
Masked
DON
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K. C. CROWNE

MASKED DON

A DARK MAFIA, SECRET BABY ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

**My ex called me fat in front of a ballroom full of masked killers.
One of the killers leaned in.**

"Which part of him should I remove first?"

Silver at his temples.
Blood-red ink across his knuckles.

One threat, and my ex's smirk dies.

Then he pulls me against him.

"Who are you?" I whisper.
"Smile, dolcezza. Let the bastard watch what he lost."

I should go home.
Instead, I follow him upstairs, his hand at my spine, his commands in my ear.
That night, I let the stranger beneath the mask wreck me.

At dawn, I learn his name, and every terrible story attached to it.
So I vanish.

Five years later, I'm facing an eviction notice and one way out:
a live-in assistant job for an employer no one will name.

The mansion doors open.

Enzo Accardi.
Billionaire. Crime lord. Killer.

One look at the little boy holding my hand, and Enzo goes still.

"You hid my son from me, dolcezza. Now someone is coming for you both."

His smile turns lethal. ***"This time, I won't ask which part to remove first."***

What to expect:

Masquerade Ball × Mafia Don × One Night Stand With the Masked Man × Secret Baby × Age Gap (20 Years) × Boss/Assistant × Forced Proximity × Touch Her and Die × Possessive Alpha × Curvy Heroine × Single Mom × Silver Fox × Rival Mafia Family × Protective Daddy × Emotional Angst

Standalone × No Cheating × No Cliffhanger × HEA Guaranteed

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CHAPTER 1

STEVIE

Rule one at the Velvet Room: masks stay on.

Rule two: don’t stare at the guns.

Every man in this room has killed someone or paid someone to.

The Velvet Room is neutral ground, the only place in the city where every family can drink under one roof without anyone bleeding on the carpet. The bleeding happens after, in the parking lot, in the river, in the weeks that follow. Nobody’s turf. Nobody’s staff. Nobody’s fault when someone doesn’t make it home.

I keep telling myself it’s one night. Then I’m out. The Velvet Room pays insanely well, enough for a deposit on a new apartment and a chance to start over.

That’s the only reason I’m here.

Tonight, the Velvet Room doesn’t look like a nightclub.

It looks like a sin the rich paid someone to decorate. Black orchids spill from silver urns like flowers left on a grave. Candlelight drips gold across a sea of masks. Feathers. Lacquer. Bone-white porcelain.

A man in a crow mask catches my eye as I pass and smiles like he already knows what I’d cost. The chill goes all the way down my spine and stays there.

Rule three: first names only, and not even real ones. The agency put me down as Bunny, to match the white rabbit mask I would never in a million years have picked for myself.

You don’t see faces. You don’t hear names. You forget everything the second you walk out the door.

Easy.

Except I never forget anything.

Fifteen years of foster homes taught me to read a room before I was old enough to know that’s what I was doing. Waitressing just pays me for it. I can already tell you which man tips and which one grabs.

I can also tell which guest has a gun under his jacket by the way he sits.

Tonight, it’s most of them.

And according to the gold card on every table, tonight is the Black Orchid Auction. Once a year, the families sell what they’re owed. Markers. Favors. Debts from men who can’t pay them back.

I pass a mirrored pillar and catch myself in it.

Black silk. Bare shoulders. Curves the dress has given up trying to contain.

I spent years treating my body like a problem I had to apologize for.

The woman in that mirror isn’t a problem.

She’s a warning.

I lift my chin and keep walking.

I’m loading my tray at the service bar when it starts.

Not a look. A warmth. It slides down the back of my neck and settles low in my belly, slow and deliberate, like a hand that knows exactly where it’s going.

My skin goes tight under the silk. My breath catches for no reason at all. Somewhere under this dress, my body wakes up and starts paying attention

before I have any idea to what.

I know the greasy once-over men in this room give the help.

This isn’t that.

This feels like being hunted, and liking it.

My first instinct is to shrink. Make myself smaller.

I straighten instead, and let whoever it is look.

I glance over my shoulder. In a shadowed alcove near the stage, a man sits alone in a matte-black wolf mask, one arm stretched along the back of the booth. He doesn’t look away when I catch him.

He doesn’t smile, either.

Even sitting, he’s the biggest thing in the room.

Broad shoulders under a black suit that was made for him and nobody else.

Silver at his temples, catching the candlelight, the rest of his hair still dark as sin.

One big hand wrapped around a glass he isn’t drinking.

He just sits there and lets the whole party happen around him, like it’s his and he’s allowing it.

Holy shit. That man should come with a waiver, and I’d sign it without reading a word.

Between the mask and the shadows, I can barely make him out, and every part of me that’s supposed to be working has stopped to stare anyway.

I don’t know his name. In my head, he’s already the Big Bad.

Older. Not by a little.

I have always had a thing for older men. The quiet ones. The ones who don’t need to raise their voice to end a conversation. I have never once had the nerve to do anything about it.

I turn away first, because one of us has to. My pulse is slamming like it wants out.

Get a grip, Stevie. He’s a guest. He’s a stranger. He’s probably somebody’s very rich, very dangerous husband.

That’s when I see Kelsey, and the room narrows to one pillar and one scared kid.

She’s nineteen. A first timer. Right now she’s backed against a pillar with her tray clutched to her chest like a shield, and an older man in a gilded lion mask is leaning over her, one hand planted beside her head.

She’s smiling the way you smile when you’re scared it’ll get worse if you stop.

I know that smile.

I’m moving before I’ve decided to.

“Sir.” I slide in at the lion’s elbow, bright and professional, and hold out a fresh flute. “Your glass is empty. That’s a crime in this room.”

He turns, irritated. Then interested.

Kelsey slips out from under his arm and vanishes into the crowd.

The lion doesn’t step back. He just turns that slow, wet smile on me instead.

His eyes start at my shoes and climb, taking their time, stopping at every place a gentleman wouldn’t.

“Well,” he says. “They’re hiding the good ones behind the coat check these days.”

My skin tries to crawl off my body.

He leans in, all bourbon and cigars. “Tell me, little rabbit. Do you bite? Or do you just hop when you’re told?” A beat. “Come upstairs with me. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’m here to pour champagne, sir. I’m not on the menu.”

“Everyone’s on the menu for the right price.” He peels ten crisp hundreds off a fold of cash and tucks them under the rim of my tray. “Think about it.”

My stomach turns over. My fingers tighten on the tray until the edge bites into my palm, because the alternative is shoving the whole thing into his goddamn face.

Over the lion’s shoulder, the Big Bad hasn’t moved. Not an inch. But his glass has gone still on the table, and every ounce of that dark, unhurried attention is locked on the lion’s hand on my tray, the way a man watches something he’s already decided to break.

Two guests standing between us find a reason to step aside.

I look at the money.

A thousand dollars is two months of groceries. Half a deposit.

I fold the bills once and tuck them into his breast pocket.

“Keep it,” I say. “I don’t take tips for things I’m not selling.”

I flick my eyes toward the nearest bouncer. The lion follows my glance, recalculates, and wanders off muttering.

When I look back at the alcove, the Big Bad is exactly where he was. One arm along the booth. Glass in his hand.

But his head has turned, just slightly, to follow me, and the candlelight catches the glint of his eyes through the mask. Even from here, I can feel the difference. Not like I’m a body in a dress. Like I’m a problem he didn’t expect, and he’s deciding whether he likes it.

Kelsey catches my eye from across the room and mouths *thank you*. I point at the bar. *Stay near the bouncers.* She nods.

I can still feel him. The whole way across the floor, his eyes stay on me, steady as a hand on the back of my neck. I keep my tray level and my face bored, like a woman who hasn’t noticed a thing.

I’ve noticed everything.

I’m halfway back to the service bar when Marco, the floor captain, catches my arm. He’s sweating through his collar, which is new. Marco doesn’t sweat for senators.

Marco once watched a congressman get slapped with a cocktail napkin by his own wife and didn’t even blink.

“Booth one,” he says.

“I’m on the floor.”

“You’re on booth one. He asked for you.” Marco tips his head toward the alcove, toward the Big Bad, without looking at him. Like looking would cost extra.

“He asked for me?”

“He asked for the rabbit.” Marco presses a heavy crystal tumbler into my hand. Two fingers of something amber and old. “Macallan. Neat. Don’t spill it, don’t chat, don’t stare. And for the love of God, Bunny, don’t do the thing with your mouth.”

“What thing?”

“The thing you just did to that lion.”

So I wasn’t imagining it.

He wasn’t glancing. He was watching. Since the service bar. Through the lion. Through every step I’ve taken since.

I give Marco a calm, professional nod and decide not to examine how much I like being watched.

Up close, he’s worse. Darker. Bigger. Stiller. Even the candlelight won’t go near him.

My body clocks how close he is before my brain can file a complaint. My skin goes tight and hot under the silk. My breath goes shallow, and I’m suddenly, painfully aware of exactly how thin this dress is.

This is fine. I’m fine.

I set the glass in front of him. “Your Macallan, sir.”

He doesn’t touch it. There’s a full glass already sitting at his elbow, untouched too.

“You already have one,” I point out.

“I do.”

“So the second one is…?”

“An opportunity.” His eyes travel up the length of me, taking their time, like he’s got every right to. “I don’t miss those.”

His voice is low and unhurried, with an Italian accent folded into the edges of it like a blade folded into a napkin. It slides down my spine and settles somewhere it has no business settling.

I should say thank you, sir, and walk away. That’s the rule.

“Expensive opportunity,” I say instead.

“I’ve paid more for less.” He gestures to the seat across from him. “Join me.”

“Staff doesn’t sit with guests.” A beat. “Sir.”

Something shifts behind the mask. His fingers go still on the glass, and his eyes darken, slow, like I just handed him something he intends to keep.

“Careful. I could get used to hearing that from you.”

My cheeks burn. I don’t say it again.

Not yet.

“Then don’t think of me as a guest,” he says.

“What should I think of you as?”

“Curious.” His mouth curves, there and gone. “About you. I don’t get curious often.”

“And if I say no to your offer?”

“Then you can go back to pretending you didn’t notice me watching you.”

Heat floods my face, then drops lower. He saw me see him.

I could say no. I’m almost sure he’d let me.

“One drink.” I sit, but on the very edge of the seat, spine straight, so we both know I can leave whenever I like. “And not because you asked. Because I’m curious too.”

His head tilts, a fraction. Not triumph. Interest, sharp and hungry, like he noticed exactly how far I didn’t lean back.

Dark hair, thick, gone silver at the temples in a way that would look distinguished on a banker and looks dangerous on him.

Ink on his neck, too. Black script curls up out of his collar and along the side of his throat, right over his pulse, like someone wrote a warning there.

I want to know what it says.

Big hands, with blood-red ink across the knuckles, old script too dark to read in this light, and one old gold ring on his little finger.

And a mouth below the edge of the mask that looks like it hasn’t smiled in a while.

My body has opinions about all of it.

Loud ones.

“He offered you a thousand dollars,” he says.

“Yes.”

“And you gave it back.”

“I did. It wasn’t hard.”

The corner of his mouth moves before he can stop it. Gone just as fast.

“Tell me why.”

I think about lying. Then I think about how he watched me do it, and it seems pointless.

“Because the money wasn’t for pouring champagne,” I say. “And if I take it, then he gets to believe I was for sale. I’m not giving that man a story where he wins.”

“Most people in this room,” he says, “would have kept the thousand.”

“Most people in this room already have a price tag,” I say. “They just had it tailored.”

That gets me something. A low sound in his chest, almost a laugh, rough and warm. It rolls through me and lands right between my thighs.

“Bunny,” he says, tasting it. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“The agency picked it.”

“The agency was wrong. A rabbit runs.” He considers me for a moment. “*Bella*. That suits you better.”

He finally picks up one of the glasses, turns it in his fingers, doesn’t drink. “You didn’t run from the lion.”

“That particular lion wasn’t worth running from.”

“And the wolf.”

He sets the glass down and leans forward, out of the shadows, and the booth gets smaller. Close enough now that I catch it. Black pepper and smoked amber, and under it something darker, like rain hitting hot stone. My stomach tightens. I want to lean in and breathe it properly.

His eyes take their time. My mouth. My throat. The pulse jumping at the base of it.

My mouth goes dry.

“I haven’t decided about wolves,” I say. It comes out lower than I meant it to.

“You have.” His gaze drops to where my pulse is giving me away. “You just haven’t said it out loud.”

Well, then.

I am working. I am in a borrowed dress in a room full of criminals, and I have a deposit to scrape together, and a man with no name is flirting with me like I’m the only thing in this room worth his time.

And I’m flirting back.

“What happens to the women who stare back at you?”

“I’ll let you know. You’re the first in a long time.”

The first. It hits low and sweet, and for a second I forget how to breathe. Then my brain catches up. For all I know, he says that to a different woman every night and takes her home after. Lord knows he could.

My pulse doesn’t care. It’s already doing something reckless.

“Lucky me.” My eyes drop to his mouth before I can stop them. “It’s the best view in the room.”

I said it. I meant it. I’m not taking it back.

The silence stretches. I let it.

His fingers flatten on the table. Very carefully. Like he doesn’t trust his hands.

“Careful, *dolcezza*,” he says, and his voice has dropped half an octave. “I’m old enough to know what to do with a compliment like that.”

Heat goes up my throat. Down, too.

“How old is that?”

“Old enough to know exactly what I want.” His eyes drop to my mouth, and stay there long enough that I feel it like a thumb across my lower lip. Then back up. “And patient enough to take my time with it.”

Take my time. Three words, and my whole body hears them as a promise. Heat pools low and heavy, my pulse throbs somewhere it has no business throbbing in public. I don't look away.

I should get up. I should get up right now.

I don't move.

"You're staring," he says. "Tell me what you see."

Caught. Again. Heat climbs my throat, and for one second the honest answer is *a mouth I'd very much like to know better*. I swallow it and give him the smart answer instead.

"You picked the one seat that sees the whole room," I say. "You just like knowing you could be the worst thing to happen to any of them."

His thumb stops on the rim of his glass. Just for a second.

There. Got him.

"They all learn it eventually," he says. "You're quicker than most. You already have."

Quicker than most. It shouldn't land the way it does. It's barely a compliment, three words from a stranger in a mask, but warmth spreads through my chest and keeps going, slow and dangerous. Men have praised my body plenty. Nobody has ever praised my mind and made it sound like foreplay.

I like it. I'm not sure I like how much.

"A woman who hands back a thousand dollars doesn't carry trays for men like these for fun." He doesn't ask. He waits. "So tell me why you're here."

Foster care taught me that whatever you hand a stranger, they keep. I keep my heart in my back pocket and my plans to myself.

So I have no idea why the truth climbs up my throat for him.

"A deposit," I hear myself say. "A door with a lock nobody else has a key to."

He goes very still. “Someone taught you to count locks.”

“Not after tonight,” I say.

He studies me like he’s reading the fine print of that sentence. Then he nods once, the way a man makes a note of something he plans to deal with later.

Then I feel it. A prickle at the back of my neck, the kind you get when someone is reading over your shoulder.

I turn.

Luca Santini.

The warmth the Big Bad put in me cools all at once. My jaw tightens.

No mask. Luca has never once followed a rule he could break in public.

He pauses in the doorway and lets the room look at him.

I was eighteen when he gave me my first front door. It took me two years to notice it only locked from the outside, and that he kept the only key.

He liked to leave marks where my sleeves would cover them. He called it being careful with me.

Six months free, and my arm still remembers the shape of his fingers.

When I turn back, the Big Bad hasn’t so much as glanced at the doors.

He’s watching me. Only me.

My fingers, gone white around the edge of the table. The breath I can’t quite get all the way down.

“You know him,” he says quietly.

“Just someone I used to know.”

He studies my face for a long moment, and I have the strangest feeling he can read everything I just didn’t say.

“He came in without a mask,” he says.

“He wants everyone to know who he is.”

“I know who he is.” Something in the way he says it, flat and quiet, puts ice in my stomach. “What I don’t know yet is what he did to put that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The one that makes me want to break something.”

I should be scared of a stranger who says a sentence like that. I am, a little. Mostly I’m warm. Mostly I’m staring at his mouth, wondering what it would feel like to be wanted that much by someone who could actually back it up.

No man has ever wanted to break something for me.

“I should get back to work.” I slide out of the booth and pick up my empty tray. My voice comes out thinner than I want it to. “Enjoy your Macallans, sir.”

“*Bella*.”

I stop.

“If anyone in this room lays a finger on you tonight,” he says quietly, “point.”

A beat.

“That’s all you’ll have to do.”

A shiver goes through me, and it isn’t fear. It starts at the back of my neck and rolls all the way down, hot and slow, until it settles low in my belly. My nipples tighten under the silk. A man just offered to hurt someone for me, and my body heard it as a love letter.

It should sound like a joke. It doesn’t. It sounds like a promise, and the worst part is how much I want him to keep it.

I don’t answer. I can’t. I walk away with my heart going like I’ve just run up four flights of stairs, and I don’t look back, because if I look back, I might go back.

I make it to the service bar.

Luca’s green eyes find me across the room. He doesn’t come over. He just raises his drink to me, smiling.

My left arm goes cold, just above the elbow. The same spot.

Six months ago, he found the rental listing on my phone. Read it all the way through, then handed it back. “Cute. You know what happens to girls like you who leave men like me? Nothing. Nobody even notices they’re gone.”

I left at four that morning. Three flights of stairs in my socks.

Kelsey slides in beside me at the bar, right where I told her to be. She follows my gaze to Luca, then looks back at me, and her hand finds mine below the edge of the bar and squeezes, hard.

“I’ve got a full tray and terrible aim. Just saying.”

Despite everything, I almost laugh. “Save it.”

When I look back, Luca is whispering in one of his guys’ ears. Then he glances at the stage and smiles. He used to wear that smile right before he made me pay for something.

The host taps the mic on the little stage. “Ladies and gentlemen of the Velvet Room, welcome to the Black Orchid. As tradition demands, before the first lot, the floor is open for a toast…”

He doesn’t finish.

Luca is already climbing the steps.

Shit.

“I’ve gotta say, the Velvet Room really upped the talent this year.” He lets his gaze linger on every server he can find. Then it lands on me. “Mostly.”

The whole room turns to look.

“So here’s to the help.” He tips his glass at me. “Especially the little bunny over there. Brave girl, wearing that dress tonight. I know I couldn’t have done it.” He gives the room a sympathetic little wince. “I’m not sure the dress can, either.”

The room laughs.

Heat crawls up my throat. My fingers tighten on the edge of the bar. Beside me, Kelsey’s face crumples behind her butterfly mask, and somehow that’s what makes my eyes sting.

Not everyone laughs.

If I open my mouth, I lose tonight’s pay. Maybe every job after it.

Kelsey’s crumpled face is right beside me.

I don’t look at the alcove. Not once. I don’t need a man to handle this for me.

So I step forward.

And I project all the way to the stage.

“Funny, Luca. You had two whole years with all of this,” I say, and run one hand down my own curves, slow, so every person in the room watches it go, “and you never once figured out what to do with it.”

The laughter changes shape. It swings, finds a new target, and sticks.

“Don’t blame the dress, sweetheart. Blame the man who couldn’t fill it.”

Someone near the front chokes on a champagne flute. Somebody else howls.

That one’s for every girl who was ever called “too much” by a man who was never enough.

Luca’s face goes red, then white.

My heart is beating so hard I’m sure he can see it in my throat.

I hold his stare anyway.

Then I feel it. That slow heat at the back of my neck, the one from the service bar. Only now it’s closer.

Luca leans into the mic, face twisted, and spits it at me in front of everyone. “You mouthy, fat little bi…”

“Enough.”

The Big Bad’s voice comes from right behind my left shoulder, deep and unhurried.

The room doesn’t go quiet. It goes graveyard quiet.

Then, softer, almost pleasant:

“Finish that word, Santini, and they’ll bury you with it in your mouth.”

Luca’s eyes shift past me, and for the first time in my life, I watch Luca Santini go pale.

The Big Bad comes to stand beside me.

Beside me.

Not in front.

Under the stage lights, he’s twice the size he was in the shadows. Black suit cut like armor. Stillness so complete it feels like a threat all by itself.

He’s close enough that heat comes off him in waves, and that dark pepper-and-amber scent hits me like a first sip of something I know I’ll regret.

My knees go weak. Not from fear.

I can’t stop looking at him. Two hundred people in this room, and my eyes keep sliding back to the line of his jaw, the hand at his side, and all I can think about is what that hand would feel like spread across the small of my back with nobody watching.

Around us, people are moving. Not toward the stage. Away from it. A woman in peacock feathers quietly sets down her glass.

Luca laughs. It comes out a half step too high, and the mic catches the crack in it.

“Come on,” he says. “It’s a toast. Everybody bleeds a little on toast night. That’s tradition.”

“She isn’t on the block, Santini. And if she were, you couldn’t afford her.”

He said it to Luca, but it lands on me. Low and hot and possessive, right between my hips. Two hundred people just heard a man decide I was priceless, and my body took it personally.

The only thing Luca Santini fears more than the man in front of him is being seen as the coward that he is.

“Relax.” He smooths his tie, smile back in place like nothing happened. “I’m saving you money.” He lifts his glass to the room. “Opening bid on the rabbit. One dollar.” He lets it hang. “Gentlemen, please. I’ve already sampled the merchandise. Trust me, nobody in here wants my sloppy seconds.”

Nobody laughs.

Not one person.

The whole room suddenly finds its drinks fascinating.

Beside me, his jaw clenches.

I feel the change in him before I see it. The air around him goes cold and still, the way a room does in the second after a gun clears its holster. Whatever was patient and amused in that booth is gone. What’s left is the thing this whole room has been afraid of all night.

He doesn’t move closer to the stage. He doesn’t have to. When he speaks, his voice is quieter than before, and it carries to the back wall.

“Speak about what’s mine like that again, Santini,” he says, almost gently, “and I’ll cut out your tongue.”

Nobody breathes.

My brain is very clear about this man. *Killer. Trouble. Run.*

My body heard *cut out your tongue* and went hot all the way down. I am in so much trouble.

Somewhere to my right, a man murmurs, “Fifteen years, I’ve never seen him get his own hands dirty.”

And something in my head clicks into place, like a lock I didn’t know I was trying to pick.

Not a guest. Not some rich stranger with a thing for waitresses who talk back.

Behind me, the woman in peacock feathers breathes it so softly it sounds like a prayer. “He’s the Don.”

My stomach drops straight through the marble.

Of course. Of course the first man I’ve flirted with in six months comes with a title and a body count.

I flirted with him. I told the most dangerous man in this building he was the best view in the room.

Luca opens his mouth.

“Apologize,” the man beside me says.

Not loud. Not angry. He says it the way gravity says fall, like there was never any question how this ends.

“Look, I didn’t know she was…”

“Now.”

Luca flinches. Actually flinches, in front of everyone who matters to him.

His jaw works like the word is a bone stuck sideways in his throat. He looks anywhere but at the Big Bad beside me.

“I’m…” He swallows. His knuckles go white on the mic. “I’m sorry.”

Two years, and it’s the first time I’ve ever heard him say it.

But the apology isn’t what matters.

What matters is the room.

I feel it tilt, the way a boat tilts when something heavy changes sides.

Two hundred people just watched the power move, and every one of them felt it go.

Then the Big Bad leans in, close enough that pepper and amber close over me, and his voice drops to something meant for me alone.

“Which part of him should I remove first?”

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CHAPTER 2

STEVIE

A man just offered me body parts. As a gift. And I'm blushing.

He isn't joking. I can hear it. If I name something, it's gone by morning.

His breath on my ear, his voice pitched for me alone, and heat pools low and heavy in my belly at a threat of violence. Something is very wrong with me, and I don't want it fixed.

For one dizzy second, I let myself want it.

"None of him," I say. "I want him to remember tonight with every piece he's got."

One breath leaves him, slow, through his nose. Almost a laugh. His fingers flex once at his side.

"As you wish, *Bella*."

Bella. God help me, I want that word in my ear while he fucks me into oblivion, until I forget I ever had another name.

The crowd starts to buzz.

"Who is she?"

I walked in tonight at the very bottom of the food chain.

A rabbit with a tray. The help. Nobody in this room was supposed to notice me, let alone wonder who I am.

Now the senators are looking. The men with guns under their jackets. The old men at the front tables who decide who lives and who disappears.

One sentence from the Big Bad, and I've climbed higher in this room than I could have in a lifetime of carrying trays.

Every masked face in the Velvet Room is turned on me.

Mine.

He said it like a fact. Like the weather.

And every single person in this room believes him.

I turn my head a fraction toward the Big Bad beside me and keep my voice low and level.

"Who are you?"

"Tonight?" His voice stays low, for me alone. "The reason no man in this room will ever speak to you like that again." His eyes stay on Luca. "Now smile, *Bella*. Let the bastard watch what he lost."

Without looking away from Luca, he works a ring off his own little finger. Old gold. A dark stone, worn smooth at the edges by somebody else's years.

Then he takes my hand, in front of everyone, and slides it onto mine.

