tomas Greco… He’s the one, isn’t he? The one selling information to the Volkovs.”

The silence is a nod of confirmation. Marco shifts onto his elbow and leans over me. When I turn to face him, he’s already watching me.

A smile flickers across his lips.

“Tomas has worked for the Benedettis for decades.” He says this like he’s explaining to himself, not to me. “He sat at Gabi Sr.’s table, and after Gabi Jr.’s exile, he stayed with Enzo. But yes. Nico and Enzo just confirmed that he’s the one.”

His jaw tightens.

“All that time, he’s been sabotaging us. We can now move against him as we have official confirmation that he’s behind at least four ambushes on our businesses in the past two months. He’s fed information to the Volkovs, taken their money, and gotten good men killed, all while sitting at Enzo’s table. We’ve always suspected Tomas. But Enzo waited this long to move on him because he couldn’t afford to make Tomas a martyr and have him win over some of the doubting dons if we punished him without irrefutable proof.”

I swallow. “What happens now that you have the proof?”

He answers calmly. “I go home. We handle it publicly. Everyone needs to understand what happens to men who betray the family.”

Handle it. I know what that means.

He observes as I process the revelation for a long moment.

“What do you think of that, Lucia?”

That’s a question I’ve been dreading. My mouth opens and closes as he waits for an answer.

“I think…” I start and stop. What if I wish that his hands—which were, just moments ago, covered in flour and oh so tenderly taking me apart—weren’t about to end a man’s life?

“You don’t have to answer. I know what this looks like from where you’re sitting.”

“Marco—”

“No. I get it. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you and a future that doesn’t include any of this.” He gestures vaguely at the opulent room, the city outside, and his whole existence. “And now you’re lying here in bed with a man who just got a phone call ordering him to kill someone else. You’re trying to figure out how you ended up here.”

That’s not fair, but it is true. Partly, anyway.

My silence goes on for too long, and he gets off the bed and grabs his pants from the floor. He grabs his shirt next, puts it on, and walks to the door.

“Pack up. We’re heading home.”

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Chapter 16

Marco

The aroma of Sophia’s beeswax and citrus cleaning agent mixes in the air with the dark undertones of brutality. The irony isn’t lost on me.

Years of bleeding others—and being bled—both in and out of the ring have etched a curse into my bones. I can feel the foreshocks of violence before the event arrives.

Even that instinct isn’t needed to analyze the tense air in the Benedetti compound’s main hall. Almost everyone present knows that blood has been spilled here before. They know, too, that it will happen again before the night’s over.

The long mahogany table is a carbon copy of the one in the main dining room, but the purposes couldn’t be more different. This is where we conduct mafia business. Chairs are arranged in a semicircle facing the center like spectators around a coliseum. Capos sit rigidly, flanking both sides of the table, their faces carved from stone and their eyes hungry. Some want blood. Some want justice. Most are still deciding which serves them better.

I stand at Enzo’s right, my fingers pressing into the scar tissue on my knuckles in an attempt to anchor myself. Without that tether, my eyes would drift to Lucia’s position near the back.

Enzo’s decision to make the hearing public is the right way to go, but I can’t ignore the unsettled feeling in my stomach.

At the thought of impending trouble, my first instinct is to look toward Lucia. She's sitting in a corner, watching the whole thing unfold. We've barely spoken since we got on the plane back to New York, but I can feel her green eyes tracking me.

"Dr. Ice," as I've heard a few of the *soldatos* call her. *Dottoressa Ghiacciata.* Except she wasn't icy with me in Naples, and now I don't know how to handle her presence.

An hour ago, I tried to keep her from this room. Told her she didn't need to see what was coming.

She crossed her arms and held my gaze without blinking. "He ordered those men to go after me at the hospital, Marco. I earned the right to watch him answer for it."

After that, I didn't argue. No use arguing with this woman when she already has her mind made up.

The doors open.

Two soldiers bring in Tomas Greco, his face carrying the smug certainty of a man who still believes he has cards to play. He came dressed for a night he didn't expect to end this way, his pressed shirt and slicked-back silver hair giving him the look of a man about to appear in front of the media.

"Tomas." Enzo's voice booms across the room without effort. "You've been charged with conspiracy against the *famiglia*, information trafficking with the Volkov Bratva, and orchestrating an attempt on my enforcer's life."

Tomas's eyes flick to me, his contempt undisguised. "Your underboss is a disgraced fighter with no knowledge of the Benedetti way. *This* is who you trust with the future of the *famiglia*?"

The hall goes silent.

I offer no reaction, refusing to grant him the dignity of a response. Enzo continues. "The evidence against you is substantial. We have recorded calls, financial records, and testimony from Volkov soldiers who've chosen cooperation over execution."

"Evidence can be faked." Tomas grits his teeth. "You would know, Enzo. You manufactured your way into that seat."

A sharp murmur runs through the crowd. Vito Moretti shifts uncomfortably, and Rocco Benedetti's eyes narrow.

Discomfort spreads fast around the seated capos. The old guard might believe Tomas's lies because they're not ready to accept that power has shifted away from the path they've always known.

Before anyone can act, I take one step forward, and all the attention swings to me.

"You want to question my place in this family?" I keep my voice quiet and intentionally cold. "Question my loyalty? My willingness to bleed for the man who gave me purpose when I had nothing?"

I stride closer to Tomas, my movements measured. My shoes click against the marble floor like a countdown. When he squirms, the soldiers tighten their grips on his shoulders.

"Three days ago, I took a bullet for this family. What have you done, Tomas, besides line your pockets with Russian blood money while pretending to serve the Benedetti name?"

Tomas flushes. "You know nothing about service, boy. I was running crews when you were still in diapers."

"You were running crews that belonged to Gabi Sr." I'm inches from him at this point. "Crews you handed to his son even when the latter proved himself unworthy. And now you would hand them to anyone who can pay you off."

The accusation hits the room hard, and several capos shift in place.

Enzo speaks again, his voice full of judgment. "Tomas Greco, for your crimes against the Benedetti family, you are hereby stripped of your rank, your crews, and your protection. Your sentence is death."

Tomas's composure shatters, and he lunges against the soldiers' grips. "You can't do this! I have allies—"

I move fast, feeling the wild, brawling temper of my kickboxing days dance through me as I throw my fist at him. My first punch breaks Tomas's nose. Cartilage gives way with a sickening crunch, and warm blood spews across my knuckles. The second hit cracks his ribs. The third knocks him to the floor, where I continue to kick him as red pools across the black marble.

A loud gasp cuts through the air behind me. I know the voice, and I can detect her fear, but I can't let myself consider it, can't think about those green eyes watching me become exactly what I've always feared I am.

I pull Tomas up by his collar, my fist drawn back for the finishing blow, and that's when he makes his move.

He goes from hanging limp in my grasp to twisting and using my momentum against me. He lunges not toward the exit, not toward Enzo, but toward the back of the room.

The world suddenly freezes, and everything in the room breaks into slow-motion pictures. Tomas's crimson fingers close around Lucia's wrist. He yanks her from Sophia's grip and a gun, stripped from one of the soldiers guarding him, appears against Lucia's temple.

Every nerve in my body fires at once. As my vision tunnels to the barrel against her skin, the rest of the room falls away.

Her lips open in a scream, but my ears barely pick up the noise. With all of my senses buried under a loud, drum-busting static, I can only read her lips.

"Marco!"

The room explodes into chaos. Soldiers draw weapons. Enzo shouts orders. But I'm already reacting.

I raise my hands, and my eyes lock on Tomas's face. I shift sideways, putting myself into the sight line between his gun arm and the cluster of soldiers nearest to Lucia.

"Tomas." It takes everything I have to keep the tremor out of my voice. "This doesn't end well for you."

"It ends however I want it to end." Tomas's arm trembles, causing the gun to waver against Lucia's temple. She's gone still in that adaptive way I've learned to recognize.

Her gaze finds mine, and I read her clear message. *I'm okay. Handle this*.

She's so damn brave.

"You hurt her," I edge closer, measuring distance and angle to not spook Tomas, "and I will spend the rest of my life making you wish you'd never been born. That isn't a threat. It's a promise."

Tomas laughs, sputtering saliva thick with blood. "You think I'm afraid of dying? I was gone the moment your soldiers grabbed me. The only question is whether I take something precious to you with me."

Lucia's hand slides almost imperceptibly toward her pocket.

My pulse kicks. The knife. She's reaching for the folding knife I pressed into her palm after our first training session. If she's listened to me for once in her life, that blade will be three inches from her fingers right now.

Brava, tesoro. Fight.

"I'll make you a deal." I go still and lift my hands. "You let her go, and I let you walk out that door alive. I'll even give you a two-hour head start."

Tomas's eyes narrow. "You expect me to believe that?"

“You expect me to let you kill her?” I don’t care who hears the loud crack in my voice. “She’s the only good part of my life. If you want to steal that from me, you’ll have to kill me first.”

For a heartbeat, Tomas hesitates. And that’s enough.

Lucia’s blade glints as she buries it into the meat of his thigh. He screams, and his grip on Lucia loosens for a fraction of a second.

My hand closes around her arm, and I wrench her behind me, spinning her out of his reach.

The palm of my other hand strikes Tomas’s chest, resulting in him staggering backward. His arm swings wildly, his finger still on the trigger. The gun fires once with a shot that shatters a window behind the assembled capos. Before he can level the barrel again, six soldiers are on him, tackling him to the ground, pinning his arms, and prying the weapon from his fingers.

The room goes quiet except for Tomas’s muffled screams and Lucia’s ragged breathing.

She presses against the wall, the knife still clutched in her quivering hand. The blood dripping from her skin isn’t hers. Her eyes are alert, but she’s unharmed.

My hands frame her face, and I’m glad to find her warm and alive.

“Are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?”

“I’m okay.” Her voice trembles but holds. “I’m okay, Marco. You got to me in time.”

You got to me in time.

The assurance shatters a wall inside me. I gather her against my chest, one hand cradling her head and the other wrapping around her waist. Her hair smells like jasmine, a familiar comfort. I bury my nose in it, and for a moment, I forget we have an audience or that I’m Marco Santori, a man who should never show weakness. I’m just a man embracing the woman I almost lost.

“I’m sorry.” My apology is muffled against her hair. “I’m sorry. I should’ve—”

“No.” She eases back far enough to meet my eyes. “Don’t apologize for being the man who protects me like he promised. I knew what I was walking into.”

“But you didn’t.” My thumb traces her cheek. “I promised you’d be safe. You didn’t sign up for these close brushes with death. You shouldn’t

have to watch me beat a man nearly to death or endure being a hostage."

In response, she rises onto her toes and presses her mouth to mine in a fierce kiss that pours out everything she can't say. As my lips slide over hers, terror and relief buzz through me, plus the dawning realization that this woman has become essential to me.

When she draws back again, her eyes are bright. "Thank you, Marco. You're a good man."

Behind us, Enzo issues orders while soldiers haul a kicking and cussing Tomas away.

"You sentenced him to death." I turn to Enzo. "Give me one good reason why he's still breathing."

"Because he didn't access that gun without help." Enzo's voice drops low. "He's alive until we know every name he's connected to. Then he's yours."

The capos disperse with the careful discretion of men who've witnessed a scene that's too intimate. Sophia meets my gaze and nods once. One hand is pressed to the swell of her abdomen, and the other stretches to Lucia, who takes it. They disappear together.

After everyone leaves, I find myself patrolling the estate.

I should sleep. I'm exhausted, my shoulder's screaming, and an adrenaline crash has left me hollow.

Instead, I stare at the moon and let the questions surface.

What is she to you?

No answer comes to me except that her presence in my life is vital, like air or blood.

What are you willing to sacrifice to keep her?

A lot. That answer comes without too much thought.

And if she's only here because she needs you to find her brother's killers, if this is all a means to an end, will you survive losing her?

That one I can't answer.

My hands tighten into fists as I reach an unwelcome but clarifying conclusion.

Men like me don't get happy endings. We get moments of borrowed time and stolen nights and the memory of someone warm in our arms.

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Chapter 17

Lucia

The morning after Tomas Greco tried to kill me, I keep my hands busy so my mind won't explode.

I start by picking up and rearranging my belongings in Marco's quarters. The converted stables are one big room meant to function as a sitting area, a study, and a bedroom. It's a soldier's space, functional, undecorated, each piece chosen for purpose rather than comfort. The gradual intrusion of my things crowds the limited space even more.

Hoping to blend my possessions with his, I fold my clothes, arrange my toiletries right where they should be, and line my medical journals on the shelf beside his tactical manuals. Their worn spines forge an unlikely alliance between wound care protocols and close-quarters combat strategies.

I transfer the framed photo of Matteo from the dresser, where it's been since I first arrived, to the sole nightstand that sits on my side of the bed, justifying the repositioning with the fact that I need it closer to me. The new location means my brother's smiling face keeps me company beside Marco's expensive watch and the small ceramic dish where he empties his pockets each night.

When he comes in from a morning run—sweat still glistening on his skin and his chest heaving—and discovers Matteo there, he doesn't say anything at first. He picks up the frame and studies my brother's face with an intensity that tightens my chest, then puts it back down with a nod.

“You don’t mind?” I ask from the doorway. I’m wrapped in one of his shirts that hangs past my thighs. The fabric still carries his woodsy, soapy scent.

“He’s part of you.” Marco crosses the room in those long, fluid strides and pulls me against his sweat-damp chest. I breathe in the musk and exertion dripping from him. “That means he’s part of this, and he’s why we’re doing this together.”

Together. The word warms my chest and spreads heat through my skin.

I do some quick runs to my apartment, with the dour-faced and armed Izzy accompanying me each time. Piece by piece, more of my belongings migrate to Marco’s place. My struggling succulent is now on his windowsill, set in the best light I can find.

My favorite mug—chipped white ceramic printed with a cartoon anatomical heart and featuring the words, “You’ll always have a place in my right ventricle”—comes as well. It was an ugly but endearing residency gift from a fellow intern, and it now claims a spot in Marco’s cabinet beside his matching set of black mugs.

Izzy notes the change in Marco’s quarters during one of her visits. She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow at my deep teal throw blanket draped across his armchair. It’s a chunky knit that clashes magnificently with Marco’s aesthetic of black, gray, off-white, and more black.

“You’re nesting.”

“I’m making myself *comfortable*. There’s a difference.” I don’t glance up from the medical kit I’m reorganizing, a project I’ve taken on voluntarily. I want to upgrade the compound’s emergency supplies as efficiently as possible, utilizing my experience at my underfunded ER. This task keeps my mind engaged since my hospital leave is still ongoing.

“You’re *nesting*.” Izzy repeats the words with more emphasis before easing into a chair with her usual predatory grace. “Sophia did the exact same thing when she moved in with Enzo. She started leaving books everywhere. Changed the towels.”

My hands still over a roll of medical tape. “I’m not. This isn’t—”

“It’s okay.” A flicker of warmth crosses Izzy’s face. “Marco’s different with you. I think I like your influence on him.”

“Different how?”

Her dark eyes are thoughtful as she considers the question. “He used to walk around this compound like he was always on the edge. Now he puts

on the act of someone who belongs."

The observation stays with me as I schedule myself for a shift in the Benedetti clinic.

The work starts small, in a corner of the medical room that smells of antiseptic and old bandages. Just an afternoon a week to start. By the second week, though, I'm treating everything from construction injuries to ear infections plaguing the soldiers' children. The waiting area always stays full, the plastic chairs consistently occupied by men with calloused hands, women with worried eyes, and kids who stare with the frank curiosity only the very young possess.

The compound's medical area sits close enough to the city that on clear days, the skyline rises along the horizon from the upper floors. The Empire State Building and the One World Trade Center stand like distant sentinels against the sky.

On days when I need to remember why I became a doctor, I look at those towers and remind myself of everything this city has survived. Those buildings, erected after catastrophe, are a sign of perseverance.

On one Thursday afternoon, Marco finds me in the clinic. He leans against the doorframe with his arms crossed, observing me as I work. I'm surrounded by drawings taped to the wall, a suggestion from Sophia to help the younger patients feel more at home. Their crayon masterpieces share the space with anatomical charts. Exhaustion gnaws at me, but satisfaction blooms in my chest.

"You've made this place yours." His eyes rake over the room before landing on me again.

"Maybe. I figured I should pull my weight while I'm here." I glance up, meeting his gaze. "The *famiglia* takes care of its own, right?"

He doesn't respond, but his expression softens.

Later, over dinner in the main villa with Enzo, Sophia, Izzy, and Nico, the conversation centers on the problem at hand. The dining room air is thick with garlic and rosemary, of good wine, and of the cozy vanilla and white jasmine fragrance Sophia wears.

Sophia scoots her chair back as she gets situated, and Enzo immediately adjusts his own seat so his pregnant wife has more space. Sophia's pregnancy doesn't seem to slow her down at all. She seems to be handling it with the same quiet grace she carries everything else, looking comfy beside her husband, resting a hand over her growing bump.

“The Volkov situation isn’t going away.” Enzo’s voice is heavy. It must be such a burden living with the weight of decisions he knows will affect many people’s lives. “They’re testing boundaries and probing for weaknesses. The information Tomas shared bought them leverage they shouldn’t have.”

At the mention of Tomas, my skin crawls. I’m back in that moment, with the cold metal of the gun barrel against my temple. I can smell the stench of his breath and taste squirming terror in my throat.

Marco’s hand finds my knee under the table.

“We need to send a message.” Nico’s tablet rests beside his plate, and the blue glow casts strange shadows on his face. “A gesture to let everyone know we’re not weak.”

Sophia peers at me from across the table, and an understanding passes between us. We’ve both chosen to get involved with dangerous men.

“What if the message isn’t about violence?” The words leave my mouth before I’ve fully formed the thought.

Everyone looks at me. In the thick silence that follows, I set my fork down.

“The Volkovs are watching us and waiting for cracks. But they’re also watching for legitimacy, strength, and the appearance of stability.” I meet Enzo’s gaze. “What looks more stable than a family celebrating? What looks more united than a wedding?”

The table goes silent. Somewhere in the house, a clock chimes the hour.

“You’re suggesting…what?” Nico emphasizes the question with his upturned palms.

“I’m suggesting we make this fake engagement public.” My heart pounds against my ribs, but my voice stays even. This is the same voice I use when delivering difficult news to patients’ families. “Let’s throw a party. Invite everyone who matters. Let the Volkovs see Marco and me as a united front and not as a weakness to exploit.”

Marco’s hand tightens on my knee.

Sophia’s smile is slow and gentle. “I think that’s brilliant.”

Enzo considers my proposal for a long time, weighing my words, my loyalty, and my place in this world I’ve chosen. Then he nods once.

“We make it happen tomorrow.”

The engagement party exceeds every expectation.

Sophia has transformed the main hall into a scene from a fairy tale. String lights weave across the ceiling in delicate webs, spreading soft gold colors across the room. Flowers crowd the tables, filling the space with sweet perfume that mingles with the aroma of expensive cuisine.

If I didn't know better, I'd never have guessed I'm amid dangerous people.

The Benedetti *famiglia* shows up in full force. Capos and soldiers arrive with their wives and families. The celebration includes both the old guard and the new.

I wear an emerald green dress that Sophia says makes my eyes "otherworldly," and my hair falls in loose curls down my back. I feel simultaneously beautiful and terrified, and I can't wait to find the man whose presence would erode some of that latter emotion.

Marco finds me before the party officially starts, and for a moment, I forget to be nervous. He wears a black suit that fits his wide shoulders perfectly and no tie, the top button of his shirt undone in a single concession to informality from a man who approaches all else like a military exercise. If he ever walked into my ER dressed like this, my hands would stop mid-suture.

He gives me an arm, and when I take it, he walks me to a corner of the kitchen. I'm breathing through my nerves and counting my heartbeats.

"You don't have to do this," he whispers to me and me alone. "We can find another way."

"I know." I turn to face him, my chest tightening as I spy the worry in his eyes. "But I don't want another way. I want this."

He draws me close for a slow, deep kiss, his hand cradling the back of my head. When he pulls back, my nerves have settled.

The party is a blur of faces and congratulations. I smile until my cheeks ache, accept embraces from women I've barely met, and chitchat about *famiglia* traditions I'm still learning. Marco works the room with his easy charm, encouraging people to forget that he's dangerous.

Then Nonna Rosa appears in all her Benedetti matriarchal glory. Sophia mentioned her earlier this week, describing a woman whose presence—when she chooses to wield it—silences crowds. She's small and silver-haired and carries the grim demeanor of a woman who's forged a life for

herself surrounded by danger. She wades through the crowd like a shark through water, and everyone parts for her.

When she closes in, she stops and considers me with eyes that have seen just about everything. “So…you’re the *Dottoressa*?”

“Yes, Nonna.” Despite the bottomless pit opening up in my belly, my voice comes out even.

She studies me without blinking. Then she reaches into her pocket and produces a ring crafted of antique gold. It has a bright ruby in the center, surrounded by diamonds. The piece is clearly generations old and heavy with history.

“This belonged to Gabi Sr.’s mother.” She holds it out. “She was a teacher who married into this family and claimed it as her own. She became irreplaceable.” Her eyes never leave mine. “Sound familiar?”

My throat constricts. “I can’t… It’s too much…”

“You can, and it’s not.” Nonna presses the ring into my palm. The metal is warm from her skin. “Marco’s a good boy. Broken, but good. You make him want to be better, yes? That is enough.”

Marco appears beside me, recognition flaring across his face when he sees the ring. “Nonna…”

“Hush.” Nonna waves a hand imperiously. “Put it on her finger. Make it official.”

Marco regards me with vulnerability and hope in his eyes. “Only if she wants.”

My heart stumbles as I stretch out my hand.

His fingers don’t waver as he slides the ring onto my finger, which fits perfectly.

The guests applaud, but Marco’s intense stare cuts straight through the noise. He’s been watching me like that all night, and now I can’t help but wonder what’s going on in his mind.

“Come with me.” His growl is deep and commanding. He doesn’t ask. He just takes my hand and leads me away.

We slip through a side door into a storage room, and the door clicks shut behind us. The room is quiet, and the moon cuts through the white drapes on the windows.

“I’ve been dying to get you alone for an hour.” He’s already backing me against a table. “You look absolutely devastating tonight. And now you’re officially mine. Do you know what that does to me?”

His mouth crashes into mine. The kiss is a formal claim, one I gladly welcome. His teeth graze my lower lip, and I gasp as his tongue sweeps in, hot and demanding. One hand fists my hair, and the other hikes my dress up my thighs. He's stiff against my hip, and I arch into him, needing more.

I clutch his shoulder and dig my nails in. "We're at our own engagement party. We should be present."

"Shh." His fingers slip under my dress, find the damp heat between my legs, and press where I ache. I bury my face into his uninjured shoulder and bite down to keep from crying out. When his thumb circles my clit through my lace panties, my knees wobble.

"There you are." He kisses down to my throat, his voice both smug and pleading. "You're mine."

A voice slices through the haze. "Marco? Nonna's looking for you. A new guest is asking for the happy couple!"

We freeze, his fingers going still against my panties. Izzy's footsteps echo down the hall as she glides away.

"*Merda*." He grins, a dark and unrepentant glint in his eyes as he pulls me close. "We'll finish this later."

I ignore the hot flush of disappointment coursing through me and nod. We put ourselves back together as best we can and slip back into the party, where I catch Sophia's knowing smile and Izzy's raised eyebrow as Marco tugs me through the crowd in search of Nonna.

She sees us first and waves us over. She's standing at the bar with Viktor Volkov, who has a glass in his hand and his pale eyes locked on me. The evening crystalizes to ice as the man lifts that glass in a mock toast. Marco's hand finds mine.

"He's here."

I heave out a breath. "What's he doing here?"

"Probably sending a message." Marco's voice is flat and controlled. "He needs to see for himself that our engagement is truly happening."

Viktor approaches, striding through the crowd with the casual confidence of a man who's aware he's untouchable. When he reaches us, his smile contains no warmth.

"Marco. Dr. Romano." His gaze drops to the ring on my finger, and the corner of his mouth curves in a smirk. "Congratulations on your engagement. The Benedetti family is…*fortunate* to have such a dedicated healer among them."

“What do you want, Viktor?” Marco’s voice could cut glass.

“Merely to pay my respects.” Viktor’s cold smile doesn’t waver. “Oh, and one more thing. I’d like to deliver a message from Bruno Caruso.”

My hand squeezes Marco’s until my knuckles ache.

Viktor leans in, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. “He says hello to his favorite student and to the doctor whose brother asked too many questions.” He eases back and adjusts his cuffs. “He’s looking forward to reconnecting soon.”

The crowd swallows him before either of us can respond.

I go rigid. The weight of the ring has transformed into more of a shackle than a promise.

Bruno is coming.

Marco draws me against his chest, his strong heartbeat thudding in my ear. “He can’t touch you.”

Later that night, after the guests have gone and the villa has settled into silence, I curl against Marco’s chest in bed. As his arms cradle me, Viktor’s threat swirls around my head. My stomach growls—I barely ate at the party—and my hand rests idly on my stomach.

I want to stay awake, keep vigil, and hold my fear at arm’s length. But his heat and the steady heartbeat drag me under. The last sensation before sleep claims me is of his arms tightening around me, as if he has no intention of ever letting go.

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Chapter 18

Marco

Reports from our foot soldiers fill the next hour, and all the while, the memory of Lucia's body against mine lingers beneath my skin like heat trapped in stone.

Nico walks in at a quarter to seven in the morning with a rigid jaw, avoiding my eyes as he holds his tablet out to me gingerly, like it's rigged with explosives.

The words on the screen blur and sharpen until the only line I can focus on is the bottom one. The summation of every fear I've been too afraid to vocalize.

Bruno Caruso has identified Lucia Romano as Marco Santori's primary vulnerability. Sources indicate active preparation for extraction or elimination. He plans to complete his objective within two weeks.

I set the tablet on the desk and peer out the window at the compound under the pale light of dawn. None of this feels real. The threat, the otherwise normal morning, and the fact that Bruno has written her name into his plans…everything reads like a storyline ripped from my worst nightmare.

"You need to see the rest." Nico brings up another file on his tablet, his fingers swiping with practiced efficiency. "He doesn't just want to take her. He's planning to use her to get to you. He'll offer her life for your surrender to Volkov custody."

"He's finishing what he started."

Nico nods. “That’s how I see it. He tanked your career to isolate you and planned to reform you into his own personal weapon. When Enzo got to you first, Bruno lost his investment. Now he wants it back.”

He swipes to another screen.

“His Volkov connection goes back further than we thought. Bruno’s been their medical asset for at least six years, running organ procurement through clinics they finance. He’s their contractor, not a partner. They fund his operations, while he delivers product and occasionally people. Right now, the person they want delivered is *you*.”

“Why? What use am I to the Volkovs?”

“You’d be a former Benedetti enforcer with intimate knowledge of Enzo’s security infrastructure. The most valuable defector the Volkovs could ask for. Bruno reclaims his investment and hands it straight to the people who bankroll him, all in one fell swoop. And he gets you gift-wrapped by leveraging the one person you’d trade yourself for… The woman you love.”

The word “love” hangs in the air between us like a live grenade then lands on my chest with a precision Bruno would admire. The worst part is that Nico isn’t wrong. However, acknowledging that would mean facing the trauma I’ve been trying to avoid.

“We need to move preemptively,” I clench my fists, working to keep my voice steady, “so we can hit Bruno before he executes his plans. He’ll show up wherever this exchange is supposed to happen. I know he’ll want to see to it in person.”

“Enzo agrees on assembling a strike team.” Nico pauses. “Bruno will be ready for that, though. He’ll have countermeasures and traps. This only works if we do the one thing he hasn’t accounted for.”

“Which is?”

Nico exhales. “He’ll expect you to stash her away and do your best to protect her and keep her safe instead of taking the fight to him.”

“Taking Lucia to Italy was a mistake.” I close my eyes. “He clocked us together at the clinic, even when he acted like he hadn’t. That's when he decided she’s the right screw to twist to hurt me.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about that.” Nico’s voice softens. “With Greco’s info, Bruno would’ve found out about her eventually. He knows our tactics, our numbers, and our typical approach. I’d bet Bruno’s doing this because

he wants to find out what you'll do when he threatens her. Do *you* know what you'll do?"

The office door swings open.

Lucia appears in the doorway, cocooned in the throw blanket from the couch, my shirt visible underneath, her hair tousled from sleep, and her green eyes bright with concern. "What's happening?"

My first instinct is to shield her. To lie and send her back to bed where she's safe.

She crosses the room before I can, her bare feet silent on the hardwood. She's already clocked the tension in my shoulders, and she reaches for the tablet in Nico's hands too quickly for either of us to intervene.

She pales as she reads, but seconds later, she shutters her expression with steel. I've come to recognize that determination.

"When I woke up and didn't see you, I knew the situation had changed, and not for the better. Marco…what are you planning?"

"Lucia, please. Let me handle this."

"You have to tell me what's going on." She holds up a hand. "And I won't accept that it's not my business. I'm not going to just sit here while you put yourself in danger." Her voice cracks. "I've already lost all my family. I'm not losing you too."

The words hit me like a physical blow.

"This isn't your fight." I infuse my voice with steel. "Bruno is *my* past. *My* demon. Let me deal with this."

"No." She inches toward me enough that I catch the faint jasmine of her shampoo. "My brother died in my arms because he was trying to stop men like Bruno. I've spent two years hunting the people who killed him. This is my fight too."

Nico quietly excuses himself, leaving me alone with the woman who's become essential to me, though I can't articulate why or how.

"You don't understand." My voice comes out as a deep, emphatic rasp. "I won't survive if he hurts you because of me. Not because I'm noble, but because you've become…"

When I trail off, she picks up the thread.

"Because I've become what?" She peers up at me, and I can see the gold flecks in her irises.

"My world." The admission escapes me. "You've become my reason for getting out of bed. My reason for breathing. You mean *everything* to me,

Lucia. And I can't…I won't let you jump into danger again."

She kisses me, and when she pulls back, her eyes are wet.

"Then don't go alone. Figure out another way. Please."

"I can't let him hurt you."

"I can't let you die." Her voice breaks. "Don't you get it? I came here needing a weapon to avenge Matteo, but from the moment you kissed me in that parking garage, I haven't been able to breathe without thinking about you. I stayed because every day with you fills me with desires I didn't think myself capable of." She swallows. "I want to be with you."

I want to be with you.

My brain short-circuits as she grabs my face in both hands. "If you walk into that trap alone, you'll confirm every fear I have. I really, *really* care about you, Marco Santori, and I can't lose you."

I haven't heard those words since my father died. I've spent my whole life being a useful, valuable weapon, but I've never been cared for like this.

My hands hang at my sides, opening and closing on nothing. The fighter in me grapples for a response that my body knows but my mouth doesn't. "What do you want me to say? I don't know how to do…this." The truth drags itself out of some deep place I've kept locked up for years. "I don't know how to be anything except a fighter and a killer. You've given your heart to someone who's never learned how to reciprocate tender feelings."

"Then learn." Her thumbs trace my cheekbones. "Learn with me."

I kiss her like she's the only force keeping me tethered to the earth. When we break apart, her forehead presses to mine, and I reach a decision.

"I'll talk to Enzo and find a way out of this mess. But you have to promise me…"

"Anything."

"If it comes down to it, and the only way to save your life is to let me go, we put your survival first. Promise me."

Her eyes flash. "I'm *not* promising that. You've already taken a bullet for me. How many times can I ask you to step into harm's way as my shield?"

"Lucia—"

"No." She rears back and crosses her arms over her chest. "You don't get to ask that or play the noble, sacrificial hero while I'm left behind to pick up the pieces. I'm not letting you go. End of discussion."

Before I can argue, Nico waves at me from the end of the hall. It must be time for another strategy meeting.

"I've got to go." I glance at Lucia, and her expression softens.

"Go. We'll talk more tonight." She presses a kiss to my jaw.

With the threat hanging over our heads, I join Enzo, Nico, and the senior capos around the table.

Enzo lays out the terms in his usual blunt way. Bruno has made a demand. Me in exchange for Lucia's safety. Enzo adds that we aren't negotiating. The plan is to cut out Bruno's ability to threaten us.

The operation has three phases. First, Nico's team will intercept the Volkov courier network that funds Bruno's operations and hit the money pipeline at its transfer point in the Red Hook shipping district. No cash flow means no men on Bruno's payroll.

Second, a strike team will raid Bruno's organ supply chain through a warehouse in the Bronx that Billy traced through the Clinica Caritas financial records. We'll seize the product, arrest or neutralize his local crew, and burn his infrastructure to the ground.

I'm responsible for the third part of the plan. Intelligence suggests that Bruno will be in New York within days, likely working out of a location in the Washington Heights medical district, which is blocks from Lucia's hospital. If he surfaces, I'll lead a team to take him. Not kill him. Take him. Enzo wants Bruno alive long enough to answer for the trafficking, Matteo Romano, and the doping scandal.

"You're leading the third team, yes." Enzo meets my eyes from across the table. "But you will follow the instructions, Marco. No detours. No addressing personal vendettas until we have him secured."

I nod, though we both know that if I find myself face-to-face with Bruno Caruso, the plan may not survive the encounter.

Throughout the meeting, the memory of Lucia's voice circles in my mind, drowning out the chatter.

I really, really *care about you, Marco Santori, and I can't lose you.*

The words won't leave my head.

I return to a quiet villa after midnight, my footsteps echoing on the marble as I climb the stairs.

Lucia's waiting for me, curled on the couch with a medical journal open in her lap. The reading lamp casts soft golden light across her features. She

looks up when I enter, and the relief in her eyes, hidden fast but not fast enough, hits like a clean body shot.

"I was starting to worry." She sets down the journal and crosses over to me. "Enzo kept you late."

I reach for her, needing to touch her. My hands settle on her hips and tug her close. I inhale the scent of her, jasmine and warmth and home. "Three days. We move in three days."

Her breath catches against my chest. "That soon?"

"I wanted you to hear it from me." I rest my forehead against hers. "You'll stay here, protected and surrounded by Benedetti soldiers. You'll be safer at the villa than anywhere else."

"But—"

"I need to know you'll be okay, Lucia. If you come with me, my focus will be split, and that gives Bruno's men an opening."

"And you?" Her voice is barely a whisper. "Will *you* be okay?"

I want to lie and promise her that we'll be fine, but she deserves better.

"I'll be careful." I draw back far enough to meet her gaze. "I'll come back to you. That's a promise."

She studies me, and then she nods, clearly satisfied.

"We should finish the rest of the conversation from earlier." Her hand comes up to rest over my heart. "About us."

Every instinct I have urges me to deflect, change the subject, and find a mission to run or a fight to pick. Instead, I hold her hand. "Okay."

"Talk to me, Marco." A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "Tell me what's in that head of yours."

I lead her to the couch and pull her down beside me, keeping her hand pressed to my chest. The words are harder to say than they should be, so I keep my gaze on wall. "For my whole life, I've been used as a tool. Bruno used me for glory. The kickboxing world used me for entertainment. Enzo uses me for protection. And that's fine. It's what I'm good at." I swallow. "But you're different."

Her fingers curl against my chest.

"You look at me like I'm more than just what I can do for you. You make me feel like my existence alone matters." I finally meet her eyes. "I don't know how to be the person you see. But I want to try. For you, I want to try."

Her eyes glisten. "Marco…"

“Let me finish.” I cup her face in my hands. “I love you. I’ve never said that to anyone and meant it, but I love you. And I’m terrified, because when you love someone, they can hurt you. I’ve been dealt serious enough wounds to understand that I wouldn’t survive the blow of you leaving me.”

“I won’t leave. You won’t lose me.” She covers my hands with hers. “I chose you. That doesn’t have an expiration date.”

My fingers close over hers, gripping tightly enough that my knuckles ache. “I need to know that our feelings will last beyond this mission. Will stopping Bruno and liberating Matteo’s ghost shatter the love between us?” My voice cracks. “When this war ends, will you walk away?”

Understanding dawns in her eyes. The worry in my heart must be written all over my face.

“Oh, Marco.”

She climbs into my lap, straddling me and cradling my jaw.

“Listen to me,” she says softly. “I might have latched on to you because you could help me find Bruno, but this has become so much more than just a search for answers. You matter to me, Marco. You’re the man who anonymously pays for children’s surgeries and teaches sick, abandoned kids how to defend themselves. You held me when I fell apart without asking for anything in return. You move me in ways I don’t even know how to explain.”

My heart starts racing, and I can’t put any thoughts together. Thankfully, she doesn’t need them right now. She leans close, her lips brushing mine. I lap at her until she opens her mouth, and then I claim her as if I need to extract the air from her lungs.

My fingers tangle in her hair and anchor her to me. When we come up for air, she sighs, her green eyes dark as a nighttime forest.

“I’m not moving from here. Not ever. You’re stuck with me, Santori.”

A lock snaps open in my chest, one that’s been rusted shut since I was twelve and they told me my father wasn’t coming home. The grief, the loneliness, and the years of convincing myself I didn’t need anyone all crumble under the weight of what she’s said.

I kiss her with fervor, as if every second between us has led to this one.

She matches my desperation, sliding her hands into my hair and pressing her body closer. The kiss deepens, soft and slow and full of emotions that words can’t adequately capture.

“I need you.” The truth tears out of me. “Now. I need to feel you.”

“Yes.” She’s already reaching for the hem of my shirt. “Yes.”

I carry her to the bedroom and lay her down on the sheets like she’s sacred. Moonlight spills through the window, illuminating her skin and turning her glinting eyes to liquid silver. I memorize the way she watches me and how her lips part underneath mine.

Our lovemaking feels different tonight. It’s slow and drawn out as I worship her with my hands, my mouth, and my body until she falls apart beneath me, my name a cry on her lips. I climax, too, unloading deep inside her.

I pull her onto my chest and hold her close, needing the comfort of her full weight to prove she’s safe.

Neither of us speaks. Nothing left to say.

But as sleep drags her under, I hear a faint whisper from her lips. “Come back to me.”

I clamp my arms around her and press a kiss to the top of her head. “Always.”

Long after sleep claims her, I lie awake in the dark.

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Chapter 19

Lucia

On the fourth morning after Bruno laid out his threats, Marco leaves at dawn.

I watch him go from the bedroom window, my arms wrapped around myself to ward off a chill that has nothing to do with temperature. His movements are sharper today, more focused, every step carrying the weight of purpose. My chest aches as I look at him.

A black SUV waits, its engine idling in the gray half-light. Before Marco climbs in, he glances up at the window. He lifts one hand in a gesture that might be a wave, a promise, or the last glimpse I ever see of him.

I press my palm to the glass and keep it there until the vehicle disappears through the compound gates.

Then I'm alone, choking on the silence.

His quarters, which seemed cozy yesterday—with his books on the shelves and my journals beside them—now close in like a memory-lined cage. His scent, a clean, cozy whiff I've come to associate with safety, lingers on the pillows. His coffee cup sits in the sink, rinsed but not washed. There are traces of him everywhere, and I wish that was enough to convince me that he'll walk back through that door.

I try to sleep but can't. I try to read but can't manage that either. Even organizing the clinic's supplies proves futile because my hands shake too much.

By midmorning, I've fled to the main villa's kitchen. Sophia finds me staring into a cup of tea I have no intention of drinking.

"You look like how I used to feel every time Enzo went out in the early days." She soon settles into the chair across from me with a steaming mug of chamomile tea. "It's like you're holding your breath and can't remember how to exhale."

I manage a weak smile. "That obvious?"

"Only to those of us who've been there." Sophia's eyes are warm, her face tinged with that rosy pregnancy glow. "The first year Enzo and I were together, I aged a decade from all the waiting."

"How did you survive it?"

"Badly, at first." A self-deprecating smile touches her lips. "I paced, prayed, called him seventeen times during one operation. Eventually, I learned that waiting is its own kind of work. You can't prevent the fear, but you can choose what you do with it."

I consider that idea. "What do you do now?"

"Now, I trust him." Her smile softens. "Not to be safe… I'll never quit worrying about that. But I trust him to do everything in his power to come home. And I make sure there's something worth coming home to."

The words sink deep in my chest.

I'm still thinking them over when Izzy appears in the doorway dressed in tactical gear. She has a gun on her hip and looks like she just stepped off a movie set.

"Sophia giving you the 'trust and nesting' speech?" Izzy grabs an apple from the counter and bites into it with casual ferocity. "Cute. My advice is different. Learn how to shoot."

I blink at her. "I'm a doctor. I took an oath to do no harm. Saving lives is the whole point. Taking them is the opposite of everything I trained for."

"What about self-defense? What if Marco's not here to protect you?" Izzy's eyes sharpen. "Your skills as a healer won't mean much if you're dead."

Sophia sighs. "Izzy, that's not helpful."

"It's realistic." She shrugs, but her eyes carry a weight her voice doesn't. "Look, I get it. You didn't sign up for this life. But you're in it now, and Marco's in love with you, so you're a target whether you like it or not."

I file the advice away for later, vowing to return to it once my hands stop trembling.

The morning drags on painfully into the afternoon. Izzy leaves for training while Sophia stays behind with me. We trade hospital stories, discuss the baby names she and Enzo have argued over, and circle back, as we always do, to the cost of loving men who leave the house armed.

By evening, no word has come through, and my phone stays silent on the table.

No messages. No calls. Nothing.

My heart lurches when Izzy returns with a blank expression.

"What happened?"

"Nothing." Izzy raises a hand. "No news is good news. The operation's still ongoing. They're just taking longer than expected."

The phrase echoes in my head and multiplies.

Sophia appears beside me to guide me to a chair. "Breathe, Lucia."

"I can't…" My voice cracks. "I can't sit here, waiting, not knowing if he's okay."

"He's alive." Izzy's voice is firm. "I'd know if he wasn't. The compound would feel it. *You'd* feel it."

I hold on to that belief long after darkness falls.

At midnight, the men return.

I'm in the clinic when the doors burst open and they carry in the first wounded soldier. His blood has already soaked through makeshift bandages.

I grab the closest man by his jacket.

"Marco. Where is he? Is he—"

"Dunno, Doc." He pulls free and hauls the injured soldier onto the nearest table. "We got separated."

I ask someone else. "Marco Santori. Have you seen him?"

He shakes his head and doesn't release the pressure on the soaked towel he's holding against his partner's neck.

My questions die in my throat when another soldier drops to his knees three feet from me, his hands clamped over his stomach. Red gore pulses between his fingers in a rhythm I recognize.

Arterial. He has minutes. Maybe less.

My body acts before my brain gives permission, and I close the distance, pull on gloves, and stoop beside the hemorrhaging soldier.

Lucia the Worried Woman vanishes, and Dr. Romano takes over.

Assess. Triage. Treat.

The next hour is a blur as six other men are brought in. I quietly oversee the compound's medics through the process of staunching excess bleeding and closing gaping wounds with neat sutures. I go from patient to patient, my hands steady even as my heart races, and I ask no more questions about Marco.

I simply concentrate on healing.

Only the most critical patients come to me. Others with medical training handle the rest. By the time the last wound is dressed, I'm running on adrenaline and willpower alone. My scrubs are stained dark with blood and gore.

Thankfully, Marco isn't one of the men on my table.

When I finally leave the clinic, I find him in the hallway, slumped against the wall as one of the compound medics tends to him. His shirt is gone, a bandage wrapped around his ribs. Bruises bloom across his torso in shades of purple and black, and blood streaks his face.

"Marco."

His head lifts at my voice, and his stone-faced expression cracks open. "Lucia. I saw you working and didn't want to bother you, so I came here."

I shorten the distance between us in seconds. My hands instantly reach for the dressing so I can assess his injuries. "How bad? What happened?"

He catches and stills my hands. "I'm okay. Just some cracked ribs and a cut on my left flank. Nothing that major. It's why I stayed away. I wanted to give you space to deal with the more serious injuries."

"Nothing major?" My voice rises. "You're drenched in blood, you've got a bandage around your ribs, and you're telling me *nothing major*?"

"I'm alive." He tugs me to his chest, ignoring one of the compound medic's protests from across the room. "Rifle stock caught me when we breached the second entrance. Gianni already cleaned it. I'm fine."

The tears I've been fighting back spill over. Suddenly I'm crying in the middle of a hallway, surrounded by wounded soldiers, and I can't stop.

Ignoring his injuries, Marco pulls me into his arms, cradling me against his chest. "*Tesoro*. I'm here. I'm right here."

My voice catches on a sob. "I know this is what you do. I know the truth of what I'm feeling. I know Sophia told me to make peace with it, and Izzy told me to learn how to shoot, and I'm still turning their advice over in my head." I hug him tighter. "But you have to come back. Every time. That's the deal."

He nods. “That’s the deal.”

Later, after the chaos settles, after the wounded are stabilized, and after I’ve properly examined Marco and declared him noncritical, we sit on the couch in his quarters with his good arm around me and my head carefully positioned against his uninjured side. Unfortunately, neither of us can sleep.

“Bruno escaped. He had a secondary exit prearranged. By the time we breached the wing where they harvest the organs, his car had been gone for forty minutes. We busted his mid-level operation, though. Twelve people were scheduled for processing. Their names were written on a whiteboard in the corridor, with blood types and organ matches listed beside them like patients on a surgical rotation chart. Except none of his patients were going to wake up.”

His jaw tightens.

“We managed to get them out. Nico’s team transported them to a Benedetti safe house in Jersey where a medic and two private physicians are looking after them until we can arrange passage home. The six traffickers we captured are in the holding warehouse on our property, waiting for interrogation. But Bruno knew we were coming. He was gone before we even set foot in the building.”

As I absorb the news, sharp, acrid disappointment rises in my throat. Underneath, though, relief stirs. Because if Bruno’s still out there, Marco still needs me. As soon as that thought hits my mind, I’m ashamed of it.

“That’s good, right?” I force myself to focus on what matters. “You saved those people. They would’ve died without you.”

“It’s a start.” He goes silent for a while. “Lucia, what I saw in that building…I can’t unsee. What they were planning to do to those people…” He stops and clenches his jaw.

I don’t ask. I simply hold him tighter.

“We lost three of our own. They died trying to get the trafficked victims out.” He shakes his head. “They were good men. And now they’re gone, all because of this feud with Bruno. I was too blinded by my thirst for revenge, and I wasn’t as sharp as I could have been.”

“Marco.” I ease back to look at him. “You can’t carry the burden of their lives. It’ll crush you.”

“I have to.” His eyes meet mine. “I’m a man who sends other men to die while I survive.”

“You also rescued a dozen people tonight.” I drag a hand through the coarse beard dusting his jawline. “You gave your all for that goal, and for that, you deserve to think better of yourself.”

A sliver of gratitude crosses his expression. “You think so? Even after seeing this? Even after seeing what I do and what my world costs?”

“Especially after that.” I kiss him softly, just a quick brush to his lips. “I’m not blind. I know what your world costs. I counted the wounded tonight, and I stitched them up. I also know what you’ve saved. Not just the victims, but those soldiers too. They’re alive because of you.”

He takes in my words, inhaling them like air. Then he draws me closer and buries his face in my hair.

“I don’t know how to be the man you deserve.”

My whisper fills the space between us. “Let me help you figure it out.”

We stay entangled, neither of us sleeping. The night settles around us, heavy but bearable because we’re bearing it together. In the quiet hours, watching the sky lighten through the window, I grapple with a question I’ve actively avoided.

If this is what being with Marco costs—all of the waiting, the fear, and the blood—can I truly survive it? More terrifyingly, are my feelings enough to pull him back from the brink, or will they be one more burden for him?

Eventually, gold spills across the room, and my phone buzzes on the nightstand.

I open a text from an unknown number and find a snapshot of Ashford County Hospital, captured across the street from the front doors. The morning light in the photo matches the light in our room. Whoever took this was standing there just minutes ago.

Below the photo, I read a line that ices my blood.

Missing you at work, Dottoressa. Hopefully we’ll see you soon.

I don’t tell Marco. He’s already bogged down with so much. Instead, I close the message without replying, set my phone down, and curl closer to him.

Still, the image burns behind my eyelids every time I try to rest, filling my head with one question…Does being with Marco mean losing the life I used to have?

My job was everything to me, and I haven’t been able to go to work for weeks. People that genuinely care about me like Jenna, Noah, Dr. Job, and my patients might now be in danger simply because they associate with me.

All because I decided to waltz into Marco’s wild world.

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Chapter 20

Marco

Three days after the raid, I still can’t talk about what I witnessed.

Not to Enzo, who pins me with those knowing eyes during strategy meetings. Not to Nico, who’s learned not to ask. Not to Lucia, who assesses me with the same wary attention she gives unstable patients. She’s careful and measured, like she’s waiting to see which way I’ll break. She doesn’t push, and her restraint—that confidence that I’ll come to her when I’m ready—worsens my guilt.

I throw myself into the one task I can handle right now.

Interrogation.

The captured traffickers sit in a converted warehouse on Benedetti property. The old structure smells of rust and old sweat. The walls are soundproofed, the rooms windowless, and the concrete radiates heat. The space is designed for conversations no one else needs to hear, and the unforgiving conditions help us extract truths.

I spend hours here, rotating between the six men and applying the kind of steady, methodical pressure Enzo taught me. I ask the same question from different angles, weaponize silence, and offer the occasional reminder that cooperation is the only currency that buys them a future.

My body forces me out only to eat food I barely taste, to shower under water hot enough to scald, or to sleep in ninety-minute intervals on the cot Nico set up in the adjacent office. None of it can erase the smell of blood and fear from my skin.

Today’s subject is a mid-level coordinator named Dmitri Volkov, distant cousin to the Bratva leadership. We caught him during the raid with shipment manifests in his jacket. Currently, he’s chained to a metal chair in the center of a concrete room where every breath echoes.

I circle him, my footsteps slapping against the floor. I measure the set of his shoulders, the twitch in his jaw, and the way his eyes track me despite his attempts at bravado.

“You know why you’re here.”

Dmitri spits on the floor, the glob of saliva splatting near my feet. “You think I’m afraid of you?” His English is precise and formal with no stumbling, but his vowels carry the drawl of a Russian man educated in Western institutions. “I’ve been tortured by professionals in Moscow who would eat you for breakfast. You’re just a washed-up fighter playing gangster in your dead father’s clothes.”

My fist connects with Dmitri’s jaw. The force snaps his head back, and blood blooms from his split lip, trickling down his chin.

“I’m not here to torture you.” I keep my voice calm and conversational. I need every word to hit the spot. “I’m here to give you a choice. Tell me about Bruno’s next operation…the location, timing, and targets. Do that, and you’ll walk out of here with all your parts attached and a ride to wherever you want to go.”

I curl my fists. “Refuse, and we do this the tough way. That way will leave you so scarred that even your mother won’t recognize you.”

Dmitri laughs, the rasp thick with blood. “You think I know anything? I only handle logistics and paperwork. I push numbers across desks. I don’t know—”

I hit him harder this time, and his chair scrapes against the concrete.

Hours later, I have some of what I need. Dmitri sits slumped in the seat, his face a mess of purple and red. One of his eyes is swollen shut, and he breathes through a crooked nose. When I stand, he spits blood onto the concrete between his feet and doesn’t bother to lift his head.

I have a location, a date, and a list of players. Bruno’s planning a major harvest event with two dozen victims, already sourced. They’re scheduled for transport in ten days. However, according to Dmitri, the final processing location kept shifting. He explained Bruno’s worry about the Naples facility being exposed and how they’ve temporarily shuttered operations there.

No matter how much I pushed him to reveal the harvest site, Dmitri held firm. He only admitted to me that it's somewhere secure, that Bruno must have been preparing for months, and that his own people don't fully understand.

It's progress, but not enough.

After deciding to let Dmitri stew for a day, I tell the men to get the prisoner back to holding. As I emerge from the warehouse and into the fading afternoon light, the brightness stings my eyes. Lucia waits by the door, her face pale against the gray building, her green eyes fixed on the blood spattered across my shirt. The evidence of what I've been doing is written in a rust brown Rorschach test across my chest.

"How long have you been here?" My voice is hoarse from shouting.

In the past three days, I haven't spent much time in our quarters. I slip in after midnight and leave before dawn while she sleeps, or at least pretends to.

"Long enough." Her voice is controlled, like she's cutting dead tissue out of a wound. "Sophia said you were down here. I wanted to see you."

I should go to her, pull her close, and let the smell and warmth of her remind me that good still exists in the world, that some lives are worth protecting.

Instead, I stay frozen, aware of what she must see when she looks at me. A man covered in another man's blood, fresh off hours of violence that prove I'm a predator.

"You shouldn't be here." The words come out harsher than I intend, edged with what might be shame. "You shouldn't see this."

"I'm a doctor, Marco. I've seen worse in the ER on a Saturday night. Knife wounds, gunshots, shampoo bottles in places they shouldn't be. I've witnessed injuries that would turn your stomach."

"Have you?" I step closer, and she doesn't retreat, though uncertainty flickers in her eyes. "Have you watched as piece after piece is cut off a man and cast to the ground while you decide whether to keep going? Have you smelled fear sweat and fresh blood mixed together until you can't tell where one ends and the other begins? Have you looked into someone's eyes while you calculate exactly how much pain it will take to get what you need?"

She's quiet for a beat. "Is that what you were doing? Calculating? Deciding whether to keep hurting him?"

The question deals me an unexpected blow. The answer should be no. I was extracting information and doing whatever necessary to protect the family, to protect her, and to stop Bruno before he can touch her. But somewhere in those hours, the lines blurred. The satisfaction of inflicting pain summons an old familiar voice in my mind. It tells me that I've always enjoyed violence and insists that this is who I really am.

"No." The lie tastes like copper on my tongue. "I was doing my job."

She studies me, and I have the uncomfortable sense that she sees more than I want her to. Those eyes are trained to diagnose and identify symptoms. I want none of mine identified right now.

Lucia's eyes cease roving my face, and she nods, though I'm not sure whether that little nod is one of acceptance or resignation.

"I made dinner," she mutters, her face revealing nothing of her thoughts. "Well, I boiled the pasta. And heated up sauce from the little Italian place you like. My talents in the kitchen end at not burning the water." She gestures toward the villa, toward warmth and light and the grace I don't deserve. "If you want to, or when you're ready, I'll be there."

She leaves without waiting for my response, her footsteps quiet on the gravel, and I stand alone in the warehouse doorway, watching her go. The distance between us widens with every step, until it feels like miles instead of feet.

I don't make it to dinner.

The memory of her uncertain expression is more than I can bear. Despite scrubbing, blood is still crusted beneath my nails, and I couldn't bear to look at her like this. The part of me that enjoyed the interrogation whispers in my ear that she should be scared and run while she still can.

Instead, I shower until the water runs cold, staying under the spray until my skin is raw while trying to wash away the stain beneath the surface. The water swirls pink down the drain, and I wish the thoughts in my mind and the worries were that easy to erase. Then I sit at my desk and stare at the wall. The bed is ten feet behind me, and she's waiting, but I can't go to her because I don't deserve to.

When I finally fold, it’s past midnight. She’s curled on her side of the bed, turned away from me, but I can tell from the quality of her breathing and the tension in her shoulders that she’s not asleep.

I slide in beside her, keeping distance between us. The empty expanse of sheets is a declaration. The heavy, suffocating silence stretches, filled with the words we’re not saying.

“Marco?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you hold me?”

Her quiet request breaks down a wall I’ve been constructing since I walked out of that warehouse.

I draw closer, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her back against my chest. She relaxes, her hand covering mine where it rests on her stomach. Her body heat seeps into me through the thin fabric of her shirt.

“I’m sorry.” The rough, raw apology slips out of me. “For what you saw and for what I am.”

She’s quiet as her fingers trace patterns on my skin. “What are you, Marco?”

The question hangs in the darkness between us.

“I don’t know anymore.” My voice is barely a whisper. “I used to think I was a fighter who got caught up in the wrong life. Then I thought I was a soldier doing what needed to be done by trading my peace for everyone else’s. Now…” I trail off, unable to explain the hollow ache in my chest.

“Now?”

“I look at my hands and wonder when I stopped flinching at what they’ve done. The blood always washes off, but the ease with which I put it there doesn’t, and that frightens me more than any enemy I’ve ever had.”

Lucia shifts in my arms to face me in the dark. I can make out the gleam of her eyes, the outline of her cheek, and the way the shadows pool in her clavicle.

“Remember that I saw you teaching those kids at the hospital how to fight.” Her voice is soft and steady. “You made them believe they were strong when the world had told them otherwise. That’s who you are, too, Marco. You’re as real as the man in that warehouse, as the blood on your hands, as every terrible act this life demands.”

“With the kids, it’s different.”

“It’s still you.” She cups my face in her hands, her palms soft against my cheeks. “You are violence and gentleness, a killer and a protector. You’re the man who breaks others and the man who mends them. You’re not just one thing, Marco. None of us are. We’re all skin-wrapped contradictions.”

I want to believe her with everything I am.

“I saw how you looked at me.” My voice cracks along fault lines I didn’t know existed. “When I came out of that warehouse. You looked at me like I was…”

“Terrifying?” She finishes for me, quiet but honest. “You were. What you did in there…what you’re capable of…it scares me. It would scare anyone with sense.” She pauses, her thumbs tracing my cheekbones. “But losing you scares me more. I’m so afraid of you not coming back and of some warehouse becoming your grave.”

I kiss her, needing her sweet, clean aura to wash away the dark satisfaction in my soul that comes from shedding blood and torturing other men.

She responds with equal intensity. Her hands slide into my hair, her body presses closer, and for a moment, the world shrinks to her mouth on mine.

When my hands start to wander—when the kiss deepens into hunger—she retreats.

“Not tonight.” Her voice is soft but firm as she draws a clear boundary. “I need to feel like we’re more than adrenaline and survival instinct. I want it to be a choice, not a reaction.”

The rejection stings like a needle plunging into my chest. But beneath the sting, I know what she’s asking for. She needs proof that we exist outside of crisis and that what we have isn’t just fear dressed as love.

I nod and roll over to my own side of the bed. “I understand.”

I don’t. Not fully. But I owe her this.

She falls asleep eventually, her breathing relaxing into a soft rhythm. Her hand remains clasped in mine, as if she’s clinging to me even while unconscious. I stare at the ceiling, replaying the past few days and trying to find the exact point where things started to fracture. Somewhere near dawn, sleep takes me.

When my eyes blink awake, I feel like I’ve hardly had a moment’s rest. I reach out for Lucia and find her side of the bed cold, a note scrawled atop

her pillow.

Went to the clinic. Needed space. We'll talk later.

I read the words three times before they sink in. Then I fold the note precisely and tuck it into my nightstand drawer. The movement rattles the photo of Matteo, and the sight of Lucia's brother reminds me of why I even got a chance with her.

I'm determined to give Lucia the peace she deserves. That's more important than settling my score with Bruno.

For the first time in years, though, my work and my motivations feel hollow, and the thought of honoring Matteo's memory for Lucia encourages me more than revenge ever could.

That afternoon, Nico pulls me aside in the corridor outside of Enzo's office, his expression grim enough to knot my stomach. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, casting us in harsh shadows.

"We have a problem." He keeps his voice low. "Dmitri is dead. Someone got to him last night and slit his throat. There are no signs of forced entry, so this was probably the work of a professional. Either we have another leak, Bruno's people are closer than we thought, or the Volkovs decided a loose prisoner was a greater liability than a dead one."

Having another leak in the compound, so close to everything we hold dear… That means Bruno's reach extends further than we know.

Nico pauses, weighing whether to continue. "Lucia's ex, Detective Dellinger, has been asking questions at the hospital about her and you. He wants to know what she's been doing with her time off. I think he's working an angle, Marco. A case, maybe, or he's fishing. Either way, it's another thread we can't afford to ignore."

That's another threat to track and neutralize.

I nod, my face blank, and thank Nico for the information. Then I walk to the window at the end of the hall and peer down at the compound below. The people are going about their days unaware of how fragile everything is.

Lucia needs space, Dmitri is dead, and while we all dilly-dally, Bruno is planning his next move.

Too many things seem to be happening at once.

Gritting my teeth, I heave a heavy sigh.

This is not the time to despair or to doubt. I have work to do.

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Chapter 21

Lucia

My emergency leave finally runs out. The weeks away from the hospital feel like a lifetime, and now, I'm finally back at Ashford for my first shift in a while.

When we finished arguing about whether I should return to work at all, Marco told me he would post someone at the hospital to watch me. We agreed that I shouldn't know their identity because the knowledge could distract me.

Whichever Benedetti soldier they assigned me is damn good at their job, because even though I try to find them, my eyes don't land on anyone out of place when I walk through the automatic doors.

This feels like jumping back on a bicycle you've abandoned since childhood and riding through the streets you grew up on. My body knows which corner to turn, what side of the hallway the hospital porters roll their carts on, the rooms the blend of blood, bleach and antiseptics come from.

But there's something missing.

The hospital might be the same, but I'm different.

My eyes scan every face in the lobby for threats instead of symptoms, and my hand instinctively reaches for the small of my back where Marco's palm usually rests.

When I decided to return to work, it was because I wanted to get away from Marco's world, but in the absence of him, I'm lost.

Jenna catches me in the break room after my first patient, taking in my white-knuckled grip on the coffee cup.

“Okay, spill.” She positions herself in front of the door, her arms crossed in that stance that conveys she’s not budging until she gets answers. “You’ve been gone for weeks, you look like you haven’t slept since approximately the last ice age, and you’re wearing that expression that says you’ve got a war going on in your head.”

“I’m fine.” I offer the same hollow response I’ve been giving since Tomas held a gun to my head. “Just tired.”

“Bullshit.” Jenna’s voice softens. “Lu, I’ve known you for six years. You’re my emergency contact and the person who gets my organs if things go sideways. You think I can’t tell when you’re falling apart?”

My fears, worries, and misgivings feel like a large fist closing around my windpipe, keeping the words stuck in there. Thankfully, my beeping pager saves me from further awkwardness. *Gunshot wound, trauma alert in bay two. ETA three minutes.*

Jenna rolls her eyes as I rush out, my body flooding with adrenaline. How ironic that I find a medical crisis more comfortable than opening up to a friend.

I’ve got work to do, and I’m glad for the distraction.

The patient is a young guy in his early twenties, dressed in an expensive cashmere-and-sneakers attire that belongs at a private clinic on the Upper East Side, not here. Considering those shoes must have cost north of a thousand dollars, someone probably robbed him for his valuables. There’s an entry wound in his thigh. The bleeding is heavy but not catastrophic.

His eyes are wide and nearly black, the pupils blown with fear.

“You’re going to be fine.” My voice is calm while my hands run through the familiar choreography of stabilizing him. “What’s your name?”

“Tyler.” His voice shakes and cracks on the last syllable. “Am I… Am I going to die?”

“Not today, Tyler. Not on my watch.”

My fingers find the wound as I map veins and pressure points without conscious thought. Noah appears at my elbow, eager as a puppy, and I put him to work on lines and vitals, grateful for the extra assistance.

As soon as I finish wrapping my patient’s thigh and smooth the dressing with the flat of my palm, he starts whispering.

“These guys jumped me for my watch, a Rolex my dad gave me for graduation. They demanded I let it go, that it was nothing to me but precious to them. I told them no. I didn’t think they’d actually shoot me over a watch.”

Precious.

That word hits like a trigger pull, and the ER dissolves into the Benedetti main hall, where Tomas has the cold circle of a gun barrel pressed to my temple and his arm locked around my throat. His lips are close enough to my ear that I can feel his breath against my skin.

The only question is whether I take something precious to you with me.

“…Dr. Romano? Dr. Romano!”

I blink to find Noah staring at me, his young face pale beneath the trauma bay lights. The room has gone quiet. Everyone’s frozen in place, their attention fixed on me.

“I need…” My voice scrapes out wrong. “I need a minute.”

I’m out of the bay before anyone can respond. I don’t stop moving until I reach the supply closet at the end of the hall. The door clicks shut behind me, plunging me into darkness broken only by the thin strip of light beneath the door. I slide down against the shelves, my back against boxes of gauze and tubing. My breath comes in short, sharp gasps that won’t slow no matter how much I fight them.

Breathe… You’re a doctor. You know physiology. Four seconds in, hold, four seconds out. Control the autonomic response.

It doesn’t work. My hands shake, my heart races, and Tomas’s face consumes my vision.

Jenna opens the door, slips inside, and engages the lock. She doesn’t speak. She just sits beside me on the cold linoleum, close enough that our shoulders press together.

“I’ve got you.” Her voice is quiet. “Just breathe. I’m right here.”

We stay like this until my pulse steadies. Eventually, I remember how to draw air into my lungs and the world stops tilting.

“Want to talk about it?” Jenna asks.

“No.” My voice is hoarse and raw. “Yes. I don’t know.”

“Start with Marco. I know he’s the one you’ve been with. The sparks between you two practically set the hospital on fire every time he came in here.”

A short, surprised laugh escapes me as I teeter on the edge of hysterical. “I think I’m in over my head, Jen.”

“In over your head how? Are you romantically confused or in actual danger?”

“Both.” I press my palms to my eyes until I see stars. “I know exactly how much danger I’m in, and I’m choosing to stay anyway, and that terrifies me more than the danger itself. He’s not what I thought he was. He’s good, Jen. Really good, in ways that matter. But his world is—”

“Violent? Scary? Full of people who might kill you?”

“Yes.”

Jenna stares at me for a moment before dropping a bomb. “Do you love him?”

The question hits like defibrillator paddles to the chest. My heart lurches, stutters, then races.

“Yes.” The truth escapes me in a raspy tone. “God help me, yes.”

Jenna is quiet for a while. Then, very carefully, she puts her arms around me and holds me tightly.

“Okay.” She nods rapidly. “Then we figure it out. But Lu, whatever happens, you won’t go through it alone. I’m here for you. That’s the deal, right?”

I put my head on her shoulder, glad to have her on my side.

We wander back out together, and I wave her off because she has duties in another wing. I labor through the rest of my shift, and by the end of it, my brain is fogged and my nerves frayed with exhaustion.

I don’t even notice a clean-cut Mason Dellinger until he blocks my path.

He unfurls himself from the wall outside the doctors’ lounge, his eyes flickering with a look that’s too fast to read.

“Lucia.”

“Mason.” I keep walking toward the exit, willing him to disappear. “Not now.”

“You look exhausted.” He falls into step beside me, his shoes tapping against the linoleum in an even rhythm. “When’s the last time you ate anything that didn’t come from a vending machine?”

“What do you want?”

He shrugs. “I want to help you.”

Mason Dellinger and I dated for eight months, so I know that he’s always been good at convincing himself he’s the hero of every story. He’s

got a knack for being attentive and constantly available, and he says all the right things to make you believe he's the safest option. Then he slowly convinces you that you'd be foolish to not follow his advice. It took me a year after we ended things to understand that safety and control are the same to him, and that he's never quite accepted my choice to walk away.

I halt and turn to face him in the middle of the corridor, ignoring the nurses and orderlies flowing around us. "Help me with what?"

Mason arranges his expression into a careful mask of concern. "I know about Marco Santori. I know about the Benedetti compound, the engagement, all of it." He holds up a hand to cut off my reply. "I'm not here to judge. I'm here because I'm worried about you."

"You're worried." My voice comes out flat and hollow.

"I am." He reaches into his coat and withdraws a folder thick with papers. "I've been investigating Santori for months. We're building a case on his boss." He opens the folder, exposing slightly grainy crime scene photos. "And Lucia, this is who you're involved with. This is what he'll turn you into."

Despite every instinct screaming at me to look away, my eyes scan the photos. Marco's at a warehouse entrance, his silhouette unmistakable. The poor quality of the pictures doesn't hide his bloodstained hands or the bodies he stands over.

"This doesn't prove anything." My voice shakes, but I still manage to force the rest of my statement out through gritted teeth. "Photos without context are just images. Where did you get these, and what exactly are you trying to tell me?"

"He's a killer, Lucia." The way Mason's tone gentles cuts deeper than a scalpel. "Look at the evidence. In the past two months, three men, all connected to Benedetti operations, have died. Each one has Santori's fingerprints all over them…literally, in some cases. He's a merciless executioner."

The photos blur as I blink rapidly, forcing my vision to clear.

I open my mouth to defend him, then hold myself back. What can I say? That Marco's different? That the man who taught sick children to fight and held me through nightmares couldn't possibly be capable of this?

I've seen it. I watched him beat Tomas until the marble floors were slick and red. I saw him emerge from an interrogation with another man's blood

crusted beneath his nails. I know exactly what he's capable of and have known since the beginning.

Still, I chose him. "I'm not asking you to break up with him." Mason closes the folder and tucks it back into his coat. "I'm asking you to be careful. Is this really the life you want? Because Lucia, once you're in, you're truly in. There's no clean break and no walking away unscathed."

His hand brushes a strand of hair from my face, and I flinch on pure reflex, pulling away.

"I still care about you, Lucia." His voice softens. "That never stopped, no matter what happened between us. And if you ever need a way out or a safe harbor, I'm here."

He leaves without waiting for my reply, disappearing into the flow of visitors and staff and suffering.

Marco's face rises in my memory as I stand frozen in the corridor. But rather than the blood-covered version from the photos, I picture the man who looked at me like I was precious.

I think about Marco's hands and how they stay gentle on my skin even after they've committed violence. How his voice, rough with emotion, whispers, "I love you," in the dark. He regards me like I'm the only person keeping him tethered to this earth.

You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved. The voice in my head sounds like my mother and contains every warning she ever gave me about getting too close to broken shards that could cut me. *You can't fix him. You can only drown with him.*

As I take long strides to my car in the parking garage, the concrete echoes with my footsteps. By the time I reach for the handle, I've made a decision.