Slowly. Like there's no one else in the room. Like he has all the time in the world, and he's choosing to spend it on this.

It's still warm from his skin. It fits like it was waiting for me.

I look down at it, and something in my chest goes very quiet.

I close my fingers around it before I can stop myself, like it might slip away if I don't hold on.

"That's his mother's ring," someone whispers behind me. "He's never taken it off. Not once."

I have no idea what it means. Every single person in this room does.

The Big Bad guides me forward, his hand low on my back, through the center of the room. The crowd parts for us without being asked. Near the bar, Kelsey presses both hands over her mouth, eyes shining.

We're almost to the exit when Luca's voice cracks across the silence.

"Do you have any idea whose ring you're wearing?"

Heat flares in my chest, sharp and clean.

"Not your concern anymore," I say, without turning all the way around.

The Big Bad doesn't look at Luca. Doesn't answer him. Doesn't so much as turn his head. To him, Luca isn't there at all. His eyes stay on me.

He walks me through the exit and into the hall beyond, where the music is only a heartbeat through the walls and the crowd is a blur of masks behind the glass. Nobody follows. Nobody would dare.

"Where to, *Bella*?" he asks.

"Somewhere quiet, before I do something reckless right here."

His jaw clenches, hard, once. His eyes go dark behind the mask, and for a second he doesn't move at all, like a man holding something back with both hands.

Whatever I just did to him, he doesn't trust himself to answer it here.

And I just walked into a penthouse suite with a man whose name I don't know.

Velvet walls. Black orchids. A chandelier that probably cost more than everything I've ever owned. Floor-to-ceiling windows, every one of them blacked out. The whole city is out there, and none of it can see in.

All I can think about is the six feet of carpet between us, and how little time it would take to cross it, and what his hands would do once I did.

He speaks first.

“I don’t get involved at these events.” He holds my gaze. “Tonight I did.”

That’s all. No excuse. No speech. Somehow it hits harder than one would.

I tell myself to stay sharp. Instead, I’m watching his mouth shape the words and imagining it on my throat.

“I’ve been watching you all night, *dolcezza*.” A pause, heavy as a hand. “You gave back money you needed. You walked into a lion for a girl you barely know. You made Santini bleed in front of everyone he wanted to impress.” His eyes don’t leave mine. “That’s rare in my world.”

Rare. Not flattery. A verdict. My pulse kicks, hard.

“It also made you a target.” His voice drops. “By morning, half that room will be trying to find out who’s under that rabbit mask.”

Something in me cools a degree. I hadn’t thought that far.

He did.

His eyes go to my hand. “So I gave them something else to remember.”

I look down at the ring.

“Everyone in that room knows not to touch what’s mine.”

Two words. *What’s mine.* Something in me goes molten. Not a gift, then. A shield. I should hate how much I like the sound of it.

I look for the catch.

“Men like you don’t do anything without expecting something back.”

“I don’t want your gratitude.”

“Good. Men who want gratitude always seem to think thankful means available.”

That earns me a smile. Small. Real. Gone fast. I feel it like a prize.

“And this dress. The whole room had opinions about it.” He takes one step closer. “Not one of them touched you.”

Another step.

“You didn’t shrink. You didn’t wait to be saved. You stood up.”

My breath goes shallow. He’s describing me like he’s reading a file, and every word is true.

“It’s just a dress,” I manage.

“It isn’t the dress.” His gaze moves down me, slow and unashamed, and back up. “It’s you in it.”

I almost hand him the old list. Too loud. Too curvy. Too difficult. Too much.

I don’t say it. He answers it anyway.

“Whoever taught you to be smaller was wrong.”

I open my mouth to deflect.

Nothing comes out.

Because he isn’t telling me I’m beautiful in spite of this body.

He’s telling me he wants me because of it.

Every smart thing I know about men like him tells me to leave. The rest of me is aching and already leaning in.

I close the distance before I decide to.

He doesn’t meet me halfway. He just waits, lets me come to him, and somehow it still feels like his move.

I stop right in front of him. I put my palm on his chest and feel the heat of him through the shirt, the slow, heavy beat under my hand. Then my fingers find his tie.

One slow pull.

“Careful,” he says, very low.

I reach for the edge of his mask.

His hand closes around my wrist. Gently. But it stops me cold.

“You can’t see my face.”

“Why?”

“Because my name gets people hurt.” His thumb rests on my pulse.

It isn’t a line. I can hear the difference.

Every warning bell I own is ringing. I can’t hear a single one of them over my pulse, beating hard and hot between my thighs.

“So you’re protecting me,” I say, “by not telling me who you are.”

“Yes.”

“That’s very noble.”

“It isn’t noble. It’s selfish.” His thumb stays on my pulse. “I want you safe enough for me to find again.”

Again.

One word, and it lands somewhere low and dangerous. Not tonight. Not one night. *Again.*

“And if I want to know?”

“Don’t.”

One word. No explanation. And it’s the hottest thing anyone has ever said to me.

“Fine,” I say. “I won’t ask.”

His thumb strokes once across the inside of my wrist, and he lets me go.

“You can still walk out that door, *dolcezza*.” His voice goes low and rough. “There’s a car downstairs. Your night’s pay is yours either way. I’ll see to it.”

A beat.

“But if you stay, I’m going to want to see all of you.” His eyes drop to my mouth, then come back up, slow. “Starting with your face.”

Heat rolls through me so fast my knees almost go.

I believe him. The exit is real.

And the exit being real is exactly what makes me not want to take it.

His fingers find the ribbon at the back of my head and stop there.

“Let me see you.” A beat, his thumb resting on the knot. “Yes?”

“And if I say no?”

“Then it stays on.” No hesitation. “And I spend the rest of my life wondering.”

“Good. Wonder for a minute.”

A sound rumbles out of his chest, low and dark, barely there, more felt than heard, and it goes through me like a hand sliding up my thigh.

I make him wait. Three heartbeats. Four. Long enough to watch his jaw tighten under the edge of the mask.

Then I nod.

The rabbit mask slides away. Cool air on my cheeks. Nowhere left to hide.

He looks at me for a long time. I don’t duck my head. I don’t fill the silence with a joke. I lift my chin and let him look, every second of it.

“*Bellissima*,” he says, low, like it’s a fact someone should have told him sooner. “They hid this behind a rabbit mask. Someone should be shot for that.”

A beat, and his voice goes darker. “Then again, I’m glad they did. Not one man in that room got to see you like this.” His gaze moves over my face like he’s claiming it. “If one had, I’d have to take his eyes.”

His knuckles brush my cheek, slow, barely touching, like he’s learning the shape of it. No smirk under the mask. No angle. Nothing in his voice that

wants anything back. He means it.

Something cracks open in my chest. Not lust. Worse.

Men have told me I'm hot. Told me I'd be pretty if I lost a little weight. Told me I clean up nice. Nobody has ever looked at my face like it was the whole point.

My eyes sting, and I'm furious about it. I am not going to cry in front of a man whose name I don't even know.

"There you are," he says quietly, like he heard every word I didn't say.

"This is wildly unfair, you know." My voice comes out shakier than I want it to. "You get my whole face, and I don't even get a peek."

His mouth brushes my temple. "I never said I play fair, *Bella*."

His breath is warm against my temple, and the words sink into me, low and slow, until every inch of my skin is listening. My nipples tighten under the silk. My pulse throbs between my thighs, heavy and impatient. I'm done waiting.

I rise up on my toes.

I slide my hand into his silver-shot hair.

I kiss him first.

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CHAPTER 3

STEVIE

He kisses me back like a man who has decided something.

One hand slides into my hair and closes, firm, tipping my head exactly where he wants it. The other spreads across my lower back and pulls me flush against him, and I feel how hard he is, pressed against my belly. Heat floods straight between my thighs.

He takes his time with my mouth. Slow. Thorough. Like he has all night and intends to spend every minute of it on me.

When he finally lifts his head, I'm the one breathing hard.

"Be sure, *Bella*." He doesn't touch me. He doesn't have to. "Once I start, I won't be able to stop."

It should scare me. It's the most honest thing a man has ever said to me.

"Then don't," I tell him.

Something in him goes still and dark and certain.

He steps back. One step, just enough to see all of me. "Take off the dress."

Holy shit.

It isn't a request. It's said in that low, unhurried voice, and it goes straight through me and lands between my thighs. I'm wet before I've touched the zipper.

My hands shake as I reach behind me. I hate that, until I see his eyes follow every inch of the zipper going down, his jaw tight under the edge of the mask, his hands curled into fists at his sides like it's taking everything he has not to do it himself.

I take my time. One strap slides off my shoulder. Then the other. The silk catches on my hips, and I let it hang there, because the sound that comes out of his chest when I finally push it down is the hottest thing I've ever heard.

The dress pools at my feet.

I'm standing in front of a stranger in nothing but black lace and heels. Every curve I've spent my life apologizing for is lit gold under the lamps. My nipples are tight and aching against the lace. My skin feels too small for my body.

And he isn't looking at me like I'm too much.

He's looking at me like he's starving.

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit.

"The rest," he says, and his voice has gone rough.

I unhook the bra and let it fall. Cool air hits my breasts, and then his eyes do, and I swear I feel that look like a mouth. I hook my thumbs into the lace at my hips and slide it down my legs, slow, bending, giving him all of it.

When I straighten, I'm bare and burning, slick and throbbing, my pulse beating hard between my legs. I have never felt this exposed. I have never felt this powerful.

"*Dio*," he breathes. "Look at you. I've been looking at women a long time, Bella, and not one of them prepared me for this."

Something in me goes molten. He's not being kind. He's being *accurate*, and that's so much worse for my knees.

I'm looking at him. That's the problem. I'm looking at the thick ridge straining against his trousers and thinking very specific, very filthy thoughts.

“Your turn.” I close the distance before my nerve can run. “Hold still.”

He does. And that undoes me more than anything: this dangerous, enormous man standing perfectly still because I told him to, his chest rising faster with every breath.

I push the jacket off his shoulders. Pull his tie free and drop it on the bed. The shirt buttons are small and my fingers clumsy, so I go slow, one at a time, and with every button his scent gets stronger. Pepper and amber and warm skin. I want to bite him.

The shirt falls open.

Oh, God.

Hard chest. Dark hair, threaded with the same silver as his temples. Ink spilling across his skin, old script running over his heart and down his ribs, disappearing below his belt like an invitation. He’s built like a man who’s never needed a gym and has broken things with his hands anyway.

I trace one line of ink with a fingertip. Every muscle under it tightens. A low sound escapes him, and it goes straight to my core.

I reach for his belt, and this time he lets me.

Buckle. Button. Zipper. I push the trousers and the black briefs down his hips together, and he springs free into my hand.

Holy fuck.

He’s thick and heavy and fully hard, flushed dark at the tip, a bead of wetness already gathered there. Bigger than anything I’ve ever had. My mouth actually waters. My thighs press together on their own.

I wrap my fingers around him. Hot. Velvet over steel. He pulses against my palm, and he lets out a slow breath through his teeth, like he’s holding on to something by a thread.

“Careful,” he says. “I’ve been hard for you since the second you walked past my booth. I’d like this to last.”

His hand closes over mine. “Not yet.”

The mask stays on. The lamps stay on. I can see every inch of him except the one thing I want most, and somehow that makes it worse. Or better. I can't tell anymore.

"Look at me," he says. Dark eyes through the black mask. "I've waited a long time for a woman worth taking my time on. I'm going to take all of it."

"Give me your wrists."

I hold them out. He picks up his tie and wraps it around them, once, twice, soft and loose, then guides my hands up and loops the end around the carved bedpost.

"Pull and it comes free," he murmurs. "So don't pull."

I don't. I stand there with my arms raised, naked under the lamplight, and watch him look at me. Slow, from my mouth to my breasts to my stomach to my thighs, like he's memorizing me.

"A man my age learns a few things," he says, his knuckles trailing down my side. "The most important one is patience. You're about to find out how useful that is."

He steps in behind me. His mouth finds my shoulder, then the side of my neck, slow and open, stubble scraping just enough to make me shiver. In the gilt mirror across the room I can see all of it: the wolf mask at my throat, his big inked hands sliding up my ribs, my own face flushed and wrecked and wanting.

"Watch," he says. "I want you to see what you look like when I touch you."

His palms close over my breasts. Heavy, full, so sensitive that when his thumbs drag across my nipples, I cry out.

"That's it. Don't hide that sound from me. I want every one of them." He rolls them slowly, patiently, until I'm arching back against him and I can feel him, hard and hot, pressed against the small of my back. "Feel that? That's what you've done to me all night."

"Please."

"Already?" A low, wicked laugh. "*Dolcezza*, I've barely started."

One hand slides down over my stomach. He doesn’t skip it. He spreads his palm there and holds it, warm and possessive, his eyes on mine in the mirror.

“Every soft inch of you,” he says. “Mine tonight. Don’t you dare apologize for any of it.”

Then his fingers slip lower and find me soaked.

“*Dio*.” His voice goes rough. “Look how wet you are for me. Dripping, and I haven’t even had my mouth on you yet.”

He strokes me slowly, deliberately, watching my face in the mirror the whole time. Every time I chase his hand, he stops.

“Don’t move.”

I freeze, trembling.

“Good. You take direction beautifully.”

The praise goes straight through me, hotter than his hand. I’d do anything to hear it again.

He starts again, slow circles around my clit, then one thick finger sliding inside me, curling, finding a place I didn’t know existed. “There. Right there. Tell me how it feels.”

“Good. So good. Don’t stop.”

“I’m not going to stop. But you don’t come until I say. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

I don’t even think. “Yes, sir.”

He groans against my neck like I just undid him. “Fuck, that mouth. You have no idea what you do to me.”

He adds a second finger, stretching me, filling me, his thumb working my clit in steady, merciless circles. He tells me how tight I am. How sweet I

sound. How he's going to have me shaking before he's even inside me. How he's going to ruin me for every boy who ever thought he knew what to do with a body like mine. He takes me right to the edge, so close I'm sobbing, and holds me there.

"Look at yourself," he orders. "Look how beautiful you are when you're desperate for me."

I look. Flushed, wide-eyed, wrists bound, his hand between my thighs. I've never seen myself like this. I've never let anyone see me like this.

"Now," he says against my ear. "Come for me, *Bella*. Let me hear it."

I shatter. It rips through me so hard I cry out, my wrists straining against the silk without breaking it, and he holds me up through every wave, murmuring filthy, gorgeous things in Italian against my neck.

"There she is. There's my good girl. So perfect. So fucking perfect for me."

He frees my wrists. Turns me in his arms and kisses me, deep and slow, then slides his wet fingers into my mouth. "Taste how sweet you are."

I do. He watches me, eyes burning behind the mask.

"On the bed. On your back. Legs open for me."

I obey. He stands at the edge of the bed for a moment, just looking, naked except for the mask, stroking himself slowly while his eyes travel over me.

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he says. "And I've seen a great deal."

Foil tears. He holds the condom out to me between two fingers.

"Put it on me."

I sit up and do it slowly, rolling it down his length with both hands while he watches, his jaw locked, his breath going ragged. When I'm done, he presses me back into the sheets, and the mattress dips with his weight, and his body covers mine, heavy, hot, perfect.

He pins my wrists above my head with one hand.

“Tell me what you want.”

“You.”

“Be specific. I want to hear that pretty mouth say it.”

My face burns. “I want your cock inside me.”

“Good girl. Again.”

“I want your cock inside me. Please.”

He gives me just the head and stops. Stretching me. Teasing. Holding there while I whimper.

“Look at me.” I look up at the mask, at those dark eyes. “I want to watch your face when I fill you.”

Then he sinks into me, slow, inch by thick inch, never looking away, until there’s nothing left between us.

“That’s it,” he groans. “Take all of it. So tight. So good. You were made to take me, *Bella*.”

He moves. Long, deep, deliberate strokes, each one dragging over that spot inside me until my vision blurs. He talks the whole time. Low, filthy praise. How good I feel. How well I’m taking him. How he’s going to remember the way I look right now for the rest of his life.

“Wrap your legs around me.” I do. “That’s it. Now hold on. I’m going to give you more.”

He does. Harder. Deeper. The headboard knocks the wall. Every time I get close, he slows down and laughs low in my ear when I whimper.

“Please.”

“Again.”

“*Please*, sir.”

“That’s it. Beg me so beautifully.” His free hand slides between us and finds my clit. “Now come on my cock. Squeeze me. Let me feel it.”

The second one is bigger than the first. It rolls through me deep enough to frighten me, and he rides me through it, harder, faster, his control finally fraying.

“One more,” he growls. “You’ve got one more for me. I know you do. Give it to me, *mia dolce ragazza*.”

I didn’t think I had one more. He knew better.

It breaks me open completely, and only then does he let go, burying himself to the hilt with a groan against my throat, *Bella* breaking on his lips, his whole body shuddering over mine.

For a long time, neither of us moves.

His weight. My heartbeat. The ruined sheets.

He pulls the condom off and drops it over the side of the bed without looking. Then he pulls me against his chest and traces one slow line up the curve of my hip, like he’s memorizing it.

“You did so well,” he murmurs into my hair. “So well, *Bella*.”

I breathe him in. Pepper and amber and sweat and skin.

Whatever he meant by tonight, I know how stories like this end. Tomorrow, I go back to the diner and the deposit and the real world.

And he goes back to whatever world is waiting for him.

But not yet.

He reaches over and switches off the lamp. In the dark, I hear the soft sound of his mask hitting the floor, and then his bare face presses into my neck, stubble and warm breath, the closest I’ll ever come to seeing it.

“A good man would let you go.” His mouth against my throat. “Good thing you didn’t sleep with one.”

It should scare me. It does, a little, a cold thread running under all the warmth. But my body hears it the way it’s heard everything he’s said tonight, and I press closer instead of pulling away.

Some smarter version of me is already packing a bag.

The rest of me falls asleep with his heartbeat under my cheek.

I wake up alone.

Gray light leaks in around the edges of the blackout blinds. The clock on the wall says a little after six. The sheets beside me are cool. He’s been gone a while.

The ring is still on my finger. I let myself smile at it.

Then I hear voices.

Two men, right outside the door, not trying very hard to be quiet.

“He wants the cars brought around before the street wakes up.”

“He say how long he’s gonna be?”

“You wanna be the one who asks Enzo Accardi how long he’s gonna be?”

A dry laugh. “Point taken.”

“And he said nobody bothers the room. He was real clear.”

The smile slides right off my face.

Enzo Accardi.

I knew the room called him the Don. I didn’t know which one. Some mob boss from some family, with men to do his bleeding for him.

I didn’t know he was *this* one.

Everyone in this city knows that name. It’s on the sides of buildings in letters six feet tall. Accardi Holdings. Accardi clubs. Accardi everything.

Billionaire. Real estate king. A man with half the politicians in New York in his pocket.

And something else.

Something people only say in whispers.

Killer.

Then a third voice, low, unhurried, coming down the hall. The voice that was in my ear three hours ago telling me I was perfect.

“The man in the lion mask. Ricci.” A pause, like he’s checking his cuff. “Not on the property. Neutral ground stays neutral. Wait until he’s home.”

“How bad, boss?”

“He put his money on one special girl’s tray tonight.” Calm. Almost bored. “Break every finger he counted it with. Slowly. Then let him count those.”

“Understood.”

Footsteps. A door somewhere down the hall. Then nothing.

I’m sitting in his bed with his ring on my finger, and I can’t feel my hands.

Last night, that voice told me I was beautiful. This morning, it ordered a man’s fingers broken before breakfast, like it was choosing a wine.

And the worst part, the part I will never say out loud to anyone, is that for one second, a small, dark part of me is glad.

I sit up.

The woman who melted in this bed a few hours ago is still here. But someone else is taking her place. The girl who got herself out of foster care. The one who has only ever had herself to count on. The one who already made the mistake of falling for one powerful, dangerous man.

She is not making it twice.

I find my bra. My panties. The dress. His scent is still on my skin, pepper and amber, and it makes my hands go slow on the zipper. I make them hurry.

The rabbit mask is on the carpet where he dropped it. I pick it up.

On the side table, there's an envelope, thick with cash. My pay from the night. He had it brought up so it would be waiting.

It's a lot more than I earned.

I count out exactly what I earned. The rest stays on the side table.

The last thing is the ring.

It slides off as easily as it went on. I hold it in my palm for one second. Cool. Heavy. Beautiful. A fantasy I let be real for exactly one night.

I set it on the pillow where my head was.

Let Enzo Accardi come back to an empty room and a ring on a pillow, and spend his whole morning wondering why I walked away.

The door opens from the inside without a sound. The man posted at the end of the hall has his back to me, phone to his ear. I slip down the back stairs and through the kitchen, still dressed like staff, the rabbit mask dangling from my fingers, and nobody looks twice.

A delivery door. An alley. The sky going blue and gold.

I don't run. Running gets you noticed. I walk fast and ordinary, like a woman late for a bus, until the Velvet Room is blocks behind me.

I'm not scared. I'm smart. I know the difference between a fantasy and a trap.

I didn't take anything of his I hadn't earned.

That's what I tell myself the whole way home.

I'm wrong.

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CHAPTER 4

STEVIE

Sixty-one days after the best night of my life, I pass out next to a bus tub of dirty silverware.

But first, Jess catches me smiling.

“You’re doing it again.”

Jess works the counter with me at Paul’s Diner, a slightly run-down twenty-four-hour spot in Astoria where the coffee is terrible and the tips are worse. She catches me mid-stare, halfway through rolling a fork into a napkin.

“Doing what?”

“The smile. The little secret one you do when you think nobody’s looking.” She drops into the booth across from me. “It’s the mask guy. Tell me it’s the mask guy.”

I toss the rollup into the bin. “It’s not the mask guy.”

“It is so the mask guy.”

“Two months,” Darla says from behind the counter, not looking up from the coffee machine she’s been fighting all morning. “Two months and we’re still on the masked stranger. I’ve had marriages shorter than this story.”

“That says more about your marriages than my story.”

“Mm.” She smacks the side of the machine. “Fair.”

Two months.

Two months since I stood up in front of the most powerful people in this city and fired back. Two months since a man in a wolf mask slid a ring onto my finger and told the whole room I was his.

The money I earned that night was good. It’s also almost gone.

Last week, the TV over the counter ran a two-minute story about a businessman from Howard Beach found in his own driveway. Every finger on both hands broken. No witnesses. No suspects. Darla changed the channel to a cooking show.

I didn’t sleep that night. I’m still not sure if it was fear. I’m not sure I want to know what else it was.

Kelsey texts me sometimes. She quit the agency the week after the masquerade and works the front desk at a dentist’s office now, and every message ends with a butterfly.

Mostly, I’m tired.

Not double-shift tired. Something heavier. Something in my bones.

I know what else it could be. I just haven’t let myself do the math.

“Hey. Focus, girlypop.” Jess snaps her fingers. “You told me about the night. You told me about the guy. You never told me the part that actually matters.” She drops her voice. “Was it good-good? Or rich-guy good?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Rich-guy good is when the hotel’s nice and he thinks you’re so impressed by his money you won’t notice he lasted thirty seconds.”

The laugh comes up out of me too loud, and it costs me. My head goes light. The room tilts half a degree before it settles.

Weird.

“He was not,” I say, when I’ve got my breath back, “rich-guy good. And how many rich guys have you even been with?”

Jess grins. Early twenties, Ohio-cute, zero shame. “Enough to know.”

Darla finally turns around, arms crossed, giving up on the coffee.

“Okay, fine.” I hold up one finger. “I’ll say this once, and then we retire the subject forever. The man ruined me. Every guy I meet now, I’m doing math in my head. ‘You, sir, are a six, and I have unfortunately seen a ten.’ It’s bad.”

“So find his number,” Jess says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“Didn’t get his name.”

That’s a lie. I’ve told it before. Nobody in this diner is ever finding out whose bed I woke up in.

“I’d have gone through his pockets during his post-sex nap,” Jess says.

“That was the deal. No names.”

“Smart girl,” Darla says into the stack of clean mugs. “Some things are only supposed to last as long as they last.”

“The smartest,” I agree.

Smart girl.

The smartest girl in the world left a ring on a pillow and walked out a delivery door into the blue morning. She did the right thing. The only thing.

And for sixty-one days straight, she hasn’t stopped thinking about him.

His voice. His hands. The black mask above me. *You take direction beautifully*, still playing in my head at the worst possible moments.

I’ve been telling everyone here it was a fling.

It was the realest night of my life.

“Okay.” I drop the last rollup into the bin. “That’s fifty rollups. I’m taking my break.”

“Kid, mind topping off the coffee at table seven?” Darla asks. “Gotta run some food.”

“Sure, let me…”

I stand up.

The floor doesn’t stay where I left it.

I grab the back of the booth. Darla’s voice sounds like it’s coming from the parking lot. “You all right, kid?”

Everything goes muffled, like we’re underwater. Gray creeps in at the corners of my eyes.

“It’s fine,” I say. “I just skipped breakfast. I’ll sit for a second. I’ll just…”

When I come to, I’m on the floor.

Darla and Jess and two customers are standing over me. One of them is still holding a fork.

“Stevie. Stevie, look at me.”

“I’m fine.”

It’s a lie, and now everybody knows it. “I stood up too fast.”

“You went down like a sack of flour,” Darla says, crouching beside me. “That’s not standing up too fast. Jess, you still got that shit-box car?”

“Betty is not a shit box. But yes.”

“Good. We’re going to the…”

“I can’t afford…”

“Urgent care. Not the ER. Cheaper. And you’re not the first girl to hit my floor in the middle of a shift.”

The urgent care on Steinway Street is fluorescent lights and laminate and sadness.

I fill out the clipboard with Jess beside me, and all I can think is how much this is going to cost.

“You’re fine,” Jess says, squeezing my knee. “Low blood pressure. My grandma used to get dizzy spells like that.”

“Your grandma was probably eighty.”

She thinks about it. “Sure. But still.”

“This place charges two hundred dollars just to look at me. If it’s nothing, I just set a whole day of tips on fire.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

A nurse pokes her head out. “Ms. Callahan?”

“That’s your cue,” Jess says. “Go. Come back with good news.”

The exam room is just as depressing as the waiting room. A PA named Marisol comes in, warm and brisk, somewhere around forty. Blood pressure. Allergies. Any conditions.

Standard.

Then she gets to my medical history, and everything changes.

“When was your last period?”

I open my mouth to answer.

Nothing comes out.

It’s been a while. A long while.

“It was…”

I do the math. Not this month. Not last month.

My stomach drops through the floor.

The last one was before the masquerade.

“Any chance you could be pregnant?” Marisol asks gently.

“No,” I say, automatically. “We used protection.”

My mouth keeps going while the rest of me counts. Sixty-one days. My last period a week before that, maybe two, which means…

Oh, shit.

“Let’s rule it out,” Marisol says, reaching for a test. “Two minutes.”

Two minutes.

The longest two minutes of my life happen in a bathroom with a flickering light and a sign about washing your hands. My hands won’t stop shaking. I wash them anyway.

How? We used a condom. I watched him put it on.

Well. I put it on him.

Back in the exam room, Marisol checks the stick through the baggie.

She doesn’t have to say it. I can see it on her face.

“It’s positive.”

“I’m…”

I can’t even say the word.

“Pregnant,” she says kindly. “Congratulations.”

Pregnant.

By a man whose face I never saw. Whose name I only learned through a door.

Enzo Accardi.

Billionaire. Club owner. Mob boss.

“Is there someone we can call?” Marisol asks. “The father, or…”

“No. There’s nobody. It’s just me.”

It comes out steadier than I feel.

Just me. The way it’s always been.

Except that’s not true anymore.

Now it’s me plus one. And the one is the size of a fig, and its father is the most dangerous man in New York.

That night, I sit on the pullout bed in my studio in Astoria. The only window looks at the brick wall of the building next door, three feet away.

It isn’t much. It’s mine.

And for the first time, I let myself think it.

I could tell him.

I could find him. It wouldn’t be hard. Knock on whatever enormous door he lives behind and tell him our one night wasn’t a one-night thing.

It was a rest-of-your-life thing.

Maybe he’d help. Rent. Doctors. Diapers. Maybe it could work.

Then I remember the voice outside that door. Calm. Almost bored. Ordering a man’s fingers broken before breakfast.

I heard what that voice does to men who get too close to what he thinks is his.

What does a man like Enzo Accardi do when he finds out about a baby he never asked for?

Does he hire lawyers?

Does he take it?

Or does he decide the easiest problem to solve is the woman carrying it?

I can’t trust him to do the right thing.

I can’t even trust him not to make me disappear.

So I make a different choice.

I put my hand on my stomach. It still feels flat. It still feels impossible.

“Just us,” I whisper. “You and me.”

And then I make the only promise I know how to keep.

“We’re going to disappear. And we’re going to do it so well, he’ll never know we were here at all.”

So I make myself one more rule. I don’t search his name. I don’t look at pictures. I change the channel when the news says Accardi, and I look at my shoes when I pass a building that wears it. If I ever see his face, I’ll want him. And wanting a man like that is how girls like me end up in a river.

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CHAPTER 5

STEVIE

Almost five years later…

"Mama, aren't those the pinch-y shoes?"

I'm hopping across our Bushwick studio on one foot, one pinch-y shoe on and my blazer half buttoned, past the eviction notice taped to the inside of our door. Thirty days. I put it at kid height on purpose, upside down, so he'd think it was boring grown-up paper.

"They're interview shoes, baby. They make me look like someone people want to give a job to."

My phone buzzes on the counter.

Dear Ms. Callahan, thank you for your interest. After careful consideration, we've decided to move forward with other candidates.

Five. That's five.

"Are you going to be on time?"

My son sits at our tiny table, very straight, in dinosaur pajamas, hands folded like a small, serious banker.

He's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. That's the first thing I think every time I look at him.

The second thing is always the same.

He has too much of his father in him. The dark hair. The dark eyes. A stillness no four-year-old should have, like he’s weighing everyone he meets and deciding whether they’re worth the trouble.

I ran across a whole city to keep him away from that man. And every morning, that man looks back at me across the breakfast table.

I set the phone face down. “That remains to be seen, my little man.”

He watches me put it down. Then he looks at me, calm as a judge.

“You’re sad,” he says. “Tell me why.”

My hands go still on the buttons.

Tell me why. Same three words. Same low, patient tone, like he’ll wait all day and already knows he’ll win. Five years ago, a man in a wolf mask said them to me across a booth.

“I’m not sad, bub.” I make my voice light. “I’m busy. It looks the same on my face.”

A knock rattles the door like someone’s being chased. Candy.

She sweeps in with platinum hair and vanilla perfume, scoops Matthew up before the door is even shut, and kisses his whole face while he shrieks.

“There’s my favorite man in the whole city.”

“Hi, Candy.” He gives her the big goofy grin he saves just for her. “You smell really nice.”

“Because I’m a lady of refinement, baby.” Over his head, she sees the phone, face down, and me not looking at it. Her smile changes into the real one. “Another one?”

“Five.”

She sets him down in front of his Hot Wheels and waits until he’s busy lining them up.

“You’ve got that look,” she says quietly. “The one where you already decided it won’t work.”

“It’s not pessimism if it’s a pattern.” I jam on the second shoe. “Five interviews, Candy. Every single one loves me in the room. Every single one ghosts me after. We both know what that is.”

“You don’t know it’s him.”

“Who else? Luca can’t get to me anymore, so he makes sure I stay broke. It’s the only power he has left.”

“Broke is like weather. It comes and goes. I watch guys go from baller to broke and back again every week at work.”

“None of those guys have a Santini keeping them down.”

“As far as you know,” she says, and winks.

I look over at Matthew, lining up his cars in a perfect row.

“What if staying in this city is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done?” I say. “Every day I stay, I’m choosing my pride over his future.”

Candy straightens my collar like a drill sergeant. “You are not failing that kid. You’re giving him a home. A routine. A mother who shows up. That’s more than either of us ever got.”

“You’re going to make me cry off the one coat of mascara I managed.”

“Then get out before you start.” She turns me toward the door by the shoulders. “Today’s number six, and six is my lucky number. Go get the job, sad shoes.”

I kiss my son, thank Candy three times, and run for the train.

The temp agency is on the twentieth floor of a skinny glass tower in Midtown, the kind that makes you feel underdressed in the elevator.

My shoes pinch the whole ride up.

Paula is waiting at her desk. Middle-aged. Polished. The closest thing I have to a fairy godmother, if fairy godmothers wore reading glasses and kept a bowl of sad mints.

Today, she isn't smiling.

"I'll be honest with you, because I think you've earned it," she says, tapping my folder. "The feedback on you is strange. 'Strong candidate.' 'Great interview.' And then nothing. A no with no reason. Five times."

"Maybe I give off an unlucky vibe."

"You give off a very employable vibe. That's what makes it strange." She looks at me over her glasses. "Is there anything I should know? Anything in your background following you around?"

"Nothing I can prove."

It's the most honest answer I've got.

"There's some X factor I can't see. But my job is to get you a job. So." She takes a breath. "I've gotten a little creative with the net."

"Creative how?"

"Not office work."

She slides a single sheet of paper across the desk. No letterhead. Almost no words.

"Here's what I know. He's supposedly one of the richest, most powerful men in New York. Very private. Very demanding. A little scary."

"Wow. You're really selling it. What's his name?"

"I don't have a name."

I stare at her.

"I have an address," she says, "and a list of requirements as long as my arm. It's a live-in position. Personal assistant. Housing included. And the pay is…"

She turns the paper and points to a number.

I work very hard to keep my face still.

“Yes,” Paula says. “That’s monthly.”

“What’s the catch?”

“The catch is I’ve sent him six people, and he’s sent every one of them home inside an hour. You go to the house. You meet him. He decides on the spot.” She pauses. “So do you.”

Six people. Sent home in an hour.

That should scare me off.

Instead, I’m doing math.

Thirty days on that notice. One month of that number covers it. Three months, and Matthew and I could move anywhere. Somewhere Luca’s name means nothing. Somewhere with a yard.

“I know it’s weird,” Paula says. “Super weird. If you want to think it over…”

I think of my son lining up his cars in a perfect row. *Tell me why.*

For him, I can handle weird.

For him, I can handle a lot worse.

“I’ll take the interview.”

Paula smiles, like it’s exactly the answer she was hoping for.

I’ll think about that smile later.

Not yet.

“Then let’s not keep him waiting,” she says.

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CHAPTER 6

STEVIE

"I hate this. I want it on the record that I hate this." Candy's already half into her work face, one eye done, accusatory mascara wand pointed at me. "I would take that boy for the whole day. I would take him for a week. But if I miss another…"

"Candy, stop. You think I'd let you lose a shift over my mess?"

I get Matthew's good jacket on him, the one without the juice stain. Thankfully, he's not picking today to make getting dressed a whole process.

"It's fine. He's coming with me."

"To the fancy, rich, mystery-man interview?"

"To the fancy, rich, mystery-man interview."

"You're second-guessing yourself," Candy says, watching me.

I tuck my blonde hair behind my ear and take a deep breath. "I mean, it's a live-in job, Candy. We'd be living there." I crouch down to Matthew's level and fix his collar, talking to her over his head. "If me having a kid is a deal-breaker, I need to know now and not after I've packed up our whole life and hauled it across the city. It's better he says no to both of us now."

"And the other reason?"

"What other reason?"

"The one where you trust that boy's read on a man more than your own."

I don’t answer that. I don’t have to. Candy’s known me long enough to hear the things I don’t say, and she’s right, anyway. It was my own radar that talked me into Luca. But Matthew’s has never been wrong. He stills and becomes watchful around people who aren’t safe, and he melts for the ones who are. I’ve learned the hard way to believe him over myself when it comes to reading people.

“He’s coming,” I say again. “End of discussion.”

Candy looks at me for a long second, then kisses the top of Matthew’s head and grabs her bag. “Go get the job. Both of you. Knock him dead.”

“It’s quiet here,” Matthew says. He always mentions the quiet of a place when he’s nervous.

And at this moment, I’m right there with him.

The address turned out to be in Riverdale, up on the ridge above the Hudson, on one of those streets where the city stops pretending to be a city and you pay big bucks for the privilege.

We come up out of the subway at 242nd Street into the thin autumn sun of midday and walk the long hill up to a street of old stone houses set back behind tall iron gates.

“Rich people like it quiet, bub.”

“Why?”

“So they don’t have to listen to us normal people.”

The house, when we reach it, is four stories of pale stone behind a high wrought-iron gate, after which is a short, cobbled walkway. It’s perfect, not a thing out of place. A camera is mounted by the gate, and as we come up the walk, it turns slowly and tracks us. Before I can find a buzzer or a call box, or any human way to announce myself, the gate clicks and swings inward on its own.

They know we're here, and they've probably known since we turned the corner onto the block.

I tighten my grip on Matthew's hand and tell myself the lie that's gotten me this far: I can always walk away.

I make myself believe the lie long enough to climb the front steps.

The door opens before I have a chance to knock. The woman standing in the doorway is somewhere in her early sixties and dressed better than I've dressed for any interview in my life. Her eyes do one efficient pass over me, noting my shoes and my blazer, and my overall disposition. There's no doubt in my mind that she's already completely figured me out.

Then her gaze drops to Matthew, and something in her face simply gives way, the composure folding clean down and shifting to something softer, more open.

"You're Miss Callahan." It isn't a question. Then, to Matthew, gentler: "And who is this gentleman?"

Matthew considers her question with adorable gravity. "I'm Matthew. I'm four."

"Four?" She crouches, just like that, in her good skirt, on the marble, so she's at eye level with him. There's an accent under her English, Italian worn smooth by a long time in the US. "That's a very important and wonderful age. I happen to have butter cookies that are also very wonderful. Later, perhaps, if your mother permits, you can try one."

Matthew's eyes light up at the mere mention of cookies, and he turns to me so quickly, he practically falls over. "Mama, can you *permit* me a cookie?" he asks, dragging out the new word.

The warmth banks back down into something cooler, but I caught it. The woman who runs this house has a soft spot for kids. I file it in the good column. I take whatever good I can get.

"Marta Rossi," she says. "I am the house manager. Come in, both of you."

The inside of the mansion feels like a different planet. Black-and-white marble polished to a mirror shine. A staircase curving up four floors. Fresh flowers in silver urns, a chandelier, ancestors in heavy gold frames. And a hush over all of it that makes me think of a tomb.

Matthew tips his head all the way back to look at the chandelier and lets out a soft, "*Woooow*."

Marta walks us toward a set of double doors at the far end of the hall and stops a few feet short of them. "A word before you go in." Her voice drops to a murmur. "He will not raise his voice. He will not be unkind to you. He will simply decide, somewhere in the first few minutes, whether you are worth his time. And if you're not, he'll dismiss you with a nod. Then I'll lead you out of here, and you'll never see him or this place again."

I can tell this is a speech she's given before. "That's comforting," I say wryly.

"It isn't meant to be." Her gaze flicks down to Matthew just for a moment, and something moves behind it that I can't name, something almost like worry, gone before I can be sure I saw it. "But I'll tell you what I told the others, which not one of them understood. He isn't looking for someone who's afraid of him."

Before I can ask why anyone would be, a man walks down the hall toward us, built like a tank in a tailored suit. He's in his early sixties, and he moves with the calm of a man nothing on this earth could surprise.

"Carmine Rossi," Marta says, and a glance passes between the two of them.

"Miss Callahan." Carmine's voice is low and level. "He's expecting you. My wife can take the boy through to the kitchen, if you'd prefer. Cookies may have been mentioned."

I could hand Matthew off and walk in clean, just a competent woman in a decent blazer. It would be easier. I can't do it.

"Thank you," I say. "But he'll stay with me. He's part of the arrangement. Better your client knows that now than wastes either of our time."

Carmine looks at me for a long moment, then the ghost of something that might be approval crosses his otherwise expressionless face.

“Fair,” he says and opens the doors. “Go on in, then, both of you.”

“Cookies after?” Matthew asks me.

“If you’re good.”

The room seems designed to make you feel small, and it works. A corner study with two walls of tall windows, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a fireplace big enough to stand in, and a massive antique desk that’s almost completely bare.

Standing at the windows, his back to me, is a man. He’s tall and broad through the shoulders. His hair is a mix of silver and black, and he wears a three-piece suit cut close to the body. It’s obviously tailor-made for him and him alone.

Beside me, Matthew is watchful and silent, the way he gets when he’s reading the room and picking up the vibe in that strange way he has.

The man turns around.

My body reacts to him before my brain does, and the reaction is hot and certain and immediate. It’s a tightness in my belly, a heat blooming low and shameful between my thighs, before even a single thought has formed.

My skin remembers his hands, and my mouth remembers his. My whole body clenches and every other traitorous inch of me lights up at the memory of a voice I’ve spent years trying to forget, to pretend no longer exists.

It’s him. Black pepper and smoked amber, faint across the room. The silver at his temples. The blood-red ink across his knuckles, and the dark script climbing out of his collar. Even without the mask, I can tell it’s him, and I’m standing there, wet and helpless in front of the last man on earth I should feel like this toward.

His name finally forms in my mind: Enzo Accardi. My masked stranger is standing in a shaft of afternoon light with his hands in his pockets, watching me like he owns me.

He stills. He's neither frozen nor shocked. He doesn't widen his eyes or part his lips. He's silent, and what's worse, the recognition on his face does no more to disturb it than a stone dropping beneath the dark water.

When he speaks, his voice is pitched low. "Good afternoon, Miss Callahan."

And that's the proof, his tone, his voice, a voice I can feel in my bones, the voice of the man who slipped a ring on my finger and claimed me in front of Luca and all the rest of the underworld, a voice I'd hoped I'd never hear again.

"Good afternoon." I will my body not to shake.

"My name is Enzo Accardi. Welcome."

I could leave right now. I doubt he'd make me stay. I could turn and run, and forget this all happened, but I don't.

I try to think of something, anything, to say, something smart and sassy that will show him I'm not scared. Before I do, however, his dark eyes drift down to the little man at my side.

He looks at Matthew, who is looking back at him with the same weighing stillness, the same patient study, deciding in his own four-year-old court whether this man is worth his attention.

Both of their faces wear the same expression, and it's the uncanniest sight I've ever witnessed in my life. I stop breathing, because I do not know what Enzo Accardi sees when he looks at my son. Does he simply see a child? Or a mirror?

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I expect Matthew to slip behind my leg and go silent, the way he does around men who aren't safe. He doesn't. He looks up at Enzo, calm and clear and totally unafraid, his head tipped a little to the side, the way you look at someone you half recognize and can't yet place.

It's a case of like meeting like, and that nearly makes my knees buckle, because my son's instincts have never failed me, and right now, they're telling him this stranger is safe.

Enzo crosses the room. Then the most feared man in New York gets down on one knee on the rug, three-piece suit and all, until he's eye level with my son.

Behind us, through the open doors, Marta makes a small sound. I've watched a room full of killers part for this man without a word. He doesn't kneel. Men like him don't.

He kneels for Matthew.

No man has ever done that. Not once in four years. Men on the train talk over his head. My son has spent his whole life looking up.

He holds out his hand. "Enzo."

Matthew studies it, then shakes it, very serious. "Matthew. I'm four." He holds up four fingers to prove it. Then his eyes drop to the red script on Enzo's knuckles, and he frowns. "Did you draw on your hands? You're not s'posed to draw on your hands."

"Why do you want to know?"

Matthew tips his head, exactly the way the man in front of him does. "'Cause I asked first. Tell me why."

Enzo goes still. Not the stillness from before. This one goes all the way down. His hand on his knee curls slowly into a fist, and by the door, Carmine actually turns his head.

Then something happens to Enzo's face that the mask never let me see. For one second, the Don is gone. What's left is a man looking at a small boy the way you look at something you didn't know you'd lost until it was standing right in front of you.

He clears his throat. Once. "So I never forget who I am." His voice comes out rougher than it should. He reaches out and straightens Matthew's collar, the one I fixed this morning, his big inked hand careful, like the boy might break.

And my son, who hides behind my leg from every man he meets, leans into it.

His eyes lift to mine and stay there. "Some people forget."

Tell me why. I taught my son to tie his shoes and say thank you. I never taught him that.

Something in my chest cracks right down the middle. Four years, I told myself I was keeping him safe. I never once let myself count what I was keeping from him.

Neither of us says one word about the boy, not yet.

Enzo rises. When he speaks again, the steel is back in his voice, like the last ten seconds never happened. "Sit. Both of you."

I do, gladly, because my legs are about to give out. Matthew climbs onto the chair beside mine and swings his legs, watching the two of us with that calm, solemn face.

Enzo takes the chair behind the desk and opens a folder. He takes out one sheet of paper and glances at it before turning his eyes to me.

He looks at Matthew again. "I assume this handsome young man isn't your temp agency contact."

I almost laugh. Almost. "No. This is my son. I was told this was a live-in job. If that's the case, we'll need to accommodate him, too."

His eyes don't leave my son. His son.

“That is indeed the case. Well, there’d be room to spare, as you can see. Matthew, how would you feel about living here?”

Matthew says nothing at first, weighing his words in that strangely mature way he has. “It would be… fun, I think. Do you have any toys here?”

Something close to a smile touches Enzo’s lips. “No, but I’m sure we could arrange for some to be brought in. There’s plenty of space to play. And I have a very big backyard.”

Matthew grins, the first kidlike thing he’s done since this interview started. A very big backyard in the city is practically unheard of. Enzo might as well have offered him a trip to the moon.

Enzo turns his attention back to me. “But that all assumes I decide to bring you on board.” He clears his throat. “Shall we begin?”

“Yes, please do.”

“Your references describe you as quiet and diligent.” He studies the page he isn’t reading. “Is that an accurate description?”

“I always do my job to the best of my abilities.”

“And nothing more?”

“I do what is asked of me, and then I go home to my son.”

His eyes lift to mine. There’s an emotion in them I don’t understand. “Good answer.”

Surprisingly, he transitions into what feels like a normal interview. He asks about my education, my previous jobs, my availability. He even asks the question about a difficult situation I’ve been in, and how I handled it.

Well, there was this one time I got knocked up by a crime boss and had to raise his son on my own. How did I handle it? I’ll get back to you when I find out.

His voice does things to my entire body that I resent. His suit moves when he leans back. I keep my spine straight and my hands quiet in my lap, and I

answer like a woman who isn’t sitting three feet from the father of her child and who’s trying not to break out in a cold sweat.

“One more question.” He closes the folder, sets it down, and looks at me. “Do you finish what you start, Miss Callahan?”

It’s a strange question, and I’m not at all sure what to make of it. Is it a trick?

“I didn’t use to,” I say. “But I got better. I had a reason to.”

I don’t look at my son when I say it. I don’t have to. He knows. I know he knows. But neither of us will admit it out loud.

“Yes,” Enzo says at last, almost to himself, “I imagine you did.”

He stands. I’m so braced for the rejection, for the cruelty, for him to hand me my coat and my humiliation, but that’s not what he says.

“You’re hired, if you still want the job, that is.”

I don’t know what to say. I blink once, hard.

“Live-in,” he says, in a tone other people use for the weather. “You’d start tomorrow. Seven sharp. Three months’ probation, and if you’re still here at the end of ninety days, perhaps we’ll discuss something more permanent.”

“Why me?” My voice comes out steadier than I expect it to. “The last I heard, you were sending people home within an hour of meeting them.”

“The boy comes, too, obviously.” He blows past the question, and maybe that’s a good thing. “As I said, there’s plenty of room. I imagine you’d like adjacent rooms.” A look crosses his face, but it’s gone before I can get a read on it. “But it’s good you’re bringing him. A child should have somewhere stable to live.”

I stand, and at that moment, I want to ask him if he knows. I’m almost positive he does. Or maybe he doesn’t. Maybe Matthew just rubs him the right way, or maybe this man has a soft spot for single moms.

The question forms on my tongue, then my lips. But before I can ask it, Matthew speaks. “Can I have a cookie now?”

“I would say you’ve earned it,” Enzo replies. “But that, of course, is up to your mother.”

He turns his attention to me.

“Okay. Cookies. Of course.”

I took the job. Of course, I took the job. I couldn’t afford not to. The money is too good, and this massive house is about the closest thing to a vacation or respite I can offer my son.

Carmine Rossi is waiting for us in the hallway with cookies, two for Matthew, one for me.

“Congratulations,” he says. “And welcome.”

“Word travels fast.”

“In this house, you’re more right than you know.”

I leave holding Matthew’s small hand in mine.

“I think it will be fun to live here,” Matthew says, chewing the last bit of cookie, the massive front doors closing behind us. “And he was nice.”

Nice. There’s a whole list of words I’d use to describe Enzo Accardi, but *nice* wouldn’t even be among the top fifty.

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CHAPTER 7

ENZO

From the window of my study, I watch her go, and I don't move until the gate has closed behind her.

My father taught me that you learn the most about a person when they think no one is watching them. Posture always shifts when someone thinks they're out of sight. Bodies tense with anger or sag with relief, and you learn only then how they really felt when they were speaking with you.

Stevie Callahan doesn't drop her shoulders. She walks down the cobbled path with the boy's hand in hers, chin level, and if she's scared or relieved or anything else, she doesn't let it show.

But she's tired, that much is obvious. It's in the set of her spine, the slowness of her step. She's a woman who works, and when she's not working, she's watching out for her son, with little else in between.

But she's tired in a way that money would fix, or at least relieve. And she's somehow even more beautiful than she was that night, which is a detail that made it difficult for me to show restraint.

"You hired her."

Carmine enters without a sound, the way he always does. He approaches me, stopping at my side and watching the empty gate in silence. His voice doesn't go up at the end of his sentence because he's not asking a question.

"I did."

“The temp agency sent six people. You sent them all home within the hour.” He turns from the glass. “This one, you hire, and with a child, no less. You want to tell me about the woman and child I just watched walk out of your house?”

I shouldn’t have hired her. I shouldn’t have done a great many things to make sure she ended up in that chair. But I did, and I’d do every one of them again.