I'll talk to Marco. As much as I'm ready to give him the benefit of the doubt, because I've come to know the real Marco, I can't deny my desire for clarity. His usual way of skirting around difficult subjects won't cut it. Not this time. I need to know whether he's willing to build a life that doesn't run on bloodshed, and whether I can live inside his world if he isn't. If I can't find a way to reconcile who he is with who I need him to be…

I can't finish the thought.

Right on cue, my phone starts humming against the console. The screen lights up to display a text from an unsaved contact.

Your friend Jenna seems nice. Brunette, works the ER night shift on Tuesdays. It would be a shame if anything happened to her. Stay close to Marco, Dottoressa. It's your only way to keep everyone alive.

My blood turns to ice. The phone slips from my fingers and bounces onto the passenger's seat.

Marco's world isn't just putting *me* at risk anymore. Now I'm a danger to the people I love, to anyone who's ever been kind to me, to everyone within reach.

I sit in my car in the garage, my hands shaking, and wonder how many people will pay for my choice to get involved with Marco Santori.

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Chapter 22

Marco

Surviving Lucia's first day back at Ashford County has proven difficult. I spent the entire morning trying not to call her, and I picked up the phone about half a dozen times before telling myself to trust this woman. If anything goes wrong, then Dani, the guard I dispatched to keep an eye on her, will let me know.

By three in the afternoon, I'm in Enzo's office reviewing the latest intelligence on Bruno's activities, hoping that hunting the man who threatened my fiancée will quiet the noise in my head.

The padrino's personal office is designed to remind people they're in the presence of real danger. When the office is silent like today, with the heavy air weighed down by Enzo's gaze, people worry even more.

He doesn't keep me waiting. He doesn't even offer coffee or the usual casual nod of respect he gives men who've earned it. He only gestures to the chair across from his desk and waits until I sit. As I do, the leather creaks beneath me.

"You're distracted."

It's not a question, and I don't treat it as one. Instead, I walk him through the status of our hunt for Bruno.

"Billy traced Clinica Caritas's financials to three shell companies in the tristate area. Nico's watching two of them. The third went dark forty-eight hours ago, which means Bruno's either shutting down or relocating. Port authority flagged a refrigerated container matching his organ transport

specs. It will arrive in Newark in six days." I keep my voice level. "We're close."

"I'm not talking about operations." Enzo's stormy gray eyes are unreadable. "I'm talking about you and the doctor. My head of security can't afford any distractions. You're the last line between this family and its enemies, and I don't need your head in the clouds."

The words hit me like precise punches. My jaw tightens, but I don't respond because he's right.

"I've been where you are." Enzo's voice softens fractionally, showing the barest crack in his armor. "When Sophia first came into my life, I couldn't function or think straight. Every decision was filtered through my fear of losing her, and I calculated everything around keeping her safe."

He rests his elbows on the desk. "The difference is that I realized what I was getting into and dove in headfirst. Bruno won't grant you a single second's reprieve just because this woman occupies your mind. He'll use it against you."

"I'm aware."

"Are you?" Enzo studies me, his eyes missing nothing. "From where I'm sitting, you're letting what you feel for her drive decisions that should be tactical. You're confused, Marco, and confused soldiers get people killed. They lose themselves, their teams, and the women they can't decide whether to protect."

The accusation hangs in the air between us, thick as smoke.

"I need you to ask yourself a question." Enzo's voice is gentle now, which only emphasizes his message. "Do you truly feel love? It's not the first time men who live the life we do have mistaken their gratitude, their obsession, or the intensity of shared danger as love. You need to know."

"I know." My hands curl into fists on my thighs. "It's love."

"Then you have a choice to make." Enzo settles back, the leather sighing beneath him. "I know what's going on in that head of yours." His voice takes on the weight of a man delivering a verdict he didn't want to give. "You're thinking I'm the wrong person to say this, given Sophia. And you're right. It makes me a bit of a hypocrite, but it's my job to take care of the entire family now, and it's my job to ask you these things."

He reaches for the glass of whiskey on his desk, turns it once without drinking, and sets it down again. For a moment, the padrino disappears and what remains is a man who has sat exactly where I'm sitting. "When they

came for Sophia, they were after leverage. That's manageable. You can negotiate leverage, take it off the board, or maneuver around it. Bruno's case is different. He's not using Lucia as a bargaining chip. He's out to hurt you, and he'll use her or even kill her if that's the only path to you. You're the target, and the most direct route runs through the woman you care about."

That truth sinks into my chest like a stone I can't lift. "Then I'll deal with this and stop him."

The look on Enzo's face doesn't change. "If you're going to do that, I need you fully focused. It's not about choosing between her and your duty, Marco. But you have to ask yourself the hard questions. Like the fact that she could be safer away from you. She's already raised eyebrows by digging into her brother's death. You're helping with that, and you should consider that being by your side might make her an even bigger target."

The weight of it drops onto my shoulders. "What are you asking me to do?"

Nico strides in without knocking with his tablet in hand and his face tight. I've only seen him like that twice before. Both times, someone had died.

"Jenna Chase is missing." He doesn't ease into it. "Someone grabbed her from her apartment within the last two hours. Phone off. No sign of forced entry, which means whoever took her had keys or someone let them in."

I'm on my feet before he finishes. "Bruno?"

"His people have been watching the hospital for weeks, mapping patterns and identifying routines." Nico flips his screen toward me, showing surveillance logs and a timeline. "They were waiting for Lucia to come back. And the day she does, they abduct her closest friend. This isn't random. It's a message."

Enzo rests his forearms on the desk. "He's telling you he can reach anyone, anywhere. Lucia. Everyone she cares about. No one is off-limits."

The roaring in my ears drowns out everything except one thought. "Where is Lucia right now?"

"Still at the hospital. She doesn't know." Nico consults his tablet. "We have maybe an hour before she tries to contact Jenna and figures it out."

"Then I need to get to her first."

Enzo rises. “Which brings us back to that choice, Marco. If you keep her close, she’s a target. If you send her away, she’s unprotected. There’s no good option, but you need to choose one and follow it through until the end. Decide now.”

I nod, run straight out to the garage, and screech onto the road like my car’s on fire. Once I start, I don’t pause until I make it all the way to Ashford County Hospital.

When I arrive, I find her sitting in her car in the parking garage in the fading afternoon light, her face pale and drawn in a way that pains my chest. The concrete around us is stained with oil, and the fluorescent lights of the garage buzz overhead. As soon as I pull in, she glances up, and the relief in her eyes nearly destroys me.

“Marco? What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.” I kill my engine, shove the door open, and cross over to her car. Before I can think better of it, I draw her out of her Honda and into my arms. She melts against me, her hands fisting my jacket lapel as she buries her face in my chest.

“I was just going to call you.” Her voice is muffled, but I catch the strain. “I need to tell you about a text I received.”

“Later.” I ease back enough to see her, tracing the shadows beneath her eyes with my gaze. “Jenna’s gone. Bruno took her.”

She jerks her head up, her face white as a sheet.

“What?” She pauses, and then a chuckle of disbelief rips from her throat. “No, I… Marco, I just saw her. She waved at me and walked out like half an hour ago at the end of her shift. She was right there. She was fine. She was…” She pauses, and her eyes widen. “How long ago?”

“I think he abducted her from her apartment. Enzo has people on it, but…” I stop, because there’s no gentle way to say this. No version of these words will leave her unscathed. “Bruno’s using her to get to you and me. This is proof that he can nab anyone.”

Lucia’s knees buckle under her, and I grab her waist to keep her upright. Violent shudders run through her body like a live current.

“This is my fault.” Her voice is barely a raspy whisper. “If I hadn’t gotten involved with you… If I’d stayed away and kept my distance—”

“Hey.” I take her face in my hands. “This is Bruno’s doing. Not yours. The moment you start carrying his sins, he wins.”

Doubt, fear, and the first flickers of retreat surface in her eyes. She's thinking of backing away. Her mind is trying to protect herself from what loving me costs, and I can't let that happen. I can't lose her to the very evil I'm trying to protect her from.

"I have an idea."

My words leave me before the thought has fully formed, but I push through anyway.

"The engagement bought us time. But news is getting around that it might be a facade, and if the wrong people believe that, you lose the shield it was meant to give you. If we're going to take down Bruno, I need the men serving the Benedettis to believe they're doing this for the family. And nothing carries the weight a marriage does."

I pull away to meet her eyes.

"In this world, in Benedetti law, a wife is protected with every mechanism the family has. We offer every alliance and would cash in every obligation owed. It'll also cost Bruno far more to touch a wife than a girlfriend or a fiancée. And it will cost anyone who helps him even more."

"That's why you want to marry me?" Her voice is soft. "For mafia protection?"

"No." I shake my head slowly. "I want to marry you because I love you and because the alternative is losing you. Both of those are reasons enough, without the strategy attached. But the strategy helps. And I'll use every tool I have."

My next words are unplanned, and they bubble up from a place in my heart unscarred by the violence I've drenched myself in for all these years.

"Be my wife. Not as an arrangement and not as a performance. For real, Lucia."

Her breath hitches. "Marco, what—"

"Nonna's ring already sits on your finger." I take her hand to trace my thumb across the ruby. "She gave it to you because she saw what I was too stubborn to admit. This stopped being fake a long time ago. So let me make it real. Marry me."

I'm talking too fast now, desperate to bridge the developing rift.

"I know this isn't how it's supposed to happen. We're in a parking garage, your friend's missing, and the world has gone to shit. But I can't lose you. Every second we're apart feels like a knife in my chest. You're the only good part of my life, and I'll burn the world to ash to keep you safe."

Her throat works around a knot. “I need time to process. Jenna’s gone, and you’re asking me to…” She shakes her head. “I can’t think straight. Everything’s spinning.”

She slips her hand from mine, steps back, and puts distance between us. “I can’t just…pretend everything’s fine when it’s not. Jenna’s out there somewhere scared and alone, and I don’t know if I can survive this life, Marco. I don’t know if I’m strong enough for what loving you requires.”

My hands instinctively lift toward her, but I force them back down. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

“That’s not true.” Her voice cracks. “I had a panic attack today in a supply closet at the hospital, surrounded by gauze and bedpans. All because a patient said the word ‘precious’ and my memory flew back to that room with Tomas’s gun at my head. I can’t escape any of it.”

The confession steals the air from my lungs.

“I can’t handle this.” Tears spill down her cheeks. “I’m a doctor. I heal people. And because of that, I can’t seem to wrap my mind around your world.”

She gestures at me, and then at Nonna’s ruby on her finger.

“Every time you leave, I wait. Every time you come back bloody, I wonder if you’ll come back at all. Every time my phone buzzes, I think it’s news of your death. And I love you… I love you so much that it terrifies me, but I don’t know if love is enough.”

I gather her into an embrace. Her body goes rigid, and then she collapses into my arms, sobbing with what feels like an ancient grief that’s been compounding for years.

“I’m sorry.” I cling to her, press my face to her hair, and breathe her in. “I’m sorry for every moment of fear, for every night you’ve spent waiting, and for every phone call that stopped your heart.”

We stand like this for a long time. The garage is empty around us, the city thrumming in the distance. At some point, she stops crying and steps back, and though her face is blotchy, her red-rimmed eyes remain steady.

“I need you to hear me.” She speaks through her tears, enunciating each word with deliberate care. “I’m not saying no. I’m not leaving. But I need you to understand that this is hard for me. With the fear and the threat of death…I’ve lost control of my own life. If we’re going to do this…*really* do this…then I need you to trust me and not decide things for me.”

“I can do that.”

“Can you?” She meets my eyes. “Because I saw the way you looked at me when you came out of that warehouse covered in blood. You wanted to lock me away someplace safe where no one could touch me. And I get it… I do. But to me, that’s captivity dressed up as protection.”

“I’ll try.” I frame her jaw with one hand, brushing her cheek with my thumb. “I’ll try to be better and to trust you. You can make your own choices and take your own risks. However, I won’t stop protecting you. It’s not in me.”

“I’m not asking you to.” She closes her eyes and leans into my touch. “I’m asking you to do this protecting thing with me, not hide details that I should know from me. Keep me beside you, not behind you.”

The night air settles around us, and when she opens her eyes, her gaze stays on mine with a steadiness forged from every horror she’s survived.

“Then don’t think. Just feel, Lucia.”

“Yes.” The word comes out broken, cracked, squeezed through fault lines. “You’re the only person who’s ever made me feel like I don’t have to earn the right to be loved. Even through the danger, and even through all of this, I want to be with you.”

I kiss her with soft desperation, a promise and a plea in one. She kisses me back, her hands pressing against my chest as she grips my jacket with both fists.

For a moment, the garage, the threat, and the trepidation all fade to the sensation of her mouth on mine and the warmth of her body against me.

When we break the kiss, she smiles brightly. “Can we go home now?”

I glance at both our vehicles. As much as I want us together, I know it would be better if we drove both cars home.

“You go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

She drives her car, and I follow in mine, almost bumper to bumper as we navigate the street together. A little sense of satisfaction blooms in my belly at our truce and the fact that it means I’m not losing her.

That strengthens my resolve to keep her safe even more. If she’s going to be by my side, she’ll need all the protection she can get.

That night, after she’s asleep in our bed and her breathing is soft and even, I place a call from my desk, assigning two soldiers to watch Lucia whenever she leaves the compound.

I tell myself I’m honoring her request while still doing what needs to be done. She’ll understand eventually.

I almost believe that.

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Chapter 23

Lucia

Feigning ignorance regarding the reason for Jenna's absence at work for a whole week has proven much harder than expected.

I'd prepared myself to lie to cops who would ask questions about her whereabouts and when I last saw her. I'd wondered how I'd move through the hallways knowing everyone is concerned about her.

However, none of that happened. I met no cops, and no one asked questions.

Hartwick, the chief admin at my hospital, strode into the call room dressed in a ridiculous, brightly colored suit with the tag attached to the front lapel. I watched him announce that Jenna's on a week-long break due to a family emergency. Nausea hit me so viciously that I barely made it to the bathroom in time.

The queasiness and slight headache lingered all day. I told myself it was the strain, the aftermath of Jenna's disappearance, the constant fear pressing down on my chest. I don't need to be a doctor to know that my gastrointestinal issues are caused by stress. It's basic physiology.

I've had two days of exhaustion, worsened by the fact that I can't even sleep. As soon as my shift ended on the second day, I returned to the villa. Marco wasn't in our quarters because Nico had him on a mission, and I didn't ask what. In his absence, the space felt too quiet, so I went to the clinic, hoping a few patients trickling in would give me something to focus on.

After an hour of lull, I'm out cold at the clinic desk, my cheek resting against a stack of patient files. I wake to find Sophia hovering over me with her big, round belly. She's wearing that knowing expression she's probably perfected through her own share of sleepless nights in this compound.

"You need to see a doctor." She settles into the chair beside me.

"I *am* a doctor."

"A different doctor, then." Her soft eyes prickle my skin.

"I'm fine."

"You're not." She covers my hand with hers. "Lucia, I've been where you are. I promise you, Jenna will be found and brought back safe. You'll feel better soon."

"You don't know that!" I snap. "And don't give me bullshit excuses for being in my shoes, because it doesn't make things better."

Sophia's eyes widen at my outburst, and she slowly pulls back. "I just want to help. I'll leave if you'd rather be alone."

"No, no." I shake my head, immediately regretting lashing out.

Jenna's out there somewhere, and the thought of her in danger means both my body and mind can't rest. My exhaustion is deeply eroding my patience and calmness, leaving room for my anger to latch onto the only person present.

A shaky breath drags through me. "Sorry…I'm sorry. It's just that I can't find her or assist in finding her. All I can do is wait and treat other people's problems while mine keep piling up. And it's frustrating."

"Yeah." Sophia rests a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I know that feeling."

"I'm always tired. Every morning, nausea hits without warning. I can barely keep food down. It's like I'm wading through cement, and I can't tell if it's worry for Jenna or fear." I look at her. "I can't wait for this to be over."

She goes quiet, her eyes widening. "Have you considered the possibility…that you might be *pregnant*?"

That word is a blow that knocks the air from my lungs.

"No… We've been careful." I pause when I hear the uncertainty in my own voice. We were careful in the beginning, but after Naples, after the confession, and after the nights where we grappled for each other like oxygen, protection hasn't exactly been at the top of our minds.

My doctor’s brain starts counting backward without permission. My last cycle was six weeks ago. Maybe seven. I’d blamed the missed period on fatigue and a body running on fumes, but now I can’t unsee the puzzle slowly coming together.

Still, I shake my head. “I’m sure I’m not pregnant, Sophia.”

“I’m not suggesting you are.” She squeezes my hand. “I’m saying it’s worth investigating. For your peace of mind, if nothing else.”

I nod, my mind racing through timelines, possibilities, and the terrifying weight of “What if?” The travel, the unstable rhythm of this new life, the nights I sought Marco’s comfort without thinking about consequences. Every rational explanation I’ve been hiding behind suddenly seems paper-thin.

Seven weeks is a long enough period, too long when I think of the implications.

As a doctor, I know the signs. They were easier to ignore and bury in in the recesses of my mind under my other millions of worries, but now that I’ve heard from someone else, the symptoms I’ve been explaining away snap into a clear pattern.

I push all of this to the back of my mind because thinking about it means facing decisions I’m not ready for.

Instead, I dive into my duties to distract myself. I complete early shifts at the hospital, travel back to the compound to put in a few hours at the villa’s clinic, and then I spend my nights in Marco’s quarters.

Meanwhile, Marco works himself to the bone to find Jenna. The dark circles under his eyes tell the story. He comes home late into the night when I’m in bed and always leaves before dawn.

I can’t bring myself to discuss the topics hanging over us—the wedding, the missed period—and I’m almost grateful that every time we’re in the same room long enough to talk, another crisis strikes, pulling one of us away.

He watches me warily these days, and I wonder if he can tell I’m hiding a secret.

Marco can’t know about the pregnancy. I haven’t confirmed anyway, and until I do, a baby is just a possibility, and possibilities don’t require confessions. That’s what I tell myself, at least.

Five days after my conversation with Sophia, on a Friday afternoon when I’m wrung out from a twelve-hour shift and still running on nothing, I

ask for more work. I hope to attach my mind to efforts in the hospital and siphon away the worries plaguing my mind.

I'm terrified for Jenna. And dread coils in my chest whenever I consider the symptoms in my body that have become too clear to ignore.

You could just take a pregnancy test and confirm the truth.

The irony isn't lost on me that a doctor who's delivered hundreds of diagnoses can't bring herself to take a simple pregnancy test.

My added shift, which I move through on autopilot, passes in a blur.

I'm cleaning a laceration on a teenager's arm when my phone buzzes with a text from Mason.

I need to see you. It's important. Usual place?

I text back.

Give me an hour.

I wonder what my life would be if I were still with the safe and steady Mason. He represents a world where two pink lines on a test would be cause for celebration, not terror.

Right now, a part of me wishes things could be that simple.

We meet at a coffee shop near the hospital. It's neutral ground and public enough to feel secure. He's already waiting with two cups on the table and a carefully blank expression.

"Double shot." He slides one cup toward me as I walk up to his seat. "You look like you need it."

The gesture is thoughtful, considerate, and normal, prompting my chest to ache for a life I've chosen to leave behind.

Ordinary is a luxury I'll never have again in Marco's world, where kidnapping, death, and threats are the orders of the day. I knew that going in.

But bringing a baby into that? That changes the whole dynamic. I could walk into a coffee shop like this with my child, and enemies could be lying in ambush—

Mason knocks his knuckles against the tabletop to snap me out of my thoughts. "Lucia? You okay?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I wrap my hands around the warm cup, drawing comfort from the heat. "What did you need to see me about?"

Mason scrutinizes me with the expertise of a man who's spent years interrogating suspects. "I've been doing more digging into Santori and the Benedetti family. And Lucia…" He pauses, choosing his words with care.

“It’s worse than I thought. I’ve seen the violence, the bodies, and the operations they initiate. This isn’t a man you can fix. He’ll drag you down with him.”

“I don’t need fixing.” The words come out sharper than I intend. “And neither does he.”

“Really?” Mason’s eyebrows rise. “Because from where I’m sitting, you look like someone who’s losing herself in a relationship that’s destroying her.”

He leans forward, his voice softening.

“I’m not going to repeat myself about Santori. I’ve said my piece. That’s not why I’m here.” He curls his hands around his own cup. “I’m here because you look like a woman who’s drowning and won’t ask for a life preserver. I still know you well enough to see that.”

My throat tightens. “I’m fine.”

“You texted me back, which means you’re not.”

“You don’t know him. You don’t know *us*.”

“I know *you*.” Mason reaches across the table and covers my hand with his. “I know the woman who used to laugh at my terrible jokes. She would stay up all night reading and still manage to be the most compassionate doctor in her class. She talked about building a life, a family, and something real.” His eyes hold mine. “Is that woman still in there? Or has she been warped by a criminal?”

The question leaves me winded. I don’t know the answer or who I am anymore.

Marco’s lover? The ice doctor who’s scared of a simple medical test? Or am I just a terrified woman in a coffee shop sitting across from the detective who used to love her? Though, that relationship also ended in disaster—Mason’s protectiveness curdling into control—and I swore I’d never repeat the pattern.

I pull my hand back and stand too fast. “Thank you for the coffee and for caring, but I have to go.”

“Lucia, wait!”

I don’t wait. I don’t even look back as I speedwalk out the door.

As soon as I start the vehicle, the world tilts sideways. Black spots dance in my vision, multiplying, spreading… My head spins, and the steering wheel swims in and out of focus. I grip it tighter, trying to anchor myself, but the spots keep coming. I’m so tired…so impossibly tired…

Then I hear a crash.

The accident is simple, really. I've drifted into a parked car at maybe five miles an hour, resulting in a soft thud of metal meeting metal. The impact still jolts me, snaps my eyes open, and forces me to contend with what just happened.

I'm sitting here, trembling and struggling to catch my breath, when a knock on the window has me jumping up and hitting my head.

Mason's followed me out, his face creased with concern. "Lucia? Open the door. Are you okay?"

I fumble with the lock, and he opens the door before crouching beside me in the cold morning air.

"What are you doing here, Mason?"

He scoffs. "I came out to see you drive away and saw you crash your car instead. You could've died."

"I'm fine." My shaky voice betrays me. "Just tired."

"You're white as a sheet." He reaches for my wrist and checks my pulse, an old habit from when we were together. Back then, he'd worry about me working too many back-to-back shifts. "Your heart's racing. When's the last time you ate?"

"I don't remember."

Mason's jaw twitches, his expression tightening into one that I know all too well. "Come on. My car's right over there. I'm taking you somewhere you can rest."

"I can't. Marco's expecting me."

"Marco can wait." He helps me out of the car, keeping me up when my knees buckle, his strong arms around my waist. "Right now, you need to take care of yourself. Nothing else matters."

I'm too exhausted and too scared to argue. I'm aware that I almost hurt myself, and if there's even a chance I'm carrying a child, I almost hurt that too. I've been operating on empty and pretending I'm fine even as every cell in my body screams otherwise.

Mason drives me to a small private clinic a few blocks away, claiming he knows the doctor and citing my right to privacy outside my own place of employment, where every colleague within six floors knows my face and at least three of them would ask questions.

He calls ahead, and a nurse in soft pink scrubs greets us at the door.

“She needs a full workup,” Mason tells her, his voice brooking no argument. “And I need to know what’s going on with her.”

The urge rises to tell him this isn’t his business, that I have people, that Marco should be here. But the words won’t come. Mason moves to follow us into the exam room, and my protests flicker out like a spent candle. I need someone beside me when I get confirmation. Even Mason will do.

After the nurse closes the door, I let them draw blood, take my vitals, and ask the routine questions, answering on autopilot while my mind drifts elsewhere.

I warn the doctor in a voice close to a whisper, “I might be pregnant.”

His eyes widen. “Oh, really?”

Mason’s face cycles through a series of emotions. First there’s shock, then hurt, and then a look that hardens behind his eyes. “You’re pregnant? With *his* baby?”

I glance at the doctor, who slips out of the room, then I turn back to Mason.

“Yes.” My voice comes out quiet but calm.

After a long moment of silence, he shakes his head. “Lucia, listen to me. I know you think you love him. I know you think this can work. But a baby changes everything. You’re not just risking yourself anymore. You’re risking a child.”

“I understand that. Can you just stop, please?”

“Does Marco know you’re pregnant?”

I hesitate, guilt flitting through me. “I haven’t found time to tell him.”

“And what do you think he’ll promise you and your baby?” Mason’s voice sharpens. “Will he vow to protect you and keep you safe? Look where that’s gotten you. You just crashed your car!”

“That’s not his fault.”

“Isn’t it?” Mason lurches forward, his eyes intense. “He’s the reason you’re in danger. The reason your friend is gone. The reason you can’t sleep or eat or think straight. And now, you’re bringing a child into that? Into his world of violence and blood?”

He’s lashing out, each word launched in the hope that he convinces me of my folly. The sting of truth hits me hard, but I can also hear the jealousy that distorts his tone.

A spark ignites in my mind.

“Mason…how did you know Jenna was taken?”

He recoils. “What?”

I struggle to sit up. “Do the police know Jenna was kidnapped and who did it? No one else seems to know.”

“It came up in my investigation.” He clears his throat.

“Tell me about the case. Do you know where she is?”

His jaw tightens. “We’re working on it.”

“You have resources. Use them. Where is she, Mason?”

“Stop, Lucia!” With that, he storms after the doctor.

In the deafening silence he leaves behind, I catalogue the things that don’t fit.

Mason knows Jenna was taken. When I asked him about finding her, he said, “We’re working on it.” That implies a case file and an official investigation. But if Jenna’s disappearance had been officially logged as an abduction, detectives would have come to the hospital to question me.

The cops would have established a paper trail, but they haven’t.

’Which means either Mason’s running an investigation off-book, or someone fed him information they shouldn’t have. And the only people who know what happened to Jenna are Marco and the people who took her.

The realization smacks me in the face.

Soon, the doctor returns with Mason in tow. They both wear strange looks that I can’t read, their eyes blank, their jaws set tight.

I immediately sense that something’s wrong.

“Uh, Ms. Romano.” He shows me a chart. “You’re not pregnant. Your hormone levels were a result of extreme emotional and physical stress.”

“No. I have all the symptoms.”

The doctor points at the chart. “That’s pseudocyesis. Your expectations triggered your symptoms. We have your negative test right here. You’ll feel better with some rest.”

My fingers take the paper, and what I read hits me hard. A deep disappointment rifles through me, and I fold the results and shove them into my bag.

Not pregnant. The symptoms were real—the nausea, the exhaustion, the missed cycle—but the cause was my own body reacting to months of sustained terror and grief. Pseudocyesis. A psychosomatic response. My body believed what my mind feared and produced the evidence to match.

I should feel relief, like a weight has been lifted.

Instead, I’m sitting in a stranger’s exam room thinking about Marco’s hand on my stomach in Naples and how he cradled me like I was already carrying something precious. I’ve been building the baby in my head for days, imagining, planning, fretting in advance about my child existing in a world where people won’t hesitate to abduct my best friend as leverage.

I wanted Marco’s baby. The revelation lodges sideways in my heart.

As the doctor slips out again, I scoot near the edge of the bed. A nurse produces crackers and a cup of tea that I eat and drink without protest. It helps to chew. As I do, the swirling shadows retreat from my peripheral vision.

“Luce?” Mason steps closer.

“I know you want to help.” Despite my chest practically caving in, I force myself to meet his eyes. “You think you’re saving me, but this is my choice and my life.” I rise, my legs steadier. “I choose Marco.”

Mason’s eyes darken, but he quickly hides his hurt behind a staunch look. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Maybe.” I grab my bag and head for the door. “But it’s my mistake to make.”

After that, Mason drives me back to my car in silence. It’s still parked where I left it, the minor cosmetic damage already noted on a windshield ticket from hospital security. I thank him with stiff formality, and he watches me drive away with an expression I can’t decipher. One of loss, maybe. Or resignation.

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Chapter 24

Marco

The house is dark when I finally get in close to midnight. Lucia's curled on the far edge of the bed, her body angled away from mine. A blanket covers all but her head, and she stares at the wall like it possesses answers to burning, unasked questions.

"Lucia."

She doesn't turn, just shakes her head once in a small, exhausted motion. "I can't talk right now, Marco."

Her voice is wrecked and hoarse, like she's been crying for hours. My chest tightens. I want to lunge across the bed, pull her into my arms, and demand she tell me what's wrong so I can fix it. But chasing her when she retreats only drives her deeper into her shell.

So I wait, sitting up on my side of the bed like a fool and monitoring the rise and fall of her shoulders beneath that blanket. I convince myself she just needs time.

Around five in the morning, I finally drift off to a weary sleep, and when I wake, she's already up and dressed, her hair pulled back. Her eyes won't meet mine, no matter how many times I try to catch them.

"Morning," she murmurs, the word barely a breath.

"Lucia." I gently reach for her wrist, but she slides free like water through my fingers.

"I'm going to be late."

Then she's gone, and I'm left in bed with nothing but the scent of her shampoo lingering on the pillow. I don't know why she's retreated behind walls I can't breach. I tell myself it's her friend's absence. Jenna's still out there somewhere in the hands of men who would use her as leverage against me. That alone would crack anyone open.

Maybe it's the proposal too. I asked her to marry me, but she didn't say yes or no, and now she's pulling away. She's probably still considering it, and she needs space to do so, so pushing will only widen the distance.

After she leaves for the hospital, I corner Sophia in the kitchen, finding her alone with a cup of tea and a stack of assignments from her students. The room smells of coffee grounds and the lingering sweetness of baking.

I don't bother with any kind of preamble. "Sophia, Lucia won't talk to me. She won't even look at me. I don't know what I did wrong."

Sophia sets down her pen, one hand drifting to her belly. The gesture sends a pang through my chest. For a fraction of a second, I picture a different woman carrying a child, but I shut that thought down quickly.

Sophia studies me with those eyes that understand more than she lets on. "Did you ever consider that it might not be about you?"

"She's pulling away. Of course it's about me."

"Marco." Her voice softens, becoming warm in an almost maternal way. "She's processing trauma. Her friend was kidnapped, and she's dealing with the possibility of the worst-case scenario." She tapers off and sighs.

"Possibility of what?"

Sophia sighs. "She's living in a world she never asked for, surrounded by violence no one should have to see. You have to cut her some slack."

Her words settle in my chest. Maybe I need to think about what Lucia might be going through and the weight she's having to bear all alone.

"How do I help her?" My voice cracks on the question. "How do I reach her when she won't let me close?"

Sophia peers at me with sad eyes. "You can't. Not until she's ready. All you can do is be there consistently and reliably…without expectations. And maybe remind her why she fell for you in the first place."

The last part sparks a desperate and probably stupid idea, and I spend the afternoon calling in favors, arranging things, and ignoring the voice that insists it won't be enough.

By evening, I have a plan.

I find Lucia in the clinic, organizing supplies with the kind of furious focus that means she's avoiding a conversation. As she works, her hands quick and precise, bandages stack up and instruments clink into sterile trays. She doesn't look up when I enter.

"I'm busy, Marco." Her no-nonsense tone is clipped.

"I know." I approach her, pluck a box of gauze from her hands, and set it aside. "I need you to come with me. Please."

She raises her gaze, and the exhaustion in her shadowed, red-rimmed eyes nearly breaks me. She has the hollow look of someone who hasn't slept in days. "Marco, I can't…"

"Just for an hour." I catch her hand, bring it to my lips, and press a kiss to her knuckles. "Please, *tesoro*. Give me an hour."

Her reluctance mixes with a yearning to believe, and she nods.

I drive her into the city, to a part of Brooklyn with brownstones lining the streets, their stoops decorated with pumpkins and chrysanthemums in orange and gold. Trees stretch toward the darkening sky, their leaves just beginning to yellow. Families walk dogs along the sidewalks, and couples lounge on front steps.

It is a serene area, the kind of neighborhood where the loudest thing you hear is a screen door closing. I know quite well this is the opposite of the world I'm in, and it's exactly why I'm bringing her here, hoping I'll be able to wash out the last of her fears about being with me.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her voice soft with confusion.

"You'll see."

I pull up in front of a small Italian restaurant with red-checkered tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles. The sign has hung there for fifty years, and the front window is steamy from the heat of the kitchen. The owner, an old friend, greets me by clasping my hand, then leads us to a corner table with a view of the entire dining room.

"Marco, what is this?" Lucia glances around, soaking in the checked tablecloth, the candle flickering between us, and the old photographs on the walls. "What are we doing?"

"Talking." I sit across from her, then reach for her hand. "Really talking. No interruptions, no distractions, no guards. Just us."

She's quiet for a moment as her gaze searches my face, then her fingers curl around my hand.

The food comes—pasta carbonara—and the owner explains that it's his mother's recipe from the old country that he made "specially for Santori's lady." Lucia laughs at his charm, and her whole face lights up. The sight loosens a knot in my chest that's been coiled all day.

"I'm sorry," The apology tumbles out, "for whatever I did and for whatever's been wrong. I'm sorry."

She shakes her head as her thumb traces patterns on my knuckles. "Marco, it's not you. It's…" She stops, peering down at our joined hands. "I'm scared of this life and what it's doing to me and what it might do to…" She stops again, her throat working.

"To what?"

"Nothing." She draws her hand back and grasps her water glass. "I'm just scared. And I don't know how to be scared and in love at the same time."

The words *in love* hit me square in the chest. She's said it before, but it was always during a crisis, and some part of me wondered if the pressure of those situations dragged the truth out of her. There's none of that doubt today. This moment is different, like the confession is just a simple, unguarded sentiment, and it makes it better that she offered it without condition across a checkered tablecloth and over her own pasta.

I stand and gather her into my arms. She cries against my chest, her body shaking, and I hold her right in the middle of the restaurant, not caring who sees.

"I've got you," I murmur against her hair, breathing the promise into her skin. "We'll figure it out together. I'm here when you're ready to talk."

After dinner, we walk hand in hand through the busy evening streets. The city hums around us, distant and irrelevant. Car horns blare from blocks away, music dances from open windows, the subway rumbles beneath our feet, and yet in this moment, there's only us.

We return to the car, and when she falls asleep in the passenger seat, her hand loosely wrapped around mine across the console, I drive one-handed through the emptying streets.

For the first time in days, I let myself relax. When we arrive at the villa, I lift her carefully and cradle her against me. She stirs as I carry her into the apartment. When her brow furrows, I mumble assurances into her ear.

"Shh, I've got you, *tesoro*."

Inside, I lay her on the sofa just long enough to lock the door, though the bolt clicking into place wakes her fully. Her eyes flutter open, unfocused, then find mine.

"Marco?"

"You're home." I kneel in front of her and brush the hair from her cheek. "Are you okay?"

She blinks slowly, and a small smile graces her lips. "Yes."

The answer releases tension I didn't know I was holding.