“An old acquaintance,” I say.

“I see.” Carmine has been at my side for years, even before I had a side worth standing at. He reads me better than anyone else on this planet, which is a mixed blessing. For instance, at this moment, I know he’ll see right through any line of bullshit I try to sell him. But I sell him one anyway. It’s part of our dynamic.

“From years ago,” I add.

The ghost of a smile forms on his lips. “And I’m sure she made such an impression with her skills that you remembered her all these years later.”

“Careful, Carmine.”

“I’m always careful, which is why I’m still here.”

I don’t tell him the rest of the story.

I don’t tell him that I went back up to that room with two espressos and a plan I had never once made for a woman. Breakfast. Her name. A second night, and a third, and however many came after that.

I don’t tell him I found the ring on the pillow and the sheets already gone cold. Or what else was on that floor, or the things I told myself about it.

I don’t tell him that I had the building’s cameras pulled before the sun was all the way up, and that I sat in a dark security office and watched her walk out the delivery door fourteen times. Grainy black-and-white. A rabbit mask dangling from her fingers. Chin up. Never once looking back.

I had men walk every block between that alley and the subway. I had them show a still from the footage to every bodega owner and bus driver in

Manhattan. They came back with nothing, every one of them, because I had kept my word and never told her who I was, and I'd never asked who she was. I had her face and nothing else. I'd been arrogant enough to think I'd have time to learn the rest.

She worked that night through a cash-only outfit that staffs masked parties under first names, and the first name on her sheet was Bunny. Luca Santini knew her real one. I could see it in the way he looked at her. But every road to it ran straight through Luca's crew, and any man I asked would have carried my question back to him. Asking would have told Luca she still mattered to me. By the time I found a quieter road, she was gone from Astoria, with no lease, no payroll, and no phone in her own name. She worked cash, off the books, everywhere she went. So I looked the slow way.

And I don't tell him about the drawer.

It's the top drawer of the desk behind me, the one with the lock. The ring is in it. It was my mother's. I wore it on my little finger every day after we buried her, right up until the night I worked it off and slid it onto a stranger's hand. It has been in that drawer ever since. Some nights, when the house has gone quiet and the work is done and there's nothing left between me and my own head, I take it out and turn it over in my fingers like a man worrying a bullet he dug out of his own body.

I am not a sentimental man. I have buried friends without it. I have given orders that would turn Carmine's stomach, and Carmine's stomach is made of iron.

But I kept the ring.

Under the ring is the money she left on the side table that morning. She counted out what she'd earned and left the rest. I've never counted it.

I don't keep things. I kept that.

I counted something else that week. Ricci's fingers. I had Carmine call me after each one, and I listened to every one of them. He tipped her. He looked at her. That was enough.

I don't tell him about the last eight months, either.

About the night one of Luca's soldiers got drunk at a table in my club on Mulberry Street and laughed about a waitress Santini had blacklisted from every decent job in the city. A curvy girl with a smart mouth. The Velvet Room. I knew who it was before he finished the sentence.

Luca never laid a finger on her in all that time. He didn't dare. The whole city heard me say she was mine, and even Luca Santini wasn't stupid enough to touch something I'd claimed. So he did the coward's version instead. He made sure nobody would hire her, and he called it a joke.

Four years I looked for her, and Luca Santini handed her to me over a bottle of grappa.

I found her in two days. She had a boy with her on the subway platform, small and dark-haired, holding her hand. A son. Some other man's, I told myself, and I made a point of never learning more.

Tomorrow, I'll put a phone in her desk drawer and call it secure. It will be. Secure from everyone but me.

She doesn't know any of it. She thinks a desperate recruiter got lucky.

I intend to keep it that way for as long as I possibly can.

"But she did make an impression," Carmine says. "She must have, if you're hiring her."

"She made an impression."

That isn't the word for it. The word for it is the one I don't say out loud, the one that has kept me up more nights than any war.

Mine.

Not the way a man owns a car or a building. The other way. The way the old men in the portraits upstairs used the word, before it meant anything as soft as love. I looked at her across a room full of predators once and something in me decided. Nothing in the five years since has talked it out of that decision.

Today she walked into my study in a cheap blazer and shoes that pinched her, fuller and softer and more tired than the girl in the rabbit mask, and

every cell in my body said the same word it said that night.

Mine.

Then I watched her lift her chin at me like she would rather die than let me see her shake, and I understood the problem.

The thing I want is the one thing I can't take. A woman like that, you take her, and you lose her. You lock a door on her, and you find her gone in the morning with nothing on the pillow at all.

So I will do the hardest thing I have ever done.

I will leave every door in this house unlocked, and I will make it so she never wants to walk through one.

Then there's the boy. Small and serious as a judge, with a stillness I recognized the moment I saw it. He studied me, weighed me, and decided I wasn't dangerous. He's half right. I'm not dangerous to him.

"Boss." Carmine's voice has changed. It's quieter, tinged with warning. "Whoever she is to you, whatever this is, you need to be careful. You're bringing a woman and her child into your home. Don't take it lightly."

"I know who she is, and I know what I'm doing. Nothing about this is being taken lightly."

"And the boy?"

I don't answer that. I've known since I was old enough to understand this life: a man like me gets his empire, and solitude comes bundled with it.

And yet, here she is. The only woman who's managed to make an impression on me is back in my life, and she brought the boy with her. And today, with both of them standing in my study, a small, strange part of me felt a possessiveness that was almost frightening.

I felt like they were mine. Mine to keep, mine to shelter, mine to ruin, if I'm not careful.

Stevie I can understand. Her son is the question I have spent eight months refusing to ask, and I am not going to start asking it tonight.

Either way, I need to be careful. She can work here, and she can bring her son. But they can't get too close.

They can't become liabilities.

"Watch the agency," I tell Carmine. "If anyone starts asking why that woman got this job, I want to know who's asking."

"And the part you're not telling me? Because there is a part you're not telling me."

I watch the gate a moment longer.

"I'll tell you when I've figured it out myself."

The study door opens without a knock, which tells me who it is before I turn around.

"So you hired someone after all."

My sister, Genevieve, crosses to the sideboard, finds the decanter, and pours herself a measure of my best scotch with the steady, practiced hand of a woman who's used to starting her drinking early. I check the clock. Not even two.

"Marta's downstairs acting like Christmas came. There's a child involved, apparently. You're collecting strays now?"

"Good afternoon to you, too."

Genevieve has our mother's face and father's eyes, which always struck me as a particularly cruel genetic hand to be dealt: a beautiful face set with the dark eyes of a predator.

She's thirty-two, dressed in designer clothes and heels with nowhere to be but the liquor cabinets of this house, and her beauty has gone a little brittle. There's a gray cast under her eyes and a tremor in her hands that makes me wonder if she's on the verge of another incident.

“Is it really a good afternoon?” She plops into the chair across from my desk, then settles and peers at me from over the rim of her glass. “You’ve got a look on your face. Was it something the help said?”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m maintaining.” She says it lightly, a line she’s used so many times, it’s worn smooth. “There’s a difference. You’d know it if you ever let yourself feel anything long enough to need maintaining.”

I let it pass. Whatever cruelty she throws at other people is nothing compared to what she saves for herself.

Genevieve was supposed to be standing where I am. And she’ll tell you that, given enough scotch. She’ll tell you the business was supposed to be hers, that she was sharper, hungrier, and that the only thing keeping her down was a father who didn’t take her seriously, and the fact that she was born a woman.

She’s not entirely wrong. She was brilliant from the start. But the part of the Accardi blood that makes its men killers came out in her as a free-floating rage she could only quiet with drink and pills and cards.

My father looked at his brilliant daughter and saw a liability, and he told her so until the bitterness calcified.

“Whatever you’re doing today,” I say, “do it sober. Or do it somewhere that isn’t my study.”

“There it is.” She offers a knowing smile. “That tone. You sound just like Father when you talk like that, you know?” She knows precisely where a comment comparing me to our father lands. And I must show it, because a tinge of satisfaction appears on her face.

“Enough. If you have something worth my time, say it. Otherwise, take your scotch and go.”

The look of satisfaction fades, and she just looks tired. She shakes her head. “God, look at us.”

“Gen…”

“You’d never know we are siblings.”

“Or maybe that’s exactly how you’d know.” I almost smile. “Seriously, Gen, I’ve got work to do.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” She drains the glass, sets it down too hard, and stands. At the door, she stops, one hand on the frame. “Anyway, I didn’t come in here just to stir up bullshit. I came to tell you that the old man wants to see you. He sent down word an hour ago, said it’s time, whatever that means. He wouldn’t tell me. He never tells me anything.” She pauses. “Maybe he’s finally dying. Anyway, a girl can hope.”

“Don’t.”

“Why not?” Now she turns. “He never spent a day worrying about whether I lived or died. I don’t see why I should spend my life worrying about him.”

She leaves, and the door clicks shut behind her.

I stand alone in my study with the afternoon sun turning the room golden, Stevie’s face still on my mind. I think about her, I think about her boy, and I think about what she’s not telling me.

Then I think about my sister, giving herself over to her demons with such intensity, she just might end up buried before the old man.

I straighten my cuffs, button my jacket, and go up to see my father, because in this house, you answer when you’re called.

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CHAPTER 8

ENZO

"Close the door. You're letting the cold in."

It's my father's usual line when I step into his suite. He doesn't joke, and sometimes I wonder if this is the closest he comes to one.

"Pop."

He's seated by the window in the chair he no longer leaves for much, a blanket draped over his knees despite the heat. He's a man who once possessed a frame big enough to fill a doorway. Men once crossed the street to avoid being on the same sidewalk as my father.

Those days are gone. Now, my father is mostly skin and bones, his hands spotted and trembling the same way my sister's do, but for a very different reason. Only his eyes are unchanged. They're flat and black and merciless, taking ruthless measure of me the same way he does any man who crosses his path.

"You look tired," he says, but it's not out of concern. It's an assessment, the way a buyer notes a flaw in a product. "You're letting it show. I taught you better."

I step past the comment. "You sent for me?"

He nods slowly, folds *the New York Times* on his lap with careful movements. "Indeed I did. I sent for you because I've given your request some thought."

I say nothing, but my body tenses just a bit.

He goes on. “You want my voice at the table when the Camorra elders sit down and decide whether you become Don in name, not just in fact.”

“It would matter, coming from you.”

“It would.” He sets the paper aside. “That’s the trouble with it.”

The meeting is a month out. In theory, it’s a formality. The Camorra elders convene, they formally acknowledge me as the new head of the Accardi family, the succession is blessed, and the city goes on turning. But that’s in theory. In practice, a formality is only a formality until someone decides otherwise. And right now, it would appear that my father has made such a decision.

“Here’s what I think,” my father says. “I think a man who needs his father to speak for him isn’t a man the table should be listening to in the first place.”

“That’s not what this is.”

“Isn’t it?” His black eyes don’t move off my face. “When I took my seat, Enzo, no one spoke for me. I walked in alone and made them respect me, and if they hadn’t, I’d have deserved whatever came after. That’s the job. That’s the only job. You stand on your own legs, or you don’t stand.”

“Times have changed.”

“Men haven’t,” he says and waves a trembling hand as if dismissing an entire generation. “You think because they wear better suits now that they’ve stopped being animals? They haven’t. They smell weakness exactly the way they always did, and a son hiding behind his father’s name is the strongest scent there is.”

“There’s a situation developing in the Santini ranks,” I say. “A young one, Luca, is moving faster than he should be able to, pulling men and money toward himself, and he’s doing it by promising the old ways: blood, territory. He’s making the kind of noise that piques the interest of the FBI.”

I let that sit. The last RICO sweep took three families apart and put my uncle in the cell he died in. My father remembers this.

“And he has some sort of personal issue with me. If I go to that table and the elders see that I don’t have your backing, they’ll read it as a rift. And *he’ll* read it as an opportunity.”

For a moment, I think what I’ve said has landed. Something moves behind his flat, black eyes; the old strategist is still in there somewhere, doing the math he spent sixty years doing better than anyone alive.

Then he shakes his head. “The Santinis,” he says, with a contempt so total it’s almost restful, “are nothing. They were nothing when I was young and they’re less than nothing now. A boy like him threatening war, making things personal… that’s a tantrum. You’re frightened of a tantrum.”

“I’m not frightened; I’m preparing.”

“You’re asking me to do your preparing for you.” He turns his face toward the window, toward the garden three floors down. “The answer is no. Whatever you’ve stepped in, you’ll clean it off your own shoe. I’m done fighting. I’ve earned the right to be done.”

“Then *be done*.”

It comes out lower and harder than I intended, before I can stop it, and the old man’s head turns back to me slowly.

We look at each other.

“Then go and run the business,” my father says, turning back to the window. “That’s the arrangement. You run things, and I stay right here in this seat. Tell me, son, how does it feel to be in charge? This little taste I’ve given you, that is. Is it everything you’d hoped it would be?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Get out, Enzo.”

I let out a small sigh of relief when I’m out of his wing, the temperature of the air cooling. I lean against the wall, thinking about the meeting I won’t have backing for. I think about Luca Santini, who would be licking his

chops in anticipation if he were a fly on the wall of my father's room just now.

War. I have no doubt it's on the horizon. Luca will hear I've been passed over for official leadership and interpret this as weakness in the Accardi family.

It'll be the war my father says isn't coming.

And I'll be walking into it alone, exactly the way the old man always said I should.

Gary Wendt runs placements for three hotel groups and half the restaurant floors in Midtown. For four years, every time Stevie Callahan's name crossed his desk, he typed two words beside it. *Not suitable.*

Santini paid him four hundred dollars a month for those two words.

He's still at his desk at nine p.m. when I walk in. Carmine closes the door behind us and stands in front of it.

Wendt knows my face. Everyone in his business does. He stands up so fast his chair rolls into the wall.

"Mr. Accardi. I… what can I…"

"Sit."

He sits.

I set one sheet of paper on his desk. Four years of deposits, every one from a Santini shell company. He reads it, and the color leaves his face one line at a time.

"Three companies wanted her," I say. "You told them no."

"It was just a favor, I didn't know she was…"

"Mine." I let the word sit on the desk between us. "No. You didn't."

I take his right hand by the wrist and lay it flat on the desk, palm down, the way you'd lay out a napkin. He doesn't fight. Men like Gary never do. They're too busy hoping.

I pick up the pen beside his keyboard. Cheap. Chewed at the cap. The pen he wrote it with.

"This is the hand that typed it?"

"Please. Please, I have a…"

I drive the pen through the back of his hand and into the desk.

The sound he makes isn't human. Carmine doesn't blink. I lean down, close enough to smell the fear sweating out of him, and wait until he can hear me over his own breathing.

"This morning I bought the company you work for. When she's ready to leave my employ, you'll call those three companies with your other hand and tell them you made a mistake about the best candidate you ever saw. Until then, you'll keep taking Santini's money and tell me every time he calls." I straighten my cuff. "Leave the pen in until you're done. It'll help you remember."

In the car, I wipe the ink off my fingers with a handkerchief.

"The soldier," I say. "The one who laughed about her at my table on Mulberry Street."

Carmine doesn't ask which one. He was there. "Tonight?"

"Tonight. Quietly. Make it look like the grappa finally caught up with him." I fold the handkerchief and put it away. "I want Santini to wake up tomorrow one man short and spend the rest of the week wondering why."

"Done."

A minute later, Carmine looks up from his phone. "Marta wants to know if the boy eats peas."

I think about Matthew in that chair, swinging his legs, telling me not to draw on my hands.

“Tell her to find out,” I say. “Then tell her to buy whatever he likes.”

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CHAPTER 9

STEVIE

As the car pulls in front of the house and comes to a stop, Matthew tips his head all the way back to take in all four floors of the place. “Is this our house now?”

“It’s the house I work at, bub. Big difference.”

“What’s the difference?”

“About forty million dollars, and probably about twenty thousand square feet and an acre of lawn, too.”

The plan is that I work and keep my head down and my mouth shut. I do not, under any circumstances, mention the tiny human moving in with me is the direct genetic result of the most reckless night of my life with the owner of the place.

Simple. Clean. Foolproof, assuming the fool in question can keep one enormous secret while under the same roof as the man it belongs to.

“Matthew, up the stairs, buddy.”

“Okay.” He pulls his gaze back to me and together we approach the front doors.

The door opens before I knock, and there’s Marta. The look on her face when she sees Matthew could power a small city.

“He came back.” She says it like he’s a sailor returned from sea. “And taller, I think. Have you grown five inches overnight?”

“No,” Matthew says with the crushing literalism of the very young. “That’s not possible.”

She laughs at his seriousness. “You know what? You’re right. But maybe you grew a millimeter. That’s certainly possible.”

“Come in, come in,” she says to us.

I step into the marble hush of the place and feel the exact thing I came here determined not to feel, which is that I could get used to this. One minute into the job and already I’m in danger of liking it.

The temperature of the hallway drops about ten degrees, which is how I know Enzo has arrived before I even turn around.

Enzo Accardi at seven in the morning looks exactly like Enzo Accardi at any other hour, which is to say unfairly, rudely good. He’s wearing a three-piece suit, and his hair is perfect.

“Miss Callahan.”

“Mr. Accardi. Here I am, reporting for duty.”

“You’re on time.”

“You say that like you’re surprised.”

He huffs a quiet laugh. “I suppose I shouldn’t be.”

“That’s right. And besides, this guy’s a little taskmaster, believe it or not.”

Matthew speaks up. “It’s good to be punctual.”

Something almost moves at the corner of Enzo’s mouth, and then he thinks better of it, as if he doesn’t want to make it so obvious so soon that Matthew’s having an effect on him that he didn’t expect.

“Excellent vocabulary, young man,” he says. Enzo offers his huge hand for a shake.

Matthew, however, has his own ideas. He lets go of my hand, and without hurry, he walks to Enzo and lifts both arms straight up in the universal kid language for “pick me up.”

Every drop of blood in my body freezes. I can’t do anything but stand there with a smile plastered on my face, all of my effort and energy allocated to the simple but extremely important task of not letting Enzo see how I feel about what’s happening.

“Oh, he doesn’t usually…” I start, too bright, but Marta is already there, soft and certain.

“He likes you,” she tells Enzo, like it’s the simplest fact in the world. “Go on. He isn’t made of glass.”

Enzo’s surprised at first, and surprise is an expression I’m certain he rarely wears. Then he clears his throat and composes himself, and I watch as Enzo Accardi, quite possibly the most dangerous man in this city, a man whom I’ve personally watched silence a room full of killers with just a few words, reaches down and gathers my son, *our* son, into his arms.

He holds Matthew carefully, like he’s handling something holy, something that might come apart if he breathes wrong. His big hand is spread across the whole width of Matthew’s back. For only an instant, Enzo looks like he has no idea what to do and is terrified of getting it wrong.

“Well, ah, it’s good to see you, young man,” Enzo says.

Matthew says nothing, throwing his arms around Enzo’s neck and giving the man a squeeze. Enzo’s eyes widen for a second, and then he responds by gingerly patting Matthew’s back.

Enzo’s gaze stays on Matthew just a few beats too long. He’s thinking, putting something together in his mind. His eyes move over my son’s face, taking in the dark hair and darker eyes, and his resting “serious face.” Is he realizing just how much Matthew looks like him? Is he thinking about the timeline?

If he is, he doesn’t say so.

“Boss,” Carmine says, standing in the doorway, car keys lost somewhere in one enormous hand, “we’re late.”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

Enzo hands Matthew back to me almost too quickly, the way you set down something hot.

“Marta will get you settled in, give you the lay of the land,” he says, already turning. “We’ll go over your responsibilities this evening.”

And then he’s gone, out into the bright morning and into the low black car waiting at the bottom of the steps. When they’re gone, I let out the mother of all breaths.

“He likes you, too,” Marta says mildly, watching the door close.

I decide very firmly not to ask which of us she means.

The garden stretches for what seems like an impossible distance in the city. There’s real grass, actual trees, and a stone path winding between them and disappearing into the distance. After four years of playgrounds that are mostly rubberized concrete and a square of sky between buildings, where you have to constantly check the ground for broken glass or worse, my son looks at that green like he’s been shown the surface of the moon.

“Is that ours?” he breathes.

“For now.”

We head upstairs. On the second landing, Marta slows at the foot of the next staircase, the one going up to the floors above, and her voice changes, just

slightly, lighter and firmer all at once.

“The fourth floor,” she says, “is Mr. Accardi’s. The elder Mr. Accardi, Enzo’s father.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize he lived here.”

“He lives here. He does not come down.” She gives a small final smile. “It’s best to think of the fourth floor as nonexistent. It does not concern us. You will most likely never see it.”

Matthew has stopped on the stairs. He’s looking up past us, past the landing, up the long well of the staircase toward the closed door at the top with the still, listening look he gets, the one that has never once in his life been about nothing.

“Matthew. Come on, bub.” He comes, but he looks back once.

“Yes,” Marta says. “Come along, your suites are just ahead.”

Marta opens a door, and my jaw drops.

The room is bigger than the entire apartment I left in Bushwick this morning, possibly bigger than my last two apartments stacked together. There’s a bed I could lose a person in; windows the height of the ceiling, allowing warm, golden light to pour in; a sitting area; and a closet that’s practically an apartment-within-an-apartment. My whole life used to fit into a space smaller than the room’s area rug.

“And through here,” Marta says, opening a door in the side wall, “is the bath, and beyond it, the second room, for Matthew.”

“I thought you both would like to have your own space but still be together in a sense. I hope I judged right.”

I have to look at the window for a second before I can answer her, because the truth is, she judged it exactly, devastatingly right, and I don’t know what to say about that. Nobody has arranged anything around what I might want in a very, very long time.

“You judged it exactly right,” I manage.

Eventually, it’s quiet. I sit down on the edge of the bed in this impossibly huge room that’s somehow mine for the time being. I let myself feel it, the space, the safety, the fact that Luca couldn’t get to me here, even if he wanted to.

I text Candy a picture of the room. Her reply comes in under a minute: eleven crying emojis and DO NOT COME BACK. Then, a second later: *Kidding. Come Sunday. Bring my favorite man.*

It could work. That’s the dangerous part. Sitting here in all this warm, golden light, with my son laughing in the next room, it honestly feels like it could work.

Then I think of Enzo’s face in the half second before he handed Matthew back to me, and the warmth cools by a few degrees. I remember exactly what I am in this beautiful house: a woman with a secret, hoping with everything I have that the man who hired me never learns the one thing that would bring the whole gorgeous place down on our heads.

“Just three months,” I tell myself.

In the next room, Matthew flings himself onto the bed for the twelfth time, shrieking with joy, already completely and totally at home.

That’s the part I’m afraid of.

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CHAPTER 10

ENZO

Luca's casino, the Gilded Crown, is located in Ozone Park, a few minutes' drive from the Aqueduct racetrack, and it announces itself the way Luca Santini announces everything, loudly, expensively, and without an ounce of good taste.

You can see the place from the expressway, a big slab of black glass and gold trim, the name spelled out in letters so large they could be seen from a passing plane. The logo is a neon crown that pulses on and off in a way that makes you want to get inside, just so you won't have to look at it.

"He built this with money he took from three families who trusted him," Carmine says beside me as we move through the floor. "And he created the tackiest goddamn thing in the metro area."

"It's a tell, just like everything else about him." My pace is even. "He's loud and wants attention. This place is merely an extension of that need."

We're early, which is deliberate. We're scheduled to meet with Jack Ketch, Luca's counselor. But I'm in no hurry to start the meeting. I want Luca to see that I'm here and that he's still operating on my time. The meeting starts when I want it to start.

I'm threading through the crowd, heading toward the private elevator at the back, when I see something at the edge of the floor that catches my eye. At the sight, everything in me goes cold and still at once.

Sitting at one of the high-limit poker tables in a roped-off bay under a chandelier shaped like, God help us, a crown, is my sister. She's slumped in a chair, a tumbler of something brown sweating on the felt in front of her, along with a scattering of chips she's in the process of losing.

"Carmine."

"I see her." His voice is flat and careful. "I can handle it."

"No." The word lands flat and final. "Stay close, but I'll do it."

Genevieve doesn't notice me until I'm standing over her. And when she does, her face registers guilt and defiance, topped off with the sort of sloppy smile that makes it clear she's had more than a few of the free cocktails.

Her pupils are black and blown wide, and there's a sheen of sweat at her hairline. I've seen her hammered enough times to know this isn't that. This involves a needle or a mirror, and despite everything she's put this family through, my heart squeezes the way it always does.

"Big brother." She lifts the tumbler in a wobbling toast. "Come to play? They've got a wonderful table here. Very generous. I'm doing them a favor, really, the way I keep donating."

"Get up."

"I'm in the middle of a hand."

"You're in the middle of a goddamn Santini casino, handing him your money and dignity in equal measure. I'm here to discuss our family's future, and you're throwing yours away." My voice is quiet enough for the rest of the table not to hear, but loud enough for her.

Something flickers behind the chemical glaze over her eyes. For an instant, I see the smart, perceptive woman she used to be.

Then she's gone. The Genevieve I don't like returns, letting out an ugly laugh, loud enough to make heads turn.

"And out comes the *Don*." She says the title like a slur. "Or the *wannabe* Don, at least. God, the way you pretend like you give a shit about me makes me sick. You just want me out of your sight so I'm not embarrassing you.

As long as I’m not, you could care less what happens to me. You’d only notice I was gone when you realized no one was drinking your expensive booze.”

It hits. She always knows exactly where to aim. But her hand trembles around the glass, and I can see it for what it is: chemical bravado.

“Carmine,” she slurs as Carmine appears beside me, the effect like a mountain quietly moving to my side.

“Miss Accardi, let me walk you out. I can drive you home myself.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

I crouch, just for a second, so we’re level, so the next part is only for her. “Gen. Listen to me. If you’re going to do this, do it in a place where I don’t have to worry about your safety. You’re in enemy territory right now.”

For precisely one moment, the bravado fades and she looks at me like we’re kids again, and our father is shouting downstairs at us.

Then the mask flips right back on.

“Fine.”

She stands too fast, sways, and catches herself on my arm like she planned it.

“Fine. Wouldn’t want to embarrass *the Don*. God forbid.”

“Come on, Gen,” Carmine says. He offers his own arm, and I can tell by the flash of her eyes that she’s realizing in this moment she’s too far gone to make it to the car on her own.

“You’re exactly like him, you know,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “*Exactly* like him. The business is all that matters.”

Carmine takes her out. I watch them go, my sister leaning against the shoulder of the most loyal man I know, the gold light sliding off her ruined, beautiful face until the darkness outside of the casino doors swallows them.

Then I stand alone in the middle of my enemy’s territory, trying to put myself back together.

The game face goes on. I've worn it longer than I've worn anything else. Carmine soon returns.

"Sent her back in the car with the guys. They'll have her home in a half hour. Told them not to let her leave."

"Good." I straighten my cuffs. "Let's go and disappoint Mr. Ketch."

Ketch is waiting for us in a private room done up like the rest of the place, all black lacquer and gold, a bottle of something expensive already open on the table. We're on the top floor of the casino, the view expansive enough to see the glow of the Manhattan skyline far off in the distance.

Ketch is a lean, gray, lawyerly creature, Luca's counselor and mouthpiece, the kind of guy who says terrible things in a smooth, polished voice. He doesn't stand when I enter.

"Mr. Accardi." He gestures at the chair across from him as though it's his to offer. "Welcome."

I say nothing, making my way to the center of the room.

He stays seated. "Sit. Drink. We're all friends."

"We're not." I sit, but I don't drink. Carmine takes up a position by the door. "But you know that already. Say what Luca sent you to say, Jack. I have a long night ahead of me."

He smiles a slick car-salesman smile. "Mr. Santini wanted me to extend, first, his congratulations. Word is the elders convene soon. A new Don formally. It's a great moment for your family." He pauses, then adds, "Such as it is."

"Such as it is."

He turns his glass slowly on the lacquer table. "It's no secret the Accardi operation isn't what it was under your father. You run things, but without the title, your territories run loose. Bad for order. Bad for business."

“Get to the point.”

“Mr. Santini is prepared to be generous. Quietly, before the elders sit down, Mr. Santini absorbs the waterfront, the Sutphin operations, and the three clubs in the east that have been, let’s say, underperforming under your stewardship.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “And what do I get out of giving Luca such a gift?”

“Easy. You walk into that room as a Don who consolidated before taking the reins, with a gesture of goodwill toward your biggest competitor. Successions are bloody, Enzo. Luca’s doing you a favor, really.”

The audacity of it is almost magnificent. He’s asking me to hand Luca a third of the family holdings, gift-wrapped, and to thank him for the privilege of looking competent while I do it.

“And if I decline this generosity?”

“Then you walk into that meeting as a man who couldn’t hold what his father left him.”

“You’re assuming I won’t be able to hold my own territories.”

Ketch smirks. “Like I said, successions bring chaos. Some of your territories are already on the brink. All it would take is a little push.” He nudges his glass toward the edge of the table with the tip of his finger. “And they might fall into other hands.”

“So, it’s a threat.”

“Not a threat, just a suggestion of possibility. And it’s not just the territories. Your sister. Genevieve, is it? Let’s just say she has her troubles. And she lacks the discretion not to gamble at our tables. Nothing about your position projects strength. Strength is what the elders look for. They want to be sure the Camorra is in good hands. The last thing they want is the most powerful family in the city in the hands of someone who overestimates his own abilities.”

I reach across the table, close my hand around the back of his neck, and bring his face down to the black lacquer. Not hard enough to break

anything. Just hard enough that his cheek is flat against the table, an inch from the glass he was so proud of nudging.

Carmine doesn't move from the door. Nobody else in the casino would dare.

"Say my sister's name again," I tell him, very softly. "Go on. I'd like to hear how it sounds."

He doesn't say it.

I let him go and sit back, and wipe my palm on his napkin.

I let the silence sit. It's a good silence; I've spent my life learning to build them. Ketch holds it longer than most men could, which tells me he's good at his job, and then his eyes flick, just once, to his own glass. It's the first tell that this conversation isn't going quite the way he'd hoped.

I lean forward and press my palms together. "Here's my reply. I want you to deliver it to Luca just as I say it." I pause to be sure he understands. "Luca will not touch one square foot of Accardi ground, not the waterfront, not Sutphin, he won't so much as sit on a single barstool in any of my clubs. And if a single one of his people comes into my territory with anything but deference, I'm not going to send a lawyer. I'll come myself."

Ketch keeps his eyes on mine, trying not to flinch.

"And when I come," I continue, "I won't send a warning to Luca. I'll send his man back to him in a body bag. Did you get all of that?"

Ketch swallows. Hard. Then he forces an easy smile onto his face. "I got it, Enzo."

"Mr. Accardi."

"I got it, Mr. Accardi."

I rise. "Good. Was there anything else?"

"Not a thing. Have a good night."

I reply with a quick nod before leaving.

On the elevator ride down, Carmine at my side, I begin to turn the conversation over in my mind. Ketch should be worried. Even with his cheek on the lacquer, he wasn't. He should've paled, should've balked, should've done something. He didn't. He was cool and calm, mostly. A man carrying a threat like that back to Luca should have shown more fear than he did.

Ketch not being worried could very well mean my rejection of Luca's offer was expected. Hoped for, even.

Did this meeting go exactly how Luca hoped it would?

The thought lodges in my mind, and it won't move. Plus, my mind has not been right since this morning, when Matthew climbed into my arms and looked at me with eyes so similar to mine that it was like looking in a mirror.

He is four, or close to it. Marta told me before I asked. I do the arithmetic I've refused to let myself do for eight months. The masquerade. The ring on the pillow. The woman who walked out a delivery door before dawn and vanished so completely that it took me more than four years, and Luca Santini's spite, to find her again.

Nearly five years gone. A child of four. Her son, with my hair, my eyes, my stillness, my way of looking at people as if able to see right through them.

Her son.

Maybe mine.

The elevator doors open and the casino floor blurs. I don't hear a single chime. Luca is unafraid. Perhaps ready for war. Perhaps wanting it. And somewhere in my house, asleep down the hall from his mother, is a boy who might be the one thing in this city I can't afford to have.

I turn to Carmine.

"The car."

Moments later, I'm in the backseat, the Gilded Crown melting into the distance behind us. I could have the truth by morning. I want to hear it from

her.

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CHAPTER 11

STEVIE

"Where's the boss?"

"He's out. After-hours business."

I don't want to know what that means.

My desk sits beside his. For some reason, that's the first thing I notice when Marta brings me to the study that evening. There are two desks in his study, the room where he interviewed me. His is a monster, a huge antique thing I remember from the interview.

Mine is smaller, newer, and set against the side wall. It's angled deliberately, so that anyone sitting at it faces the same direction he does, beside him. I'm not sure what it means, but I've no doubt he did it for a reason.

She nods toward my desk, and I notice something placed neatly on it, right in the center. "He left you a note with some rules of the house. I'll be around if you need me."

I move to the desk. On the blotter, squared to the edges, is a folder with my name on it and a single sheet of cream paper laid on top. The sheet turns out to be a letter, handwritten, in a slashing black script that looks exactly like how I pictured he'd write.

Miss Callahan,

Notes, in order of importance:

1. My calendar. I keep two. You'll keep the real one, and you will never discuss its contents with anyone, including people who tell you they already know what's on it. They don't.

2. I receive a great deal of correspondence. You'll sort and summarize it for me, and in time, you'll learn my voice and answer the less important business in my name. Until then, you sign nothing.

3. Marta runs the house and Carmine runs the affairs outside the house. You take orders from me but defer to them. They are my authority when I'm not here.

4. You will see and hear things in this house. You will repeat none of them. This is not a request, and it is the term on which all the others depend.

5. You'll be paid weekly. The first payment is already in your account. There's a phone in the drawer. It's yours. It's secure. Keep it on you.

You have a sharp tongue. Good. I have no use for people who are afraid of me. I have a great deal of use for people who are not.

E.A.

I read it twice. The second time, I notice there's no welcome, no pleasantries, no mention of Matthew. Did I expect him to? The truth is, I have no idea what to expect of him.

I get to work, even though no one has told me to. The calendar's a labyrinth and the correspondence is worse, and for a couple of hours, I lose myself in it the way I haven't lost myself in anything since I don't know when. The simple animal pleasure of being good at a thing, of bringing order to someone else's chaos for a paycheck, feels good.

Somewhere down the hall, faint through the old walls, I can hear my son laughing. The sound stops me cold. Marta's got him in the kitchen, the two of them having some cookies and milk. Every now and then, his laugh floats down the corridor, the sort of surprised shriek of delight only kids his age are capable of, and the kind of laugh I hardly hear from him these days.

By the time I’m done poking around the study, and Matthew’s down for the night, I’m restless and wrung out all at once. The house is too big and too quiet to resist. So I do the thing I’m probably not supposed to do on my first night.

I go exploring.

I almost turn back. Then I find the library, and I forget about turning back entirely. It’s two stories, with a ladder on a brass rail and a spiral staircase in the corner. The smell is pure heaven, old paper and rich leather, a smell only books can emit.

I step into the space, running my fingers along the spines without pulling out a book just yet. Some of them are behind glass, and some of them are in languages I can’t read. There’s a globe taller than Matthew, and on the walls between the shelves are pictures of the family, old portraits, going back generations.

The paintings are of hard-faced men with angular features and dark eyes, as well as unsmiling women who practically radiate matriarchal power. I can almost *feel* the weight and strength of the Accardi line as I stand in the middle of the room.

I find Enzo’s father among them, younger, terrifying, painted in his prime, with a hand on the shoulder of a small solemn boy who could only be Enzo, who could, God help me, be Matthew, the resemblance running down through the generations like a current.

I stand there for so long looking at those faces that I lose track of time, because I realize these aren’t just paintings of random men. No, they’re part of a bloodline.

My son’s bloodline.

Whatever happens in this house, whatever secrets it holds, whatever history it carries, my son is the newest addition to it.

I make myself leave the room before I become too sentimental.

And in the corridor outside, I nearly trip over Genevieve.

She’s seated on the floor near the stairs, one hand white-knuckled on the banister as if holding on for dear life, an empty wineglass in the other hand. I’m not sure what’s going on, but it looks as if she fell to the floor, tried to get up, but is having trouble finishing what she’d started.

Her eyes find me, and they’re bright and wide for a second, as if she’s reverted for just that instant into a little girl, unsure of where she is and what’s happened to her.

Then they narrow, and she snorts.

“Oh,” she says, focusing on me with effort. “It’s the help.”

“That’s me.” I approach slowly and crouch a little next to her without getting too close. “And since I’m the help, I might as well ask if you need some. You want a hand?”

“From you?” She laughs, and it’s an awful sound, all ragged edges. “God, the little secretary wants to help me out. Isn’t that just lovely.”

She tries to pull herself up using the banister, but her foot slides again and she hits the ground, the wineglass tumbling out of her hand but, thankfully, landing on the runner without shattering into a million pieces.

I don’t think about it. You don’t, when you’ve spent your life around people coming apart. I just move in and get an arm under hers and take her weight.

“Don’t,” she says, even as she lets me. “Don’t you dare be kind to me. I can’t stand it.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I lie. “Just don’t want to explain to your brother why his new assistant let his sister crack her head open on her first day on the job. Up we go. Lean on me. There you go.”

“Where are your rooms?” I ask, guiding her toward the stairs.

“This floor. Just… just down the hall. At the end.”

As we pass the stairs, she stops dead, swaying, and looks down the dark hall toward the staircase that goes up to the off-limits floor. Her face is tense, as if she’s scared.

“He’s up there, you know.” There’s a tinge of bitterness in her tone. “The old man. Our father. He’s up there, sitting in the dark in that room he never leaves. And you know why he does it? Because of what he’s done.”

She pauses, her eyes still fixed on the fourth floor. I don’t say a word.

“He’d never admit it. Not in a million years. But all the things he’s done… they weigh on him.” She raises a finger. It trembles. “But don’t get it twisted: He’s not sorry for any of it. Not ever. He’s just scared of the consequences. But if you ask me, I think the consequences are up there with him, like ghosts.”

She turns her eyes back to me, and I see unmistakable fear. “Run. It’s not too late. Take your kid and run and never come back.”

The hair stands up on my arms. I don’t say anything. There’s nothing to say to a truth that big from a stranger on a staircase, and she’s already moving again, already pulling me on toward her own door.

“There,” she says, pointing. “That one.”

I get her into her beautiful room that’s gone to chaos: clothes everywhere, bottles on every surface, the curtains drawn. I get her onto the bed. I take her shoes off and pull a blanket up over her and set the wastebasket within reach of her head.

She’s mostly gone by then, sliding into oblivion. But as I straighten up to leave, her hand shoots out and catches my wrist, hard, and her eyes open and fix on me with a sudden, terrible clarity, like for one second the fog has burned all the way off.

“He was kind once,” she says. “Our father. Enzo pretends he never was. Maybe it’s easier to imagine that he never loved us than that he once did but stopped.” Her grip loosens. Her eyes drift. “It’s this house. This family. We’re cursed.”

Then she’s asleep, or close enough, her breathing deep and ragged.

I stand over Genevieve Accardi in the wreck of her beautiful room, and I think about what she said, what it could mean, how much truth there was to it.

And for the first time since I walked back through that gate, I let myself wonder if I’ve made a terrible mistake.

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CHAPTER 12

STEVIE

I walk out of Genevieve's room with her last words, before passing out, playing over and over in my mind.

Cursed.

Then I see Enzo, and I stop breathing. He's standing at the stairs, still as stone. It doesn't even look like he's breathing. The hall light catches one side of his face and leaves the other dark. His expression is blank, and that blankness is about the most frightening thing I've ever seen on a human face.

He knows.

"My study," he says quietly. "Now."

Luca got *loud*, like his anger was half a performance with an audience in mind. Not Enzo. Enzo is quiet, which is somehow worse.

He doesn't wait for me to follow him. Instead, he turns slowly and makes his way downstairs, the dull, heavy thud of his footfalls fading as he does.

He knows I'm going to follow him, and I do. My legs wobbling, I hurry down the stairs and then the hall. The study door is open just enough to cast a warm glow into the hallway. I approach the door and see him standing right inside. My heartbeat stutters.

Without making eye contact, I hurry into the study, noting the heat radiating off him as I pass. Then he shuts the door with a click as I take a seat, my

pulse pounding in my ears.

For a long moment, Enzo doesn't speak. He crosses slowly over to the windows and stands with his back to me and his hands in his pockets. I sit in the middle of that enormous room and wait, which is a punishment in its own right.

"How old is he?"

"Mr. Accardi…"

"How old is the boy, Stevie? It's not a difficult question. You know the answer to the day."

"Four." My voice is steadier than I am. "He's four."

"Four."

He turns finally. The controlled blankness is cracking a little, and an emotion I can't quite make out is breaking through. Anger? Sadness? Both?

"And it's been a little under five years since you left that ring on the pillow and slipped out of my life." He takes a slow breath. "So I'll ask you once, Stevie, and I'll only ask once. Is he mine?"

I try to lie. God help me, I try, because lying is the only defense I have left, and because the truth in this room would paint a target on my son's back.

"No." My voice holds. I don't know how. "I was seeing someone after you. A few months, nothing serious. He moved to Phoenix before Matthew was born. He's not in the picture."

Enzo doesn't move. He looks at me for a long time, the way I imagine he looks at men across a negotiating table, waiting for the crack.

I don't give him one. I've had five years of practice.

"A man in Phoenix," he says finally.

"Yes."

"What was his name?"

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.” The corner of his mouth moves, but there’s nothing amused in it. “I held your son. And I have spent my whole life across tables from men who lie to me for a living. You’re very good. You’re better than most of them.” He steps closer, and my heart slams against my ribs. “But you blinked when I said *mine*.”

“I didn’t…”

“So here’s what I’m going to do.” His voice drops, low and even and frightening. “I’m going to take your word for it. Tonight. I’m going to let you keep your man in Phoenix, because you’re sitting in my study looking at me like I’m the thing under the bed, and I won’t pull the truth out of you with my hands. But understand me, Stevie. I don’t forget anything. That boy is going to grow up under my roof, and every single day, I’m going to be looking at my own face.”

The room tilts. I grip the arm of the chair.

“Tell me why,” he says, quieter. “Not the boy. You. Why did you run?”

“I was twenty,” I say. “I was twenty and broke, and I had just found out through a door that the man I’d spent the best night of my life with was Enzo Accardi. A billionaire. A crime lord. The men outside that door said your name like it was a warning, and I knew exactly what it meant. What was I supposed to do? Wait in your bed for you to wake up and decide what I was to you?”

“You could have asked me.”

“Asked you what? Whose fingers you were breaking before breakfast?”

He doesn’t answer. That’s the answer.

“I should go,” I say on reflex. The oldest one I own. “I can find another job. I’ll be out by the weekend. You don’t have to see either of us again.”

I turn to the door. He moves fast, the predator under the suit finally showing, a man crossing a room to stop a woman from leaving him a second time.

I flinch. I don’t mean to. It’s pure instinct, an old fear I keep buried, and it comes up at the sight of a man like him closing the distance.

It stops Enzo like a wall. He freezes two feet from me.

Very slowly, he steps back and takes his hand out of the space between us. I watch him make himself do it.

“The door isn’t locked,” he says, low and rough. “I told you that five years ago, and it’s still true. If you walk out of it, I won’t drag you back.” His eyes hold mine. “But you ran from me once. You won’t get a head start twice.” A beat. “I will always know where you went. I want you to understand that before you decide.”

It should frighten me. It does. It also does something else, something low and hot and shameful that I don’t have a name for yet.

Because Luca would have blocked the door. Luca did block it, more than once. And this man just told me he would let me go and then watch me for the rest of my life, and some starving part of me heard both halves and wanted them.

I look at the door.

I cross the space he just made between us, all of it, and I put my hand flat on his chest the way I did the first night and feel the heavy thud of his heart.

“Stevie.” It’s a warning. “If you touch me right now, I’m not going to be able to…”

“I know,” I say. “I didn’t ask you to.”

And five years of longing and resentment and curiosity and grief and desire that never stopped, not even once, finally explodes to the surface.

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CHAPTER 13

STEVIE

Enzo doesn't move at first. He stands rigidly, as if trying to resist me.

Then he gives in.

"Stevie." My name comes from his mouth, low and rough.

I rise on my toes and kiss him.

This isn't the same as the masquerade night. I can feel it already. That night was about discovery, curious hands touching new skin. This is five years of grief and longing and resentment detonating all at once. Our mouths collide and his hands fist my hair, tilting my head exactly where he wants it. I give it right back, scraping my nails down his chest and pulling at his shirt.

He walks me backward to the desk and sweeps the papers off when we get near enough. The edge of the desk bites into the backs of my thighs. The press of the hard wood reminds me that this is his domain, his place of control.

He lifts me onto the desk in one motion. My dress rides high. His mouth is on my throat, open and hot, teeth scraping the skin there, until my head falls back and a broken sound slips out of me.

"Stevie," he says against my skin, a warning and a question at once. His voice is gravel and smoke.

I answer by yanking at his belt, pulling it like a ripcord and tossing it aside.

My clothes come off, and he pauses, stepping back a little, just enough to take in the sight of my body. His expression changes, and I'm confused because I don't know what he's thinking.

Then it hits me: it's reverence.

Not just the lust and passion from that first night, but something heavier.

He reaches out, tracing the shape of my breasts with his fingertip. Then he moves his touch down to the soft curve of my belly, then the faint silver lines low on my hips. This is the first time a man has seen me naked since the pregnancy.

"I know I'm different…"

"You carried him," he says, cutting me off. "You carried a child, and you're all the more beautiful for it. I won't hear a single word of apology for what I see right now."

My chest tightens, and I chew my lower lip, not sure how to handle the words he just offered me.

I don't let the sweetness of the moment linger. I attack the buttons of his shirt with my fingers, pulling at his collar and scattering them to the floor. He grins at my urgency, and I push the shirt off his shoulders, tracing the hard planes of his muscle with my fingertips, my pussy clenching at the feel of his skin against mine.

I shove his slacks and underwear down, his cock springing out thick, flushed, and already leaking at the tip. The sight of him bare in this room, in the place where he decides fates, sends another pulse of heat through me.

He drops to his knees. His mouth is on me before I can say or do anything. Pleasure explodes through me, his tongue hot and relentless and stroking slow and deep. He presses his tongue to my clit, then kisses me there, and I moan loudly. My hands plunge into his hair and I grab him, directing him right where I need him.

Enzo obeys, growling into me, the vibration pulling sharp cries from my throat. I'm close, shaking, hips rolling against his face, and he pulls back.

“Not yet,” he says, his voice dark.

His eyes meet mine from between my thighs, narrowing just enough to let me know the power play is happening, his control turning into focus. He licks me, sucks me, slips a finger into my wet folds. The tension ratchets higher, and I whimper in frustration, the denial making everything more intense.

Then I snap back into focus.

My turn.

I slide off the desk and guide him into the chair behind it. He lets me, not resisting, sitting with his gorgeous, thick cock pointed straight up at me.

I drop to my knees between his spread thighs, leaning forward and licking the bead of precum off the end. I open my mouth and take him inside. He groans as I seal my lips around him, his cock big and heavy on my tongue. I taste the salt of him, the evidence of how badly he wants this. He’s too big to take fully into my mouth, so I use my hands for the rest, cupping his balls and gripping his shaft.

His fingers weave into my hair, not guiding or forcing but holding on. He groans, a word of Italian slipping out of his mouth that I’m sure is a curse. I hollow my cheeks, taking him into my mouth as deeply as I can.

Enzo gasps, his hips twitching and his control fraying, and I find myself strangely loving how I’m making him fall apart. I keep sucking, lashing him with my tongue and stroking him, secretly hoping to push him over the edge, even though he’s trying with everything to hold back.

“Stevie. Fuck. Stop.” He pulls me up before he finishes. “I need to be inside you. Now.”

We come together then, urgent and half standing. He lifts me, turns us, and drives into me against the wall beside the desk in one long, relentless stroke. The stretch burns, but the fullness is perfect, devastating. I gasp at the invasion, nails digging into his shoulders. He stills for half a second, buried deep, jaw clenched.

“Five years.” He breathes the words against my mouth. “Five years I’ve been wanting this.”

Then he moves. He plunges in all the way to the root, stretching me perfectly, my eyes widening at the intensity of it.

He holds, then pulls back and plunges again. Soon, he sets a rhythm, with deep, punishing thrusts rocking into me. Every slide drags against that perfect spot until I’m practically sobbing. His hand moves to my breast, thumb circling my nipple. The other takes my cheek into his palm, holding me, caressing me, caging me in.

“*Sei mia*,” he growls, filthy and reverent. “Mine.”

His hand slides from my cheek down to my throat. He doesn’t squeeze. He just rests it there, warm and heavy, his thumb on my pulse, and looks at me with a question in his eyes.

I nod. I want it. I want to feel how much of me he could take and doesn’t.

His fingers settle, the lightest pressure along the sides of my neck, and the whole world narrows to his eyes and his hand and the brutal, perfect rhythm of his hips.

I can feel the grief breathing through the heat. There’s not just lust in what’s happening; there’s loss and ache and a reconnection that neither of us knew we’d ever have. I glance down, watching his thickness drive into me over and over, and I fall past the edge.

“*Enzo*!”

I shatter around him, clenching hard, my vision whiting out. He holds back, but just barely, his hips grinding through my orgasm.

He carries me to the wide leather sofa without pulling out. We land in a tangle.

Now, it’s slower, deeper, face-to-face. Eye contact I can’t escape. The anger has spent itself; what’s left underneath is the thing neither of us will name. He moves in long, rolling strokes, watching every flicker across my face. I wrap my legs around him, meet him thrust for thrust.

And this intimacy terrifies me more than the frenzy did.

A second orgasm builds more slowly. It rolls through me like a wave I can't outrun. I come again, gasping into his mouth, and still he holds.