"I'm okay." She reaches up and cups my jaw in her hands, and I lean into her touch like a starving man. "I don't want you to worry about me. Let's just focus on finding Jenna."

My jaw clenches. I hate that she's right.

"Okay." I kiss her tenderly. "I love you." My declaration comes out rougher than I intended. "I know I don't say it enough, but I do. I love you so much that it scares me."

"I love you too." She rests her forehead against mine, and I inhale her jasmine scent. "I'm sorry I've been a little distant since yesterday."

I can't read the hesitation in her voice or the emotion that flickers across her face. But I've learned that chasing meaning in every minute sign or look only pushes her further away.

"I understand." I skim her cheek with my thumb, wiping away a stray tear. "I'm scared too. But we'll figure it out together."

"Together." She says it like a prayer.

Then she kisses me again.

It starts gently. Her lips are soft and careful, like she's mapping me, but then I feel the shift. Her fingers grip my hair. When I tilt her head back and deepen the kiss, she moans.

Somewhere between her mouth and mine, the tenderness catches fire.

Her hands slide under my shirt, her palms flat against my stomach, and I suck in air at the contact. Her fingers feel cool on my heated skin, spreading goosebumps over my chest, and every touch drives me fucking crazy. I've held myself together for days, watching her pull away and not knowing why, all the while swallowing the urge to lock her in this house until she tells me everything. Now she's touching me like she needs to remember I'm real.

"I need you." The admission escapes her between kisses, desperate and true. "I need to feel you now."

She doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I wrap my arms around her, carrying her. She’s lighter than she should be. Have I been so lost in my own head that I didn’t notice her avoiding meals? I take her to the bed and lay her down like she’s crafted from glass.

She peers up at me with open desire in her dilated pupils, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks rosy. My groin thrums in anticipation.

I start with unbuttoning her shirt. My fingers are firm, but inside, I’m unsteady. Each inch of skin I uncover, I follow with my mouth. I reveal her collarbone, the valley between her breasts, then the curve of her ribs. My stubble drags against her, and she shivers. The small whine that escapes her throat goes straight to my cock.

“You’re stunning.” My lips trace the spot just below her navel. An expression flickers on her face again, but it’s gone before I can identify it. I run my fingers over her belly, enjoying her sucking in her stomach, her breath hitching beneath my palm. “So strong. So brave.”

She pulls me up, her hands fisting in my hair, and drags my mouth back to hers. “Make love to me, Marco. Please.”

Please.

That fucking plea cracks my restraint. Gone is the careful tenderness she needed when she was fragile. Now, she’s asking for *me*.

I strip away the rest of her clothes hastily. When she’s bare beneath me, I worship every inch of her, her breasts, her ribs, the soft plane of her stomach. She arches into my mouth, her fingers twisted in my hair, desperate noises escaping her that go straight through me.

I’m shedding my jeans when she presses both palms against my chest and pushes with surprising strength. I land on my back, the mattress absorbing the impact.

She climbs over me, one knee on either side of my hips, and the sight of her above me—flushed, fierce—steals the breath from my lungs. Her dark hair curtains her face, and her green eyes bore into mine.

“My turn.” She speaks with a fire that tells me she’s done being handled. “You promised me equal footing. So, let me take what I need.”

Dio.

“But first…” She flattens her palm on my chest. My heart pounds under her hand, rabbit-fast and out of control. “We…we should use protection.”

I nod without argument, go over to the nightstand, grab the condom, and roll it on while she watches, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

“Better?” I ask.

“Yes.” She rises on her knees, reaches between us, and positions me at her entrance. The head of my cock nudges through her slickness, and she holds my gaze as she sinks down onto me in one slow, devastating drop.

Her gasp and my groan blend between us, sacred and profane, both a prayer and a curse.

She stays still for a moment, adjusting, her hands splayed across my chest. I grip her hips but don’t guide them. She told me to let her take what she needs, so I do.

The first roll of her hips is unhurried.

The second roll is harder. The third shatters any pretense of patience.

She finds an urgent, relentless rhythm, riding me with the fierce concentration of a woman reclaiming everything she nearly lost. My hands clutch her thighs, leaving marks she’ll wear as proof this was real.

“You have no idea,” I cup the back of her neck and bring her forehead to mine, sweat dripping between us, “what you do to me or how you make me feel.”

“Then don’t stop.” She grinds down furiously, her hands braced on my chest for leverage, her pace quickening. ”Don’t ever stop.”

I plant my feet on the mattress and thrust up into her, matching her pace and driving deeper from below. The new angle changes everything. She cries out, her head falling back to expose the long line of her throat.

“You’re close. I know it. Let go, Lucia. I have you.”

She tightens around me.

“Yes. Right there. Don’t stop.”

Her replies splinter into fragments torn loose by each downstroke. When her lips part, her eyes roll back, and her whole body goes rigid, I can tell she’s about to break.

“Come for me.” My voice is wrecked and barely holding together. “Let me feel it. *All of it*.”

She shatters, and her orgasm tears through her in waves. Her back arches, her spine lifts off the mattress, and her mouth opens in a sound that’s half my name and half a wordless, raw groan. Her cunt clenches around me, pulsing so hard that I feel every tremor around my cock as she milks me and demands more.

The sensation is too much and exactly enough.

“Fuck, Lucia!”

I grasp her hips and drive into her twice more. Hard. Desperate. My thrust stutters, and then I bury myself to the hilt and go rigid. My own hot, blinding climax rips through me. I spill into the condom in loads that seem dredged up from somewhere below my spine, and my vision whites out.

She collapses against my chest, trembling, her breath shuddering against my neck. My arms slowly go around her, our hearts slamming against each other through the thin barrier of skin and ribs.

Slowly, the world comes back.

I lift my head and peer down at her. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips are swollen, and her eyes are soft and heavy-lidded. She looks at me like I'm a man worth keeping.

I love her. *Dio*, I love her. So I tell her.

The confession tumbles out and lands heavily, like it's been weighed down by gravity.

"I love you. Whatever happens and whatever comes next, I love you."

I pull out carefully, dispose of the condom, then roll onto my side while taking her with me. Her body curves into mine, and I wrap myself around her, my arm over her waist. Our legs tangle, and my nose settles into her hair. I don't want to let go. Not ever.

"You okay, *tesoro*?" My thumb traces her cheekbone, brushing away a tear I didn't see fall.

She cradles my face. Her fingers are gentle, and her eyes are wet. This dangerous, broken, beautiful woman chose *me*. She keeps choosing me, even when I give her every reason not to.

"I've never been better."

My hand slides down to rest on her belly in a gentle, reverent caress. I don't know why she looked so sad when I kissed her there earlier. Maybe someday she'll confide in me. Maybe she won't. But right now, in this moment, she's here. She's warm. And she's *mine*.

That's enough to render the rest bearable.

"I need to tell you something," she whispers.

I lace her fingers with mine. "We talked last night, but I'm listening."

She opens her mouth, but before she can speak, the buzz of her phone cuts through the silence.

She grabs it, unlocking the screen and swiping open a text from an unknown number.

You want your friend back? Bring me your brother's notes about me. You've got forty-eight hours, Dottoressa. Ticktock.

Attached is a photo of Jenna, bound and gagged. A clock visible in the background shows the current time.

Lucia pales. "Oh, god. Oh god, Marco."

Sobs rack her body and I tug her close, squeezing her tight as she quakes.

It dawns on me in that moment that I can't let him keep torturing her like this.

"I'm going to Enzo tonight. We're pulling every useful man we have off whatever they're doing and putting them on finding Jenna. Nico has a contact in the Newark Port Authority who owes us. If Bruno moves her, we'll know."

"But the message said forty-eight hours. I didn't know how to tell you about this, about the…" She stops, her hand flying to her mouth and pressing hard against it like she's physically suppressing the words.

I scoot closer. "Tell me about what?"

Her eyes drop to her stomach for a fraction of a second before she catches herself and glances away. "Nothing. Jenna first. We focus on Jenna first."

I lift her jaw and force her to meet my eyes.

"We're going to get Jenna back." My rough voice is thick with emotions I can't name. She nods against my chest, still crying, and I continue to soothe her. For a moment, the world outside doesn't exist.

The clock is ticking, though, and Jenna's time is running out.

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Chapter 25

Lucia

Marco reaches for his phone, and instead of telling me to wait in the house like he usually does when he has mafia-business, he draws me close to his side, one arm around my waist.

As he scrolls through his contacts, his body tenses. Those cold words from Bruno about Jenna are still burning in my memory, and his forty-eight hour deadline shrinks with every heartbeat.

Marco dials Nico and puts the phone on speaker.

“I need to have a meeting with you and Enzo in his study.” Marco’s voice remains steady in a way mine could never be right now. “Bruno made contact. He has the nurse, and he wants a trade.”

Nico doesn’t ask for details. He just acknowledges and ends the call.

Marco heads for the door, taking me with him. My footsteps ring sharply against the marble of the hushed compound in a countdown I can’t stop.

We arrive at Enzo’s study, brightly lit even at this hour, heavy curtains drawn against the night. Nico’s already inside with Vito and two other soldiers whose faces I’ve learned over these weeks.

Enzo’s at his desk, his expression unreadable. He gestures for Marco to take the chair across from him. I stay standing because sitting feels like surrender. I can’t let the fear settle into my bones where it might never leave.

The padrino sighs. “Tell me everything.”

I narrate the text and show it to Enzo, who studies it before addressing Marco. “I assume you have a plan?”

Marco sets his phone on the desk between them. “I’m going to call him. I need you all to hear what he says. And if we can keep him talking long enough, I want a trace on the line.”

Nico crosses over to a laptop on the side table, where he connects a tracking device to a phone system I don’t fully understand. My medical training has prepared me for many things, but not for hanging out in a crime lord’s study while the man I love prepares to bargain for my friend’s life.

Before he places the call, Marco glances at me, quick and certain, and I realize he’s asking if I’m ready. I’m not, and I never will be. But I nod anyway because Jenna has no one else and running away from this moment would mean losing a part of myself I’m not willing to give up.

He dials and puts the call on speaker. Blood rushes in my ears. Four rings. Five. Then a voice I’ve only heard in nightmares rumbles through the line, smooth and cold and familiar in the worst possible way.

“Marco.” As soon as Bruno’s voice booms across the study, every man in the room goes still. “I wondered when you would call.”

“Then let’s not waste each other’s time.” Marco’s tone remains level and controlled, but his jaw muscle jumps with every word. “I want the nurse. Tell me what *you* want.”

Bruno’s soft laugh raises the hair on my arms and churns my stomach. “You want the girl back? Bring me the doctor and her brother’s notes about me. Come alone to the address I text you, or I will start sending Nurse Jenna back in pieces. You have until midnight tomorrow.”

“You said forty-eight hours.”

He scoffs. “That was for *her*. She told you about it, though, so I’m moving up the deadline.”

My heart crashes, and I suck in a breath. Marco shakes his head, signaling for me to keep calm, but his hand curls into a fist on the desk.

The timbre of his voice doesn’t change. “And the address?”

Bruno offers a dramatic and mocking reply. “You’ll have it an hour before the exchange.”

“Wait.” The command spills out of my mouth. Marco’s head whips toward me with sharp, questioning eyes, but I’m already bending toward the phone. “I want to speak to Jenna. I need to know she’s alive.”

After a slight pause, Bruno speaks again, his tone softer, almost amused. “The doctor has a spine. I didn’t expect that. Very well. You have two minutes.”

I hear shuffling on the other end, then a muffled voice, and finally, Jenna. I have to press my hand over my mouth to stifle a sob.

“Lucia? Lucia, is that you?”

“It’s me, Jenna. I’m here.” I grip the edge of the desk because my legs are threatening to give out. “Have they hurt you?”

“I don’t know where I am. It’s cold and dark, and I can’t see anything.” She starts crying. “Please, Lucia, please get me out of here. I’m so scared!”

“I will. I promise you, Jenna. I promise.” The reassurance feels useless and paper-thin against her obvious terror, but I need to say it. I want her to know someone’s fighting for her. “Can you tell me anything about where you are? Sounds, smells, anything?”

“I can hear water nearby.” She’s weeping now, everything pouring out in a rush. “Like a river. It smells like mold and old wood. And there are train horns in the distance too.”

I hear sharp laughter in the background. This is all suspicious, Bruno allowing her to give us clues uninhibited could mean the bastard’s taunting us. It feels like he’s laying breadcrumbs to draw us exactly where he wants us to go.

“Please hurry. He said he would hurt me if you didn’t do what he says. He showed me a knife, Lucia. A big one.”

My vision blurs with tears, but I blink them back because crying won’t help Jenna or Marco. Tears won’t bring me any closer to finding my friend. “I’m going to fix this. But I need you to stay strong for a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

“I will try, but please, *please* come soon.”

“Time’s up.” Bruno’s tone slams shut like a door, and I hear Jenna’s muffled groans as she’s pulled away from the phone. Her voice fades into a desperate wail that cuts through me like broken glass. “You have your confirmation, Doctor. Now deliver what I asked for, or the next time you hear her voice, she’ll be screaming.”

The line goes dead.

I stay on my feet by sheer will, pressing my hands flat against the desk to keep myself upright. Marco’s beside me in an instant, his warm, steady palm resting on my lower back. I want to collapse into him. I want to

scream and sob and beat my fists against his chest until the fear drains out of me. But Jenna's counting on me. I can't afford the luxury of falling apart.

Nico glances up from the laptop screen. "The call was too short. I got a general area, though. They're near the old Industrial District by the river. Pinpointed the location to within a radius of about three miles. No exact address. The train tracks and the water narrow it down, but we're still looking at dozens of potential buildings."

Enzo rises and drifts to the large map spread across the table at the center of the room. The paper is worn, creased, and marked in places that don't pertain to this mission. The ink looks as black as dried blood.

The river, the rail lines, and the sprawling grid of warehouses and abandoned factories litter the paper. Somewhere in that mess of concrete and rust, Jenna is being held by a man who would kill her without a second thought.

"We need a plan." My words come out with surprising strength. "Bruno wants the notes Matteo hid, so he needs me alive and cooperative. That means we have leverage."

Marco looks at me with an inscrutable expression that causes my chest to ache. "You aren't going anywhere near him. We're sending in a team to scout the area and narrow down the location."

"We have to hurry." I turn to Nico, then to Enzo, my voice trembling.

Marco shakes his head. "But you can't go in there, Lucia. I know Bruno. Even if he gets the notes, he won't let Jenna go. He'll kill her anyway because that's who he is. We can't just hand over what he wants and hope for the best. Jenna must be extracted by any means necessary."

Enzo considers me for a while, calculating and reassessing. "You've thought about this."

"I haven't been able to think past it since that text came through."

He waves his fingers over the piece of paper. "Do you see anything on this map that seems similar to what Jenna described?"

I trace my finger along the Industrial District beside the river. "Nico said the call came from this area. Jenna mentioned water and a train. She must be near one of the old rail bridges or one of the warehouses with direct river access. Only a handful of buildings fit both criteria."

Nico brings up satellite images on his tablet, and we spend the next hour sorting through the possibilities.

I’m not an operative. I don’t know how to clear a room or disable a security system. But I know how to assess risk and triage a crisis, and those skills translate better than I expected. Marco starts asking me questions about medical contingencies. How long can Jenna survive without food or water? What injuries can they treat in the field, and which ones require immediate evacuation?

By the time we have a working plan, the clock on the wall reads one in the morning. The soldiers disperse to prepare their gear, while Nico goes off to coordinate the surveillance teams that will start monitoring the likely locations before dawn. Enzo pours himself a drink and directs us to get some rest, though we all know rest is impossible.

Marco and I soon find ourselves alone in the study, the map still open between us. The weight of what we’re about to do weighs down on my chest like a stone.

He speaks softly. “We’ll get her back. I can handle Bruno if I know you’re here and safe.”

“I’ll stay put.”

He draws me into his arms, and I cling to him so tightly that I feel his heart pounding against my chest, matching my own frantic rhythm.

“Come back to me.” I whisper the plea against his neck, the same prayer I’ve offered up since the first time I realized I couldn’t live without him.

“Always.” His voice is rough with emotion, with love, with the promise that he’ll fight his way through hell to find his way back to me.

We stay like this for a long time, entwined in Enzo’s study with the map still spread across the table. A sharp, cold, relentless anxiety burns in my stomach. Marco is my comfort, with his arms around me and his breath warm against my hair. I tell myself that whatever happens tomorrow, we’ll face it together.

For Jenna’s sake, for my sake, and for the sake of a future I’m not ready to give up on, that has to be enough.

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Chapter 26

Marco

Bruno shortened his deadline the moment he knew Lucia told me about it, leaving us with the knowledge that every minute we spend planning, Jenna could be lost or relocated. By the time Vito confirms the location, my skin crawls with the need to act. Bruno's men stashed Jenna in a warehouse on the edge of Newark's industrial wasteland. It's an abandoned building with broken windows and rusting pillars. The perfect hideout.

I've studied the blueprints for hours, committed every entrance and exit to memory, and mapped every blind spot. Now, I'm crouched in the shadow of an abandoned factory across the street with cold, damp concrete seeping into my knees. Two guards at the front entrance rotate every twenty minutes while a third patrols the perimeter.

The third guard is sloppy, his attention fixed on his phone more than the sight lines. Based on the heat signatures from the drone scanner Nico ran twenty minutes ago, at least four more wait inside.

Nico's voice crackles in my earpiece. "Confirming intel. Jenna's on the second floor, east side. They've got her in what looks like an old office space. Single guard posted outside her door, rotating on the same schedule as the front."

I take in the information with a deep breath. Behind me, six Benedetti soldiers stay perfectly still. Vito and Rocco are at the front, along with four others chosen for their discretion and their aim.

The night air carries the scent of rust, diesel, and the nearby river. Adrenaline charges the heavy silence, promising that the next few minutes will break into violence.

"Remember," I keep my voice barely above a breath, "our primary objective is the girl. The secondary goal is to capture Bruno's men for interrogation. We want names, locations, and connections. Bruno's not here…we know that going in…but someone in that building knows where he's hiding, and we're going to find out who."

Vito nods, his dark face unreadable in the gloom. Rocco cracks his knuckles, an old habit that shows he's nervous, though he'd never admit to it.

At two seventeen on the dot, we go. The perimeter guard is scrolling through his phone, and the front guards are mid-rotation, so their attention is split. I take point, my suppressed weapon trained forward and my footsteps silent against the gravel littering the ground between the buildings. My wire cutters chew through the chain link in seconds, and then we're through the gap.

The first guard meets a soundless death when my arm wraps around his throat and my blade finds the space between his ribs. Rocco sneaks behind the second one, smashing a fist into his face and bringing him down with a chokehold. We strip him of his radio and bind him for questioning later.

By the time we reach the second floor, we've neutralized three more guards. The building is still silent, its occupants unaware of our presence.

When Rocco and I arrive at an office door, I try the handle first and find it locked. A quick look confirms what I was hoping for. The door is old, with weak hinges, so I drive kick it hard and the wood gives with a crack.

Our prize awaits us.

Jenna wriggles in her restraints, the cloth gag muffling her screams. Her eyes widen with recognition when she understands we've come for her. Tears spill down her cheeks, tracking through days-old grime.

"You're safe." I hastily cut her bonds. "We're getting you out of here. Don't make a sound."

She nods and complies, though it may be because she's trembling too violently to speak. She tries to stand, but her legs buckle immediately. Rocco catches her before she hits the floor, then reads the situation with a single look my way. Jenna doesn't protest when he scoops her up and

carries her fireman-style as we swiftly head back the way we came, trying to avoid alerting the other guards.

We're halfway down the stairs when an alarm slices through the dark with a sharp, industrial screech that bounces off concrete and doubles back on itself.

Someone must have noticed the missing guards.

Shouts echo off the walls, and from their pounding footsteps, I estimate at least eight armed and ready men. We need to get Jenna out of here without fully engaging them. I pivot, covering the retreat, my pistol cracking off shots to suppress their advance.

"Go!" I fire, drop a shooter, then fire again at another one emerging from a side entrance. "I'm right behind you!"

The men coming through the side door wear tactical gear without insignia.

As we burst into the night, the Benedetti vehicles roar to life, their engines shattering the quiet. While the convoy moves out, I take one last look back at the warehouse. In the center of the third-floor window, a figure stands with his hands clasped behind his back. Even at this distance, and even through the darkness, I recognize the posture.

He was here after all.

Bruno Caruso smiles down at me like a man playing a game he's already rigged.

My blood runs cold.

He issued the ultimatum expecting me to bring Lucia and surrender, but I brought soldiers instead and stole the girl. He's not stupid and would've at least prepared for that scenario. This heist feels almost too easy, almost like…

He *let* me take Jenna.

The revelation is like a plunge into frigid water. He never intended to keep her. She was the bait, guaranteed to force me to react first and think second. He must have something else in play that I don't understand yet. But what could be the reason for orchestrating this whole fiasco, just to let us all get away scot-free?

An idea—horrible and writhing deep in my guts—strikes me, and I shout at the drivers to speed back home.

Jenna doesn't speak. Curled in the back seat of the SUV and cloaked in a thermal blanket someone produced from an emergency kit, she stares at

empty air, her body trembling with delayed shock. I sit across from her, not wanting to crowd her, but staying present to show her she's not alone anymore.

When we reach the compound, Lucia's waiting at the gate, the grounds quiet around her.

She rushes toward the cars in sweatpants and one of my shirts, her hair a wild tangle, her eyes desperate with a fear I recognize too well. The moment the vehicle stops, she yanks open the door and tugs Jenna into her arms.

"Jenna…Jenna! I'm sorry, so sorry for what you had to go through because of me."

Jenna finally breaks. She sobs against Lucia's shoulder in great heaving waves as Lucia rocks her and murmurs words I can't hear. The sight of the two of them clinging to each other tightens a knot in my chest I didn't realize I'd tied. One wears borrowed sweatpants, and the other, a soiled thermal blanket.

I give them space, opting to concentrate on coordinating with my men. "I want a team back on that building right now." I keep my voice low. "Vito, you pick them. I just want eyes. If Bruno's still there, I want to know where he goes when he leaves."

Vito nods and reaches for his phone. Jenna and Lucia have broken their hug, so I join them as we head to the guest quarters we've prepped. It's one of the compound's smaller apartments, but it's quaint and close to where Lucia and I stay.

Lucia sits on the bed with Jenna's head in her lap, gently stroking Jenna's hair while her friend sleeps.

"She's going to be okay." Lucia's voice is barely audible. "Physically, at least. Dehydration, malnourishment, and bruising are clear even in this light. Nothing that won't heal with time and care, though." She looks up at me, and her palpable gratitude tightens my chest. "You brought her back."

"I said I would."

"I know." She extracts herself carefully from the nurse's sleeping form and crosses over to me in bare feet. "I just…" She stops, pressing her forehead to my chest and fisting my jacket. "Thank you, Marco." She sniffles and pulls back to wipe her face with the back of her hand. "If it's all right, I'd like to stay with her tonight."

I kiss her forehead before I step out.

An hour later, Nico finds me in the kitchen, his expression grim. My stomach clenches. The room smells of coffee and freshly baked bread, but I've got no appetite.

"Tomas Greco's gone." His whisper is meant for my ears only. "Enzo kept him alive to extract every name connected to Bruno's network, just as he said he would after the trial. We've had him in the holding cells under the east wing for three weeks."

Greco knows our protocols, our safe houses, and our weak points. He's a weapon in Bruno's hands now.

The pieces slot into place with a click I feel in my jaw.

"Bruno played us from the start, using Jenna as a distraction to get our best men focused on the warehouse and give him the chance to break Greco out of his cell."

My hand smashes down on the counter, rattling the dishes on the drying rack.

"I should have known." My voice comes out flat. "The rescue came too easy."

"Looks that way." Nico delivers the facts without emotion. "We saved the girl, so we should focus on that at least."

I dip my chin. Right now, there's nothing to do but adapt and press on.

"Let's put extra eyes on every Benedetti asset. Double the patrols and triple the security rotations. Find out who helped Greco escape. There's another leak somewhere in this compound, and I want it plugged before it drowns us."

After Nico leaves, I linger in the kitchen, wondering if I'm always going to be one step behind and always reacting instead of acting.

A few quiet days follow after the rescue. Jenna recovers slowly, spending most of her time with Lucia, and their friendship finds its footing again. Lucia's lighter when Jenna's around, laughing more, being playful.

The marriage proposal lingers in a corner of my mind. She's given no definite answer yet, and while I worry that we need it to completely secure her protection, I give her a few days to decide.

During those days, shadows continue to pool under her eyes. She picks at her meals, nudging food around her plate. Four days after the rescue, I discover her in the bathroom gripping the sink, her face pale as paper.

"Lucia." I'm at her side instantly, my hand on her back as tremors run through her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She shakes her head. "Just…stomach issues. Probably something I ate."

I want to press, demand the truth, and try to fix whatever's wrong. But I remember my promise to trust and let her come to me, so I nod and let it go.

A night later, I come home early to find her out cold on the couch. She clutches a sheet in her hands, and even in rest, her expression carries a sorrow that stops my heart.

She stirs when I cross over to her, her eyes opening slowly before settling on my face. The paper slips from her fingers onto the cushion.

"Lucia?" I sit beside her and examine what appears to be a list of test results. The pregnancy one is marked with a definitive negative. "What is this?"

"I thought I was pregnant." Her voice cracks. "I had all the symptoms. The nausea, the exhaustion. I was so sure. I'd even started imagining it, planning for it, and shaping a future around it." She presses the heels of her palms against her eyes. "Mason took me to a clinic last week. A doctor he knew ran the test. It came back negative, Marco." Tears spill over. "Negative."

The word hits me twice. First the loss of a child I didn't know I wanted until now. Then, a beat behind, the blow that she went to Mason and his handpicked doctor instead of me. The unspoken question lodges like a splinter, but she's coming apart in my arms, so Mason can wait. Her body trembles with tremendous force. "Hey. Hey, it's okay. It's okay."

"Is it?" She pulls back to meet my eyes, her face blotched and raw. "Part of me was hoping for it." She gulps hard, blinking rapidly to push back more tears. "Now I don't even know what I feel anymore. Relief? Grief? Disappointment?"

Holding her chin with my right hand, I wipe her tears with my thumb. "What do you want, Lucia? Forget what you think you should feel and forget about what you're scared of. What would make you happy?"

As she searches my face, she's quiet for a long moment. Then she exhales. "I think I want a family with you, Marco." She scoffs. "It's stupid,

based on things I've said before, but it's the truth."

My heart stops for a beat, but when it kicks back to life, it roars like a high-capacity engine.

"Then marry me." I rest my forehead on hers and feel her breath on my skin. "Let's get married, but not because of Bruno or the Volkovs or any of that. I want you to be with me. I want a family with you."

"But a kid in your world… It'd be difficult. Very difficult."

"I know." I pull back to meet her eyes. "I know what I am, what I do, and the things I've done that I can't undo. And I'm not promising it'll be easy or safe or normal. But I do promise to spend every day trying to be worthy of you…and of *us*."

She holds my gaze, then releases a slow breath. "Yes." Her tone is steadier, laced with determination. "Yes, Marco. I'll marry you."

I kiss her, slowly and deeply, letting my lips tell her everything I can't say. Gratitude and hope and terror and love, all bundled into one heart-swelling gesture. When we break apart, her smile lights up her whole face.

"Let's do it soon." She frames my cheeks with her hands. "No waiting or planning…just do it."

"Tomorrow too soon?" I'm only half-joking.

"Give me a week." Her laughter rings out bright and clear. "I need at least a week to find a dress."

"A week." I kiss her forehead, her nose, and her lips again. "I'll make it happen."

The days disappear into a blur of preparation. Sophia takes over wedding planning with terrifying efficiency, her lists and timelines and color schemes fanning across the dining room table like she's managing a campaign. Izzy handles logistics with her usual lethal competence. Jenna, recovering but stronger every day, appoints herself as Lucia's personal attendant and chief morale officer, keeping her chuckling when the stress threatens to overwhelm.

Rather than engage in some of the wedding planning like a normal bridegroom, I'm told to instead focus on what Bruno is planning and on uncovering who inside this compound helped Tomas Greco walk out of that

basement. We have a leak, and after Jenna and the Tomas extraction, I can't afford to ignore the threat.

Two days before the wedding, Nico drops the bomb.

"We found the connection." He slides his tablet across my desk, the screen glowing with files. "Bruno's been working with someone inside the police precinct who had access to Matteo Romano's investigation. That person knew what Matteo was digging into and ensured that Lucia's brother would be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

When my eyes scan the info, ice shoots through my veins.

Detective Mason Dellinger. Lucia's ex. Always hovering at the edges of her life, always playing the part of a concerned friend.

"He's been dirty for years." Nico's voice is grim. "He's taken payments from Bruno, protected the trafficking operation, and eliminated anyone who got too close. Including Matteo."

I stare at the evidence, at the bank records, call logs, witness statements, and photos, all laid out in damning detail. A mosaic of betrayal.

Nico looks up at me. "You need to decide how and when to tell her."

I nod, my mind racing through options, consequences, and futures. If I reveal the truth now, days before the wedding, that knowledge could destroy her trust and newfound peace. If I wait—if I hide it—that's a different kind of betrayal because I promised to be upfront with her.

Only one choice lets me sleep at night.

"Keep this between us for now." I hold Nico's gaze. "After the wedding, when she's officially my wife and protected by Benedetti law, we tell her. Then we deal with Mason."

Nico hesitates, visibly conflicted, before nodding. "You're the boss."

That night, I watch Lucia sleep, her hand tucked under her cheek, her lips parted, her breath coming slow and even. I think about what she's survived and what she's overcome. I consider the family she wants, the future we're shaping, and the life I'm determined to give her.

I swear to myself—to whatever gods might be listening and to the ghost of Matteo Romano—that I'll protect her from this. She'll be safe from Mason, from Bruno, and from the knowledge of what her ex-boyfriend did to her brother.

I press my lips to her hair, pull her closer, and stare at the ceiling until dawn paints the room gray.

As morning light filters through the curtains, Lucia stirs, stretches, and smiles up at me with sleep-soft eyes. In this moment, with her warm against my side and the wedding days away, I almost believe we can have peace, love, and a future. But Mason’s file burns at the back of my mind, and Bruno’s shadow looms.

The worst is yet to come. And when it does, I’ll need to be ready to lose everything to keep her.

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Chapter 27

Lucia

The morning light spills through the windows of the breakfast nook, painting the room in shades of golden warmth.

Having regained her appetite, Jenna sits across the table shoveling forkful after forkful of Sophia's famous frittata into her mouth. Her laugh comes easier and brighter, and the shadows under her eyes have finally started to fade.

I'm also slowly starting to get back to being myself again, except for the nausea and exhaustion. I know the effects of my pseudocyesis may take a while to subside.

Marco's been a sweetheart through all of this.

A week of compound life—of safety and routine and being surrounded by people who'd kill anyone who tried to hurt Jenna—has done what weeks of hiding and running never could.

"I can feel you diagnosing me." Jenna points her fork in my direction, a piece of egg clinging to the tines. "Stop that. I'm fine. You're the one who looks like you haven't slept in a month."

"My wedding-planning timeline is seven days, start to finish." I reach for my coffee. "Sleep is for people with reasonable expectations. The ones who take a whole year just to pick a color scheme."

Jenna snorts, the noise undignified and wonderful. "Am I hearing you right? Is the woman who's marrying into the mafia really a good judge of what a 'normal' wedding should be?"

“It’s not… We’re not…” I stop, sigh, and allow the truth to settle. “Okay, yeah, that’s exactly what’s happening. When did my life become a cable drama? When did I become the kind of person who’s okay with all this?”

“When you decided that hot, broody assassins were your type.” Jenna grins, her eyes dancing. “No judgment here. His cheekbones alone are worth the risk. I’d sign up for a little light kidnapping for bone structure like that too.”

“You must be crazy to joke about your abduction like that.” I throw a napkin at her, and she catches it, giggling.

“I’m okay, Lu. I’ve never felt safer than when I’m here. Strange, right?”

That afternoon, Sophia hosts the bridal shower in her soft-lit sitting room, where fresh flowers spill from crystal vases and the scent of roses and peonies permeate the air.

Sophia had insisted on picking my dress, a soft sage silk that falls just below the knee. Understated enough to still feel like me, yet pretty enough that I’ve clearly dressed for an occasion. I’d drawn the line at heels. We compromised on block wedges that I’ve already forgotten are on my feet.

Jenna explains how some of the Benedetti women, grateful for my medical presence, transformed the space, which now has the appearance of a magazine spread, with pale linens, flickering candles, and enough champagne to float a small battleship.

When I walk into the party, it’s almost like I’ve stumbled into another woman’s life. Do I truly deserve this kind of joy?

Sophia greets me with a hug, her arms strong and sure, and she presses a small, wrapped box into my hands. “From all of us. Well, from Izzy and me. Nonna’s gift is…separate.”

“I’m afraid to ask.” I turn the box over in my palms.

“You should be.” Izzy appears at my elbow, a completely different woman in her silk dress instead of her usual black leather pants. “Sophia picked out something practical. I added a surprise.”

“Her idea of a surprise is a Glock with your initials engraved on it.” Sophia sighs. “I talked her down to a gift certificate for self-defense classes.

It was the best compromise I could manage."

"They're very expensive classes," Izzy's expression doesn't change, but warmth flickers in her eyes, "with very good instructors. People I trust with my own life."

My bright, free laugh surprises even me. I can't remember the last time I cracked up like this, unguarded and present, surrounded by women who've become family.

More guests arrive through the afternoon. I greet wives of capos and daughters of soldiers, all women who've carved out lives in the shadow of violence and kept their hearts intact. They're examples of what I'm becoming, and I scan each face as they bring gifts wrapped in tissue paper and stories blanketed in glee and merriment, plus advice that ranges from useful to hilarious to blush-inducing.

"Always keep spare clothes in the car." One woman, gray-haired and elegant, speaks with a certainty forged by decades of experience. "You never know when you'll need to make a quick exit. Stilettos can be a problem too. Running in flats is easier."

Another nods sagely. "Learn to love cold coffee. You'll be drinking a lot of it while you wait for them to come home. Hot becomes lukewarm, which becomes cold, and you'll drink it anyway because it's the only thing keeping you awake."

A third leans in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "And for god's sake, invest in good lingerie. You'll need something that motivates him to run to you after stressful days. Something that says 'welcome home' better than words ever could." Laughter erupts around me, and the tension I've been carrying since the first time I saw Marco in my ER loosens in my chest.

I haven't felt this way since Matteo died in my arms and since I stopped believing I deserved to be happy. When Nonna Rosa enters, the room settles immediately. The Benedetti matriarch moves like a queen through a court, small and silver-haired and terrifying in her undeniable authority.

She stops in front of me, taking me in with eyes that have seen births and deaths, weddings and wars, and the whole bloody sweep of *famiglia* history. The entire archive is written on her soul.