We shift once more. I push him onto his back on the sofa and straddle him, reclaiming the pace. My hands brace on his chest as I sink down, taking him fully. I set the rhythm, slow at first, then faster, grinding my clit against him with every roll of my hips.

He gazes at me hard, his hands gripping my thighs like he's worried I might slip away. The power is all mine now, and I take it, riding him hard, my breasts bouncing, his hands sliding up my sides and tracing my curves.

Then he takes over, grabbing my hips and holding me in place as he pounds upward with incredible force. This one builds so powerfully I worry it might break me.

"Come with me," he demands, his voice shattered. "Now, Stevie."

We finish together. His control is finally, completely gone. He spills deep inside me, pulse after pulse, a guttural sound tearing from his chest as his hips grind like he never wants to leave.

I clench around him again, the release carrying five years of grief and want and fear collapsing into one blinding moment.

When our orgasms fade, we stay locked together, our bodies trembling and sweat-slicked. He wraps his heavy, warm arms around me, stroking my hair back from my damp forehead. Then he guides me down flush on top of him and places a kiss on my temple, then my cheek, then the corner of my mouth.

The comedown is where everything floods back. We're tangled on the sofa in his study, the city lights glowing behind the glass. And nothing's been solved. In fact, everything is more complicated now. His heartbeat slows, but mine picks up again, unease settling in my bones.

Somewhere under the panic, a smaller, practical thought surfaces: no condom this time. I've been on the pill since Matthew, every single day, alarm on my phone. I tell myself that's enough.

He traces a slow circle on my bare shoulder, memorizing me again. I don't pull away. For the first time since that night, I don't want to run, and that's more frightening than running ever was.

Panic hits me in a flash. My body tenses.

"Something wrong?" he asks.

I slide off him and onto my feet, staring blankly ahead. Without saying a word, I move over to my bra and panties and clothes, slowly stepping into them.

"Stevie, say something."

I purse my lips and compose myself and then speak. "This isn't a good idea. This has to stay professional. Not like this."

When I'm dressed, I turn toward the door, the door he said would always be open, and rush toward it.

True to his word, he says nothing as I throw it open and run out into the hall, hoping he didn't catch a glimpse of the tears stinging my eyes.

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CHAPTER 14

ENZO

From my study window, I watch the boy meet his own personal playground for the first time.

I had it installed before dawn. I made the call at four in the morning, after Stevie fled the study and left me standing in the wreck of my own desk with her taste still in my mouth and her lie still in my ears.

By sunrise there were men in the garden assembling cedar and rope and a slide. There's a swing and a small wooden fort and a climbing wall scaled down to the size of a four-year-old.

Now Matthew is out there in the cold bright morning with Marta, shrieking as she pushes him on the swing. I stand at the reinforced glass and watch him the way I'd watch a man across a table. The tilt of his head. The way he checks the gate before he lets himself laugh.

I know that check. I was doing it at his age.

"Phoenix," Carmine says behind me. I told him at five this morning, while the contractors were hauling lumber through the side gate, and he has had two hours to think about it the way he thinks about everything, slowly and all the way to the bottom. "A man in Phoenix."

"That's her story."

"You want me to find out if there's a man in Phoenix?"

"There's no man in Phoenix."

“Then you want me to pull the birth certificate.”

I turn from the window. “No.”

He waits. Carmine is the only man alive who can wait at me.

“If I pull it, then I know,” I say. “And if I know, I’ll act on it. I’ll take him to a lawyer and put my name on him and do exactly what my father would have done, and she’ll be gone by Sunday with him under her arm.” I look back out at the garden. “She lied to my face because she’s terrified of what I’ll do with the truth. I won’t prove her right by stealing it.”

“And if Luca gets curious before she gets honest?”

That’s the question that kept me up all night. I don’t have a good answer, so I give him the true one. “Then I burn down whatever he touches. Nothing leaves this house, Carmine. Not a guess, not a rumor. You, me, Marta.”

“Marta already knows. She knew the second she saw him in the hall.”

Of course she did.

“To a man like Luca,” Carmine says, “a child in your house is a soft place. An exposed throat.”

“I know what Luca is.”

“I’m not talking about Luca. I’m talking about you.” He tips his chin toward Stevie’s desk. “Look.”

A photograph is propped against her monitor in a small, cheap frame, the kind they sell in drugstores. I cross to it without meaning to.

It’s Matthew at maybe six months old, in a high chair, spaghetti sauce smeared across his face and fists and hair. His mouth is open in an ecstatic laugh, two tiny teeth showing at the bottom.

I stand there too long. I can feel Carmine watching me do it.

“Two teeth,” I say.

Carmine doesn’t answer.

“If he’s mine, I missed that.” I set the frame down exactly where it was, squared to the edge of her desk. “I missed all of it.”

“Then don’t miss the rest,” Carmine says. “That part’s still up to you.”

He leaves. I stay at the glass and watch the boy climb the little wall and stand at the top of it with both arms in the air, like a man who just took a city.

Stevie walks in at seven sharp, dressed for work and armored for war. She doesn’t look at the playground through the window. She looks at me, then at the couch, then very carefully at neither.

“Mr. Accardi.”

“Miss Callahan. Your son seems to be enjoying the new playground.”

Her mouth tightens. “You built him a playground overnight.”

“I had productive insomnia.”

“Most people stay up all night watching Netflix.”

“I’m not most people. And a boy needs a place to play.” I lean back in my chair. “Any boy. Even one whose father lives in Phoenix.”

The color comes up in her cheeks, fast and hot. “Don’t.”

“I’m not asking. I said I wouldn’t, and I won’t.” I hold her gaze until she has to look away first. “But I want to spend time with him.”

Her whole body goes still. “Why?”

“You know why.”

“He isn’t…”

“Then there’s no harm in it. An hour in the garden. You can watch every second.”

“No.” It comes out hard and fast, the no of a woman who has built every wall around her son by herself and is used to holding them alone. “You don’t get to decide something like that because you built a swing set. He doesn’t know you. To him, you’re the man who owns this giant house and gave his mommy a job. If you start showing up in his life, he’s going to get attached, and then what? What happens to him when this ends?”

“What makes you think it ends?”

She doesn’t answer that. I don’t think she can.

Everything in me wants to answer her with power. It’s right there in my mouth. This is my house. That is my face on that boy. You will give me my child.

I don’t say it. I swallow it, and it goes down like broken glass.

“All right,” I say.

She blinks. “All right?”

“When you decide he’s ready, you’ll tell me.” I let her see exactly what it costs me. “Don’t make me wait long, Stevie. Five years used up most of my patience.” I pick up the first folder on my desk and hold it out to her. “In the meantime, there’s correspondence you need to go through.”

She takes it. She studies me a moment longer, suspicious of the surrender, and then she sits down at her desk six feet from mine and opens the folder, and we work in a silence so loud I can hear her breathe.

I sit there all morning. Every few minutes, without meaning to, I look out the window at the boy on the playground, and every time I do, she sees me looking.

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CHAPTER 15

STEVIE

By the third week in Enzo Accardi's house, I know exactly what scares me the most.

It's not the armed guards at the gates. It's not the inescapable feeling of being watched by the security cameras tucked into every corner. It's not even the fact that Enzo's appointments are all staffed with men who look like they know seventeen different ways to dispose of a body.

No. What scares me the most is that Matthew is *happy* here.

This morning, we're seated at the long breakfast table, Carmine at the far end behind his newspaper, Matthew across from me, with one knee tucked under him, stacking his toast into a wobbling little tower while Marta watches.

"Am I in trouble?" he asks, glancing up.

"Not yet, *ragazzo mio*," Marta says, eyeing the tower, then the plate under it. "But that is the good china, and you have jam on places jam should not be. So just be gentle."

"I'm being gentle," Matthew says.

"Go for it, bub. You've earned it. That's a great, yummy-looking tower."

"It really is," Marta agrees. "A man who builds with his own two hands. Very impressive."

Matthew frowns. “I’m not a man. I’m four.”

“My mistake.” Marta dips her head. “Forgive me, sir.”

I’m still laughing when she fills my coffee without being asked. That’s the problem with this house: it keeps giving me things I didn’t know I was starving for, like good company over breakfast, a garden where Matthew can play without me having to be on the lookout for street crazies, and a kitchen stocked with all of his favorite snacks.

And safety dressed up so prettily, I almost forget to distrust it.

“You’ve gone quiet,” Marta observes, settling into the chair beside Matthew with her own cup.

“Just thinking.”

“That’s dangerous in this house.” Carmine turns a page. “We discourage it.”

I look between the two of them. “How long have you both been here?”

“Since Enzo was a boy,” Carmine says. “We’ve watched him grow up.”

He says it plainly, but his eyes don’t leave the newspaper, and I understand that I’ve wandered up to the edge of something the Rossis don’t discuss with the help they’ve known for all of three weeks.

“He was a serious boy,” Marta says anyway, surprising me. “Like yours. Watchful. Too watchful, more than a child should have to be.” She says it softly, looking at Matthew, and then she looks at me, and there’s a whole conversation in it that neither of us is going to have out loud. “He turned out better than he had any right to,” she finally says. “Better than this house should have allowed. I think you should know that from someone who was here for all of it.”

I don’t know what to do with that information, so I drink my coffee and don’t answer, which Marta lets me get away with.

The door swings open and Genevieve wanders in. She looks like hell, paler than usual, her sunglasses pushed up into unbrushed hair. She heads straight for the orange juice and pours a glass. Her phone buzzes against the marble. She glances at the screen, turns it face-down, and doesn’t touch it again.

Matthew watches her with open interest. “How come your hands are shaking?”

The kid notices everything, even when he shouldn’t. “Matthew.”

Genevieve doesn’t get upset. Instead, she lets out a huff of a laugh, like she’s amused and surprised all at the same time. “Because kids make me nervous.” She’s trying to make light of it, though the joke doesn’t entirely land.

Genevieve regards me with a strange look in her eyes, as if she’s trying to figure out the right words to say what she wants to say. “Listen, Stevie. That first night,” she says. “You…” She stops and starts over, stiff, like the words are a language she’s not familiar with. “You didn’t have to do that, get me up the stairs. You could’ve left me there. Honestly, most people would’ve, and they’d have been right to. So, thank you. That’s all. Don’t make it weird.”

“Wasn’t going to.”

“Good.” She finishes the juice, sets the glass down, and on her way out, she pauses by Matthew’s chair and looks down at his toast tower. The ghost of a smile crosses her lips. Then she’s gone, and everyone in the room lets out a collective breath.

“That,” Marta says quietly, “is the most I’ve heard her say to a houseguest in a year.”

I’m still turning that over when the door opens again and Enzo walks in. He’s dressed for the city, wearing a charcoal three-piece, looking unfairly handsome. Just the sight of him makes me ache between my thighs.

For a second, he just stands in the doorway, taking in the scene. Something crosses his face. It’s there and then it’s gone, but I’m starting to be able to read him. He didn’t grow up with mornings like this, with a full table and friendly faces waiting for him to join them.

Then Matthew sees him. “Up,” he announces, already lifting his arms. “Up, up.”

My gut tightens. Matthew hasn't seen much of Enzo over the last few weeks, and I'm pretty sure that's by my design, and Enzo has honored it. He doesn't know who Enzo is yet, but he *is* drawn to Enzo in a way that's uncanny, like he knows about their connection on some level.

I hesitate. Everyone in the room is very carefully *not* watching me hesitate.

"Go ahead," I finally say, and my voice is almost level.

Enzo crosses the room and lifts Matthew out of the chair, and he's better at it than I expected, more like a man learning the weight of his own child. Matthew settles against him, entirely at ease, and immediately gets to business.

"I'm hungry still."

"You ate a building made of toast," Carmine notes.

"That was carbs," Matthew says, a word he has clearly learned from me and deployed with devastating confidence. "I need fruit now."

Enzo, without missing a beat, reaches into the bowl on the sideboard and pulls out one of those little pouches of sliced organic fruit I always see at the store, the kind I always want to get for Matthew but can never afford to.

"The pantry," Enzo says, catching my expression, "has been stocked. Everything on the list a child his age likes, and a few things I'm told his mother likes, too. If there's something missing, you tell Marta and it's here by evening." He says it flatly, almost businesslike.

"Thank you," I manage to say.

Enzo holds my gaze a moment and then, mercifully, lets it go. He passes Matthew gently to Marta, who eagerly receives him.

"We have somewhere to be," he tells me. "You and I. In the city. Carmine will drive." He turns to Marta: "He's yours for an hour, maybe two."

"Hear that?" she asks Matthew. "You're *tutto mio*."

Matthew's already squirming his way toward a second fruit pouch and doesn't even look up to watch us go.

Enzo helps me into my jacket in the front hall while Carmine brings the car around. It's a small gesture that involves his hands briefly touching my shoulders, just long enough that my skin breaks out in goose bumps.

"Why am I going with you?" I ask. "You don't take me to meetings in the city. It's always too dangerous. So what's going on here? What's different about this?"

He hesitates, and I can see him deciding how much to tell me.

"If I'm coming with you, you tell me everything," I say before he has a chance to edit his response. "Everything."

He purses his lips, then nods. "Five years ago, I stood in a room and watched a man try to make a woman feel small in front of the whole underworld." His mouth curves just a bit. "He tried, but he failed. The room laughed at you, but you didn't care. You stood up for yourself in a way that most of those men would never dream of.

"All I could do then was silence them. But now, they're going to hear you. And this time, they're going to listen."

"Enzo…"

"Luca."

I stop, my eyes widening at the mere mention of his name.

"The meeting is with Luca," he says. "I want you there, and I want you at my side. I want to give you the chance to look him right in the eye and show him you're not afraid."

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CHAPTER 16

STEVIE

"You're nervous."

The car is a little pocket of the kind of silence you pay big money for in New York City. There's no road noise, no rattle, no *clang-clang-clang* of passing garbage trucks or wail of sirens. It's just the city sliding by in perfect quiet.

Carmine's driving, and Enzo and I are in the back, my body practically sinking into the expensive leather.

"I'm cautious. It just looks the same from the outside."

"Right," he says, "you don't get nervous. I've watched you in situations when it should happen: the interview, the night of the party."

"And?"

"You get sharp." Then he looks at me, amusement in his gaze. "And you sharpened up in the hallway before we left. I could hear it happening."

"That's a disturbing thing to be able to hear."

"I have a lot of disturbing skills. A long list. And I typically don't need to use them around breakfast time."

"No, breakfast is for finding the one way to get Matthew to eat fruit."

"I had it sourced."

“You had a four-dollar snack *sourced*.”

“I had a lot of things sourced. The snack was just one of them.”

I’m not sure what to make of that, so I just sit with it.

“What?” he says.

“Nothing. Just strategizing.”

Carmine slows the car, pulls to the curb, and I look up at the building we’ve stopped in front of. Every warm, easy thing in my chest turns to ice water.

Glass and steel, twenty stories of it, and over the doors in brushed silver letters tall enough to read from the next block: SANTINI CORP.

“No.” It’s out before I can stop it. “No, absolutely not.”

“Stevie…”

“That’s his *building*, Enzo. That’s…” My pulse is hammering like a fist on a door.

“I told you we were meeting him.”

“I know. It’s just…” I take a deep breath, gripping the armrest. Now I can feel my heartbeat in my ears. “Meeting with him is one thing. Going to his *building*, his *lair*, that’s something else.”

“I’m not bringing you in to be a weapon, or a message, or a thing he gets to look at. I’m bringing you in as exactly what you are: my right hand. The person who keeps my calendar and reads my correspondence and notices things in a room that I miss.” His voice drops. “You don’t have to do anything in there but be yourself. That’s the entire plan.”

“And if I say drive on right now? Take me home?”

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“Then Carmine drives on.” No hesitation. None. “And Luca spends the rest of his life believing he can still make you hide.” His eyes hold mine. “Is that what you want him to believe?”

Something about the way he puts it does something to me, makes me square my shoulders, makes me realize that I am so tired of letting men like Luca Santini decide how I’m allowed to live.

“He called me fat in front of the whole room.”

“He did.”

“And blacklisted me so I couldn’t get a job.”

“Most of it.”

I look up at the big silver letters, unbuckle my seat belt, and nod. “Then let’s go ruin his morning.”

Approval, hot and immediate, flares in Enzo’s eyes, as if what I just said turned him on.

Then he’s out of the car and around to my door. He offers a hand I don’t need but take anyway. I’m about to walk into the one building in this city I swore I’d never set foot in, and I’m going to need every advantage I can get.

The lobby is all marble and ego; the Santini logo is inlaid in the floor, so you have to walk across his name to reach the elevators. I make a point of stepping right on it. I spot a thin, nervous man whom I recognize from Luca’s inner circle waiting near the elevator bank. He visibly pales as Enzo and I approach, as if he can tell how unbothered we are, how we’re walking right into the enemy’s house, like it’s ours.

We take the elevator up twenty floors. The thin man doesn’t speak and neither do we, and I spend the ride with my heart slamming against my rib cage, but with my face arranged into a perfectly polished blankness. Enzo stands beside me, radiating a calm so total, it starts to envelop me.

The conference room takes up a corner of the floor, glass on two sides, the whole gray city laid out below. I recognize Luca’s lawyer, Jack Ketch,

who’s already there. He’s lean and gray and lawyerly as ever, telegraphing a different kind of danger than Enzo. A few other well-dressed men are in attendance.

At the head of the table is Luca. He turns as the door opens, a smile for Enzo already on his face. He’s older but exactly the same, the good looks, the green eyes, the expensive watch, and the smile that always made my skin crawl just a little. It’s a predator’s smile, a smile that’s always at its warmest and most disarming right before he strikes.

He rises halfway from his chair, his hand extended slightly, ready to get down to business with Enzo, when his eyes land on me. The smile dies on his face.

I watch it happen in real time, and I will treasure that moment, I think, for the rest of my natural life.

The confusion first, then recognition, ugly and total, then something close to fear, there and gone, as he tries to grasp what it means that the woman he humiliated at the Velvet Room just walked into his own conference room at Enzo Accardi’s shoulder, dressed like she belongs there, calm as they come.

“Stevie?” My name comes out of his mouth wrong, questioning, but Luca Santini doesn’t ask questions.

“Luca.” I say it with total cool. I let his name be nothing in my mouth. I let him see, in the flat, pleasant blankness of my face, that he doesn’t get a reaction from me anymore, that he hasn’t earned one in years. “I’m Mr. Accardi’s assistant. I’ll be sitting in.”

The silence is gorgeous. It stretches. Ketch’s eyes go from me to Luca and back, recalculating something.

Enzo lets it hang, lets Luca drown in it for one more second, before he pulls out the chair at the far end of the table, the one that somehow becomes the head of it the moment he touches it, though it’s Luca’s building, and gestures me into the one beside it.

“Luca,” Enzo says, pleasant as a knife going in. “You remember Miss Callahan. I believe the last time you saw her you were doing comedy.”

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CHAPTER 17

ENZO

Luca recovers fast. Men like him always do. He has the smile back on his face by the time he sits, and he aims it at Stevie. “You could’ve told me you’d hired new help, Enzo. I’d have sent a fruit basket.”

She doesn’t even blink. Good.

I don’t look at her. Looking at her would tell Luca exactly where to aim. But I feel her beside me the way you feel a loaded gun in your own hand, quiet and certain, and something in my chest that has been clenched for a long time eases by one notch.

He thought he’d be sitting across from a frightened girl he used to own. He’s sitting across from the woman who walked out of my bed without a backward glance, and he has no idea what that means yet.

“Three weeks ago, Jack brought me your offer,” I say. “The waterfront, Sutphin, and three of my clubs, handed to you as a gift. I wanted you to hear it in plain words, Luca, because I think it sounds different out loud than it did in your head.”

“The offer stands,” Luca says, leaning back in a pointed attempt to look casual. “And honestly, Enzo, you should take it. Your operation’s a mess. The old man’s locked himself in the attic. Your sister’s a regular at my tables. Did you know that? Lovely girl. Terrible at cards.” He smiles. “Word gets around. The elders are old men, and they like a clean house. And yours is looking very, very dirty right now.”

“My house,” I begin, “is my concern. Let me tell you about yours.”

Luca narrows his eyes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I lean forward, letting the pleasantness drain out of my voice. “You’re moving too fast, Luca. Borrowing money you can’t pay back, making promises you can’t keep. And you’ve decided I’m in your way.”

I let that land. “That was your first mistake,” I tell him. “What’s mine stays mine. And that goes for everyone in it.”

His eyes flick to Stevie for just a moment, and I can tell the implication has been understood.

“You wanted this meeting to discuss business matters. Then let’s discuss. But I want to make one thing perfectly clear. You go behind my back, you try to make any moves toward Accardi territory, and I can assure you, the next meeting we have won’t be nearly as congenial as this one.”

Luca’s smile is still there, but it’s costing him something to hold it now. I can see the effort in it.

“You always did think you were smarter than me,” he says.

“I don’t think it. I know it.”

He narrows his eyes again, and I decide this is the moment to force the issue. I stand and button my jacket.

“Now, unless there are actual business matters, I’ll be on my way.”

Luca sits up. “No. I asked you here for a reason. Let’s talk shop.”

I let my gaze linger on him for just a moment before I unbutton my jacket and ease back into the chair.

“All right. Let’s.”

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CHAPTER 18

STEVIE

They talk shop, and I take notes.

I sit at Enzo's right hand, with my leather folio open in front of me, writing down dates and names and numbers in my neat little hand.

I don't let one single thing show on my face. It's hard being here with Luca, and there's no sense in pretending it isn't. This is the first time in years I've been in a room with him, this man I used to date, used to think was special.

But I notice that something's very off about the content of this meeting. Luca's throwing out numbers and addresses, like he's trying to bury Enzo in a flurry, like he's trying to speak too quickly for me to write it all down.

Enzo presses. Every time he does, Luca leans back, smiles, lets it slide off him, like a man holding a card he hasn't played. He keeps talking about Accardi business too casually, like a man who's seen real numbers, instead of guessing at them.

Then he makes his mistake. It's a small one, the kind you'd only catch if you'd been listening very carefully. Thankfully, I was.

"Take the Bracco delivery," Luca says, swirling his glass. "Carrieri waterfront, end of the month. You think I don't know your schedule, Enzo? I know it better than you do."

The date's wrong. He's working from old information. I keep Enzo's calendar, the real one, the one he told me on my first day that I was never to discuss, and I logged the change myself last week.

The Bracco shipment. I remember it got pushed back. And that means whoever's been feeding Luca details about Accardi business went quiet before that change was made, and Luca doesn't know it.

That's worth something. I don't know exactly what. But Enzo will.

I don't look up. I slide my phone half an inch out from under the folio. In my lap, below the lip of the table, I type with one thumb while the other hand keeps writing.

Bracco date he just gave is 7 days stale. Shipment moved last week. I logged it. His source went cold. He doesn't know yet.

I send it. I keep taking notes.

I hear Enzo's phone gently vibrate on the table. It's face-down, and he doesn't pick it up. Instead, he tilts it with one finger, glances to read the screen, and frowns. Then he leans back.

"The Bracco delivery," he says. "Say that date again, the one you're so sure of."

"End of the month." Luca spreads his hands. "The thirtieth. Like I said, I know your routines, Enzo."

"Mm." Enzo lets a silence hang in the air, lets Luca sit in it without knowing why. "Someone's been telling you stories, Luca, and those stories stopped being current about seven days ago. You should ask yourself who got nervous enough to stop talking to you."

Luca's smile flickers for just a second.

But I see it, and so does Enzo.

Inside of me, something lights up that I haven't felt for a long time.

Victory.

I did that. I didn't just survive the room, didn't just sit down and hold on to the table for dear life. No, I picked up a thread he didn't know he'd dropped and did the exact right thing with it. And now, Luca's sitting there with his confidence cracked in two.

And he has no idea I was the one who did it to him.

He recovers fast. But it rattled him. And a rattled Luca reaches for the thing that's always worked before.

"You know what I think this is?" he asks. That green-eyed gaze swings to me, and I recognize the look: appraisal. *Judgment.*

"Choose your words carefully, Luca," Enzo says.

Luca continues as if Enzo hadn't spoken. "I think this is sweet."

"Sweet?" Enzo asks.

"Yeah, sweet. You bought yourself a little assistant, Enzo. And not just any assistant, but one I used to fuck. Funny how both of you wanted to prove a point to me and did it in the same way. You sold yourself to him, and he was happy to buy you, like a used car I got tired of driving."

The old me would've flinched, felt the heat climb my neck, broken into a cold sweat. But I'm not the old me anymore.

I don't move. I let the ugliness sit in the air, his and not mine. I keep my face calm and my pen still.

Enzo cuts him off before I have to say a word. Whatever pleasantness had remained in his voice is now gone completely. "That's a member of my staff and household you're talking about. Think *very* carefully about your next sentence, Luca."

He doesn't raise his voice, which is more powerful than if he'd screamed the words. "You come at my territory; I let you talk. But if you come at her again, that's the end of it. We stop talking. If it's war you want, you can have it. But understand what you're asking for. You're an upstart little brat going against one of the oldest and most powerful families in the city. If I have to crush you, I'll make goddamn sure it's for good."

The room is deadly silent.

I decide I'm done being talked about like I'm not in the room. I set my pen down. I look up, full on, the first time all meeting, and I give Luca a small, pleasant smile.

“You keep bringing up what we used to be,” I say, “like you’re so goddamn proud of it. Funny, I remember it differently. I remember you stood up in front of all your pals and tried to make me and my body into a punchline.”

Luca shifts in his seat, his jaw working.

“But that’s not what happened, is it? A man in a mask came to my side and put you right in your place, and you didn’t have a single word to say about it. I bet that’s what everyone remembers the most: you glowering, pissed off, just like you are now.”

I lift an eyebrow as I continue. “It’s been five years. I’ve built a whole life since that little thing we had, and here you are, still talking about that night like it was the proudest moment of your life, when all that memory should do is make you want to cringe out of your skin. You’re pathetic.”

Luca’s face does something he can’t control. It’s a flush, a tightening. The mask slips for half a second, and everyone there gets to see the furious little boy underneath.

There you are.

Enzo stands and buttons his jacket. “We’re done here, Miss Callahan.”

I gather the folio, unhurried, and walk out of Luca Santini’s conference room on my own two feet. I don’t look back. There’s nothing back there worth the turn of my head.

I hold it together down the hall, into the elevator, through the marble lobby with his name set into the floor, out into the cold bright morning.

The second the car door shuts, where no one can see, I collapse, head in my hands, the adrenaline draining out all at once, my hands shaking.

Enzo notices. He notices everything. But he doesn’t make a big thing out of it. “You were brilliant in there,” he says quietly. “The Bracco date? I’d have caught it eventually. You caught it in real time, right in the middle of it, while taking notes on three other things. Do you know how rare that is?”

“I read rooms. It’s a thing I do.”

“It’s not just a thing you do. You didn’t survive that room. You ran it.”

I look out of the window so he can’t see my face and can’t see what his words are doing to me. He can’t see the big, dopey smile on my face.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been anything but a survivor. And I’m ready to find out what else I can be.

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CHAPTER 19

STEVIE

Matthew goes down hard that night, the way he does after a big day.

I sit next to his bed longer than I need to. I've been doing that lately, watching him sleep in this enormous room in this enormous house and trying to work out how the hell I got us here.

I ease my finger out of his grip, kiss his forehead, turn off the lamp, and slip through the bathroom to my own room. I'm just starting to feel how tired I am when the knock comes.

Two soft raps. Careful, like whoever's on the other side isn't sure he has the right.

Enzo stands in the hall in shirtsleeves, collar open, no jacket. He's holding a white box about the size of a shoebox, with the lid already off. There is nothing on his face at all, and I have learned in three weeks that nothing is the worst thing his face can do.

"Is he asleep?"

"Out cold." My eyes drop to the box. "What is that?"

"It came to the gate an hour ago. A kid on a bicycle, paid in cash, no name." He holds it out, and I take it. "It's addressed to Matthew."

The floor of my stomach drops away.

Inside, nested in pink tissue paper, is a child's mask. Cheap white plastic, an elastic band, two tall rabbit ears dusted with glitter. The kind you'd buy at a party store for two dollars.

Five years ago, I wore a rabbit mask to the Velvet Room. The name on my sheet that night was Bunny.

There's a card tucked under the mask. I know the handwriting before I read it. I used to find it on Post-its. The weekend he locked me in his apartment because I smiled at a bartender, he slid them under the bedroom door, one every few hours, while he sat on the floor outside and talked to me through the wood in that soft, reasonable voice. *You know I hate it when you make me do this, baby.* When he finally opened the door, he'd brought me flowers.

For the little one. Tell his mother I never forgot the rabbit. L.

My hands are shaking so hard the tissue paper rattles.

"He knows," I whisper. "Oh, God. He knows about Matthew."

"He knows there's a child in my house." Enzo takes the box back from me, gently, and sets it on the dresser like it might go off. "He knows the child is yours. And today he sat across his own table and watched you take him apart, and I think he went home and did some arithmetic." His voice is very quiet. "He's guessing, Stevie. Men like Luca send boxes when they're guessing. They want to see who flinches."

"Then I won't flinch."

"You already did. So did I." He steps inside and shuts the door behind him, and for the first time since I walked through his gate, he doesn't ask first. "I told you I wouldn't ask again. I'm breaking that promise tonight, and I'll answer for it. But I can't protect a boy from a man like Luca while I'm pretending I don't know whose he is."

He doesn't come closer. He doesn't have to. The whole room is full of him.

"Is he mine?"

Five years of practicing lies in the dark. Three weeks of the man in Phoenix.

“Yes,” I say. “He’s yours.”

Enzo goes so quiet I can hear the city through the glass. Then he turns to the window and puts one hand flat against the frame, like a man holding up a wall.

“The condom tore,” he says to the glass, very low. “That night. I found it on the floor the next morning, next to a ring on a pillow. I told myself it didn’t matter. I’ve been telling myself that every day since.”

I stare at his back. For five years, I have wondered how. He knew the next morning.

“Four years,” he says.

“Enzo…”

“You hid my son from me.” His voice is barely there. “Four years. His first word. His first step. The first time he was sick in the night and someone had to hold him. Four years of a person who is half me, and you’d have taken the rest of his life if Luca hadn’t left a box at my gate.”

“I was protecting him.”

“From me.”

The two words just sit there. Neither of us can do anything about how true they are.

He turns around. His eyes are black and wet and absolutely merciless, and I understand, standing barefoot in a sleep shirt in his house, that I am finally looking at the man the city is afraid of. Not the one who built my son a playground. The other one.

“I have killed men for stealing far less than this from me,” he says. “You know what I am. You’ve known since you heard my name through a door. Anyone else on earth who took four years of my child would not be standing in this room.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“Good. Then you also know what it means that you are.” He breathes in, and some of the black goes out of his eyes, though not all of it. “Tell me one thing. What was his first word?”

It undoes me. I didn’t expect it to.

“‘Light.’” I’m crying now. “He’d point at the lamp. I couldn’t afford much. The lamp was the brightest thing in the apartment, and he loved it.”

“Was he scared of the dark?”

“For a while, when he was two. He grew out of it.”

“Who held him when he was sick?”

“I did. It was always just me.”

“Did he ever ask about his father?”

“When he was two. *Where daddy?* I don’t even know where he learned the word.” I wipe my face with the heel of my hand. “I told him his daddy lived far away.”

Enzo closes his eyes. When he opens them, the grief has been put somewhere I can’t see, and something colder has taken its place.

“Luca Santini is coming for you both now,” he says. “He’s still guessing. So we give him something else to look at.”

“What does that mean?”

“Tomorrow night I have an event. A ballroom at the top of a tower, one of mine, full of the worst people in the city. You’re coming on my arm. Not as my assistant. As yourself. I want every person in that room to see you next to me and wonder what you are to me.” He nods at the box on the dresser. “Most of all, I want Luca to see it. A man like Luca can only hate one thing at a time. The longer he’s looking at you, the less he’s looking at who sleeps on the other side of your bathroom wall.”

“So I’m the decoy.”

“You’re the shield,” he says. “I hate it. But I’d rather he aim at what I can stand next to in a crowded room than at what he could carry out of a

bedroom.”

I should say no. I should throw that box at his head and take my son and run, the way I did the first time.

But I think of Luca’s handwriting on that card. I think of him lying awake doing arithmetic about my son.

“Okay,” I say.

He nods once and picks the box up off the dresser.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Find the kid on the bicycle,” he says. “Then find who paid him. Then find who paid that man.” He looks at me over the open lid. “And then I’m going to have a conversation with each of them, and you’re going to sleep through all of it.”

“And Luca?”

His smile turns lethal. “This time, I won’t ask which part to remove first.”

He means it to comfort me. It doesn’t. And it doesn’t make me want to run, either, which scares me more than anything else that has happened tonight.

It makes me want to reach for him.

So I do. I grab a fistful of his open collar and feel the heat of his skin against my knuckles, and I pull him down and kiss him.

The office was a wound breaking open. This is slower and darker, a choice made in a quiet room with a threat to my son sitting on the dresser, and both of us knowing exactly what he is.

His hand comes up to my jaw. The other slides to my waist and hauls me into him. A sound I didn’t plan on comes loose in my throat, and he swallows it and kisses me like he intends to take his time with every inch of me, and I let him, right up until he lifts his head.

“Wear green tomorrow,” he says against my mouth. “Let them all wonder.”

Then he takes the box and goes. I listen to his footsteps on the stairs, all the way down, past the ground floor, to wherever it is in this house that men like him go at night.

I sit on the edge of the bed in the dark for a long time, lips still warm, body still humming, and I don’t let myself wonder where that is.

Not yet.

Enzo

The kid on the bicycle took forty minutes to find. He was nineteen and looked fourteen, and he cried, and I gave him two hundred dollars and sent him home to his mother. Boys like him are not part of this.

The man in the Mets cap who paid him took three hours.

He’s in the chair under the single bulb now, the one my father had wired into the basement ceiling thirty years ago. Carmine has already done the part with the hands. I didn’t ask him to. Carmine has watched Matthew eat cereal at my kitchen table.

I open the box from the dresser and take out the rabbit mask.

“You bought this,” I say. “Two dollars. Party store on Fordham Road. You picked the one with glitter.”

He tries to talk around the blood. I don’t need him to. Luca’s name is already on the paper in Carmine’s pocket.

I stretch the elastic and fit the mask over his face. The tall ears tip forward. Glitter in his eyelashes.

“You sent this to my son.”

It’s the first time I’ve said it to anyone but her. *My son.* I say it to a man who won’t live to repeat it.

“River,” I tell Carmine. “Leave the mask on. When they pull him out, I want Luca to see it on the news.”

In the kitchen, I wash my hands until the water runs clear. Then I climb the stairs, past his mother’s door, and open Matthew’s a crack. He’s asleep sideways, one foot off the mattress, a stuffed rabbit crushed under his arm.

I fix his blanket. I tuck the foot back in.

Then I stand in his doorway until the sun comes up.

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CHAPTER 20

STEVIE

Five years ago, I walked into a room just like this in a uniform that wasn't mine: a too-tight black thing someone poured me into. But tonight, the dress is made for me and me alone. The dress is deep green and cut to fit a body I stopped apologizing for a long, long time ago.

It doesn't ride up or pull or fight me. It just fits. Enzo said green. Marta found it, and they were both right, which I am not going to tell either of them.

The venue is one of Enzo's, the top floor of a tower forty stories up, all glass and gold light and an endless view of the city. The room is full of exactly the kind of people I'd spent that night serving, billionaires and politicians and men whose names you only hear whispered.

I'm nervous. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. My heart's going and my hands want something to hold.

Enzo feels my anxiety, just as he always does. "Look at me," he says, his voice low as we step into the space. "Not the room."

His hand settles at the small of my back, warm through the fabric. "You're not here carrying a tray. You're not here to be leered at. You're here on my arm, and every person in this room is going to want to know who you are. So let them wonder."

He doesn't leave my side. A man like him in a room like this has a hundred people who want a piece of him. But you'd never know that by the way he

walks with me, a hand at my back, introducing me by name. Miss Callahan. *My right hand*. I love the title.

“If you keep doing that…” I murmur between introductions.

“Doing what.”

“If you keep touching my back and saying my name like that, people are going to talk.”

“That’s the idea. People are always going to talk.” His mouth is very close to my ear. “I’m choosing what they say.”

I take a flute of champagne off a passing tray carried by a girl in a black dress that isn’t hers, and our eyes meet for one second. I give her a small smile I hope says *I see you, I was you, you’re going to be fine*, and I let myself breathe. It’s working. The whole impossible night is working.

Which is, of course, when Genevieve finds us. She looks beautiful tonight. Every time I see her, I can’t help but wonder what the old Genevieve was like, the one I never knew, the one who hadn’t been hurt in a way that had led to all of her self-destructive behavior.

“There he is,” Genevieve says, too loudly, lifting her glass as she approaches. “The Don and his new assistant. Don’t you two look domestic.” Her gaze moves to me and she snorts.

“Gen.” Enzo’s voice is quiet and even. “You’ve had enough.”

“I’ve had exactly enough. That’s the whole point.” She sways as she says it, and a little champagne spills over the rim of her glass. A couple of people nearby turn their heads and look.

Enzo doesn’t make it a fight. He just lifts one finger and Carmine is there, appearing out of the crowd the way he does, big and calm and gentle.

“Miss Accardi,” he says softly, “let me help you outside for some air.”

“I don’t *want* air, Carmine.” The words come out in a pout. However, she lets him take her arm, because some part of her knows it’s futile to fight. He turns her toward the doors, and she looks back at me over her shoulder. For

one moment, the haughty drunk defiance drops off her face, and what's left is older and sadder.

"Listen to me," she says, and I can tell she's being real.

"Genevieve." Enzo says her name sternly, in a way that would shut up anyone on this planet except his sister.

"No," she says, "I need to say something. The women in this family… We don't get the happy ending. We just don't. I didn't. My mother didn't. The house takes it out of you. Whatever you came in with, it takes it." She narrows her eyes at me. "He'll be good to you. He will. Right up to the point that it costs him something, and then you'll find out what he really is."

"Enough."

She stops, takes a deep, slow breath. "Fine. You want me gone? Then I'm gone."

Still on Carmine's arm, she strides to the terrace doors and vanishes into the night.

When she's gone, I just stand there, unsure of what to say.

"Don't," Enzo says quietly.

"Don't what?"

"Don't take what she said personally. She's not wrong about the house. She's not wrong about what happened to her or my mother." His jaw is tight. "But she's wrong about me."

How do I know?

"All I can do is show you," he says, as if reading my mind. "Don't let her give you a reason to run before I've given you a reason to stay."

For a little while, it's good. It's better than good. We move through the room, and he keeps me lit up. I start to feel like I belong on his arm.

And then the air changes.

I feel him before I see him, like he's an approaching storm shifting the air pressure. A ripple moves through the crowd, heads turning toward the doorway of the room.

Near the bar, a woman in pearls leans toward her husband. "They pulled a man out of the Harlem River this morning. Wearing a kid's party mask, Richard. A bunny."

Enzo's hand doesn't move on my back. I don't look at him. I think of glitter in pink tissue paper with my son's name on the card, and something cold and satisfied settles in my chest, and I don't ask.

I already know.

I turn just as Luca walks in. He's dressed for the evening in a variation of what he wore at the meeting, a sharp suit, expensive watch, and a grin that doesn't reach his eyes. He moves into the room like the night is about him.

"Easy," Enzo says quietly. "He's not going to do anything here he can't take back. He's going to talk. Let him."

Luca reaches us with his glass already raised, like we're all old friends. "Enzo, quite a party. And…" He turns to me, and the smile sharpens. "You brought your assistant. Off the clock, even, and in quite a dress."

"Luca," Enzo says flatly. It's not a greeting; it's a warning.

Luca's had a few, and Luca in a crowd is Luca at his worst, because a crowd is the only thing he's ever really loved. He pitches his voice just a little louder than it needs to be, just enough for the nearest cluster of people to catch it, the way he did five years ago with a microphone in his hand.

"I've been wondering since our meeting." He looks me up and down, that old awful appraising crawl that used to make me feel like meat. "What *is* this, exactly? Because I know this girl, Enzo."

Enzo narrows his eyes. "Be *very* careful, Luca."

"I wouldn't dream of being otherwise. I know her, Enzo. I knew her a hell of a lot better than you know her once upon a time. In fact, I remember

having her in my bed for the better part of two years.” He says it to the room around us just as much as he does to Enzo.

“Stop,” I say, “now.”

But he doesn’t stop. He turns to the people around us instead, all reasonable charm. “I’m only saying what everyone here is thinking. The old man hasn’t been seen in a year. The sister owes my tables six figures. And the one person Enzo trusts with his calendar is a girl who used to sleep in my bed.” He lets that settle. “If I sat at the elders’ table, I’d wonder whose secrets she’s really keeping.”

A few gasps sound around us. Enzo clenches his hands into fists, ready to step toward him. But I shoot him a quick glance.

“You say another word,” I say, “and watch what happens, you spoiled little prick.”

He clicks his tongue. “So, what is it, Enzo? Charity? Or is it that she’s good for a hell of a lot more than just keeping your schedule?” His smile widens, all teeth.

The little knot of people around us has gone quiet. I’ve already opened my mouth, ready to unleash on this arrogant asshole. But Enzo’s hand finds the small of my back. Not pulling me behind him, just there. A question, the way it was the very first night. And in the half second it takes me to feel it, I understand. He’s not stepping in front of me; he’s asking if I want the floor or if I’ll let him take this one. And I decide, just this once, to let him.

“Luca.” Enzo’s voice doesn’t rise. “I’m going to say this once, clearly, so there’s no confusion later, because I find confusion leads to mistakes, and I’d hate for you to make one.”

He sets his glass down on a passing tray.

“I want to get one thing clear: This woman is not charity, and she’s not a possession. She’s not a joke I’m telling at your expense, though God knows, you’d make an easy punchline.”

A ripple of laughter moves through the crowd.

“She’s the sharpest mind I’ve got in my arsenal, and I have a great, great many sharp minds at my disposal.

“So, let’s correct your bullshit in public, since you brought it in with you tonight.” He pauses and his voice drops, somehow traveling farther the lower it gets. “You think her softness is weakness, which is a mistake that might be the one that ends you. Let me be clear for everyone listening: Anyone who mistakes this woman’s softness for weakness will answer to me. But only after they answer to her. And I promise you, when she’s done with you, you’ll wish I’d had my chance first.”

“And since you asked whose secrets she keeps,” he adds. “Mine. That’s why you’re nervous.”

Luca’s face has tightened in fury. He’s looking for the comeback, the recovery, the thing that flips it, and for once he can’t find it, because there’s nothing to grab. You can fight a man who calls you a thief. You can’t fight a man who just told the whole room that you’re the one who should be afraid.

“Careful, Accardi,” he manages. “You’re letting people see what matters to you. That’s how men like us get hurt.” His eyes flick to me, an ugly scowl on his face. “Everybody in this room just learned exactly where to push.”

It’s a threat, a real one, under the bravado. The air goes thin, and for a second I think this is it, this is where it turns from words into something else.

“Luca.” A new voice, old and dry and amused, cuts clean across the standoff. “You’re making a scene. Now, let an old man through.”

The crowd parts, and a different kind of danger walks into the middle of it. The man is in his late seventies. His head is topped with thick white hair, his face the color of cured leather, his eyes missing absolutely nothing. He’s not big and he’s not armed, but you can tell by the way he carries himself, the way the room rearranges itself around him, that he is from the generation that built all of it, the one even Enzo defers to.

“Vittorio Manfredi,” Enzo says with real respect in his tone, the first I’ve heard him give anyone. “You honor us.”

“I honor the bar. The company’s a bonus.” Manfredi’s sharp old eyes move from Enzo to Luca and back, reading the tension in a glance. “Luca, you’re loud tonight. You’re loud most nights lately. A loud man is a man who doesn’t have his house in order, telling everyone it’s fine.” He smiles, all teeth. “Go home, son. You’ve made your impression. It wasn’t the one you wanted, but you made it.”

And the amazing thing is, Luca listens.

“Yeah,” he says, glancing around as if counting just how many eyes are on him. “I have an early morning. Have a good night, Mr. Manfredi.”

On his way past, he leans in close enough that only I can hear him. “Did the little one like his ears?”

Luca throws me one last look on the way out, and there’s murder in it, the real thing, cold and patient and angry.

Then he’s gone.

The room exhales. The music, which I hadn’t noticed stopping, returns to a normal volume. People remember they were having conversations. The night continues.

Manfredi turns to Enzo, and his face softens into an almost grandfatherly expression, though I don’t trust it for a second.

“He’s not wrong about one thing,” the old man says.

“Your house,” he goes on. “People are talking.” Vittorio plucks a glass off a tray with a surprisingly steady hand for a man his age. “You know I know your father, Enzo. Ran with him when we were younger, much younger than you.” He sips his drink and smiles fondly. “Wild, terrible days. And the best of my life.”

He pauses, and his eyes grow sharper. “How is your father, anyway? No one’s seen him. Not at the spring meeting, not at Sal’s funeral. It’s been… what, a year? More?”

“He keeps to himself these days,” Enzo says, smoothly, carefully. “His health isn’t the best.”

“His health.” Manfredi repeats it without inflection, a light echo.

“Give him my regards, then,” Manfredi says. “Tell him Vittorio asked after him.” He sips his drink. “Tell him, too, that a Don who can’t produce his own father starts to look like a Don who’s hiding something. The elders notice these things, Enzo. They’re old and they’re bored and noticing is most of what we’ve got left.” The grandfatherly mask falls off. “But that’s tomorrow’s worry. Tonight…” He turns to me and bows his head a courtly inch. “You didn’t introduce me to the dangerous woman, Enzo. Where are your manners?”

“Vittorio Manfredi,” Enzo says. “Ms. Stevie Callahan.”

“Callahan.” He says my name like he’s trying it on for size. He does one pass over me with his eyes, but it’s not like the way Luca does it, that awful crawl. He takes my hand, raises it with great care. “I’ve heard about you. You’re the one who can frighten grown men with just a notepad.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A pleasure to meet you. I didn’t realize I had a reputation.”

“Word travels,” he says cryptically. “Anyway, it’s a good thing. This city needs more people Luca Santini is afraid of. We have a bit of a shortage at the moment.”

He releases my hand, lifts his glass an inch in something like a toast, and drifts back into the crowd as smoothly as he came out of it.

Enzo doesn’t say a word. He turns, takes my face in both hands, right there in the middle of the room, in front of the elders and the politicians and every phone in the place, and kisses me.

Not a polite kiss. Not a question. The kind of kiss that tells a whole room the argument is over and he won it.

When he lets me go, the people around us have very carefully found something else to look at.

“You didn’t ask,” I say. It comes out nowhere near as indignant as I want it to.

“No.” His thumb drags once along my lower lip. “Luca just told this room you were a question. Now they know the answer.”

I should be furious. A month ago, a man deciding something like that for me would have had me halfway to the door.

Instead, my knees have stopped working, and there’s a hot, shameful pulse low in my belly that has nothing to do with the champagne.

“That,” I say, “was a lot.”

“That was a normal Friday.” But Enzo’s watching the door Luca left through, a new tightness in him. “Manfredi’s right. My father not showing his face is becoming a problem. Luca’s going to use it. The elders are going to use it.” He shakes his head, then sets it aside and turns back to me. “You all right?”

“I let you fight that one for me.” I’m a little embarrassed by it. “I don’t usually.”

“You didn’t let me fight it. You let me stand next to you while you decided not to bother.” He almost smiles. “There’s a difference. I just said it out loud.”

And God help me, I feel the last of my careful resistance to this man go quietly, completely, down the drain.

“Take me home, Enzo,” I say.

Desire flares in his eyes. “Home,” he repeats, like he’s testing the word, like he likes the shape of it in his mouth. He smirks. “Actually, I have a better idea.”

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CHAPTER 21

STEVIE

Luca's presence lingers in the air, but the room settles back into its rhythm. The crowd breathes again, and music threads through the low murmur of conversation.

"Come."

Enzo takes my hand and guides me to the middle of the dance floor. Everyone around us is doing their best not to watch, but I can feel the heat of dozens of pairs of eyes on me. His hand finds the small of my back just where it was before, his touch as warm and steady as always. I close my eyes and remember that night years ago, when he touched me in the same way, guiding me up to the secret room.

"A dance?" I ask as he pulls me close to him.

"A dance. A dance with *tesoro mio*."

"*Tesoro?*" I ask. "That's a word I'm not familiar with."

"Treasure," he says. "I think it's fitting."

I smile. I can't help it. "I love it."

The dance is slow, and he holds me close. His palm spreads wide against the green silk, like he's claiming the fabric and the skin beneath it at the same time. We move in the small space he makes for us, and the rest of the room fades to a soft blur of light and distant laughter.

“You didn’t run,” he says, low against my temple. His breath stirs the fine hairs at my hairline. “Many women wouldn’t want to be anywhere near a man like him after what he did to you.”

I keep my eyes on the line of his jaw, on the faint shadow of stubble I already know the feel of. “I’ve already run from him once. I’m not going to do it again. From here on out, he’s the one running from me.”

Something in my chest pulls, and I feel a tightening, a warmth between my thighs. Without thinking, I dig my fingers into his shoulder and bite my lower lip.

The song ends. He doesn’t let go. Neither do I.

“Do you remember that night?” he asks. “When I took you to the private room at the club?”

I let out a surprised snort. “Are you kidding? I’ve never forgotten it.”

Enzo glances over his shoulder toward a nondescript door with a single guard posted next to it. “This venue has similar features.”

His eyes hold mine, dark and steady, and he asks without asking. I nod once. He takes my hand and leads me off the floor, through the door, nodding at the guard. The door opens to reveal a private staircase that feels like muscle memory and something brand new at the same time as we travel up.