"So," Nonna's voice is dry as old parchment, crackling with years, "you're truly marrying my grandson."

Marco is in no way related to her by blood, but I've learned that she adopts the men who prove their loyalty, and Marco earned that adoption when he became the enforcer, just like Enzo before him.

"Yes, Nonna." I meet her gaze, refusing to flinch or look away.

She regards me for a long moment before her eyes soften around the edges.

"He broke at twelve years old." She follows her words with a little sad smile, the first sign of emotion she's shown today. "He spent all the years after his father's death and that trainer's betrayal believing himself unlovable. He truly thinks he doesn't deserve the effort."

She reaches out and cups my face with a papery hand. "You've filled the hollows in his life with your light and warmth. For that, you have my gratitude and my protection. Anyone who threatens you answers to me and the *famiglia*."

My throat tightens, and tears prick at the corners of my eyes as she hands me a small, worn pouch of faded blue velvet.

"This was mine, given by my husband the day we married. Now it's yours. May it bring you more joy than it brought me, and may you never need to use it the way I did."

I open the pouch and find a small derringer inside, the metal of the elegant antique cold against my palm.

"In my day," Nonna's voice stays quiet, "we didn't wait for the men to save us. We saved ourselves. We had to. Remember that, little *Dottoressa*. Love him, yes, love him with everything you have. But never forget that you are your own best protection. You survived before him, and you'll survive after, if you must."

Before I can respond, she sweeps out of the room, carrying every bit of aura of a woman even the most dangerous men in this *famiglia* won't cross.

The party continues around me, full of chatter and clinking glasses, but I stand frozen, with the weight of the tiny gun in my palm and Nonna's words burning in my heart.

Later, once the guests have left and the compound has gone still for the night, I find Jenna on the terrace, gazing at the stars scattered across the dark sky.

"Hey." I lower myself into the chair beside her, the metal cool through my clothes. "You okay?"

Jenna's face is half covered in shadows as she looks at me and smiles, then returns to peering out into the night.

We stand here for about five minutes, no words necessary.

She breaks the silence with a sigh. "I keep thinking about what would have happened if Marco hadn't come or if they'd kept me there longer…" She stops, her throat working. "How close I came to not existing anymore. I could've been just another name on a missing person report or another photo on a flyer no one reads."

I reach out and take her hand. "But you do exist. You're here. You survived."

"Because of him." Jenna shifts to look at me, her face catching the starlight. "And because of you. You loved someone dangerous enough that he'd burn the world to keep you safe, and that meant he'd burn it to save me too." She pauses. "Is it worth it? Loving him while knowing the cost? Knowing that every day you're risking this?"

"Yes." The word comes out sure, steady, and certain. I haven't felt this grounded in months. "It's terrifying, and it hurts, and sometimes I think I can't breathe from the fear of it. Still, he's worth it."

Jenna nods, processing. "I get that. I think I might want that one day too. A man who'd make the fear worth feeling."

"You'll get it," I squeeze her hand, and she squeezes back, "when you're ready. The right person will fall absolutely in love with you. And until then, you've got a whole *famiglia* of people who'd go to war for you now. You're one of us."

Jenna's eyes glisten. "Yeah, I'm starting to realize that."

When I slip into the bedroom I share with Marco, he's waiting with his phone in his hand. His expression softens the second he sees me.

"Good party?" He sets the phone aside and draws me down onto the bed beside him.

"Perfect." I curl against his chest and breathe in his clean, inviting scent that means home, safety, and love. "Nonna gave me a gun."

His chuckle vibrates through his chest, then through me. "She gave me one, too, when I became Enzo's underboss and she adopted me. She said every Benedetti man should know how to protect what's his, then sat me down and made me promise to always carry it."

"What did you do with it?"

“I still have it.” His arms tighten around me. “It’s in the safe next to the gift I’m going to give you tomorrow.”

“What gift?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.” He kisses my hair. “How was this afternoon really?”

I tilt my chin up to look at him in the dim light. “It really was perfect. These women are extraordinary. They’ve survived so much, and they’re still whole. They’re still able to laugh, to love, and to welcome me like I’ve always belonged here.”

“You do belong.” He brushes a lock of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek. “You’ve belonged from the moment you stitched me up in your ER.”

I huff against him. “I was so mean to you. I can’t believe you came back.”

“You were magnificent.” He kisses me tenderly, a promise in every touch. “You still are. And every day, you only grow more magnificent.”

The kiss deepens. His hands slide into my hair, and my fingers lift the hem of his shirt. With no desperation or fear driving us tonight, we make slow, tender love, indulging in the quiet joy of two people who’ve chosen each other.

Afterward, I lie on my stomach, my chin propped on his chest, watching the lamplight play across the planes of him while his fingers rake lazy paths through my hair. Cued by his phone buzzing twice, he reaches for it, types one-handed, and then sets it down.

“Work?” I ask, the question muffled against his skin.

“Always.” He kisses my forehead. “Nothing you need to worry about, though. Just Nico being Nico.”

The dismissive edge in his voice gives me pause. Should I demand that he tell me the truth about whatever he’s hiding? But I’m so tired, so content, and so full of the heat of him and the glow of the evening.

“Don’t keep secrets from me.” I murmur the quiet plea.

“I won’t.” He nudges me closer. “I promise.”

I want to believe him, but as sleep drags me under, a corner of my mind whispers treacherous words.

He’s hiding a truth he thinks will hurt me. I know he is.

When I wake hours later, it’s pitch-black, like it usually is before dawn, and he’s asleep beside me. His breathing is even, and on the nightstand, his

phone glows faintly with notifications. I'm still staring when the screen goes off, and my gut screams that those messages are brimming with foul machinations he doesn't want me to see.

I could check. I could read his messages, uncover what he's protecting me from, and discover what Nico needed to communicate so urgently.

Instead, I curl closer to him, press my lips to his shoulder, and try to trust and believe in the promises we've made.

His phone buzzes one more time, and I reach across him to silence it before it wakes him. The screen lights the moment my fingers brush it.

Mason's moving. We need to deal with him sooner.

My blood runs cold.

Mason? What does Nico want with Mason?

Why is Marco keeping secrets two nights before our wedding?

Sleep doesn't come back, but when Marco stirs at dawn and slips from the room, I keep my eyes closed and let him go.

I listen to him rattle around as silently as he can, and when the door clicks shut behind him, I'm left alone wondering if I should've just asked.

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Chapter 28

Marco

I’m in Enzo’s office, nervous as hell about saying my vows right.

I suck in several gulps of air thick with cigar smoke while staring at satellite images. Our chapel, built of smooth, carved stone, sits on the eastern edge of the compound, close enough to reach on foot but far enough from the main villa that defending both would stretch us thin.

We just got intel that Tomas is planning an attack on the estate. Tomorrow, I’m supposed to stand at an altar and speak my vows. Tonight, I’m staring at sight lines and calculating how many men it takes to keep a bride alive long enough to say hers.

“They might hit during the ceremony.” Nico’s voice carries the calm, clinical air of someone who’s delivered bad news too many times to soften it. “That’s what I’d do. Maximum chaos, maximum casualties. Tomas knows our protocols, where our people will be positioned, and every gap in our security because he helped design half of them. He’ll exploit all of our weaknesses.”

Enzo studies the maps, his biceps flexing as he clenches the mahogany desk. “Can we secure it?”

“Physically? Yes.” Nico pulls up another overlay. Defensive positions bloom across the satellite image. “We can put enough bodies in place to turn any assault into a suicide mission. That’ll force them to pay for every inch. We can lock down the perimeter, control all sight lines, and create overlapping fields of fire.”

He pauses, looking around to meet every eye in the room. “But costly doesn’t mean impossible. If they’re willing to die, they’ll get through eventually. If Tomas has Bruno’s backing, he probably has plenty of men like that, so the question becomes how many of them we can handle.”

My jaw tightens. “We don’t let them get through because we know their playbook too. We know how Tomas thinks, how he operates, and what he’ll prioritize. Our men can counter his.”

“At the risk of changing your wedding into a war zone.” Enzo meets my eyes from across the table, his gray gaze unblinking. “You should postpone. Wait until we’ve neutralized the threat, until Bruno’s handled and Tomas is back in a hole. No one would blame you.”

The suggestion hangs in the air, heavy with implication.

I think about Lucia’s face when she said yes, the light in her eyes when she talked about finding a dress, how she’s started to believe—really believe, for the first time since I’ve known her—that we might actually have a future and that she might deserve one.

“No.” The word rushes out, firm and final. “She deserves this, and I’m not letting Tomas Greco snatch one more thing from me. He won’t have one more night, not one more moment. Certainly not this.”

Enzo dips his head, approval dancing across his features. “Then we prepare. Double the visible security, triple the hidden. Put shooters on every rooftop with sight lines to the chapel.” He pauses, weighing his words. “And Marco? You need to tell her. She deserves to walk into that chapel with her eyes open, knowing what she’s choosing.”

I nod, though even as I do, I’m not sure I can. I’ll have to watch her eyes spark with fear yet again.

When I walk into our quarters, I find Lucia before the full-length mirror in a flowing white gown. She looks…*ethereal*. For a second, I forget why I’m here. The fabric glows in the lamplight, pools around her feet, and frames her so completely that my heart stops mid-beat. She swirls around when she hears my footsteps, hope and nerves and radiance all tangled together in her expression. My heart races with happiness at the sight.

“What do you think?” She smooths the fabric with nervous hands, a ghost of a smile playing on her lips. “Sophia helped me select it. I know it’s bad luck for you to see before the wedding, but I needed to know the fit was right.”

I cross over to her slowly, drinking her in. I memorize how the gown hugs the curve of her shoulders, how her hair falls loose around her face, and how her eyes search mine for approval.

"*Dio*," I growl. My chest tightens, and my eyes burn with tears I refuse to let fall in front of her. "You're going to destroy me walking down that aisle, and I'm going to let you."

Her smile widens, becoming genuine. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I cup her face in my hands, feel the warmth of her skin, and kiss her softly. "Tomorrow, you're going to be my wife."

"Scared?" She's teasing, but there's a real question underneath and vulnerability she doesn't often show.

"Terrified." I take her hand and press it flat against my chest, over my hammering heart. "But not of marrying you. Never of that. I'm terrified I won't be able to protect you from what's coming."

Her eyes narrow as if she senses the worry behind my words. "What's coming, Marco? Tell me."

Enzo's words echo in my head.

She deserves to walk into that chapel with her eyes open.

"Tomas Greco escaped."

Fear flashes across her face before she pulls herself together. I explain how Bruno used Jenna's kidnapping as a diversion, pulled our soldiers to Newark, and walked Tomas out of his cell.

"Bruno knew about and planned for every move we made. And now Tomas is back in his hands with everything he knows about our security. We think he's planning to hit the wedding."

I search for any crack in her composure, any sign that this might be getting too much for her and that I need to rein in how much I'm sharing. She shows no symptom of being overwhelmed, her mouth flattened in a thin line of concentration.

The fact that she's taking this so well makes me think of the other bomb I've got to drop on her. I have the Mason file that proves her ex-boyfriend played a role in her brother's death waiting in a locked desk drawer.

I'll tell her about that tomorrow, when she's officially mine and the *famiglia's* protection is hers by law. Tonight, she gets the version of me who only has to be honest about the threats I've already fessed up to.

"Are we still doing this? Getting married tomorrow?"

"Yes." My tone holds no hesitation. "If you still want to."

“I do.” Her hands frame my jaw, her palms warm against my skin. “I want to marry you, Marco. Tomorrow, tonight, whenever. I’m done running and being scared. If Tomas wants a war, let him bring it. Let him come. But he’s not stealing this…or anything else…away from us.”

I clamp my mouth over hers, my heart pounding with hope and the fierce, terrible love that’s deeply rooted in my chest. She kisses me back with equal ferocity until we both need to catch our breath. When we break apart, we laugh.

She waves me off so she can change into the gray sleep shirt she must have claimed from my drawer. It’s three times larger than her usual size, but she looks adorable.

Soon, we’re lying in the dark, her head on my chest, her hair fanned across my shoulder, and her body snuggling into mine. Her back is against me, my arm is slung across her ribs, and we’re both facing the window where the compound lights give the curtains an amber glow.

As her body settles against mine, the guilt in my chest pushes outward.

“I’ve been keeping some things from you.” The admission scrapes out before I can lose my nerve. “About the investigation, about Bruno, and about people from your past who you need to know about.”

She stills against me, her breath hitching. “What people? What things?”

“Not tonight.” I kiss her hair. “Tomorrow, after we’re married, when you’re officially mine and protected by *famiglia* law, I’ll tell you everything. I promise.”

Silence stretches between us. Then she traces a finger over my lips. “I’m trusting you, Marco. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.” I gather her close, feeling her heartbeat pound against my ribs. “I swear.”

The morning of our wedding dawns clear and cold, a perfect autumn day that whispers of good omens.

I’ve been up for hours coordinating with my team, checking and rechecking positions, and running scenarios through my head until they blur together.

By the time I’m dressed in the custom suit tailored to disguise the weapon at my spine—my grandmother’s rosary is warm in my pocket and the familiar weight of Nonna Rosa’s small gun is a comfort against my ribs—I’m as prepared as I’ll ever be.

Nico finds me alone in the chapel and staring at the altar draped in white flowers. Candles flicker in their holders, light and shadow dancing across the space where my future will soon walk toward me.

“Lucia’s almost ready.” Nico joins me at the altar, positioned as always with one eye on the nearest door. “Jenna’s with her. Izzy’s in charge of ordering the chaos and keeping everyone in line.” He watches me. “You okay?”

“I don’t know.” I turn toward him. “I’ve walked into firefights less scary than this and faced down men with guns who wanted me dead. This is different.”

Nico’s lips twitch into a near smile. “That’s love, my friend. It makes the strongest men weak and the bravest men cowardly. Love cuts through all armor.”

“I don’t feel weak.” I look toward the altar and the flowers. “Maybe I finally understand what strength is actually for.”

Nico nods. “Did you tell her about the dirty cop?”

“Mason.” The name comes out in a flat, irritated tone. “I only hinted that I have a truth to confess. I couldn’t do it before the wedding. She could get upset or try to confront him or walk into a trap while attempting to get answers. I need her safety secured, and that happens once she’s married and protected by *famiglia* law. She’ll be untouchable. Then we deal with Mason.”

Nico considers me for a moment. “It’s a risk. If she learns the truth before you can tell her and that you kept it from her, it’ll be trouble.”

“She won’t. Not until after the wedding.” I grind my teeth. “And when she does, I’ll deal with the consequences. I’ll handle her anger, her disappointment, and whatever barbs she needs to throw at me. But first, I need her safe, and that only happens with this wedding. All else can wait until she’s safe and protected, like she should have been from the beginning.”

Nico dips his chin. “Your call. But Marco, it’s now confirmed that they’re planning to ambush the wedding.”

I process this, my mind racing through possibilities, contingencies, and every scenario I've trained for.

"We need to adapt. Put a man on Lucia…have him follow her, watch her, and not let any stranger within three feet of her."

"Already done." Nico's phone buzzes harshly in the quiet chapel. "That's my cue. Guests are arriving. Time to play happy attendee while managing security."

He claps me on the shoulder and leaves, his footsteps echoing off the stone floors. I stand alone in the chapel, surrounded by flowers and candles and the weight of all I stand to lose.

Within seconds of him walking out, the heavy oak doors are thrown open and a flood of chattering guests start to fill the pews. The priest arrives, too, and strides up to the altar.

Among the crowd, I can spot a few faces of soldiers we've planted to handle things if the threats come to life.

The familiar cold settles in my chest, an old companion that visited before every fight I had in the ring. But this fight carries higher stakes. There are no referees here, and I'm risking more than my own body. I could lose the one person who matters more than my own survival.

I push the thoughts from my mind, straighten my jacket, and prepare to meet my future.

Whatever happens today, I'm marrying Lucia Romano. I'm claiming her and binding her to me in ways that can't be undone.

After that, I'm coming for Bruno Caruso with everything I have.

The music starts as I take my place at the altar, turn to face the crowd, and wait for my bride. When the familiar chords rise to a crescendo, heads swivel in expectation.

Lucia appears at the end of the aisle, radiant in her white gown. Her eyes find mine across the crowded space.

The world drops away, the crowd, the loud hymn, the threats, the violence, the war waiting outside those doors. In this moment, I see only her, and the smile that breaks across her face when she meets my gaze briefly stops my heart.

Then my phone gives three short buzzes against my thigh.

It's Nico's emergency code, and a trio of sharp vibrations means only one thing.

It's starting.

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Chapter 29

Lucia

I sit in front of the mirror, trying to recognize the woman looking back at me. A wave of nausea rolls through my stomach. I press my hand flat against it, breathing deeply.

It has to be wedding nerves.

Jenna appears behind me, still in pajamas, her hair a glorious disaster of sleep-tangled waves. She holds two steaming cups of coffee, the rich scent cutting through the floral notes of the room and grounding me.

“You look like you’re about to perform surgery, not get married. That’s your ‘I’m about to tell someone they have six months to live’ face.”

“I’m not sure there’s a difference.” I accept the coffee and wrap my hands around the ceramic, letting the heat seep into my palms. “Both require steady hands and the ability to pretend you’re not terrified of what’s to come.”

Jenna settles on the arm of the chair, angling her head in one of her signature tells before calling me on my own nonsense. “Underneath all the doctor composure, are you frightened? Is that actually the issue?”

“Scared of marrying Marco? No. Scared of what comes after? Yes. His world, and the people who want to hurt him, *do* frighten me.” I recall the text I read on Marco’s phone and the image of Mason’s name glowing in the dark. “And then there’s all the secrets I don’t know that I’m not supposed to see.”

“That’s cryptic.” Jenna’s eyes narrow, and she steps closer with worry in her expression. “Want to elaborate?”

“Not yet.” I set down my drink, reach for her hand, and grasp her fingers. “But I have a feeling I’ll be able to share more after the wedding.”

She slurps her own coffee. “Then let’s get you ready.”

The morning passes in a blur of activity. I endure hours of my hair being pinned and twisted while makeup is applied in careful layers. We laugh when Jenna counts the number of tiny covered buttons that line the back of my ivory silk dress and declares it a bridal hazard.

The dress is understated and elegant, with a modest scoop neckline, fitted waist, and gentle fabric that flows over my hips to the floor. It’s perfectly in line with my style, and when I glimpse myself in a full-length mirror, I understand why people cry at these moments.

Sophia arrives with quite a number of fresh flowers, from dahlias in deep burgundy and amber to chrysanthemums in cream. They all enhance the atmosphere. Izzy materializes with a flask of some unknown liquor that burns going down and chases away the last of the morning chill.

“Nonna’s recipe.” Izzy grins at my expression and my slight cough. “For courage. It also works for forgetting, if things go sideways.”

“Nothing’s going sideways.” Sophia’s firm tone brooks no argument. She has one hand braced against the small of her back in a posture I’ve often seen from women in their third-trimester. She should be resting because her due date is mere weeks away, but instead she straightens my train, adjusts my veil, and surveys me like a general preparing for battle. “Today is perfect. Say it with me.”

“Today is perfect,” I repeat, and for a second, I almost believe it.

Jenna takes fifteen minutes to pin my delicate tulle veil into place, then steps back to admire me.

“You’re stunning, Lu. Marco’s going to lose what’s left of his mind when he sees you.”

“That’s the goal.” I smile, but my eyes keep drifting to the window that overlooks the compound below.

Many of those men in dark suits aren’t just guests but security detail disguised as attendees, and I’ve learned to spot them. I spy the extra bulge under jackets that aren’t just formal wear and note the way certain men position themselves near exits, near the altar, and near me. They’re good at

what they do, but I've already spent so much time paying attention to signs and signals in this world.

As Marco told me, trouble is coming.

Izzy appears at my elbow, her expression shifting from festive to focused. "Walk with me."

We slip into the hallway, away from the chaos of preparation, and the voices fade behind us. Izzy's drops to barely a whisper.

"I've heard chatter about Tomas planning an attack today. We don't know when, and we don't know how, but it's gonna be big." She meets my eyes and holds them, searching for the answer to a question she hasn't yet asked.

I nod once.

Izzy beams. "You have to make a choice."

"A choice?"

She reaches into her dress and pulls out a small pistol.

Of course she's armed.

"Do you have Nonna's derringer?"

I nod again. The gift sits in the hidden pocket Jenna sewed into my dress. She even tied a cerulean ribbon around the grip, giggling as she knotted it and calling it the most dangerous "something blue" in wedding history.

"Can you use it?"

"Yes." I touch the pocket, feel the weight of it against my thigh, and check the safety through the fabric the way Izzy taught me.

Izzy offers a warm, approving smile I've never seen from her before. She slides her own pistol back beneath the silk of her dress. "You're going to fit in just fine, Doc. Now let's go get you married."

The march to the chapel is slow and deliberately drawn out, every detail sharp and vivid. Jenna walks ahead, scattering petals that drift to the ground in soft clouds of white. Sophia adjusts my train with every stride, and Izzy scans the crowd with eyes honed by countless hours of combat training.

When we walk through the doors, my eyes snap to the altar.

Marco looks devastating in his dark suit. His eyes find mine across the sea of guests, and the awe and joy on his face prompt my heart to stutter.

I glide down the aisle, and the world narrows to him.

Halfway there, several guests in the back pews whose eyes constantly rove around catch my attention. One particular woman in a hat can't quite

conceal her earpiece.

I keep going, a smile on my face and my hand steady on the bouquet.

When I reach Marco, I pass my bouquet to Jenna without looking, and his hands clasp mine. Tension runs through his grip. I lean in, pressing my forehead to his as if overcome by emotion, my lips barely moving as I speak.

"A few men and a woman sitting along the aisle aren't ours."

"You saw them." His voice is low, barely louder than a breath.

"Yeah." I squeeze his hands and soak in the heat of his skin. "Tell me what to do."

"Marry me." A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "My people will handle the rest. Trust *me* to handle it."

"And what if it's not enough?"

"Then we handle it together. Like everything else."

The priest begins the ceremony, his voice warm and practiced. I repeat vows I mean with my whole heart, but all the while, my senses are attuned to every flicker of motion and every shadow that doesn't belong.

"I, Lucia, take you, Marco…"

In the back row, a man's hand slowly slides into his jacket.

"…to have and to hold…"

A man near the far wall shifts, his eyes on the first guy.

"…from this day forward…"

Marco's grip tightens on my hands. His eyes flick past me, and even though he looks calm on the surface, I can feel him tense, ready to spring into action.

"…for better, for worse…"

The intruders are seated at the outer edges of the pews, near the walls. Benedetti soldiers close in from different corners of the chapel, guiding them out through the side doors as quickly as they can. A few guests glance toward the rousing melee and look away. These are mafia families. They know when to pretend they saw nothing.

"…for richer, for poorer…"

The priest holds out a single gold band on a velvet cushion. When I slide the ring onto Marco's finger, I feel his breath stutter, signaling the smallest fracture of his composure. He's never worn anything that marked him as belonging to someone else. Nonna's ruby already sits on my hand, where it's been since the night she pressed it into my palm.

No second ring necessary. That one says it all.

“In sickness and in health…”

The priest smiles knowingly.

“…’Til death do us part.”

After our vows, the priest blesses our union and pronounces us husband and wife.

In many ways, the danger has receded, though I know better than to think it’s passed.

Marco seals his lips over mine with his hands framing my face, and I’m just about to lose myself in the sensation of our first married kiss when the chapel doors explode inward.

Men pour through the opening, their guns raised. Screams rend the air as the wedding guests scatter in a stampede. My training—every drill Izzy’s pounded into me for weeks—kicks in. The bouquet hits the floor, my hand finds the hidden pocket in my dress, and my fingers close around the derringer. The pale blue ribbon is smooth against my palm as I pull it free.

Beside me, Marco reacts with lightning speed. His own weapon appears from seemingly nowhere, and he positions his body between me and the threat.

“Get her out!” He’s shouting, but I’m not going anywhere.

I fire at a man lunging toward us, catching him in the shoulder. His eyes widen in shock as he drops. The derringer’s recoil jolts my arm, but I don’t stop.

Tomas Greco emerges from the haze of smoke, a gun in each hand and his face twisted with hatred. He shrieks words I can’t hear over the chaos and gunfire and the pounding of my heart, then he aims for Marco.

I act without thinking, stepping in front of my husband and pulling the trigger.

My bullet hits Tomas in the chest. He staggers, fires wildly, and then Marco puts him down for good.

The chapel goes quiet.

Most of the guests have escaped. I stand in the wreckage of my wedding, smoking gun in hand, the bodies lying around me either groaning in pain or dead silent. A sharp pain alerts me to the fact that a bullet grazed my arm. Though it’s bleeding, the wound isn’t serious.

Marco’s at my side, drawing me close to examine the injury. His hands shake against my skin.

“You’re hit.” A dark shadow crosses his face. His fingers brush against the ivory fabric of my gown, now stained with stark red blossoms. The color drains from his face. I’ve never seen terror like this on a man who charges at violence without flinching. “Lucia. How bad?”

“I’m okay.” I hook a finger under his chin, force him to meet my eyes, and caress the tremor in his jaw. “I’m standing. I’m talking. We’re okay. We’re alive.”

He doesn’t believe me. His eyes keep dropping to the crimsons stains. His fingers tighten against my arm like he’s trying to mend the wound closed by sheer force of will.

Around us, Benedetti soldiers secure the chapel and in-house medics tend to the injured and drag away the dead.

Jenna appears, white-faced but alive, her dress splattered with blood that I’m grateful isn’t hers. Sophia, eight months along and unwilling to be anything but useful, directs medics from the doorway with calm efficiency, one hand on the frame and one on her abdomen as if reminding herself to breathe. Meanwhile, Izzy hovers over Tomas’s body with an expression of cold satisfaction.

I peer down at the gun in my hand and the bloodstains on my dress. I can’t tell which part of it is mine or that of our assailants. My eyes then fix on the man I just married, who’s staring at me like I’m a miracle.

“I killed someone.” My voice is quiet. The fact hasn’t fully processed.

“You saved my life.” Marco takes my hand, bringing it up to press a gentle kiss against my knuckles. “And us.”

I should feel horror, guilt, and regret. After all, I—a woman who swore the Hippocratic oath—just took a man’s life. Instead, I feel alive. Terrifyingly, completely alive.

Is this who I am now? A woman who kills to protect what she loves?

Mason’s warning in that coffee shop echoes in my head unbidden.

This is who you’re involved with. This is what he’ll turn you into.

But Marco didn’t make me anything. I chose to fight and kill beside him.

The question now is whether that proves my strength or whether I’ve lost myself.

In the aftermath, a compound medic tends to me while I watch Marco coordinate the cleanup of the chapel. When the medic moves on to other

patients who probably need his help more, I stand and walk to a corner of the hall, staring into space.

Jenna approaches, then reaches for my hand, her fingers cold but steady.

“Lu? You okay?”

I turn to her, and she pales when she peers into my eyes. Maybe she can see the woman I’ve become.

I whisper the truth I can no longer hide. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

One thing remains certain, though. I’m married to the man I love, and I murdered someone to keep him alive.

The rest can wait.

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Chapter 30

Marco

An hour after the wedding is shot to hell—literally—I march into the compound's clinic.

The place is filled with beeping monitors and medics helping my wife coordinate triage. Lucia's been tending the seriously wounded for the past hour, and it doesn't look like she'll be done any time soon.

She looks nothing like a woman who gunned down a man in her wedding dress.

My *wife* saved my life.

With the last patient stabilized, Lucia washes her hands at the sink. The water runs pink before clearing. She rolls her shoulders, working out the tension, and finally peers at me from across the room. Though blood and dirt have ruined her white dress, mascara streaks her face, and strands of her hair have fallen loose from the pins, she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

"Stop staring." She crosses over to me, her voice heavy with exhaustion. "I'm fine. The bullet only grazed me."

"I'm not staring at your arm." I pull her carefully into my chest, her heart thudding against my ribs. "I'm staring at *you*. My wife."

Her shaky laugh comes out half joyous and half disbelieving. "Being someone's wife is going to take some getting used to. Specifically, being *your* wife."

“We have time.” I press a kiss to her hair and breathe in the scent of her beneath the smoke and blood.

Lucia draws back to meet my eyes with that direct gaze I’ve come to love.

“I need to clean up. And then we can go to our room.”

We’re going home to a space we’ll keep building together until it fills with her journals, more succulents on the windowsill, and countless signs of her presence in my life.

“Anything you need, my love.”

We bathe first. Steam billows around us as I carefully clean the graze on her arm. The wound is shallow—a kiss from a bullet rather than a bite—but the sight of the injury makes my chest clench. My hands are gentler than they’ve ever been on any wound. I treat her like she’s precious and breakable, even though she’s proven she’s anything but.

She watches me work, her expression soft in the light. “You’re good at this. Steady hands.”

“I’ve had practice.” I kiss her shoulder, and she shivers. “Mostly on myself. I’ve patched myself up in hotel rooms, safe houses, and in the backs of cars after jobs gone wrong.”

“I know.” She intertwines her left fingers with mine, and the right hand caresses my cheekbone. “I know some of what you’ve done to survive. I can only guess at the rest, at every wound you’ve carried alone. But I’m here now. I still choose you.”

My throat closes around my reply. “Even after today? After what you had to do? And after what I turned you into?”

“Especially after today.” She leans into me, pressing her forehead against mine. “Because I learned something about myself I didn’t know. When it comes to protecting the people I love, I’m just as dangerous as you are. I have that in me too.”

I should argue. I should tell her that violence corrupts and that she should run back to her world of healing and life, but the words forming on my tongue taste like lies before I even speak them.

Instead, I pull her toward me through the warm water until she's straddling my lap, her knees bracketing my hips against the porcelain. I kiss her like she's the last breath of air I'll ever take. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging me closer, and I groan into her mouth.

The water, cool now against my burning skin, ripples around us. We keep kissing—tongues twisting together, teeth grazing—her chest flush against mine.

"We should get out of the tub." I break away, my forehead resting against hers. My eyes drop to the graze on her arm. The cleaned wound is raw and pink against her olive skin. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine." Her fingers find my chest beneath the water and slide down my stomach. I hiss at the contact. Her fiery touch sears away the numbness that's lived in my bones for as long as I can remember. "I need you, Marco. I need to feel alive, to remember that we're still here and that we survived."

That's enough. I stand and lift her from the bath. Water streams from both of our bodies and pools across the tile floor. Neither of us cares. I carry her to our bed and lay her down, residual water darkening the sheets as I settle over her.

She lies beneath me, bare and wet and glowing in the dim light, marked only by the thin scrape on her skin.

"Magnificent." I lower myself beside her, my lips brushing against the fluttering pulse in her throat. I kiss her collarbone, then gently bite her as I slide downward and nuzzle the swell of her breast. Her chest heaves, and her fingers tangle tighter in my hair. "Lucia, you're so fierce. So strong. So impossibly brave."

She gasps and arches into me as I latch on to her nipple and swirl my tongue around it.

I worship every inch of her, drifting farther down, tasting the salt of bathwater on her skin, pressing my mouth to the soft plane of her stomach, the ridge of her hip, the crease of her inner thigh. She trembles beneath my lips, her fingers raking through my hair.

"Marco." My name comes out like a prayer. "I need you close. Not below me, not above me. Close."

I understand what she's asking. I lie beside her on my side of the bed, facing her. She mirrors me so we're eye to eye, the full length of our bodies aligned on the damp sheets. I hook her knee over my hip, opening her to

me, and her hand slides down my chest and stomach, closing around me. The touch buckles the air in my lungs.

“I want to see your face,” she whispers. “The whole time. I want to watch you fall apart for me.”

That shatters the last wall I’ve ever constructed.

I reach for the nightstand, find the condom, and roll it on while she stares unabashedly, her green eyes never leaving mine. Then I grip her hip, angle myself against her slickness, and push inside in one slow, unbroken thrust.

Our exhales fill the room like vows neither of us planned to make.

She’s so tight, so warm, and at this proximity, I can feel every pulse of her heartbeat, the tremors running through her muscles, and each breath that catches and releases against my lips. For a long moment, I hold still, buried deep as I learn what it feels like to be inside her for the first time since she became my wife.

“Husband.” She says the term like she’s testing its weight, and her lips curve. “My husband.”

“Wife.” My voice cracks. “My wife. My whole life.”

She rocks her hips forward, pulling me deeper, and the friction draws a groan from somewhere beneath my ribs. I match her slow, deliberate tempo, my hand spread wide across her lower back to hold her flush against me. Each stroke is unhurried, each withdrawal a loss, every return like coming home.

We move together in a cadence that belongs only to this night. Her leg locks over my hip. My hand traces the curve of her waist, the swell of her breast, the column of her throat, and she arches into every caress like her body is answering questions mine hasn’t yet learned to ask.

“You saved my life today.” My lips graze hers with each thrust. “I watched you pick up a weapon and choose me over everything you believed about yourself.”

“I would do it again.” Her nails rake down my back. “Every time. Without hesitation.”

Her honesty lights a fuse I can’t control. The rhythm quickens. Her breath comes faster, sharper, each exhale feeding the fire coiling inside me. I grip her hip more forcefully, drive deeper, and she buries her face against my neck with a cry that vibrates through my collarbone and straight into my chest.

She clenches around me, her release gathering like a wave. Our bodies are pressed so close that every movement grinds her against me, the friction and fullness stoking a pressure that ignites hard and fast.

"Let go." I press the words into the hollow of her throat. "I have you, and I always will."

She comes undone in my arms. Not with the shattering force of many of our earlier experiences, but with a slow, devastating unraveling. Her body tightens around me, drowning me in rolling waves of pleasure. Her mouth opens against my skin, my name repeated like the only word left in her vocabulary. The sensation pulls my own release from somewhere I didn't know existed. I bury myself and hold myself there, pulsing inside her, my vision whiting out, my arms locked around her like I'm afraid the world will try to steal her from me again.

Rather than separate, we stay exactly where we are. Side by side, face to face, still connected, her leg draped over my hip, my hand resting on the curve of her waist. In the quiet, our hearts settle into the same steady rhythm.

She raises her hand between us. Nonna's ring glints in the lamplight, and I press my lips to the finger wearing it, then her palm.

This hand pulled a trigger to save my life.

We lie here until the silence stops feeling like aftermath and starts feeling like the first page of whatever comes next.

Then my phone buzzes on the nightstand.

I ignore it.

Another buzz. Then another.

Lucia raises her head, and her eyes find mine in the dim light. "You should check that. It might be important."

"Whatever it is can wait. This is our wedding night."

"Marco." Her voice is gentle but firm, a doctor's tone that brooks no argument. "Check it."

I reach for the phone, and when I read Nico's message, my heart stops mid-beat.

Lucia's observing me, her eyes sharp with concern like she's picking through my expression for clues. "What's wrong?"

"Nico pinpointed the location where Tomas and his men mobilized. Most likely, it's Bruno's hideout." I set the phone down and meet her eyes. "I have to go."

Ripping myself out of her arms now, when we've survived the worst and found each other again, feels like the hardest act I've ever performed.

She sits up and caresses my cheeks. "I know you do. Just come back to me safe. Promise me."

"I promise." I kiss her softly. "I'll be here before you wake up again. You won't even know I'm gone."

She convinces herself to trust me, to let me go, and to believe in my promise.

I dress quickly, kiss her one last time, and slip out into the night.

Bruno's hideout is a farmhouse among empty fields, about an hour outside the city. I approach the place cautiously with Nico, Vito, and Rocco. The four of us traverse through the darkness like ghosts, our footsteps silent on the dew-wet grass.

"Intel says Bruno's inside." Nico's voice is quiet in my earpiece. "At least six guards as well. Possibly more based on heat signatures."

I nod and signal the team forward with hand gestures honed by years of practice. We breach silently and with lethal force. The guards go down soundlessly as we clear the rooms one by one. Each empty discovery tightens the coil in my chest.

No sign of Bruno.

Save for a few guards and the documents spilling from filing cabinets, the farmhouse is empty. Files are stacked on every surface, and a computer terminal is still running, its screen casting blue light into the darkness. Bruno's been operating from here long before Naples, maybe since the day he destroyed my career and disappeared.

I'm standing in the center of it all, rage gathering like a storm, when Vito calls out from an office.

"Marco? You need to see this."

Cabinets line the room I find Vito in, each one stuffed with records going back years. My eyes flick across medical documents, athlete dossiers, financial ledgers, and shipping manifests. Vito holds out a folder, his expression strange in the low light.

I take it and read.

It’s *my* file from the New York State Athletic Commission that details the doping charges that destroyed my career and stripped me of every title and shred of credibility I’d earned. Bruno’s malice reduced my name to a punch line.

Among the official documents, I discover handwritten notes in Bruno’s meticulous script, his initials on every page. This is a surprisingly detailed account of how he framed me, with copies of the planted evidence, the identities of the coached witnesses, and the entire timeline of the leak.

This feels like finding an oasis in the desert.

“He documented his own masterpiece.” Nico’s voice is flat. “He couldn’t resist proving to himself that he pulled it off.”

As Nico reads over my shoulder, his breath hitches. “Marco, this clears you of every charge and proves you were set up. With this, you could show the world that you were never a cheat.”

The room spins around me. Years of shame, of carrying a disgrace that wasn’t mine coalesce into an emotion I have no name for. Bruno’s manipulation caused my downfall. He set up this long game to feed his need to control and destroy. The pages tremble in my hand as I flip through everything once more to ensure my eyes aren’t deceiving me.

Rocco discovers more. I’m not the only one. Bruno kept records of payments, communications with officials, and other evidence that he’s been executing this scam for decades and destroying fighters who refused to play his games.

Beneath all of it are the ledgers. He tracked organ procurement by blood type and market value, shipping routes between Naples and Newark, and client lists with payments tallying into the millions.

The kickboxing training was Bruno’s first empire. The organ harvesting was his second. He’s been managing both for over a decade.

By the time we finish cataloguing, I have enough evidence to not only clear my name but to dismantle the trafficking network and put him away for the rest of his life.

Nico claps me on the shoulder, his grip warm and solid. “We got him. Not physically, but we got him. You’re free, my friend, if you want to be.”

Staring at the folder in my hands, a sense of vindication spreads through me. Finally, I can dream of a future that won’t carry the stain of my past.

“We need to move.” Carefully, I tuck the documents into my jacket, close to my heart. “Bruno’s still out there, but now we at least know where

to look.”

We sweep the rest of the farmhouse, gathering evidence and securing the scene. By the time we’re finished, dawn lightens the sky, gray bleeding into gold at the horizon.

I hurry toward the vehicles, anxious to get back to my wife.

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Chapter 31

Lucia

I wake to sunlight filtering through the curtains and pooling across sheets that smell of him, of me, and of the particular warmth that comes from two bodies sleeping intertwined.

Then I realize I'm alone, and a chill settles in my chest.

He said he'd be back before I woke. *If he's not here now, what does it mean?*

I'm just sitting up when the smell hits me—rich, dark coffee, smoky bacon, and the sweetness of pastry—and my stomach rumbles with an appetite I haven't felt in weeks.

Before I can jump off the bed, a shadow spills across the doorway. Marco Santori leans against the frame with a tray balanced in his hands. He watches me with that expression I'm still learning, his eyes soft and tender, a gentleness I never thought I'd see on the face of a man carved by violence.

"Good morning, Mrs. Santori."

Hearing the title makes my face bloom into a smile I can't hold back. My voice comes out hoarse and sleep-rough. "You actually made breakfast."

"I'm a man of many talents." He crosses over to the bed and sets the tray across my lap with a ridiculous but earnest flourish. "Eat. You've been skipping meals again."

I look at the spread—pancakes stacked high, crispy bacon, fresh fruit arranged in careful patterns, coffee steaming in my chipped mug—and a sharp prickle stings my eyes.

"You didn't have to cook for me."

He sits beside me on the bed, close enough that his thigh presses against mine. "I wanted to make you breakfast on our first morning as husband and wife. Is that allowed? Am I breaking some rule?"

I laugh, the noise real and unguarded. "I think it's required. Loving, cherishing, and feeding each other pancakes is in the marriage fine print."

"Then I'm exceeding expectations." He winks as he reaches forward and steals a strawberry from my plate, moving his hand away before I can catch him.

"I thought the breakfast was for me?"

He grins, his teeth sinking into the fruit and spreading juice on his lips. He eats like a man with no audience, and the simplicity of it wins me over.

"Married people are supposed to share things, sweetheart." He licks the rest of the juice off his lips, then off his fingers. "To be honest, I didn't make any for myself."

"Your mistake, not mine, mister," I murmur with a smile. "But since I want to start this off being a great wife, I'll share with you."

He chuckles. "Oh, thank you."

The casual intimacy of us joking around and teasing each other makes my belly flutter. I drag the food tray to the center, and we dig into the meal in comfortable silence. I'm saving it all to my memory, because these happy moments with him are just like I dreamed. Marco must sense the direction of my thoughts, because his hand finds my knee under the covers, resting there like it's always belonged.

"So…" I set down my fork, wrap my hands around my coffee mug, and let the warmth seep into my palms. "What about the honeymoon? We never actually planned one, what with the shoot-out, the interrogation, and the whole almost-dying situation."

"We were a little busy." His thumb traces slow, hypnotic circles on my knee. "But I have ideas."

"Oh yeah?" I raise an eyebrow as heat climbs my cheeks. "Do elaborate."

"I'm thinking…a private cottage on a beach that no one else knows about and you in very little clothing for days. Maybe weeks."

The blush spreads down my neck. “That sounds more like a fantasy than a plan.”

“It’s both.” He bends forward and kisses the corner of my mouth with his soft lips. “I’m very good at multitasking. Fantasies become plans. You’ll learn this about me.”

I’m about to volley back when he draws away. The change in his expression is subtle, but I’ve learned to read him.

“I have one more thing for you.” He pulls out a folder from the nightstand that I hadn’t noticed, its edges crisp and unmarked. “A wedding present of sorts.”

I take it, confused, and when I open it, photos of a building spill out. The first shows three stories of brick wall and large windows that I immediately recognize as the vacant storefront two blocks from the hospital, the one with the faded “For Lease” sign out front. I’ve walked past it a thousand times.

Each photo reveals the square footage in detailed diagrams. He planned a clinic on the first floor, a gym on the second, and the entire third floor is open and big enough for a residence that could contain enough bedrooms and bathrooms for whatever suits our purposes.

I glance up at him, and the question comes out thin. “How did you know I liked this place?”

“Jenna told me you always mentioned it when you guys drove by.” He’s watching me carefully, like he’s not sure whether I’ll laugh or cry but will accept either outcome. “You talked about what you’d do if you could start a practice there, so I’ve drawn up options. You could have a clinic, run a service that doesn’t turn anyone away. I could build a gym and a community where kids could learn to defend themselves while also teaching them about responsibility. And the top floor could be a proper living space. Our home.”

When I shared this dream with Jenna, I never imagined I’d be handing out a map to my heart that my husband could follow back to me.

“It’s ours.” His voice is vulnerable and stripped of all his usual armor. “Your name’s on the deed. Mine’s on the mortgage. We can build this together.”

I set the folder down, trying to blink back the mist in my eyes. The paper rustles as the photographs slide against each other. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” He gathers me against his chest, his arms encircling me like they’re the only force keeping me together. “I just wanted you to have a place of your own. This isn’t about me or my world or any of the chaos we’re still wading through. It’s for you.”

My tears spill in quiet, controlled heaves that leave me breathless but lighter, like a knot has been cut loose. Marco cradles me through it, his hand stroking my hair, his heartbeat steady under my ear, and his breath warm against my skin.

When I finally draw back, my voice is wrecked. “I don’t deserve you. That’s the truth.”

“That’s not how this works, *tesoro*.” He rests his forehead on mine, his right hand reaching up to thumb away my tears. “We choose each other every day, both when it’s easy and when it’s hard. That’s the deal.”

I sit up straighter to kiss him, but the abrupt ringing of my phone interrupts us. Jenna’s name flashes on the screen.

“Mrs. Santori, get dressed and get out here. Everyone’s waiting, and Sophia will kill me if you’re late.” She hangs up before I can respond.

“The reception?” Marco raises an eyebrow.

“Apparently our *famiglia* has thrown us a party.” I grab his hand and pull him off the bed. “We can’t keep them waiting.”

Twenty minutes later, after reaching past everything new in the closet for the one garment that feels like me—the green dress Sophia swears makes my eyes otherworldly—and watching Marco button a fresh shirt with the focused precision of a man more comfortable loading a weapon, we wander over to the compound’s east garden and weave through the crowd. Sophia has transformed the space by threading string lights through the old olive trees, and long tables covered in white linen feature enough food to feed a small army.

The Benedetti *famiglia* has turned out in force, and for once, the guns are hidden, the guards are relaxed, and the only agenda is toasting the new couple until the champagne runs out.

Half an hour into the party, I’m dancing with Jenna and giggling at her description of the capos attempting the chicken dance when Enzo’s voice cuts through the noise.

“If I could have everyone’s attention.”

The garden quiets as the padrino speaks. Conversations fade, and glasses lower. My hand finds Marco’s automatically. He’s against me in an

instant, his arm sliding around my waist and pulling me to his side with a possessiveness that stutters my heart.

Enzo stands beneath the olive trees with Sophia beside him, and for a moment, the man he was before he became Padrino surfaces. He was just a man in love with a woman who was grateful to be alive.

“Most of you know what happened at this couple’s wedding.” His easy, commanding voice carries across the space. “What you might not know is that when the shooting started, Dr. Lucia Santori…” He pauses to let the name settle and become real. “She didn’t run. She pulled a gun and fired back, saving lives. And then she spent the next three hours treating the wounded, because that’s who she is. She’s a healer, but also a fighter and a woman who doesn’t flinch.”

The crowd murmurs, and heat climbs my cheeks. Frankly, I hadn’t even had time to think about my reaction. I just…did what was necessary.

“We’re announcing some changes today.” Enzo’s tone shifts, becoming more formal. “Marco Santori has served this *famiglia* with loyalty and blood for years, but he has earned the right to establish a new life. Effective immediately, he will step back from operations. His role as head of security passes to Nico, who has earned it with every year of his service. Marco’s focus will shift to our legitimate enterprises like the gym and the clinic. He will oversee the kind of work that shapes futures.”

My breath catches. I glance at Marco, but his eyes stay glued on Enzo. He doesn’t look surprised or uncertain. He’s watching the padrino like a man who’s been waiting for this to become official. His jaw is set, and his shoulders are loose.

He knew. He probably asked for it.

For now, I reach for his hand.

“He’ll always be part of this family.” Enzo’s gaze shifts to us. “’However, Marco can now create a legacy of his own with the woman who’s saved him in more ways than one.”

While the guests in the garden erupt into applause, I’m still processing and attempting to understand what this means.

Marco lets go of my hand and steps forward. “I want to mention a few things.” The announcement comes out rough, unpolished, and nothing like Enzo’s effortless oration. “I’m not good at speeches at all, really. That’s more Lucia’s thing.”

A laugh ripples through the throng. When Jenna whoops, my cheeks flame.

“But I have to try.” Marco’s eyes find mine, and his expression softens beyond anything I’ve seen before. “Before I met Lucia, I was just a weapon. A fighter, a soldier, good for nothing but violence, damaging things, and hurting people.”

He returns to my side and takes my hands with trembling fingers.

“But she saw in me a man who deserved more, who could *be* more. And she…” His voice cracks, and the garden blurs through my tears. “She didn’t change me. That’s not what love does. She showed me that the man I already was, the ruined parts and all, was worth loving. I didn’t have to earn love by being someone else.”

I blink, and the tears streak down my cheeks.

“I’m not promising I’ll be perfect.” He squeezes my hands. “I might screw up or fall back into old habits or do things I regret. Even so, I promise I’ll spend every day striving to be the man she sees when she looks at me. A man who deserves her. I’m going to dedicate the rest of my life to making sure she knows exactly how much she’s loved.”

Though he’s addressing the guests, his eyes stay on me.

“So, that’s my speech. Thank you for coming and celebrating with us. Most of all, thank you for welcoming her into this family. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving it.”

He kisses me, and I wrap an arm around his neck.

An applause breaks over us, and I laugh with wild abandon, feeling all the while like I’m soaring.

“My turn.” I pull back to address the excited faces around us, my voice steadier than I anticipated. “I’m not good at speeches, either, regardless of what Marco would have you believe.”

I look at the man who’s become my universe.

“When I first met Marco, I thought he was danger incarnate and a heartbreaker.” Everyone in the garden seems to hold their breath. “He’s also the kind of man who does good when no one’s watching and never mentions it. He sees strength in people before they see it themselves and shows up every time, without being asked, for the people he loves.”

My voice wobbles, but I keep going.

“I didn’t fix him. He didn’t fix me. We just…chose each other through the chaos and the fear and the moments when we both wanted to run. And I’m going to keep choosing him for the rest of my life.”

I reach for Marco’s hand and lift it so everyone can see the gold band on his finger. His eyes soften.

“You gifted me a building.” My voice carries across the garden. “And I gave you this. A reminder that you’re not just a weapon or a soldier. You’re my husband, my partner, and a man who deserves to be loved exactly as he is.”

His whole heart shows on his face, and his thumb rolls the band like he can’t believe it’s there.

“I love you.”

He embraces me and buries his face in my hair. “I love you more than I ever thought I could love anything.”

Enzo’s voice slices through the applause. “Cue the music now before these two reduce my toughest soldiers to tears.” After some chuckles and a ripple of relief, an Italian melody fills the space. The party breathes back to life around us.

It all feels beautiful and perfect. Though, if I know anything about Marco’s world, it’s that his days are never peaceful for long, and even if he’s stepping back from the front lines, part of me questions how long that will last.

I recall that text on his phone from the night before the wedding.

What am I missing here? He’s definitely still keeping some secret about Mason. But is he doing so with the best of intentions?

My phone buzzes against my left palm, and I slip it free from my little clutch without thinking.

Speak of the devil. Mason.

Did my thoughts conjure him?

I read his text.

We need to talk about Matteo. Please, Lucia, just give me five minutes.

My thumb hovers over the screen. I think about Marco’s speech, the gold band on his finger, and his eyes on me like I was his whole world.

Then I think, once again, about the text I saw on his phone the night before our wedding. Nico had mentioned Mason’s name alongside the words, “Deal with him.” Marco promised to tell me everything after we got married, but the ceremony is over and he still hasn’t said a word.

I pocket my phone without answering. Doubt settles in beside my love for Marco, and I wonder which one will prove harder to live with.

We made promises to each other that I should hold him to, but we're in such a great place now. I don't want to ruin things.

Marco finds me at the edge of the garden and wraps his arms around me from behind. His chin rests on my shoulder.

"Everything okay?"

I lean into his embrace and let myself be held.

"Not okay. Perfect."

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Chapter 32

Marco

I submitted my case appeal to the board of the Athletic Commission the night after I recovered the files from Bruno's hideout and right before the wedding. I've owed myself this reckoning for years, and if I prevail, perhaps I can also live a normal life with Lucia.

A week later, I'm walking into the New York State Athletic Commission offices in the Financial District. The building features stone structures and marble flooring that gleams under harsh white light. The stature and grace of such a place remind me that the state is larger and older than anything anybody alive has ever constructed.

I pass the security checkpoint without being accosted by a piercing beep and stride past men in suits who have never donned boots and a tracksuit and thrown a punch. Even so, these men still decide who's allowed to compete.

How ironic that a man like me who ran enforcement for one of the oldest crime families in New York can walk into a government institution with a folder of evidence in my hand to request the restoration of my reputation.

I can almost recite every name on the brass plaques on the walls. They're all champions I used to know, men whose names became legends. A part of me wonders whether my name would've been up there as well if Bruno hadn't derailed me.

I stop just outside the hearing room. The folder under my arm suddenly feels heavy, and for a moment, I'm twenty-two again, walking in here to listen to the panel rattle off my crimes and strip me of every recognition and honor until all I have left is a collapsing career.

I went from hero to villain in a matter of weeks.

Lucia's hand brings me back to my senses, her fingers threading through mine. "You okay?"

I look at her, and the knot in my chest loosens. This is my wife, the woman who saw me at my worst and chose me anyway. The chaos of these past months, the violence and fear, and the moments when I thought I'd lose her all brought us here.

"I'm fine." I squeeze her hand, and she squeezes back. "Let's do this."

The hearing lasts three hours. I sit at a long table with Nico beside me brandishing his tablet and his calm competence. Lucia is in the front row where I can see her whenever I need to borrow some strength.

Bruno's confession unfolds before us, and I wince internally at his looping handwriting. Those words should have been mine to say. We hear witness testimony from officials who finally admit what they knew. The paper trail proves, beyond any doubt, that the scandal was manufactured.

When the commissioner reads the verdict, he rattles on about exoneration and the full reinstatement of my record, but I don't feel the vindication I expected.

Though I sit still through the Athletic Commission's formal apology, I don't experience any rush of triumph or satisfaction. I'm taken instead by stillness and the absence of a weight I've been carrying for so long that I've forgotten what standing straight feels like.

When we venture outside, the press swarm the steps. Someone from the International Kickboxing Federation wants to talk about a comeback, a media agency tries to woo me into a commentator role, and the reporters all want a sound bite about the redemption story of the decade. I know all they see is the headline and the marketable arc of a fallen hero restored, and they need to strike quickly while my story still has some value.

I wave them off, then pull Lucia into the back seat of the waiting car, cradling her hand in mine. Soon, the city blurs past the windows.

She angles her body toward mine. "You did it, right? The ban triggered by the doping scandal has been overturned, and your record is clean." Her thumb traces lazy circles on my knuckles

I shift to look at her. The afternoon light catches her eyes and deepens the shade to the vivid green of old forest canopy after rain.

I nod. “I did, finally. I carried the shame for so long. Even knowing I’d been set up somehow, some part of me blamed myself for not noticing the deception. Every loss, every closed door, and every year I spent watching other men win the careers I could have had ate away at my resolve. And now…everyone knows I was innocent all along.”

She slides a hand up the nape of my neck, gently massaging my jaw. “I never believed you would stoop that low. Not from the first night you told me what happened. I could hear the truth in your voice, even when you couldn’t hear it yourself.”

“I could have a career again.” The hope that rolls from my tongue tastes strange, like an exotic spice that I might come to hate or love. “The Federation wants me as a commentator or maybe a coach. They’re offering a way back into the world I lost. I never thought I’d be able to touch that world again.”

“Do *you* want that?”

I consider the question. Then I think about the gym I’ve been planning, the kids I want to teach, and the life I’ve been creating with Lucia. I thought the empty space in my chest could only fill with purpose once I got my name exonerated and when the world finally believed me. But I’m not so sure anymore.

“I think…I want to shape our future.”

I cover her hand with mine, pressing it closer to my face.

“I want to work with kids who need someone in their corner. Kids like I was, before the world decided I wasn’t worth believing in. I want us to have a clinic, a gym, and a legacy that will outlast our names. We can do work that matters for once, and I don’t need to be in the spotlight again. I just have to be a man you’re proud to call yours.”

She flashes that smile of hers that kicks my heart sideways. There’s no one I’d rather have at my side, supporting my dreams, than this woman.

“You already are that man.”

Over the next week, the space slowly transforms into what we imagined. I throw myself into it with the same focus I once reserved for training, fights, and survival. This project has become my purpose, and it means more to me than any other job ever has. Through it, I'm forging my future and carving out a path to reinvent myself.

Lucia sticks beside me most days. She's on reduced hours at Ashford County while the new clinic takes shape, and she holds her own with the physical work. With her hair tied back and her sleeves rolled up, she sketches out the clinic floor plan on sheets of paper that cover the sawhorse and plywood structure we've erected as a table. She orders equipment, calls vendors, and arranges deliveries, bringing her clinic to life piece by piece, just as I bring the vision of my gym to reality.

Our place smells of fresh paint and sawdust and that particular chemical tang of new flooring. A half-finished ring sits in the center of this floor, ropes just waiting to be strung and canvas just waiting for the first feet to cross it.

Jenna shows up with coffee and lots of opinions about my construction methods. Sophia appears with fabric samples and paint swatches, "because a clinic needs to feel warm." She's not wrong. Izzy hauls in gym equipment and offers unsolicited advice on the security system, which turns out to be genuinely useful, though I'd never tell her that.

Enzo comes one afternoon when the light is fading and the construction crew has gone home. I find him in the main gym space. He's standing in the half-built ring while staring at the exposed brick and the high ceilings. His eyes see the dormant potential of this place.

"You're really doing this, Marco. Creating something great here."

"I had help." I walk over to him. "Lucia did the clinic plans. Jenna's handling the community outreach and finding families who need us. Sophia hunted down a deal on equipment that I'm not going to question too closely. It takes a village, I'm told."

Enzo manages a small but real smile, the kind I've only seen a handful of times in all the years I've known him. "That's what family does. We'll help you become more than you thought you could be."

Eventually, Enzo breaks the silence that's settled between us. "I'm proud of you." His praise comes out in a gruff tone. "You know that, right? You could have stayed where you were and remained useful. After all, that

was the only life you knew. Instead, you chose to become more than your past. Better than your pain."

I look at the partial ring, the freshly painted walls, and the sign over the door that Lucia insisted on. She designed the mock-up, and for now, her handwriting will welcome everyone who comes through this place.

Santori Community Center: Where Champions Are Made.

"I had a good teacher." I meet Enzo's eyes and let him see my sincerity. "You taught me that redemption isn't earned. It's built every day, piece by piece."

Enzo clasps my shoulder and squeezes once, his grip familiar. "You're going to be great at this, Marco. Even better than you were in the ring." He gestures at the space, at the future we're crafting. "You were always meant to be this man."

I think about his declaration later, when the work's done and I'm in the middle of the empty gym with Lucia by my side. The quiet around us is the calm before a much-needed storm, and expectation buzzes through me.

"You're thinking loudly." She leans into me, her head on my shoulder and her hair soft against my neck. "What's going on in there?"

I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. "I never thought I'd have any of this. My name cleared. My record restored. The community center. The woman I love right next to me, helping to build something that's ours." I pause. "I spent years waiting for the other shoe to drop, all the while telling myself that I didn't deserve good things. It's different now."

"How so?" She tilts her face up to mine, her eyes glinting in the fading light.

"Now I think…maybe I'm deserving. Maybe I always have been, and I just couldn't see it."

She responds with a soft, lingering kiss, and I kiss her back.

When we get back to the compound that night, we find a package on our doorstep. Lucia picks it up and turns it over in her hands. Her brow furrows. "Did you order something?"

I shake my head. "Open it."

Inside, we find a small stuffed bear, soft and brown, wearing a tiny boxing robe with *Team Santori* embroidered on the back in gold thread. A note in Sophia's familiar handwriting sits underneath.

We're all so happy for the growing Santori family.

Lucia stares at the bear. Color drains from her face, and her hands begin to tremble. “Marco, this is definitely from Sophia.”

“I didn’t…” I read the note again, and a cold weight sinks in my chest. “She thinks you’re pregnant.”

“Yes, she does.” Lucia’s voice is strange, flat, and hollow. “Because of the symptoms I had before.” She sets the bear down on the table with exaggerated care. “I need to tell her that I’m not actually pregnant.”

She sobs out the last word, and I feel her heart racing as I hold her against my chest.

I kiss her forehead. “We’ll tell her together. When you’re ready. We’ll wait until saying the words doesn’t feel like reopening a wound.”

She nods against me, but her shoulders are tense and her breathing’s uneven. I want to fix it, to give her back that stolen hope.

That night, after she falls asleep with her hand curled under her cheek and her breathing evens out, I reach for my phone. A message from Nico glows in the darkness.

Mason Dellinger’s gone dark. Apartment empty. Phone untraceable. No one’s seen him in days. He’s a ghost.

I stare at the screen. The fact that Mason’s disappeared and currently poses no danger to Lucia should relieve me. I’m worried, though. Men like that don’t vanish completely, and while he’s out of our reach, he’ll be scheming with Bruno and waiting for us to let our guard down.

Beside me, Lucia slumbers peacefully, her face slack in the dim light. I need to tell her about Mason and all I’ve hidden.

But not tonight, when she’s safe and mine. I’ll protect her from this for as long as I can.

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Chapter 33

Lucia

I’ve enjoyed two weeks of waking up next to Marco with sunlight filtering through our curtains. The weight of his arm drapes across my waist, and his breath warms my neck.

Three days after Marco’s exoneration, while I’m sleeping in my room after a solid fourteen-hour stretch in the compound’s clinic, Sophia goes into labor.

Since Marco and I have been so focused on our project that we’re usually knackered, Sophia decided we should be left to rest, so the compound physician handles the delivery.

I’m awake when Enzo comes in to tell Marco. The padrino crosses the corridor in the gray four-in-the-morning light, his face carrying that stunned, quiet wonder of a man who’s just held his child for the first time.

When Marco returns to bed, he whispers into my ear. “A girl. She’s healthy, and Sophia’s well.”

I nod and say nothing, pressing my face into his chest and thinking about what it means to bring a child into this dangerous world.

The following weeks unfold with a strange, fragile sweetness. I spend my days measuring rooms in the new space and ordering equipment for the clinic, letting myself believe that maybe, I’m allowed to be happy.

My nausea, however, refuses to cooperate with that belief. It comes and goes without warning, settling behind my ribs at odd hours. Morning, noon, the middle of the night. Exhaustion trails me through my shifts like a

shadow that coffee can’t shake. My body still feels an unexplainable tenderness. My breasts ache with a new softness, and smells I never noticed now sicken me.

A dozen medical explanations exist for how I’m feeling, and I run through them in my head every morning as the nausea crests and subsides.

None of those explanations fully satisfy me, though. Through it all, my heart keeps insisting on a truth my mind refuses to accept.

In the bathroom, I grip the sink, the porcelain cool under my palms as I wait for the wave of queasiness to pass. It’s the third time this week I’ve lost my breakfast.

My mind whirls with the question I buried after the negative test.

Why is my pseudocyesis still happening?

These signs should stop now that I’ve stopped believing I’m pregnant.

Unless I haven’t?

I look at the pale, hollow-eyed version of myself in the mirror, and my hand presses against my flat belly. For a moment, I imagine Marco walking into a nursery painted soft yellow, picking up our little child, and beaming.

Then the negative test replaces that image, and I push away from the sink. I force myself to get dressed, to braid my hair, and to go to work. There’s still a lot to be done at the Santori Community Center.

Jenna needs my help. Marco needs me to be okay. I can’t fall apart over a future I built in my head and lost before it could begin.

Working a shift at the hospital these days feels strange, like I’m reassessing a life that’s no longer mine. Jenna’s at the nurses’ station when I walk in, and when she sees me, her face lights up. For a second, the world seems almost normal.

“You look terrible.” Jenna’s brow furrows as she hands me a chart and falls into step beside me. “I’ve been watching you push your food around your plate for three days. Are you going to tell me what’s actually going on? I’ve had to stop myself from prying it out of you in front of Noah.”

I chuckle. “I’m good, Jen.”

“So why does it seem like you haven’t slept in a week?” Jenna’s frown deepens, her voice heightened by the sharp concern she’s perfected over the

years. “Lu. Talk to me. You’ve got that face.”

“I’m fine.” My answer comes out automatically. “Just busy working on the community center, and I’m still feeling a bit sick.”

“Get a full workup done. Diagnostic testing, metabolic panel, urinalysis, EKG…everything. I’m worried about you.” Jenna’s voice softens. “You’ve been through so much lately.”

I reply more sharply than I intend. “It’s stress. It happens. I’m fine.”

Jenna studies me for a long moment, then nods. “Okay. If you say so.”

We work throughout the morning in companionable silence, falling back into the rhythm we’ve established over years of shared shifts.

I treat a teenager with a broken wrist. His mother hovers at his shoulder, visibly relieved when I confirm it’s a clean break. I check on a grandmother with chest pain, and her hands shake as she describes the tightness, the fear, and the weight pressing against her insides. My last patient at the end of my shift is a feverish baby. Her parents narrate how her cries have been keeping the whole family up as I administer some fever-reducers.

On my way out of the hospital, my phone rings with an unknown number. When I pick up, I hear an unmistakable voice.

“Lucia, please don’t hang up.”

Mason. Calling from a burner, which means he ditched his regular number that Nico’s people were tracking.

I’ve ignored every call and deleted every message without reading, telling myself I don’t need him and that I shouldn’t trust anything he has to say if Marco and Nico are digging into him.

I hang up and turn back to the chart in my hand. Not two seconds later, the desk phone at the nurses’ station rings, and Jenna answers.

“Ashford County ER, nursing station. …Mason?” Jenna’s eyes shift to mine, her brow lifting as I shake my head vehemently. “She’s busy. Yeah, I can take a message.” She listens to him for a moment. “Matteo’s case? What do you mean, you found something?”

I go still for a half second, my mind racing.

Waiting for Marco to talk to me about the text and clue me in on what else he’s hiding hasn’t panned out. Most of our time together these days is spent constructing the gym and the clinic.

There’s nothing wrong with hearing what Mason has to say.

My hand reaches for the phone. “Give it to me.”

Jenna hesitates, her eyes meeting mine. “Lu.”

“Give me the phone.”

I take it, and as I press it to my ear, my pulse hammers in my throat. “Mason.”

“Lucia.” His voice is tired, urgent, and scraped raw. “I know you don’t want to talk to me, but I found information about Matteo and the trafficking ring that changes the picture completely.”

Every instinct screams at me to end the call and walk away. But he said Matteo’s name, and I can’t let that thread go, not when it’s the only one I have left.

“Where are you?”

“Our usual coffee shop. I just need five minutes of your time. Please.”

“I’ll be there in twenty.” I end the call.

Jenna’s watching me, her face pinched with worry. She rests a hand on my arm. “Lu, whatever he’s selling, you don’t have to buy it.”

I’m already grabbing my bag, my jacket, and my keys. “If he has answers about Matteo, then I should see him.”

“He could be lying just to get you there.” Jenna’s eyes follow me. “You know he never moved on. That’s why he’s always sticking around.”

“He could be telling the truth.” I hold her gaze to show her how serious I am. “I have to know, Jen. I *have* to.”

She shakes her head in resignation.

“Don’t worry. It’s just Mason. I can handle Mason.” I glance around the room, checking for the incognito Benedetti soldiers who I know watch over me. “Jenna, I want you to go out there and distract my guards.”

She sighs as she walks toward the men. “Okay, but you owe me.”

The coffee shop is nearly empty when I arrive late in the afternoon.

Mason’s at the table in the back corner, the same one he always chose when we were together. His drink sits untouched, going cold.

He stands when I approach, and relief flickers across his face.

“You came.”

“You said you had information about my brother.” I keep the table between us. “Talk.”

He gestures to the chair across from him, and I sit down reluctantly, perching on the edge.

“I’ve been investigating the Benedetti family, and I found things I couldn’t tell you before because they would have put you in danger if I’d spoken too soon.” He slides a thick, worn folder toward me. “I found the trafficking ring Matteo was investigating before he died. And I found out who’s really in charge.”

I open the folder. Grainy photos spread across the pages, shadowed and indistinct like surveillance shots taken from too far away. In the center, I find a photograph of Marco, Nico, and Enzo in a warehouse I don’t recognize, their faces half lit and their postures familiar.

“What is this?”

“Proof.” Mason speaks with careful, measured words in the voice he uses when delivering news he knows will wound. “The Benedetti family isn’t just connected to the trafficking ring, Lucia. They’re operating it. Marco, Enzo, and Nico are the ones in charge. They’ve been using you to get to Bruno Caruso and make him the fall guy. They want to cover their own tracks.”

His claim doesn’t make any sense. He hands me witness statements with portions of testimony starkly highlighted. Six arrested felons mention Marco and Enzo in relation to kidnappings.

“That’s not true.” I push the papers back, and when he won’t accept them, I drop them on the table. “Marco would never—”

Mason interrupts by leaning toward me, his eyes intense. “He would. Your husband’s been lying to you from the beginning. Being with you is all a cover. This whole time, he’s been running the same operation that killed your brother.”

My hands tremble. I scan the statements again, hunting for a flaw that proves Mason wrong. But the documents appear authentic, and the timeline fits the gaps in Marco’s schedule, accounting for the nights he came home late and the meetings he didn’t explain.

Even with all the paperwork, my mind refuses to believe.

“It’s not possible.” Even as I argue, a sinking feeling settles deep in my gut. “I know who he is.”

“Do you?” Mason tilts his head and slides another document my way, this one a list of Marco’s movements over the last six months, cross-referenced with trafficking incidents. “Because you’ve known him for,

what, a few months? And in that time, you've been in his compound, surrounded by his people, navigating his world. How would you know if what you're seeing isn't exactly what he *wants* you to see?"

I glance at the dates on the document and struggle to fit them with the gaps in Marco's schedule that I always accepted without asking.

"You're wrong." Though I continue to deny it, my voice cracks.

"The testimony comes from Benedetti employees who've turned state's evidence." Mason speaks with reluctance, like he's delivering news he doesn't want to. "They were on the inside. They saw the operation happen, and they named names, Lucia. Under oath. In depositions. Marco Santori is on record as overseeing organ procurement."

"That's—"

I stop and press my hands flat on the wood, my chest tightening around a breath I can't quite complete.

My heart knows the truth. Marco held me while I cried. He's shown me a hundred times what kind of man he is. While my logical brain wants to see the documents with cold facts that the contents can be true, my heart can't reconcile the man I now know with what this evidence says.

Deciding I need to ask Marco in person, I push back from the table, my heart screaming in my chest.

"I need to go."

"Lucia, you know Matteo wouldn't want you to be with a man like Marco."

"I can't deal with this right now. I need air." I'm already standing, reaching for my bag. The papers on the table have started to blur. I can't sit across from Mason and watch him dismantle everything I believe about Marco. If I don't get outside, I'm going to completely fall apart.

"Lucia, please."

Once I get through the door, the afternoon sunlight assaults me, too bright after the coffee shop's dim interior. My heels strike the sidewalk too fast, my breath coming in shallow gulps as I dig through my bag for my keys with trembling hands. Matteo's name keeps colliding with Mason's words, and I can't think clearly enough to separate the grief from the doubt.

I'm halfway to my car when Mason's hand closes around my arm. "Wait!"

I pivot, ready to demand he respect my choices. I want to tell him, with utter finality, that I'm done with him forever.

But I don’t have time.

A sharp prick stings my neck, and fire instantly engulfs my veins. My pulse hammers, my vision smears at the edges, and my knees buckle.

As I sink to the floor, Mason’s face swims in front of me, twisted into the desperate, broken expression that’s been there all along.

I never saw this coming.

His voice sounds distant, strange, and echoey. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t let you go back to him. Not when I’ve come this far, and not when I’m this close.”

Everything folds in on itself. The sunlight shifts from gold to gray to black. The last thing I hear before everything disappears is Mason’s thin, garbled voice.

“Bruno was right. This is the only way.”

Then nothing.

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Chapter 34

Marco

I’ve been at the community center all day, painting walls in long, even strokes while my mind circles the same territory.

I keep thinking about the clinic Lucia’s designing, the gym we’ll build together, and the life we’re constructing from the rubble of who we used to be.

Even though my hands are raw and my back aches, I’ve never been happier. The smell of fresh paint and new wood floods my lungs. Quite literally, I’m shaping our future with my hands.

I text her around four with clumsy fingers.

Coming home. What do you want for dinner?

I get no response. She’s probably with a patient. I shower, change, and drive home with the windows down and the evening air cool against my skin.

A quick debriefing about Bruno’s whereabouts holds me back in the main villa. Nico runs through the latest surveillance reports, Billy presents his analysis of the shell company financials, and I contribute where I can while checking my phone under the table every few minutes.

Four thirty. Nothing from Lucia.

Five o’clock. Still nothing.

By the time the meeting breaks and I return to our quarters, her radio silence has grown teeth. I text again, then call. The screen shifts, prompting

me to leave a voicemail. I text once more, keeping the words casual even as my chest clenches.

Six o'clock.

The worry stops gnawing at the edges and opens into a maw that swallows me whole.

Then I call the hospital. Dr. Webb informs me she left hours ago. I walk over to the compound's clinic to see if Lucia headed there after her shift. She sometimes does when someone's seriously ill. I find Jenna reorganizing supply shelves with the focused energy of someone keeping her hands busy to avoid thinking.

"She never came in today," Jenna says before I've even opened my mouth. Her eyes flick to mine and away again, so quickly that I almost miss it. "I thought she was with you at the community center."

The cold fist in my chest clenches. I'm in the car in a flash, racing through the compound gates. My mind cycles through possibilities with the merciless speed of a man who knows exactly what he's afraid of.

I try to convince myself I'm wrong. She's probably just playing a prank or running errands. She could have even fallen asleep at the community center, lost in her plans.

Her apartment is my first stop, but Lucia's black Honda Civic is nowhere on the street, and the dark windows show no sign of life. The community center is my next thought. When I arrive at the uncompleted building to find the front gate unlocked, I'm immediately on edge.

I draw my gun and rush inside, searching nooks and crannies on every floor.

Each empty room hits my chest like a fist.

Some walls are up on the third floor in the living and bedroom areas. Hurrying in the living area, I stand in the center as light spills through from the east-facing windows.

Still no trace of my Lucia.

My phone buzzes with a message, and I stop breathing. For one second, I hold the screen face down against my palm.

If the message is Lucia telling me she's fine, I'll feel ridiculous for the last twenty minutes I've spent panicking.

I tap my screen to illuminate the text.

I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry. Please don't look for me.

My hands go cold. My heart races, and I can't do anything other than stare at the screen.

I call her immediately. The phone rings five times, then six, then goes to voicemail. I call again and again, and each time, I get her recorded voice asking me to leave a message in a professional tone.

I hang up and text her once more.

Lucia, call me. Now.

The reply comes too quickly.

I have nothing to say to you.

My jaw tightens.

What happened? You can tell me what's going on, tesoro.

Nothing happens at first. Then three dots bounce around before the reply appears.

Just let me go, Marco. I'm not ready to join a conniving, murderous, criminal family.

I go still.

Lucia might have reasons not to trust me, but she would never refer to the entire *famiglia* she's met—including Sophia—as any of those names.

That's how I recognize this for what it is. The cadence is wrong, missing Lucia's sharp, precise voice and the undercurrent of warmth she can never quite hide. For months, I've read her texts between cases, quick notes, and clipped reminders. I know how she shortens sentences when she's tired and adds bite when she's annoyed.

This isn't her. This is someone too emotional to keep their contempt for my family off the screen. Someone wants me to think she's walked out so I'll delay my search for her.

Someone took her.

I'm on the phone before I can draw another breath, somehow managing to keep my voice steady, even as my hands quake.

"Jenna. She's gone."

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Her voice sharpens.

"Taken. She texted me, but it's not her. I mean, the messages are from her number, but it's not how Lucia writes."

After two beats, Jenna's composure breaks.

"Oh, god. It's Mason." The words pour out. "He's been calling her all week from a burner phone. She went to meet him today at the coffee shop

because he said he had information about Matteo. She made me promise not to tell anyone. Marco, I should have told you."

The realization hits like a sledgehammer to the skull. "I've got to go."

I end the call, dial Nico, and rattle off what I know.

He waits for the end of my rant before responding with determined precision. "I'll track him down right now."

"I need to know his last known location, his contacts, his vehicle, every piece of data we can scrape together. Find out where he took her." I speak in a controlled tone that I use when the mission is all that matters.

My hands continue to tremble.

"I need it now."

The Benedetti soldiers mobilize quickly, and I have the machine Enzo has built roaring to life around me in record time. Men I've trained with for years navigate through the space with grim efficiency, pulling up maps, coordinating teams, and checking weapons.

Enzo directs the search with his typical calm authority. Izzy works satellite images, her fingers flying across keyboards. Nico has doubled down on his efforts to track Mason's car and credit cards, and now we've got a snapshot of his whole life laid bare across a myriad of screens.

I hover in the center of this maelstrom, useless. I'm the best tracker they have, the most effective killer, and a man who's found enemies in every corner of this city, but I can't find her. I can only wait while other people work as time slips through my fingers like water.

"Got a location." Nico's voice cuts through the chaos, and every head swivels toward him. "Mason's car pinged on a traffic camera on Interstate 9, northbound, then dropped off surveillance thirty minutes later near Rockland County. There's an abandoned psychiatric complex up there… been derelict for over a decade. It's isolated and surrounded by heavy woods with no residential neighbors for miles."

My blood runs cold. "An abandoned medical facility. That would be a perfect organ trafficking hub."

"That's what I'm thinking." Nico pulls up the location on the main screen and reveals satellite images of buildings flanked by a thick forest.

“It’s one of the places we cleared when we were searching for Bruno and again when Jenna was taken. But I bet he would bank on us not checking a third time. It’s forty minutes from Washington Heights, defensible, hidden, and exactly where a man with medical infrastructure would set up shop.”

“They’ve been planning this.” My voice sounds distant, like it belongs to someone else. “Bruno used Tomas to attack our wedding, knowing we’d survive but that the assault would shake us. He used the Volkovs to fund his operations and keep pressure on our compound. He used Mason to get close to Lucia, to isolate her, and to plant doubt in her. Every problem we’ve faced for months leads back to one man, and now that man has my wife.”

Enzo appears beside me, his face grim in the glow of the screens. “We have everything we need to get her back. We’re going in hot.”

“Then let’s go.” I’m already marching toward the door, toward my weapons, and toward the car that will take me to her.

“Marco.” Enzo catches my arm, his grip firm. “You need to be clearheaded for this. Lucia needs the enforcer more than the husband right now. If you let grief drive you, you’ll take risks the plan can’t absorb, and she’ll pay for it.” His fingers dig into my shoulder. “Can you be who she needs you to be?”

“I’m clear.” The words come out level and stripped of all emotion except for certainty. “The plan, the building, what we’re walking into, and what it costs to lose focus… I’m not going to lose focus.” I hold his gaze. “I know exactly what I’m doing, and I’m going to bring her home.”

He studies me for a moment, then nods. “Let’s go get your wife.”

The drive to Rockland County takes fifty-three minutes. I count every one, my weapon in my lap as I run mental scenarios I can’t stop and don’t want to finish. No one in the vehicle speaks. Nothing to say that the speedometer isn’t already screaming.

The complex rises out of the tree line, a relic of another era that the woods have been trying to swallow. We kill the headlights a quarter mile out and roll in dark, the road visible only by the moonlight filtering through the canopy. Crumbling brick and boarded windows come into view as we close the distance, and floodlights mounted on the upper floors cast harsh white pools across the surrounding area.

Cars sit parked in the back, and guards stand posted at the entrance, their flashlight beams sweeping in slow, practiced arcs. My wife is somewhere in that building…and in the hands of men who want to hurt her.

“Two teams.” Nico’s sharp command leaves no room for argument. “We hit the front to draw their attention and make them think that’s the location of the main assault. Marco’s team goes in through the basement entrance, locates her, and gets her out. No heroics, no detours. Just grab her and go.”

“And Bruno?”

“Bruno’s yours,” Nico promises with a heavy tone. “Whatever happens in there…whatever you need to do…we’ll handle the aftermath. Just bring her back.”

I nod once, then check my weapon, feeling the familiar heft of it in my palm. I also have a knife at my waist that I trust to do any job the gun isn’t suited for.

Then I move.

The basement entrance has a metal door half hidden by overgrowth. A keypad glows faintly next to it, confirming that this complex hasn’t been vacant as long as previously thought.

The guard doesn’t see me coming. I bring him down silently by crushing my arm against his windpipe until the life leaves him.

Inside, the passages stretch into darkness. The air is thick with dust and the fetid dampness of waterlogged walls. My flashlight cuts a narrow path through the black, illuminating broken equipment, collapsed ceilings, and the slow rot of a place that’s been waiting to die. But somewhere above me, there’s light and movement.

So I start climbing.

Voices carry through the hollow halls, distorted by distance and the strange acoustics.

I run faster through the dense, stale air. The corridors blur as my feet find the path without conscious thought, my hands keeping steady on the weapon.

Whatever happens tonight—whatever it costs—I’ll either get her out or die trying. There was never any other option

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Chapter 35

Lucia

The world comes back in pieces, and each sense returns with its own particular violence.

First comes the sharp smell of antiseptic, which burns the back of my throat and turns my stomach. The chill comes next. Metal beneath my back leeches warmth from my spine, and straps bite into my wrists. The air's so cold that it raises goosebumps on my bare arms.

My hearing returns next. Soft, familiar voices argue somewhere in the fluorescent-lit distance. Their words are indistinct, but the intent is unmistakable.

I open my eyes to the ceiling of an operating room.

I'm strapped to a table, my arms secured at the wrists, my legs bound at the ankles. My clothes have vanished, replaced by a paper gown that offers no protection against the cold seeping into my bones. My head throbs in rhythm with my pulse, while my mouth tastes metallic and bitter. Somewhere to my left, machines hum and beep.

I know this place. I saw it in Matteo's files, in the photographs he took before he died. Bruno Caruso's operating theater, where victims went in whole and came out in pieces.

I'm going to die in this room.

"You're awake. Good."

I roll my head toward the voice, and the movement causes a spike of pain through my skull.

Bruno Caruso stands in the doorway.

He looks exactly like he did in Naples, even though I only caught a glimpse of him then. He wears his immaculate white coat, probably pressed and folded for this occasion, wire-rimmed glasses, and the same calm certainty of a man who believes he's in control of every room he enters.

His expression appears almost pleasant, almost welcoming, as if I'm a patient who's come for a consultation rather than a prisoner he's planning to butcher.

"So you're the doctor who's in bed with a killer."

He approaches me, his footsteps echoing on the tile, and places his fingers on my wrist with clinical efficiency. Then he picks up a chart from the tray beside me and flips it open with the brisk efficiency of a physician reviewing notes.

"Apologies. I'm usually more cautious with my pregnant patients."

The news lands before my brain can process it. He tilts the chart toward me, and I read it out of instinct.

It's my blood panel from the clinic, the one Mason arranged. Elevated hCG at 47,000 mIU/mL, consistent with eight to ten weeks. Progesterone levels tracking high. The urinalysis that should have shown a clear positive has been annotated in a different hand. The word "negative" was written over the original result in ink that doesn't match the rest of the report.

The test wasn't wrong. Someone changed it, and I should have caught the fake diagnosis weeks ago when my symptoms didn't go away.

My hands go cold.

"Yes, Dear Doctor." He glances at me from over the top of the page. "A very clever trick by Mason, you know. He chose a doctor who owed him favors and who'd lie without asking questions. As a doctor yourself, I didn't think you'd be so easily fooled. Deep down, you were relieved you didn't have to bear the child of your butcher."

"You're wrong!" I struggle against my restraints and try to sit up. My heart strains like it's about to burst into smithereens. "None of that is true!"

"About your feelings for your husband? You be the judge of that. Or is this about your pregnancy? Why would I lie about that?" He opens his arms in a wide shrug.

He's right. He has no reason to deceive me here, not when he doesn't believe I'll survive this encounter. I glimpse that plain certainty in his eyes.

He sets the chart down and picks up the syringe. As he prepares it, my mind does cartwheels.

I'm carrying Marco's baby. He doesn't know, and if I die in this room, he never will. The baby I didn't know was in my womb will cease to exist in a fluorescent-lit nightmare while its father is somewhere out there looking for me.

The advice Izzy gave me during a combat training session three weeks ago flashes through my head. *When they think you're helpless, that's when you strike.*

I begin twisting my right wrist against the strap's edge with micro-movements, careful to ensure nothing's visible from Bruno's position.

"You know nothing." My voice comes out hoarse, scraped raw by whatever they used to knock me out. "This isn't going to go the way you want it to," I say loudly enough to cover the creak of old leather straps as I work my wrist against the buckle. "And you're not going to get inside my head."

"Really? That's disappointing." He holds the syringe up to the light and taps the barrel to dislodge bubbles.

"Mason has worked with me for some time. I needed a connection in the NYPD's ranks, and anyone can be bought for the right price. The detective seems to have a sweet spot for you, though. He begged me not to touch you after your brother dug into our business and got himself killed. I think Detective Dellinger is still in love with you."

Bruno chuckles, darkness in every note.

"And then you got yourself entangled with Santori, my former protégé. Apparently, you and I were always meant to cross paths."

He circles me like a vulture about to feast on a carcass. "Dellinger was devastated when he found out about your marriage. He begged me to eliminate Santori so he could swoop in like a prince charming."

Bruno *tsks* in a mocking way.

"But then you got pregnant. Mason knew the baby would tie you to Santori permanently and make leaving him impossible. So, he made sure to give you all the assurance you needed that a baby wasn't going to tie you down."

"I was never going to leave Marco either way!"

"And that's why we switched to plan B." Bruno sets the syringe down and meets my eyes with an emotionless, inhuman gaze. "You're very

valuable, Dr. Romano. Not just as leverage against Santori, though that's certainly useful. But your brother, Matteo, was brilliant. He found things no one else could find and saw patterns the rest of us missed entirely. We believe he left you some clues about the full scope of what he documented before we killed him."

My heart stops. The world narrows to his face, his words, and the nonchalant manner in which he's just confirmed what I've feared for years.

"Who's we? Was Mason a part of…" The words die on my lips.

"You're as inquisitive as your brother, no?"

Bruno's voice is conversational, almost bored.

"I'll answer your questions because I'm in a good mood tonight. So, yes, Mason set him up and fed him information that led him to his death. The detective gave us his location, schedule, and the intel we needed to make it clean. Then Matteo found our procurement ledgers. Included were twelve months of transactions linking our operation to four hospital systems in three states, every name and dollar amount documented."

He shrugs noncommittally.

"We ran out of time and had to remove him from the board. He was still breathing when my men were done with him, last I heard. Made it as far as your ER and kept insisting you'd save him."

The grief moves through my body like a shock wave, pressing against the back of my throat, then behind my eyes. I let it sit there. I don't push it down because that would cost energy, and I'm focused on grinding the strap against the table.

"Matteo was smarter than you, you know," I bite out the words. "He was careful. You'll never find those files."

"Oh, I'll get the files *and* your husband." Bruno leans close enough that I can smell the starch in his coat and the coffee on his breath. "You'll tell me where your brother hid them. And Marco will come for you because that's what love drives men to do. They become stupid and predictable."

He tilts his head. "The Volkovs have wanted your husband for months. Not for his fists, but for what he carries in his head. Every security protocol, every safe house location, every name in the Benedetti network. Once I hand him over, they'll extract what they need, and I'll collect what I'm owed. By the time Enzo realizes his head of security has been turned inside out, the entire Benedetti operation will be compromised beyond repair."

I grit my teeth. “I can’t tell you anything because even I don’t know where the files are.”

His eyes flare. “Wrong answer. You don’t want me jogging your memories, girl.”

“I don’t know.” My voice shakes, tears gathering in my eyes.

“You do.” He picks up the syringe again and tests the needle against his thumb. “And one way or another, you’re going to tell me.”

I watch his hands, his rhythm, his patterns. Men like Bruno always think they know how much pain a woman can endure or how much pressure they can apply.

I’m going to show him exactly how wrong he is.

“The files are in a safety deposit box.” My voice hitches and stumbles as I sell the performance. “In a bank in the city…one of those old places that doesn’t ask questions. I have the key well hidden in my apartment.”

Bruno brings his face closer, his eyes hungry. “You’re going to have to tell me the location. Otherwise, I’ll force it out of you.”

As his threat hangs in the air, the strap gives way. My hand is free.

My face fills his whole field of vision, and I take the opportunity to deal some damage. My eyes flick to the side, and before he even realizes what’s happening, my fingers snatch a scalpel from his instrument tray. I swing my arm in a wide arc and drive the blade into the meat of his forearm.

He unleashes a satisfying scream. Not quite satisfying enough after what he did to Matteo, but there’s no time for more.

Before he can recover, I tear the second strap loose and jump off the table. I scramble for the door in my ripped gown, and my bare feet slap on the floor. Behind me, Bruno shouts for guards, his voice high with pain and fury. I sprint through the corridors, my gaze darting around for any way out of this hell.

A storage room appears on my left. The door’s ajar, and light spills through. I shove it open and freeze.

The room is kept at a near-freezing temperature, cold enough that my breath clouds in front of my face. Medical-grade coolers line the walls in stacked rows, each one humming with its own power supply and labeled with a date, a blood type, and an organ name in Bruno’s meticulous handwriting. Kidneys. Livers. Hearts. The clinical precision of it churns my stomach more than gore ever could.

This isn’t chaos but inventory. A supply chain managed with the same careful efficiency as any hospital organ bank, except the donors never consented and never walked out.

The doctor in me registers the setup instantly. This is temperature-controlled cold storage with a forty-eight-hour viability window at most, and its purpose is clear. Bruno’s buyers are waiting for these deliveries, and the clock on every cooler is already ticking.

Behind the last row of coolers, I spot a small window frosted with condensation but wide enough for me to squeeze through.

I grab a chair and swing it at the glass, which cracks but doesn’t break. When I swing again, it cracks a little bit more. On the third swing, the window shatters. I climb through the threshold even as glass cuts into my skin, focusing on the night air on my face.

A vicelike grip closes around my legs, and my body is dragged backward.

“No!” I fight, claw, bite, and taste blood in my mouth that isn’t mine. “Let go of me!”

I’ve been caught by one of his men. I drive my elbow toward my assailant, but he catches my arm and throws me across the room. My back hits the coolers, and I fall to the floor because of the impact.

Bruno appears in the doorway with another guard behind him, his arm wrapped in a bloody towel, his face twisted with more fury than I’ve ever seen.

He goes still as the fury retreats behind a more frigid mask. “You want to know what happens to people who hurt me, Dr. Romano? They find themselves on my table, and I take what they owe me. Piece by piece.”

He gestures to the men, who lift and then drag me back toward the operating room. I struggle the whole way, but I’m weak, bleeding, and my bare feet slide on the tile.

They strap me to the table once more. The chilling metal is back against my spine, and the restraints bite into my wrists and ankles. Bruno picks up a new scalpel, tests the edge with his thumb, and watches a bead of his own blood well up and drip.

“We’ll start with a kidney, I think.” His voice is almost thoughtful as he draws a clear liquid into a syringe from a vial on the tray. “Vecuronium. A paralytic. Every surgeon’s familiar with it.”

He taps the barrel. “It will freeze every muscle in your body while leaving your mind perfectly alert. You’ll have no ability to scream or move while I work.” He holds my gaze. “Kidney first. Then heart, liver, lungs, pancreas, intestines… Until there’s nothing left to take.”

I close my eyes and think of Marco. His steady hands on my skin. The heat of his palm against my jaw. His voice, rough with emotion, telling me I was worth more than I knew. The way he looked at me this morning, soft and wondering, like I was a gift he’d never thought he deserved.

My thoughts right now are for the baby I’m now sure I’m carrying, the life I wanted to build, and the future I was starting to believe in. I think of Matteo, of that photograph on my nightstand where his smile is bright and alive.

By now, Marco and the rest of the family will have figured out I’ve been taken. I know my husband’s scouring through every inch of this city to find me.

He won’t be here in time. It’s too late.

I couldn’t protect our child.

I open my eyes to find Bruno riffling through the instrument tray as he ponders which weapon to wield. His two men post up by the door, and the wound on my left palm trickles blood down my fingers.

The shuffling stops. Then footsteps, unmistakably Bruno’s, thud toward me.

“Marco…” The name slips out quietly. I’m not calling out for him or expecting anything. I speak it because my soul resonates with the truth of what we are, and I want to take that one earthly bond with me into whatever comes next.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. Sorry I didn’t trust you sooner. I wasted so much of our time being afraid of what you were.”

“Marco.” His name is barely a breath from my lips. “We would’ve been so happy. You, me, and our child. Maybe in the next lifetime, I’ll find you again. I love you.”

As I close my eyes one last time, bracing for agony, the door explodes inward.

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Chapter 36

Marco

My lungs burn with each labored breath as I climb the stairwell, pushing upward into the darkness.

"Marco, be careful." Even through the earpiece, Nico's worry is audible. "Don't take unnecessary risks."

I respond with a noncommittal grunt. I keep my weapon up as my senses stretch to their breaking points. My footsteps echo off the concrete. Somewhere above, through layers of abandoned floors, Lucia waits. Alive. She pulls at me like the beat of my heart, and hope surges, feeding my adrenaline.

A guard in tactical gear with no insignia stands just outside the stairwell. *Must be with the same contract soldiers we encountered at the Newark warehouse.* Bruno using these men instead of the Volkov soldiers raises questions about the state of things between him and the Bratva.

I don't wonder about that for long before lowering my gun, pulling my knife from the boot, and slitting the guard's throat. As his body collapses, I slip my arms under his shoulders, silently guiding him to the concrete. Dark blood pools beneath him as I return the knife to the sheath.

As soon as another guard steps out, I slam my elbow into his temple before he can call for help or raise his weapon. He crumples, his head cracking against the wall.

The third guard sees me coming. His eyes widen, and he gets off a single shot that screams past my ear. Then I'm on him, channeling all my

rage and fear into my fists, punching his face, his chest, every weak point. I attack him just like his current boss taught me to years ago.

When I rise from his limp body, warm, wet blood slicks my hands. My shoulder throbs where the bullet grazed me, but I don't feel it. There's no room for pain because every nerve is tuned to one frequency.

Lucia.

Nico's voice crackles in my ear, cutting through the roar of my pulse. "Two more on the third floor. Bruno's in the operating room. I believe she's alive, Marco."

The words hit like oxygen to a suffocating man. I'm moving before Nico finishes speaking, taking the stairs two at a time, my heart pounding a war-drum rhythm that syncs with the syllables of her name.

Lu-ci-a. Lu-ci-a.

The third-floor is dim, the fluorescent tubes overhead flickering in and out. The chemical tang of preservatives sting sharply.

Among the boot prints layered in the dust, a fresh set of small, bare footprints leads toward the far end of the hallway. My pulse jumps.

Lucia.

Bruno's voice carries toward me, calm and lecturing, stirring the old need for his approval.

"Kidney first. Then heart, liver, lungs, pancreas, intestines… Until there's nothing left to take."

I inhale deeply and drive my heel into the metal door, blasting it open with crushing force.

My eyes find Lucia first. She's strapped to the table, her gown torn, her face bruised, and her wrists raw and bleeding. Her chest heaves, and the moment her eyes—wide and fierce and burning with a fury that only the living possess—lock onto mine, my name rips from her throat.

"Marco!"

She's alive.

In an instant, I evaluate the situation. Two guards have their weapons raised. The machines hooked up to Lucia—one pulse monitor, one IV line—beep incessantly.

Bruno stands at the center, his right hand clutches a scalpel that glints in the light. In his left hand, he holds an instrument tray. His face is schooled into an expression that could either be pride or hunger. I recognize the cold calculation that's lived behind his eyes for as long as I've known him.

“Marco.” Bruno’s voice is almost gentle, almost warm. It’s the voice he used when I won, when I was useful, and when I was his. “I was wondering when you’d get here. You always did like to keep me waiting.”

My gun whips up. The guards focus their muzzles on me, tracking my every action. For a moment, no one moves. The air is thick with the weight of our history.

When I speak, my words are unrecognizable. “Let her go, and I’ll let you walk out of here. I’ll let you walk away with whatever you have left.”

Bruno’s laugh echoes off the tile walls, familiar in ways that make my skin crawl. It transports me back to gym locker rooms, to supplements and plates of food I never should have trusted, and to everything I lost.

“You think I’m going to walk out? After everything I’ve built? After all I made of you?” He gestures with the scalpel, flicking it toward Lucia in a way that triggers a flinch. “No, Marco. This ends here, one way or another.”

I take out the first guard with a shot to the chest. He falls as the blood spreads across his shirt.

Before the second can react, I pull my knife out of my boot and hurl it. The blade finds his throat, and his eyes widen with shock as he drops his gun. He claws at the wound, then crumples.

Bruno reacts quickly for a man his age. He undoes the straps holding Lucia down and drags her between us. The blade of the scalpel darts to her throat.

Her wide eyes fixate on my face.

“Put the gun down.” Bruno uses that same calm, reasonable voice that talked me through my first professional fight, my first loss, my first real taste of failure. The one I craved, right up until the moment he told me I was worthless. “You know how this ends.”

My hands are unwavering, but my voice isn’t. “If you hurt her, there’s nowhere in this world where you can hide from me. I’ll burn it all down, Bruno. I’ll obliterate every piece of your empire and every person who’s ever worked for you. I’ll leave you with nothing. Then I’ll tie you up and strip off a piece of your flesh hourly. I’ll keep you alive for days, until you’re writhing and crying and wishing you could undo the mistake of touching her.”

“You paint a scary picture, Son.” Bruno’s hand shifts on the scalpel, the blade trembling against Lucia’s skin before he stills it. The mask slides back on, and his voice curdles. “I saw the news, by the way, about your little

redemption show at the Athletic Commission. You think clearing your name changes what you are? I *made* you, Marco. A piece of paper doesn't erase that."

"But it undoes you."

His jaw tightens, and he presses the scalpel closer to Lucia's throat. The tip dimples the skin below her jaw. A bead of blood wells and rolls down her neck in a thin red line.

Lucia's fierce eyes lock on mine, and she shakes her head once. It's a tiny, desperate message to not do anything reckless. A whimper escapes through her clenched teeth that hollows out my chest.

"I'm offering you a choice, Marco. Drop the gun, or lose everything you love. What's it going to be?"

He's right. No matter how much punishment my imagination can conjure, I'll never live through losing Lucia.

My gun drops to the floor, the clatter echoing against the tile.

Bruno's smile widens. "Good boy. Now walk away—"

"No." I raise my hands in the air. "You always talk about bravery and how it takes a true man to see his actions through until the end. So, fight me. No weapons, no tricks. Just us, the way you taught me."

"You want to challenge me?" He stresses the words, his eyes alight with a cold assessment. "Careful. I ran rings around you in your prime. You're no longer the kickboxer you were, and even then, you couldn't touch me."

"You told me I wasn't good enough for you to bet everything on." I roll my shoulders and drop into the stance he drilled into me when I was young and desperate and willing to do anything to earn his approval. "You said you were the real deal, and I was just a failed legacy. Show me it was the truth, or admit that everything you carved into me was a lie."

Bruno's gaze roams across my face, my hands, and the shape of my stance. Then he sets the scalpel down on the tray with a soft click, shoves Lucia away from us both, and raises his hands.

"Marco." Lucia's voice doesn't waver, but I note the terror in her eyes. "You don't need to fight him—"

"Keep behind me, against the wall." I don't look at her. If I do, I'll lose the thread I've latched on to. "I have to do this."

I feel her nod, but my attention stays on Bruno. He observes our exchange like a man confirming a suspicion. "She's your weakness." He speaks the words aloud, though they seem meant for himself.

“Yes, she is. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” I shift my weight forward and bring my fists up, settling into the stance Bruno drilled into me before I was old enough to shave. “Now come on, old man. Enough talk.”

“You always did have to prove yourself.” He circles me quickly, light on his feet in a way that reminds me of how great a fighter he used to be. “That’s what made you so easy to break. You craved goodness so badly, needed validation like oxygen. You never understood that you were worth more to me broken. That shattered version was where your real value lay. Heck, you could’ve been my lieutenant in all of this.”

He rushes forward with a low kick to my left leg, followed by a jab that splits my lip.

Copper floods my mouth and dribbles down my chin.

“You picked me up when my father died.” I take another hit and feel my eye starting to swell. The skin pulls tight. “You made me believe I was worth something. You made me believe I was part of your family.”

“I also convinced you that you were most worthy when you won.” Bruno throws a combination of a hook and body shot.

I roll the hook but absorb the body shot against my ribs. The world goes white with pain. He needs to believe I’m weakening, so I let him commit too far forward.

“Being worth something and winning were never the same thing.”

I swing, and my fist connects with his jaw. The crunch of bone and the familiar shock of the impact travel up my arm.

He staggers, recovers, and comes back at me.

“I loved you.” My words splinter. “You were the closest thing I had to a father. And you drugged me, let them brand me a cheat, and burned my career to ash. Then you threw me away like I was nothing.”

“You *were* nothing.” Bruno’s face is bloody now, his movements slower, his breath coming in ragged pants. “You were always going to be nothing. You’re a fighter with no killer instinct and a man with no stomach for what it truly takes to win. I gave you everything…the training, the connections, the name you made for yourself…and you couldn’t even be grateful enough to become what I needed you to be.”

I drive my fist into his stomach, then into his chest. Bruno goes down and I follow, my weight pinning him to the blood-slick floor as the cold tile presses up against my knees.

“I *was* grateful.” My hands close around his throat, and I feel the pulse of him beneath my fingers. “I would have died for you. You destroyed me anyway. You convinced me I deserved to lose my whole identity.”

“Don’t you understand? You needed to be destroyed first to become what I needed you to be.” Bruno’s voice is raspy, and his wide eyes are fixed on my face. “I wanted to forge you into a sharper, more formidable weapon. One built to survive in this world and take what you need. You should be thanking me.”

My hands tighten around his neck. Bruno’s face purples, and his hands claw at my wrists. Somewhere behind me, Lucia calls my name, but she seems so far away. Her voice is barely a whisper against the roar of blood in my ears and Bruno’s voice, still talking, still explaining, still pretending he did any of this for anyone but himself.

“Marco.” Lucia’s voice—closer now—cuts through the noise. Not a plea. A warning.

Her voice loosens my grip for a fraction of a second, which is all the time Bruno needs. His hand shoots beneath his lab coat and comes out with a scalpel, slashing upward toward my throat. I jerk back, the blade kissing the air an inch from my jugular, and my gun skids from my waistband across the tile.

Bruno scrambles free, blood pouring from his mouth, and lunges, not for the exit but for the guard’s pistol on the floor. His fingers close around the grip. He raises it toward me, his arm shaking, his smile a red ruin.

“I made you,” he rasps as he levels the barrel at my chest. “And I can unmake you.”

The shot comes from behind me.

Not from Bruno’s pistol, but from mine. The one that skidded across the floor, already in Lucia’s hands.

Bruno’s body jerks. The weapon falls from his fingers. He peers down at the bloom of red spreading across his white coat, then past me to where Lucia stands barefoot on the cold tile in her hospital gown, grasping my weapon with both hands, her arms straight, her aim steady despite the tears streaming down her face.

“That’s for Matteo.” Her voice doesn’t waver.

Bruno sinks to his knees. His mouth opens and closes around words that never form. After he falls forward onto the concrete, the room goes still.

I approach Lucia and ease the gun from her fingers. She releases it without resistance, and her hands begin to shake the moment the metal leaves her grip. Fine tremors run through her whole body.

“I killed him.” She hiccups the words, gasping loudly as I gather her into an embrace.

“Just in time.” I bury my face in her hair. “You saved me.”

She releases a broken cry against my neck that might be a laugh or might be a sob. Perhaps both at once. She quakes against me, and as I hold her, the world narrows to her breathing and the beat of her heart against mine.

Nico’s voice crackles in my ear. “Dellinger’s heading for the east stairwell. Move now.”

I squeeze Lucia’s hand once, then pull her up and take off toward Mason. I spot him at the end of the corridor, shoving himself through a fire door. In seconds, I close the distance and drive him into the wall. His ribs crack under my forearm.

“You’re done, Mason.” I haul him up by his collar.

He laughs through bloody teeth. “I was trying to save her from you. Every move I made was to protect her from a man who’ll get her killed.”

“You handed her brother to Bruno. And then you handed *her* to Bruno.” My voice twists into something barely human. “You call that saving her?”

The defiance in his eyes melts away. “She deserved better than you.”

“Maybe. But she chose me.”

I release his collar and step back. Nico’s men close in, but Mason wrenches free, lunging for the stairwell. Nico’s gun fires once, and Mason tumbles down the stairs, landing at the bottom with empty eyes.

I don’t check if he’s alive or dead. He’ll receive justice in one form or another. My focus is on extracting a teary Lucia.

In the car, she curls against me, her blood on my hands and mine on her skin. But when I stare into her eyes, I discover relief rather than fear or worry.

“Marco.” She sounds dazed and reverent. “’I was pregnant the whole time. The test was wrong. Mason made sure it was wrong.”

The world stops. I stare at her hand against her stomach and then up at the tears streaming down her face. A bottomless fissure opens behind my ribs, radiating into my bones.

“We’re having a baby.” My voice comes out strange, rough, and broken. “We’re…”

“…having a baby.”

I blink back the sting behind my own eyes as I kiss her. We stay like this, pressed together in the back seat until the city lights blur past and the compound gates open and the life we thought we’d lost starts to feel possible again.

As we pull into the compound, Lucia’s hand finds mine. Our fingers twine together over her stomach.

Relief floods her voice. “We’re going to be okay.”

I look at her bloodied, exhausted body, and I believe her. I’m just grateful she’s alive.

For years, I carried Bruno’s voice in my head insisting I was nothing without him. The silence where that voice used to be is the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.

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Chapter 37

Lucia

The hours after we return blur into a procession of faces. Enzo grips Marco’s shoulder without a word. Nico arrives with his tablet and a flask. Izzy scans me from head to toe, then gives me a hug for the very first time, fiercely enough to steal my breath.

Sophia arrives with Jenna, baby Valentina tucked against her chest in a cotton wrap and sleeping through the chaos the way only a newborn can. Sophia cups my face with her free hand, whispers a blessing in Italian, and lowers herself into the chair beside my bed, Valentina rising and falling with each breath.

When Jenna sees me, she breaks, tears falling from her eyes in a torrent. I grab her hands, unprepared for how much her crying would undo my own composure. “I’m okay now, Jenna. Stop crying, or else I’ll cry, and then we’ll both be useless.”

After they all leave, I lie in the quiet and let the truth I’ve been avoiding seep in.

I killed Bruno Caruso. Hands trained to heal took another life.

I brace for the horror, the guilt, and the shattering of my oath. What comes instead is a calm certainty that I would do it again to protect the man beside me and the baby inside me.

The compound has gone unusually still. No footsteps, no murmured voices, and no engines at the gates. Just the wind and the quiet that comes when the world has finally stopped holding its breath.

I sit on the edge of the bed, snug in a blanket that smells faintly of cedar, watching Marco pace.

A medic has checked him out, taped his ribs, cleaned the split lip, and closed the fresh gash above his right eye with butterfly strips. It's a grim twin to the old scar that cuts through his left eyebrow.

The medic told him to take it easy, but he can't seem to stop pacing back and forth in the small room. His bare feet are silent on the worn boards, and his hands open and close at his sides.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor." My steady voice cuts through the silence.

He stops before pivoting to look at me. The bruise on his face is already darkening, spreading from his cheekbone to his jaw. The cut on his lip still oozes shiny blood in a thread of red that he keeps wiping away with the back of his hand. But the intensity of his eyes pains my chest.

"I almost lost you."

"But you didn't." I hold out my hand, palm up. "Come here. Please."

He strides over and sinks onto the bed beside me.

I immediately lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder as he twines his arm around me. For a long moment, we just breathe, and the rhythm of our lungs synchronizes in the dark.

"I need to tell you something." My words come out in the tone I use when I'm about to deliver urgent news to a patient. "About what Mason told me when I met him at the coffee shop."

Marco stiffens beside me. "You don't have to."

"I do." I pull back enough to meet his eyes. "He showed me evidence. I know now that the photos were doctored, but at the time, I didn't."

I stop to swallow against the tightness in my throat.

"He told me the Benedetti family was running the trafficking ring and that you'd been using me as a cover to make yourself look legitimate. He even said you were the one who killed Matteo."

The color drains from Marco's face so quickly that his bruises stand out like ink on paper. "Lucia, tell me you didn't trust him."

"I didn't believe him." I'm speaking quickly in my efforts to reach him before doubts creep in. "Not really. I've watched you build a life from nothing and seen you choose kindness when violence would be easier. But some part of me…some part that's been waiting for you to hurt me since the beginning…listened, wondered, and asked, 'What if.'"

His hands cup my face, gentle despite the blood still under his nails. “I would never.”

I lean into his touch, his palms warm against my cheeks. “I know that now. But I didn’t then. And that’s what I need you to understand. I was so scared of being hurt that I couldn’t let myself trust that the good in my life wouldn’t be snatched away.”

“Nothing’s taking me away.” His voice frays at the edges. “Lucia, you’re the only part of my life that’s ever made sense. You’re the only reason I know how to be anything other than what Bruno made me and the only reason I started believing I could be more.”

I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him, tasting salt from tears I didn’t know I was shedding. My heart pounds so viciously, the beat reaches my fingertips. When I pull back, his eyes are red and glistening in the dim light.

“I was going to tell you,” Marco falters, “about Mason. I wanted you to know he was working with Bruno. But I wanted to wait until after the wedding, and then I postponed it again, telling myself I was waiting until you were safe and mine. Then Bruno took you, and Mason died, and the truth felt like one more wound I couldn’t bring myself to inflict.”

He stops to take a shuddering breath. “I was scared you’d leave or look at me the way I’ve always looked at myself, like I’m just violence and danger.”

I cup his face, his stubble scratching my palms, his pulse beating beneath my fingers. “Never. You mean so much to me.”

“You don’t know everything about me, Lucia.” His voice, barely a whisper, is the confession of a boy who learned too young that love meant loss. “I’ve inflicted more pain than I can remember. Sometimes, I wonder whether I’m that much different from Bruno. Is this all just a looping ring of karma?”

I put my nose in the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent. “You aren’t what Bruno made you. There’s so much more to you than the armor everyone sees. I know who you really are when there’s nothing to perform and nothing to prove. You’re the man I married. The father of my child.”

His breath catches. “Our child.”

I move back, then look down at my stomach, where his hand rests. His fingers splay across the thin fabric of my shirt.

“I thought, when the test was negative, that I’d imagined it. I figured my body had tricked me because I’d been so sure and wanted it so badly. But it was real. She was real. She was here the whole time.”

“She?” Marco’s tone is wondering, almost reverent. “You think it’s a girl?”

My laugh comes out surprisingly bright. “I don’t know. I’ve just been calling her ‘she’ in my head ever since I found out. Sometimes, you just sense these things.”

He presses his lips to my stomach in a gesture that cracks my heart open.

When he looks up, awe’s etched in his features. “I’m going to be a father. A good one. The father I never had. I’ll give her every chance I never had, every joy I never thought I deserved. She will know she’s loved every single day.”

“Every single day,” I echo before kissing him. He smiles against my mouth.

Then he tugs me close and slowly undresses me. Leisurely lovemaking follows. Marco touches me like I’m precious, his hands tracing the still-flat expanse of my belly, the dip of my waist, and the scars I’ve collected in this life I never expected to live. His fingers find each one, map them, and kiss them as if he can undo every wound with his attention.

“I was so scared.” His lips trail down my throat, my collarbone, and the space between my breasts. “When I saw you on that table, I thought I was too late.”

I drag his head up to meet his eyes. “You weren’t. You always come for me. Every time I’ve needed you, and every time I’ve called, you’ve answered.”

He kisses me in a deep, searching way, and I open for him, letting him fill the spaces I’ve been keeping empty since I was old enough to know that love meant loss and that the people you trusted would always find a way to leave.

He steps back just enough for me to see his face. His gaze is raw and open like it was that night in the clinic when he told me about his father, about Bruno, and about the boy who spent his whole life trying to be worthy of love.

“Our child will never know what I went through. Never.”

My hand finds his and holds on tightly.

“After my father died, I spent days trying not to cry. I wanted to be strong enough and brave enough for someone to find worthy. When Bruno came along, he made me believe I could become a champion. Then he ruined me. I’m never going to let our child feel that kind of confusion or desperation.”

His voice breaks apart in his throat. “Thank you for giving me a chance to reinvent myself. Before you, I didn’t think I could have anything good, and now I believe I can be a husband and a father. I believe I can be more.”

“You always were.” I guide him into a soft but deep kiss. “You’re mine. Ours.”

He groans against my mouth, and then he’s inside me. I gasp, the world narrowing to the feel of him, to the way he says my name like a prayer he’s been waiting his whole life to speak.

After, he rolls onto his back, drawing me with him until I’m draped across his chest, but I shift lower, resting my ear against his stomach as he presses his palm against mine.

The house is still. Outside the window, the wind holds its breath, and I realize that for the first time in months, I’m not bracing for the next disaster.

“Let’s talk about that honeymoon.” His voice is sleep-thick. “I think we should go somewhere warm. To the coast, maybe. I want to watch you grow round with our child without having to worry about anyone trying to kill us.”

I laugh at his gentle honesty. “That’s…specific.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” he admits while kissing my hair, “ever since you told me about the baby. I’m letting myself picture the life we’re going to create and the future we’re going to have.”

The future.

The two words create a picture of our building, finally finished. I can imagine my clinic in soft blues and whites, with smiling patients walking in and out. His gym would be just above that, and knowing Marco, I can picture a mix of gray, black, and red colors. I can also envision teens running around in the ring as he barks orders. The real prize, though, will sit above all that.

A home for us, with a place for the baby. We’ll paint our nursery a soft yellow and the rest of the house a mix of chocolate brown and caramel. We’ll shape this life together, from scratch.

I curl closer to him and feel his heartbeat under my ear. “I want all of it.”

He squeezes me tighter, and I fall asleep tucked around him, his hand on my belly and his breath warm against my hair. The future stretches out before us, a hopeful horizon illuminated by our shared dreams.

When I jolt awake during the night, the compound is dark and silent, but Marco’s watching over me, his face soft in the dim light.

“Go back to sleep.” His hand finds mine under the blanket.

I close my eyes and dream of a little girl with her father’s eyes.

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Chapter 38

Marco

Ten weeks after I faced my past at the abandoned hospital, we're in Italy.

It took that long to get here. The whole *famiglia* went through a serious debrief. We all had to give police statements and root out Bruno's moles. Enzo's lawyers negotiated federal cooperation with impressive speed. And throughout all of it, Lucia slept, sometimes fourteen hours at a stretch, while her body recovered from the ordeal.

The Amalfi Coast villa rises out of the morning mist like a painting left to age in the sun.

White walls have been weathered by salt and time. Blue shutters fade to the color of a summer sky. A terrace hangs over the sea as if the architects wanted to lean out and touch the water.

I linger by the window, watching the sun bleed gold across the waves, and I smile. This is a life I never thought I'd have.

Lucia's still sleeping, her body curved around the pillow and her hand resting on the small but definite bulge of her belly. She's been extra tired these past weeks—both the pregnancy and the trauma finally catching up with her—and this trip is the first time either of us has stopped moving since the renovation began at the community center. There have been blueprints, contractors, and endless decisions about floor plans and equipment orders. For once, neither of us cares.

As she rests, I watch her breath stir the fine hairs at her temple and her fingers clutch the sheets. She's beautiful, made even more so by the way

morning light paints her skin in shades of amber and cream.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand with a photo from Enzo. Valentina is asleep on his chest, one tiny fist around his finger. A single line of text pops up below.

Your turn soon, fratello.

I smile and set the phone down.

Before we left for Amalfi, Enzo and I sat in his office, but not for a briefing or a mission or a threat assessment. We were just two men drinking a bottle of expensive whiskey and sharing the kind of conversation that only happens when the wars are over and the silence finally feels safe.

He told me the *famiglia* would always be my home and assured me that stepping away from enforcement was simply an evolution. He said the community center was exactly the kind of legacy the Benedetti name needed. And when I told him I was terrified of becoming a father, he laughed and said the terror never goes away, only changes shape.

I peer out at the sea again, watch the light shift across the water, and let myself believe he was right.

Lucia finds me on the terrace an hour later. She's drowning in one of my shirts that falls past her thighs. Her hair is loose around her face, and her feet are bare on the cold tile. In the morning light, she looks soft, sleepy, and youthful, and my heart turns over in my chest.

"You're up early." She settles beside me on the stone bench and leans into my side, her warmth seeping through my shirt. "Couldn't sleep?"

I loop an arm around her and bring her closer, the weight of her settling against me. "I wanted to watch the sun rise and remember the light, the sea, and the way you looked when I left you sleeping."

She tilts her face up to mine, her eyes catching the rose hue. "Anything else?"

"I wanted to savor this." I gesture at the sea stretching out below us, the sky still pink at the edges, and the life we've been given. "The moment everything changed. When I stopped running and let myself have joy."

She smiles, and I gather her into my lap until her thighs bracket my hips.

“Marco.” She breathes my name against my mouth like a prayer. “The sun’s coming up. Anyone who walks by will see us.”

“It’s a private home, so no one walks past here.” My hands settle on her hips to keep her in place. “And I’m not against showing off how much I love you or how much I want you. I’m never letting you go.”

She releases an utterly unguarded laugh. “That’s very possessive. Very mafia of you.”

“You’re just noticing?” I kiss her throat, reveling in the way her pulse jumps under my lips. “I’ve been possessive since the moment I first saw you in that ER, standing under fluorescent lights and looking at me like I was a problem to solve. I fell for you before I even knew what was happening.”

“I was mean to you.”

“You were magnificent.” I pull back to meet her eyes. “You still are, and more so every day.”

She kisses me with a deep hunger, and I lose myself in the sensation of her mouth on mine, the taste of her, and how she says my name like I matter.

We stay on the terrace, her sitting in my lap with her back against my chest. The sea breeze cools our skin while the morning sun climbs higher over the water, shifting it from pink to gold.

My hand rests on the curve of her belly, and beneath my palm, I sense a flutter, faint as a moth’s wing and gone before I’m sure it was real.

“Did you feel that?” She keeps her tone so soft, it’s barely audible.

“Yeah.” My throat closes around the word. “I did.”

We watch the light dance across the water in slow, rippling patterns, and neither of us says anything more. Nothing to say that the flutter hasn’t already said.

Instead, she makes a request. “Sing to me. I heard some sweet tunes coming from you this morning, before the sun came up.” She winks. “You thought I was asleep, didn’t you?”

I laugh, and an embarrassed heat creeps up my neck. “I’m not a singer, woman.”

“Please.” She stares at me while fluttering her lashes and biting her lower lip. “I want to hear you and remember this.”

I could never say no to that face.

I clear my throat and start singing an old Italian tune my father used to hum when he thought no one was listening. The words are rusty in my mouth, and the melody is imperfect, but she's regarding me like I'm precious. By the time I reach the last verse, her eyes are closed, her breathing is even, and her hand is curled over my heart like she's holding it steady.

We stay like this in the quiet of the Italian morning and fantasize about the life ahead of us. Our daughter will have my stubbornness and her mother's courage and will grow up knowing she's loved. Lucia's clinic will heal the wounds our world has inflicted, and my gym will teach children that there's another way to be strong and become a good adult.

When she wakes hours later, the light has moved. The evening sun warms the terrace, casting the space in deep gold. I'm still watching her.

"What?" she asks in her beautiful, sleep-rough state, her hair tangled across the pillow.

"Nothing." I pull her close and kiss her forehead. "I'm just thinking about the future."

She smiles against my chest, and the warmth of it spreads through my whole body. "A good future?"

"The best." I gaze out at the sea. The sun is setting over water that's been here since the planet coalesced and took form. The woman who saved me is by my side, carrying the child we're bringing into the world. "We'll have the best future I could have ever imagined. The one I never let myself want."

She falls asleep again, her body molding to mine. I stare at the stars as they come out one by one and ponder the life I've been given.

This is another chance for a family. A reason to be good.

When she stirs and reaches for me, I vow to always be here.

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Chapter 39

Lucia

Seven months later

The old brick building that houses the Santori Community Center sits proudly on the corner of a block that's been fighting gentrification for fifteen years. Just down the street, there's a Dominican hair salon next to a new coffee shop with a fourteen-dollar latte. The church on the south end has been around since 1897, but the mural on the east wall was painted by community kids in 2019.

I love how our center now appears as though it's always belonged here, as if the bones of this place were waiting for us to find them.

I stand at the entrance, nine months pregnant, one hand pressed to my lower back where the ache has become permanent as the other waves at the crowd gathered to celebrate. The afternoon sun catches the gold lettering of the new sign above the doors, which glitters against the brick.

Somewhere behind me, Marco, a man trained to handle violence yet utterly unsure what to do with impending fatherhood, hovers.

"You should be sitting down." His tone is low and urgent, the same one he uses when talking someone out of a reckless decision. "You've been on your feet for hours. Your doctor said you should rest."

"I'm fine." I lean into him and let him take some of my weight. He wraps his arm around my waist automatically. "I'm not missing the opening

of our center just because my husband is being overprotective. I didn't leave Ashford and convince Jenna to come with me just to observe from a window."

"Overprotective is a strong word. I'm showing an appropriate level of concern." He shifts, his hand traveling to the small of my back, his palm warm through the thin cotton of my dress. "There's a significant difference."

I laugh at his minor panic. "Is there? You've been hovering since we got here. Jenna asked if you'd been surgically attached."

"Lucia." When he catches my chin and tilts my face up to his, I glimpse the fear living underneath the calm. It's the same fear that's been in his eyes since we found out about Elena. "You're supposed to be resting. The baby could come any day. Any minute! And you're moving around!"

"The baby will come when she's ready." I pat his stubbled cheek. "And until then, I'm going to watch our dream open its doors and revel in having all those months of work finally pay off. All those nights when you came home with paint in your hair and sawdust on your clothes will finally feel worth it."

The place is exactly what we imagined, exactly what we built together. The gym on the second floor stretches out behind the glass doors, sunlight pouring through the tall windows.

Heavy bags hang from the ceiling in neat rows, their leather new and their chains gleaming. The ring sits in the middle, ropes still white and canvas unstained, ready for the first fighters to step inside, the first kids who'll learn that strength can protect instead of harm.

The clinic on the first floor is bright and welcoming. The walls are painted the pale green that Sophia insisted would be calming. The exam rooms are stocked, and the waiting area is filled with chairs that Jenna picked out because they reminded her of her grandmother's kitchen.

The staff weaves through the space with the particular grace of people who've been given a life they never thought they'd have. Many of them are Bruno's former trafficking victims who've found their way to us through channels I'm still learning to navigate, and they fill roles according to their capabilities.

The third floor is *our* space. We designed a state-of-the-art kitchen, a massive living area, and five bedrooms, each with their own en suite.

Jenna moved to Washington Heights to be closer. She runs the youth programs with a ferocity that startles everyone who doesn't know her. Pride swells in my chest.

"This is yours." Marco's lips hover close to my ear. "Every brick, every blueprint, every late night, all of it dreamed and fought for and brought to life by the woman standing beside me."

"*We* built this." I link our fingers together. "You and me. Together. I had the vision, but you…made it possible. You gave me the space, the resources, and everything else."

He responds by giving me a soft, slow kiss right in front of everyone. His hands frame my face, and his thumbs trace my cheekbones. Someone whistles, someone else cheers, and I'm laughing against his mouth.

Then, the first contraction hits.

It rolls through me like a wave, tugging at a deep, primal place. I gasp and pull back, my hands gripping his arms.

"Oh!" The sound comes out thin and surprised. "That's freaking perfect."

"Lucia?" Marco goes white beneath the tan he's picked up over the summer. The color drains so fast that his pulse visibly jumps in his throat. "Lucia, what's wrong? What's happening?"

"That's a contraction." I grip his hands and breathe through it the way they taught us in the classes. He attended them, too, and gave them the same focus he once gave to fights. "That's definitely a contraction. It's what we've been waiting for."

His panic and terror are immediate, absolute, and beautiful. "The car. Where are the keys? I need the care bag." He glances around wildly, scanning the crowd, cataloguing threats, and mapping exits. "Jenna! Jenna, she's having the baby! The baby is coming!"

Jenna appears at my side like she's been expecting this. She takes one look at the scene before her and takes charge.

"Breathe," she commands with a steady voice, her hands resting on my shoulders. "We've got time. The hospital is just ten minutes away. Maybe less if Marco drives the way he usually does."

"The hospital." Marco's voice is high and strange. He's confronted armed men with less fear. "We need to get to the hospital."

"Marco." I grab his face and force him to look at me. His jaw shakes with a fine tremor. "I need you to breathe with me. Can you do that?"

He stares at me, and then, slowly, he nods. His hands spread across the curve on my stomach, where I can feel our Elena kicking. Marco counts my breaths with me, pulling himself back from the edge.

“We’re going to have a baby.” Wonder and joy thread through every syllable. This is the voice of a man who’s spent his whole life taking things apart and is finally learning to build a life. “We’re actually going to have a baby.”

“We are.” I give him a soft, quick kiss, feeling the tension in his shoulders ease just slightly. “Now get me to the hospital. I refuse to have this baby right here while you panic.”

Elena Santori arrives four hours later, screaming her fury at the world, her fists clenched, her face red, and her lungs already proving she’s her father’s daughter. Her first cry fills the delivery room, cutting through the exhaustion and the pain and the particular chaos of new life. I’m crying with her before I even know I’m crying and reaching for her before I know my arms are empty.

Marco passes her to me, and I watch the man who’s been a weapon, a soldier, and a tool become a father. The same hands that have taken lives are impossibly gentle as he cradles her and then sets her into my arms with the careful reverence of a man holding his whole world.

“Elena,” he whispers, his voice cracking. His cheeks are wet with tears he doesn’t try to hide. “Elena Marie Santori.”

Hours later, after the nurses have finished their checks and the room has emptied of everyone but us, I shift Elena to the crook of my arm and stretch toward Marco with the other hand. He settles on the edge of the bed, careful not to crowd us, and leans in until his forehead rests against mine. Elena sleeps between us as the three of us breathe together in the quiet.

We’re a family. This future, held in the space between his heartbeat and hers, is one I never thought I’d have.

“She’s perfect.” Marco glances up at me with red eyes, his heart laid bare. “She’s absolutely perfect. She looks just like you.”

“She has your nose.” I trace her perfect features and brush her dark, wild hair that’s sticking up in all directions. Her tiny hand curls around my

finger with a grip that surprises me. “And your stubbornness. She couldn’t hold on for another day to start her life. Not one more hour.”

His excited laugh comes out free and loud. “She’s going to be trouble. The best kind.”

“Just like her mother.”

I hand Elena back to him and sink against the pillows, starting to succumb to fatigue. “I love you. I love her. And I love this life we’re building. Every broken piece of it.”

He crosses over to me, Elena cradled in his arms, and kisses me softly and sweetly. Our first kiss to mark this new family of three.

“I love you too,” he murmurs against my mouth. “Both of you. More than I ever thought I could love anything, and far beyond what I ever let myself want.”

I wake to find Marco still watching me. Elena sleeps on his chest, rising and falling with each of his breaths. The room is dark now, the windows showing only the distant lights of the city. The hospital is quiet at night. Marco’s hand rests on Elena’s back, steadying her, and his eyes possess a softness I’ve never seen before.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispers sharply. “Elena’s with me, and I’ll stay awake while I’m holding her. Rest. I’ll be here when you open your eyes.”

So I do, and the second I close my eyelids, sleep drags me under.

The last thought I carry into the dark isn’t one about fear. It’s about the quiet certainty that this life is ours to keep.

I dream of a little girl with her father’s nose and stubbornness, growing up in a world we’re striving to make better, one day at a time. I dream of the center opening its doors, of the kids who’ll come to learn and heal and grow. I dream of an older Marco teaching our daughter to throw a punch and when to walk away, his hands gentle on her shoulders and his voice patient and sure.

When I wake in the morning, I cradle my daughter and sit beside Marco as the sun rises over the city.

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Epilogue

Marco

One year later

The community center's back courtyard has been strung with lights and lined with folding tables. Elena's first birthday has brought the Benedetti *famiglia* together like nothing since our wedding, and I stand in the doorway, watching it all happen.

The padrino sits beside Rocco at one of the tables, a coffee in his hand, observing as Sophia guides Valentina across the paved courtyard. At twenty months, Valentina toddles on unsteady legs, her dark curls bouncing, a fistful of wildflowers she pulled from the planter box clutched in her hand. Sophia follows a few paces behind, one hand outstretched, close enough to catch Valentina but determined to let their daughter find her own footing.

Enzo throws back his head, cackling at something Rocco says. For a moment, the padrino I've known for years is replaced by a man just grateful to be alive.

Izzy has been in Atlantic City for the past year on an assignment for a casino project, but she's home now. The project's architect and her new boyfriend, Oliver, is at her side, looking slightly overwhelmed by the crowd. But I daresay, Oliver looks like a better fit for Izzy than the previous guy. Henry Romano was a disaster in every manner of the word, and I'm glad to see someone's helped Izzy move past that mistake.

Gio's here too, planted near the doors out of habit, though these days his security firm guards gala openings and ribbon cuttings instead of smugglers.

Jenna sits cross-legged on an outdoor rug nearby with Elena in her lap, doing her valiant best to contain a one-year-old who's recently discovered that legs are for standing. Elena pulls herself upright against Jenna's shoulder, takes three teetering steps toward Valentina, and sits down firmly on the concrete, prompting everyone to laughter.

Lucia sits near the courtyard wall, watching Elena with a wonder that hasn't dimmed, the same expression she wore the first time I placed our daughter in her arms.

"You're staring." She looks up as I approach, her knowing smile carrying that familiar warmth that broke me open and let the light in. "What are you thinking about? You've got that face."

I lower myself beside her on the rug and pull her against my side. "Just thinking about how I'm here seeing our daughter eat cake with her whole face, you're here growing our second child, and I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop."

She leans into me, her fingers lacing through mine. "It was a long road. A hard one."

"The longest and hardest." I kiss her hair. "Worth it, though. Every step."

Elena crawls toward us, pink frosting smeared across her cheeks as she spreads out her arms. She's tiny and perfect. So much of her mother lives in her, in the set of her mouth, in how she looks at the world like it's full of wonder.

"Papa." She pats my cheek with sticky fingers, and my heart breaks open the way it does every time she says it. "Papa."

"That's right." I scoop her into my lap. "I'm Papa. And you're my whole world. You and Mama."

Enzo wanders over, Valentina balanced on his hip, and nods at the building behind us. "Marco, I'd like to hear how the programs are going. Tell me how I can help you do more."

I balance Elena on my hip, and her fist grips my shirt. "Sixty-three kids enrolled in the gym programs in the first quarter. The clinic sees hundreds of regular patients now. And we have three youth kickboxing championships happening in four months."

A smile spreads across Enzo's face. "What comes next?"

"We should expand." I shrug. "More kids out there deserve help and somewhere to go. They need someone to tell them they matter before the

world tells them they don't."

When Enzo drifts off to rejoin Sophia, Lucia regards me with a hint of relief in her eyes. "I'm proud of you. You know that, right? Of the man you've become, the father you are, and the husband you never thought you could be."

I kiss her, and Elena squirms between us, demanding inclusion. Her little hands push at our faces with the particular tyranny of a child who's never had any doubt about her place in the world.

We chuckle and pull her between us. For a moment, the universe is exactly what it should be.

As the sun sets, the party winds down. Light shifts from gold to rose to the deep blue of evening. Guests thin slowly, the way good celebrations conclude with lingering handshakes, one last glass, and children scooped onto shoulders with sleepy protests until the building eases into the quiet that comes after a day well-lived.

I stand at the window, watching the last light fade over the rooftops. The city skyline catches the final glow of the day. This is our home now, a place we constructed for ourselves in a building that we own.

The third floor seems perfect. It has proper bedrooms with attached bathrooms that hold all of my woman's vanities and a kitchen alcove that Lucia complains I splurged too much on, with a little false cabinet where I hide my whiskey.

A small garden window overlooks the east side, with chairs set in the corners. Lucia and Jenna sit out there until noon every weekend.

Lucia comes up behind me, her arms snaking around my waist and her cheek pressing into my back.

"Elena's asleep." Her voice is soft, tired, and content. "I washed the frosting off her cheeks, and she went down instantly, still kicking her feet. Dreaming, I think. Good dreams."

I pivot, tug her close, and feel the weight of her against me. "I have a gift for you. I've been waiting for the right time to give it to you."

I reach into my pocket and pull out a small velvet box. She looks at it, then at me, her eyes curious and her brow furrowing.

“Marco, don’t tell me that’s another ring.”

“It’s not a ring.” I open the box to reveal the gold medal inside, inscribed with the name “Matteo Romano” and the date of his death. “The police department finished their investigation, and the feds have wrapped up too. This is Matteo’s. They wanted to honor him for his work and for the lives he saved.”

She stares at the medal, and for a heartbeat, she’s not breathing. She touches the inscription with trembling fingertips, as if it might vanish.

“He’s being recognized.” The words seem to catch in her throat. “Matteo’s going to be recognized. After all we went through… After all this time…”

“His bravery.” I hug her as she starts to sniffle. “His sacrifice. The avalanche he started brought down the trafficking ring and rescued those victims. I have a lot to thank him for too. He’s the reason we found each other.”

She pulls back, nods, and accepts the medal, clutching it in her hands. As she does, I see the girl who lost her brother and spent two years seeking justice. She never stopped fighting for the truth, even when everyone told her to let it go. It’s hard to still see her as the same woman who stitched me up in the ER. Now I just see the woman who chose me when she had every reason to run.

Her voice splinters. “Matteo would have loved you. He would have been so happy for us, for Elena, and for everything we’ve built.”

“I hope so.” I pull her close and hold her while she cries. Her tears drip onto my shirt, but her hand continues clutching the medal. “I hope he’d see me as a man worthy of his amazing sister.”

She looks up at me, her eyes wet and her heart visible. “You’re worthy of everything. Always have been. You just needed someone to show you.”

We kiss and head to bed, and I can’t help but marvel at this new life I have.

In our bedroom, I watch the moonlight waltz across the ceiling and listen to the quiet of the living quarters. A stillness creeps in, one that comes when the world has stopped taking.

“What are you thinking about?” Lucia’s voice is sleepy and content. She’s a woman who’s finally let herself rest.

“That I never thought I’d have this.” I reach for her, pull her closer, and feel her heat against my side. “A wife. A daughter. A son on the way. A life

that’s mine. A life I chose.”

She offers a soft, warm smile as she looks back at me. “And now?”

“Now I think maybe I was always meant to.” I kiss her forehead, her nose, and her lips. “Maybe all the pain, all the loss, and all the things that broke me were leading here to you and to this life.”

She cuddles against me, her head on my chest, her hand over my heart, and her hair spread across my skin. “Do you regret any of the choices that brought you here?”

I think about Bruno and all the years I spent believing I was nothing. Back then, I felt undeserving, like I was only good for violence. I recall the fights, the blood, and the things I did to survive.

Now, I don’t even have to think about the answer.

“Not one.” I press a kiss to her hair and feel her go slack against my chest as sleep claims her. “Because all those choices led me here. To you and to Elena. To everything I didn’t know I was allowed to want.”

She slips into sleep in minutes, with her hand still pressed to my heart. I stay awake, watching the moonlight shift across the ceiling, listening to my family breathe, and ponder the life I’ve been given.

A second chance. A family. A reason to be good.

I hold my family closer and let myself believe.

Isabella

Seven months ago

Dinner’s long over when Enzo finds me on the terrace.

I’m leaning against the stone balustrade with the compound lights spread out below, letting the night air do what two glasses of wine couldn’t. Inside, I can hear the others, Sophia’s laugh, Marco saying something low that makes Lucia groan. Seven months out from the warehouse and the wedding and all that blood, and they’ve gone and built a life out of the wreckage.

Gio’s in there too, holding court by the fireplace, swearing his security firm does nothing these days but babysit art galas. Good for all of them. Truly. But that life isn’t mine.

“Atlantic City.” Enzo hands me another glass of wine. “The casino project needs an architect. Oliver Bellamy. Best in the country. Designed security for banks, embassies, two federal buildings I’m not supposed to know about.” He pauses. “He owes me his life, and he still refused.”

“Then he’s either principled or stupid.”

“Principled. He wants to stay clean, legitimate, and untouchable by association. I respect that.” Enzo’s eyes stay on mine. “But I need him, and I need you to convince him that working for us won’t cost him the life he’s built.”

I know what “convince” means when Enzo has that look in his eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“A man determined to stay clean is a man running from something dirty.” He sips from his glass. “Nico hasn’t found any dirt yet. So get close. Find out what he’s protecting.”

The End

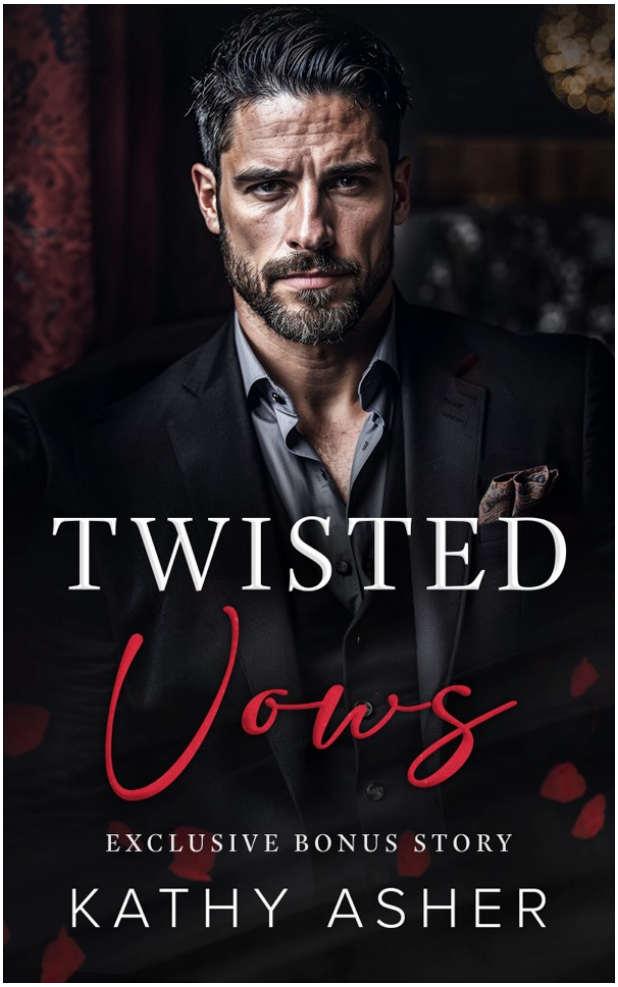
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Acknowledgments

To Rose Harbor Publishing, thank you for believing in this story and giving it a home. The care and dedication that went into bringing this book to life humbles me, and I’m grateful for every step of this journey.

To my spouse and kids, you are my greatest joy and my loudest cheerleaders. You held everything together on the days I disappeared into this world, and this book exists because you made space for it.

To my readers, your messages, your enthusiasm, and your willingness to fall in love with these characters alongside me has meant everything. Thank you for trusting me with your time and your hearts.

With gratitude,

Kathy

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About Kathy Asher

Kathy Asher is a steamy romance author who loves reading and writing heart wrenching steamy romance stories. Kathy's love for traveling has led her to explore and observe love and romance across the world.

In her writings, she brings to life strong and passionate characters from various walks of life. Her stories are a journey into the depths of human emotions, offering a glimpse into the fiery world of desire and connection.

She writes stories that pull the readers like none other whether it is into the world of mafia romance or steamy age-gap romance or small-town billionaires.

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