The room at the top is smaller than the one from that night, but the bones are the same. Private. Hidden away from the party. Low lighting, a gorgeous couch. But no mask this time. No pretend claim in front of a crowd. No pretending we’re strangers who will never see each other again.

“Last time, I was gone by dawn. I heard who you were through a door, and I walked out and kept walking.”

Enzo closes the door behind us. “This time you won’t.”

Enzo doesn’t rush. He steps in close, fingers finding the zipper at the side of the green dress like he’s unwrapping something he’s been fantasizing about

for years. The silk parts. He slides it down my arms, over my hips, letting it pool at my feet.

His eyes move over me slowly, fuller breasts, the soft curve of my stomach, the hips that widened after carrying his son. He doesn't look past any of it. He looks at all of it like it's exactly what he wants.

"Christ, Stevie." His voice is rough. "You have no idea what this body does to me. What it did. What it still does." His hands settle at my waist, thumbs stroking the faint silver lines low on my belly. "Five years I've been living on the memory of you. Memory was a liar. You're better."

The words hit deep. I reach for him, pull his mouth to mine, and the last careful distance between us disappears.

He drops to his knees right there on the carpet, green silk still tangled around my ankles. His hands slide up the backs of my thighs, urging them apart and my panties down, and then his mouth is on me, hot, deliberate, worshipful.

He takes his time. Licks slow and thorough, his tongue pressing against my clit, his fingers holding me open.

"God," I moan as he makes one long, slow drag of his tongue against my slit. "How the hell are you so good at that?"

He flashes me a grin from between my thighs, his lips glistening with my juices. "You bring it out in me."

I fist my hands in his hair, guide him exactly where I need him, and he lets me. When I come, it's sharp and sudden, my head tipping back against the wall, a broken sound tearing out of me as he licks, his finger gliding in and out of me.

"Okay," I say, my vision unblurring. "More. I need more."

Another grin as he rises, his dick tenting his slacks. "Greedy girl."

I smirk. "You bring it out in me."

I'm being cocky, but I'm still shaking from the orgasm as I push him back onto the couch. He goes willingly, his eyes dark and hungry, his mouth still

slick from me. He quickly undoes his belt and zipper and pulls everything down. That gorgeous cock springs out.

I climb onto his lap and reach between us, wrapping my hand around the thick, hot length of him. Enzo's already leaking at the tip, and I drag my thumb across it, watching his jaw clench.

"Fuck, Stevie."

I stroke him more, loving how hot and heavy he is in my hands. I want him inside like nothing else, but part of me wants to keep touching him, wants to feel the hot splash of him against my hand as I bring him over the edge with just my touch.

But I don't. Instead, I line him up and sink down slowly, feeling that perfect, almost obscene stretch. He fills me completely, thick and perfect, and I have to pause at the bottom just to breathe around the burning-sweet ache of it.

"You look so goddamn good full of me," he says, placing his hands on my ass and guiding me into a grind.

I moan, feeling him so deep and pressing against the spot that makes my vision blur at the edges.

"That's it," he rasps, hands gripping my hips hard enough to bruise. "Just like that."

I brace my hands on his chest and start to move. Slow at first, rolling my hips in tight circles, then lifting and dropping, finding the angle that makes sparks shoot up my spine. I keep my eyes open. I want to see him, want him to see me, my full breasts, the soft give of my belly, everything.

"You're so fucking beautiful like this, *tesoro*," he growls. "Take every inch. *Dio*, look at you riding me like you were made for it. Let me feel how wet I make you."

I do. I set the pace, chasing it, grinding down on every downstroke so my clit drags against him. His hands slide up to my breasts, thumbs circling my nipples, then one hand drops to where we're joined, and his thumb presses firmly against my clit. The pressure is perfect.

I ride him faster, chasing the edge, and when the second orgasm hits, it crashes through me sharp and sudden. I bite his shoulder to muffle the cry, clenching hard around him, and he groans, gripping my ass and pushing me against his thickness. I press down onto him as hard as I can, making sure he's buried all the way, as I come.

"*Brava ragazza*. Just like that."

Before the aftershocks even begin to fade, he moves. One smooth, powerful roll, and I'm under him. Then he's turning me, strong hands guiding me, until I'm on my knees on the wide couch, chest pressed into the cushions, my ass up.

He pushes back inside in one deep thrust that knocks the air from my lungs. The angle is devastating. He's deeper than before, hitting places that make my toes curl, and he doesn't hold back.

Enzo pounds me like he's been starving for this and finally doesn't have to pretend anymore. It's hard, relentless, the wet slap of skin on skin loud in the quiet room.

His hand slides up my spine and settles at the back of my neck. "Still with me, *tesoro*?"

"Don't you dare stop."

He laughs, low and dark, and brings his palm down on the curve of my ass. One sharp crack, and I feel it all the way to my toes. I gasp into the cushions. He soothes the sting with slow circles of his hand, then does it again, and this time the sound that comes out of me is one I've never heard myself make.

One arm bands around my waist. His other hand slides under me again, fingers working my swollen clit in tight, fast circles in time with his thrusts. I'm sobbing into the fabric, overwhelmed, overstimulated, and he leans over my back, mouth at my ear.

"You feel that, *mia*?" he pants, voice wrecked. "This is mine. All of it. This body, the way you come for me. Sei mia. And I'm going to fill you up, *tesoro*. Going to come so deep, you'll feel me for days. *Vieni per me.*"

I don’t have time to brace for it. It builds brutal and fast. I’m shaking, pushing back to meet each of his thrusts. And when the climax hits, I practically black out.

“*Dio*,” he groans.

He follows me over the edge, burying himself deep, pulsing hot and thick inside me. We collapse in a tangle of limbs and sweat and ragged breathing. He pulls me against his chest, still inside me, and presses a kiss to my damp temple. For one minute, the world is small and warm and possible.

This could actually work.

I let myself think it, dangerous and sweet.

We dress slowly. The green dress slides back into place. He tucks in his shirt, fixes his cuff links with steady fingers. I’m reaching for my clutch when the first crack splits the air downstairs.

Then another. And another, fast, overlapping.

My instinct knows what it is before my mind does.

Gunshots. A lot of them, coming from the party below.

Enzo’s already moving, the lover vanishing and the Don, the killer, taking his place. He puts himself between me and the door before I’ve even finished processing the fact that I’m scared. His hand clamps around my arm, and this time his touch is like iron bracing me.

There’s a hard bang on the door.

“Enzo, we need to move. Now.” It’s Carmine, his voice urgent.

Enzo’s already got me behind him, a gun in his hand. I see his face and his eyes are terrifying, flat and lethal. The man who worshiped me is gone like he was never there.

And only the killer remains.

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CHAPTER 22

STEVIE

Enzo opens the door, and all I hear is screaming.

The hallway outside the private room is full of smoke and noise and people running the wrong way. More gunfire sounds out from the main room, closer than it was just a short time ago.

It's here. It's rolling up the stairwell toward us in flat, ugly cracks.

Carmine's at the door. "Four shooters on the floor, maybe more," he says, low and clipped, to Enzo, like he's reporting the weather. "They came in through the service entrance. They're not spraying the room. They're working it. They're looking for someone."

"So it's not random," Enzo confirms.

"Not as far as I can tell. Mostly warning shots. But that could change at any second, like when they find whoever they're looking for." His eyes cut to me for half a second. "We move now, while they're still downstairs. Back stairwell. Go."

Enzo changes. I've seen him controlled and I've seen him dangerous. But that was a different sort of dangerous, the implied kind, the kind that silences men with just a look.

Now I'm seeing *why* just a look from him is enough to silence someone. He moves with a gun in his hand that I have no doubt he'd use without a moment's hesitation. Readiness for violence is woven into him, into his movements. There's no softness to him at all.

He moves to the end of the hall, checks, and then hurries back to me.

“Behind me,” he says. “Hand on my back. Don’t let go, don’t stop moving, and if I tell you to get down, you don’t ask why, you just do it. Understood?”

“Understood.” My voice doesn’t shake. An old survival instinct has taken the wheel, the same thing that gets me through everything, an instinct I don’t understand but that is on my side all the same.

We move.

The back stairwell is half a hallway away, but it might as well be a mile. We go fast and low, Carmine ahead, Enzo’s body between me and the open stairs, and for a few seconds, it’s almost working, and then two men race up the landing below us, dark clothes, weapons up, and they see us.

Everything happens at once and very slowly.

Carmine shoots first. The sound is enormous, as intense as a physical blow to my ears. One of the men folds over in a way that makes me sick, but the other gets off a wild burst. The wall beside us comes apart in a shower of plaster and noise, and Enzo shoves me sideways through an open doorway into some kind of service alcove.

He covers me the entire time, making sure any bullet headed my way would hit him first. As he moves, he turns just enough to raise his own pistol and fire. Two shots, *bang-bang*, close enough that the room lights up for a split second.

Then there’s an awful quiet.

“Hallway’s clear,” Carmine says from the hall. “That’s two. The other two are pulling back. Sounds like whoever was still on the main floor is pulling back, too. Guess they didn’t plan on anyone actually shooting back.”

There’s blood running off Carmine’s left hand where a chunk of flying plaster opened it up. He doesn’t even look at it.

Enzo’s already pulling me up. “Are you hit? Stevie. Look at me. Are you hit?”

“No.” I do a fast inventory. “No. I’m okay. I’m okay.”

Over his shoulder, in the hall, I see the man Enzo dropped, and there’s no looking away fast enough. It’s awful. I don’t need to ask to know he’s dead. The man is so still. Dark spreads underneath him, and the look on his face is one of total surprise, as if he’d never considered in a million years the actual possibility that he might get shot. His death mask is a record of that being his final thought.

My stomach turns over hard and the world tilts.

Then I hear a sound underneath the ringing that pulls me back into my body faster than any amount of fear could.

Someone crying.

We move down the hall and take a turn, not using the stairs we used to get up here. This path takes us through the service hallway, and I spot a kid, barely twenty, in a server’s black vest and white shirt, and he’s been hit. He’s making a high, thin sound that’s not even words. I pause, wanting to do something, anything for this poor kid caught in the crossfire of something that had nothing to do with him.

“Stay back,” Enzo says.

He drops to the kid’s side and assesses. When he’s done, he puts his hand on the kid’s sweaty cheek.

“They missed the artery,” he says. “You’re going to be fine. EMTs will be here soon. Take off your vest and use it to keep pressure on the wound.”

I can’t believe how calm he is, speaking like nothing had happened at all.

Something about Enzo’s tone is enough to snap the kid out of his daze. He slips out of his vest and presses it against his leg, just as Enzo said. But the kid’s still groggy and not sure what to do. I hurry over to him and drop to my knees next to Enzo and press down hard on the leg the way you’re supposed to, harder than he’s doing, and I put my face right in front of his.

“Hey. Hey. Look at me, not the leg. What’s your name?”

“M-Marcus…”

“Marcus. You’re okay. It’s the leg, it’s not bad. I’ve got it. You’re going to be fine. Keep your hand right here with mine and keep looking at me. Don’t look at the leg. Are you waiting tables to pay for something?”

“School,” he gasps.

“School. Good. You’re going to finish school. Press here.” I move his hands back where they need to be without letting go of him.

“Come on,” Carmine says. “We need to keep going.”

It’s not over yet. The other men are still here. I ease one hand away and Marcus covers the wound with his own, aware enough now to help hold the pressure.

“Is it over?” I ask. “You said the other two are gone?”

“Pulling back,” Carmine says. “Stay down anyway.”

Enzo is watching me. I feel it more than I see it, a half second where his attention is on me instead of the stairs, and there’s something in it I don’t have time to read.

“Stairwell is clear,” Carmine reports. “Police inbound, two minutes. We’ve got people coming up to lock it down.” He looks at Enzo. “You need to be gone before the badges get here. You and her both.”

“No.” It’s out of me before I’ve decided to say it. I’ve still got one hand over Marcus’s on his leg, and he’s in no shape to be left. “I’m not leaving this kid on the floor so I don’t have to answer questions. Get him help first, then we go.”

Carmine looks at me for a long second. Then he almost smiles and says to Enzo, without taking his eyes off me, “I like her. More, I mean.”

“I know,” Enzo says quietly. “Believe me. I know.”

“And Matthew?” I ask. “Marta?”

“I checked in with the house,” Carmine says. “Nothing’s happening there. It was only this building.”

Relief washes over me like nothing else, the feeling so intense, I have to lean against Enzo for support.

The next minutes are a blur of arriving medics and police, of handing Marcus off to someone with a real medical kit. My hands are red. There's blood on the green silk dress, and I don't care about it at all.

And when it's finally done, when there's nothing left for my hands to do, that's when they start to shake.

Enzo takes them into his. He doesn't say anything about it. He just holds them steady until they stop, his eyes never leaving my face.

"You didn't freeze," he says. His voice is low, like he wants to make sure I heard and understood him. "Bullets were flying, people were getting shot, and you didn't freeze. And you might've saved that boy's life."

"You said he was going to be fine."

"It was hardly certain. But it is now, thanks to you. Who taught you to do all that, be so calm under pressure?"

"Nobody. Somebody has to keep things moving. It's usually me."

"Not anymore," he says. "Not by yourself. Not ever again."

Part of me wants to argue with him, to tell him he doesn't need to look after me, that I'm fine by myself and always will be if I have to.

But I don't. I'm too wrung out for that. I let him hold my hands in the wreckage of the party, sirens screaming on the streets below. And I let myself, for just one exhausted second, believe him.

Then I think of Matthew, asleep at home, miles from here, behind a wall and a gate and Marta's watchful love. Safe. He's safe.

But they came for us tonight. In a room full of Enzo's people, in one of Enzo's own buildings, with guns. They came right into the middle of all this protection like it was nothing.

And the chill that goes through me has nothing to do with the night air.

Because if they can do this here…

“Enzo.” My hands go tight around his. “We need to get home. We need to get home right now.”

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CHAPTER 23

ENZO

The first thing I do, before the police, before anything, is put a phone in her hand and let her hear Marta's voice.

Matthew's asleep. The house is locked down, and I had Anthony, my security second-in-command, double the men at the gate, just to be on the safe side.

Matthew never even woke up, and Stevie hears that from Marta herself, some of the wildness going out of her eyes when she does.

I'm standing in the wreckage of my own party, waiting for the law. An hour ago, this ballroom was gold light and champagne. Now it's filling with officers, red and blue strobe lights flashing on the street dozens of stories below. It's not long before the paramedics are carrying out the men Carmine and I downed.

I'll have to explain, but not now. At this moment, Stevie's all I care about. She sits in a chair someone found her, a blanket over her shoulders, staring off into the middle distance. I don't leave her side. A hundred things at that moment demand my time and attention: Carmine, the police, the question of who just tried to kill me in my own building. But all of them are secondary to the woman in front of me, the mother of my child.

"You're doing it again," she says. It's the first thing she's said in a while.

"Doing what?"

“Standing in front of me, like the room’s still dangerous.” She looks up at me, more clearly than I expected, more tired than I’ve ever seen her. “It’s not. You can sit.”

My first instinct is to argue, but I push that down and I sit. After a moment, her hand finds mine under the blanket and grips it hard, and neither of us says anything about it.

I want to tell her this is my fault. Not the guns; I don’t yet know whose fingers pulled the triggers. But the danger, that’s all mine. The blood on her dress, the man she watched me kill. It all happened because she was too close to me, too close to the storm.

A detective walks over to us, plainclothes, tired, mid-fifties, the kind who’s worked this city long enough to know whose party this was and how little he’ll be able to prove.

“Reyes,” he says. “Homicide. Rough night, Mr. Accardi.”

“I’ve had better.”

“Four shooters came in through the service level. Two deceased, two in the wind. No IDs. They came clean, no wallets, filed off serials.” He watches me. “That’s money and planning. This wasn’t a robbery.”

“No,” I agree, “it wasn’t.”

“Want to tell me who’d do this to you?”

“I’d tell you if I knew.” Which is true, technically. I have a name in my mouth but no proof behind it, and a detective is the last man I’d hand it to, regardless.

“Was anyone hurt?” Stevie asks. “I mean, aside from Marcus.”

Reyes runs his hand through his hair. “A few injuries. All strays. Aside from the poor SOBs who pulled this stunt. Could’ve been a hell of a lot worse. But you two don’t need me to tell you that.”

“Good,” Stevie says.

“Funny thing.” Reyes doesn’t look away. “Luca Santini was a guest tonight. Left a while before it started, his people say. He’s at the precinct right now, being very cooperative. Real broken up about what happened.”

Luca was here and gone before the guns. He’d come in and made a scene and then left. I snort, shaking my head. He was forging an alibi. Hundreds of people at the party can now place him there, his little tantrum the biggest thing they’ll remember from tonight. Well, the second biggest.

And I wonder… *Did the war start tonight?*

“I’m sure he’s devastated,” I say.

Reyes turns to Stevie. “Ma’am, I know it’s a bad night, but I need to ask a few questions. You were with Mr. Accardi when it started?”

She straightens her posture under the blanket, and she lies for me like she was born to it. “We were upstairs,” she says, steadily. “He was showing me the private rooms. I’m his assistant, he hosts business up there, and I needed to see the layout. We heard shots and Carmine got us to cover. Mr. Accardi protected me the whole time. He saved a wounded server. If he hadn’t kept his head, more people would be dead.” She holds Reyes’s eyes. “Whoever did this came for him, Detective. He’s the victim here, not whatever you walked in assuming he was.”

Reyes looks at her a beat too long. Half the party watched me kiss her an hour ago, and he knows it. He writes it down anyway.

“She’s wrong,” I say.

Reyes’s eyebrows arch. “Is that right?”

“About one detail. She was the one responsible for saving the server. I only helped.”

Reyes writes it down. He thanks her and moves on.

I sit there holding her hand, watching as the detectives take a few more statements, my eyes moving over the shattered glasses on the floor.

Under Stevie’s steadiness and loyalty, there’s something else. She watched me kill tonight, watched how quickly and calmly I can take a life. It’d all

existed in the abstract to her, but now it’s real and undeniable.

I know that look. I’ve spent my life watching people get their first real glimpse of what I am. They don’t come back from it the same. Nobody ever has.

Carmine appears at my shoulder, hand wrapped, still running my security one-handed because he won’t stop for a cut. “Car’s downstairs. You should both be gone before this turns into paperwork.”

“Two minutes.”

He nods and goes.

“Take me home,” she says again, the way she said it before the world fell apart, but quieter now, wrecked. “Please. I need to see Matthew.”

“Carmine’s got the car.” I lift her hand, the one I never let go of, and hold it against my chest. “We’re going home. He’s safe, Stevie. I swear on everything I have, he’s safe, and I’ll keep him that way.”

It’s a promise I have no right to make. The night just proved I can’t keep anyone safe, not even in my own house.

I make it anyway.

Because I’d promise her the moon right now, and mean it, and I will find a way to deliver it or die trying.

And that scares me more than any of the blood on this floor, because it tells me exactly how far past saving I am already as far as this woman is concerned.

The next night, Anthony calls me down to the basement.

The kid on the bicycle who brought the rabbit mask to my gate was nineteen and had been paid sixty dollars by a man in a Mets cap. The man in the Mets cap went into the Harlem River with the rabbit mask still on. This one won’t get off that easy.

The man in the chair is younger than I expected. Twenty-three, maybe twenty-four. Good teeth, cheap boots, a rosary tattoo climbing out of his collar like he thought God might be watching. He isn't praying now. Now he's bleeding from the nose and staring at the drain in the middle of the concrete floor as if it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen.

Everyone stares at the drain. That's why it's there.

"Dario Ferrante," Anthony says from the doorway. "We picked him up at a cousin's place in Howard Beach this afternoon. He still had powder burns on his hands."

Carmine would call him stupid, if Carmine were here and not upstairs with two stitches in his hand and Marta guarding him like a dragon.

"Scared," I say instead. "From the outside, scared and stupid look the same."

I take off my jacket and hand it to Anthony. Then I unbutton my cuffs and roll my sleeves to the elbow, one and then the other, slowly, because the boy is watching me do it and I want him to have time to think about why.

Two floors above us, Stevie's light is off. Matthew is asleep on the other side of the bathroom wall from her, the gray rabbit tucked under his chin. I checked on them both before I came down. I stood in the hall outside her door longer than a man should, listening to her breathe.

Then I came down here.

There are two houses under this roof. She has only ever seen one of them. I intend to keep it that way.

I pull a stool across the floor and sit facing Dario, close enough that our knees nearly touch.

"Do you know who I am?"

He nods. His lip is split, and the nod makes it bleed again.

"Say it."

"Enzo Accardi."

“Good. Then you understand that I already know most of what you’re going to tell me. Who paid you. How much. Where the money was left. So this isn’t really an interrogation, Dario.” I lean in. “It’s a test. I want to see if you’ll lie to me.”

“Mr. Accardi, I swear, I don’t know who paid…”

I don’t let him finish. I take his left hand by the wrist, flatten it on the arm of the chair, and bring the heel of my palm down on his first two fingers, once, hard, in a direction they were never built to go.

The sound he makes isn’t a word. It bounces off the cinder block and comes back smaller.

I wait for it to stop. It takes a while.

“That,” I say, when he can hear me again, “was the lie. We’ll count it as the only one you get. Who paid you?”

“Nicky.” It comes out wet and fast. “Nicky Bianchi. He drinks at a place on Rockaway, by the casino. He gave us the envelopes, he gave us the guns, he told us which door.”

“And who pays Nicky?”

“I don’t know. I swear to Christ, I don’t. He just said *the man*. The man wants this, the man wants that.” He’s shaking so hard the chair rattles. “But there was… there was a girl. That was the real job. The shooting was just noise. Make noise, get everybody running, find the girl in the green dress and bring her out the service door. Alive. He said alive. He said it like three times.”

The room goes very still.

“Go on.”

“Nicky said nobody touches her face. Said the man wanted her in one piece, because he had plans for her, and he didn’t want her messed up before he got to…”

He stops, because he has seen my face.

I have spent my life training my face not to do things. I don’t know what it’s doing now. Whatever it is, it makes a man who walked into my party with a rifle try to push his chair backward across the concrete with his heels.

Luca didn’t come to my party to kill me.

Killing me was the excuse. The noise. He came for her.

Five years he’s been nursing it, the night she laughed at him in front of everyone who mattered and walked out of his life on my arm. He didn’t want her dead. Dead would have been over too fast. He wanted her back in a room with him, with the door locked, so he could take as long as he liked teaching her what happens to women who laugh at Luca Santini.

I think of the green dress. I think of her hands pressed to a stranger’s wound, steady as a surgeon’s, while the man who wanted her dragged out through the service door sat in a precinct with a cup of coffee, playing the victim.

“Did you see her?” My voice sounds very far away. “That night. Did you get close to her?”

“No. No, I swear to God, we never made it upstairs. We heard the shooting on the back stairs, and the two who went up never came down, and we ran…”

“Good.”

I mean it. It’s the only thing he has said tonight that bought him anything.

I stand. My knees crack. I’m forty years old, I’ve been doing this since I was nineteen, and somewhere in the past month I have started to feel the floor in my joints.

“What happens now?” Dario’s voice cracks down the middle. “Please. Please, I got a mother, I got a little sister, I…”

“Everyone has a mother.”

I roll my sleeves back down. I button the cuffs. Anthony holds out my jacket and I shrug into it, and the boy watches every motion like it’s a clock

counting down, which it is.

“There was a kid at that party,” I tell him. “Marcus. Twenty years old. Waiting tables to pay for school. You put a bullet in his leg, and he’ll carry that scar for the rest of his life, and he’ll never even know your name.” I look down at him. “That isn’t why I’m angry. Bystanders bleed. It’s an ugly business, and I made my peace with that a long time ago.”

I lean down until he can’t look anywhere but at me.

“I’m angry because you came into my house to put your hands on what’s mine.”

Then I straighten, turn to Anthony, and say the two words my father used to say in this same basement when I was a boy listening at the top of the stairs.

“The river.”

Dario starts screaming before I reach the stairs. I turn off the light on my way out, and the screaming goes on in the dark behind me, and I put my foot on the bottom step and look up.

Stevie is standing at the top of the basement stairs.

She’s barefoot, in the thin sleep shirt, one hand on the rail. The light from the kitchen hall is behind her, so I can’t see her face. I can only see that she isn’t moving.

I don’t know how long she’s been there. I know from the way she’s holding that rail that it’s been long enough.

Anthony goes still behind me. Nobody has ever come down those stairs uninvited. My sister never has. My mother never did.

I climb them one at a time. She doesn’t back up. When I reach the top, I can see her face, and it’s white, and her eyes go to my hands and stay there.

“How long?” I ask.

“Since his fingers.” Her voice is flat. “I heard you go down. I followed you.” Her eyes come up to mine. “He said the girl in the green dress. He

said alive. He said the man had plans for her."

"Yes."

"Luca."

"Yes."

Below us, Dario's screaming has broken down into something wetter. She flinches at it, once, and then she doesn't flinch again.

"What's the river?" she asks.

I could lie to her. I've lied to better people about worse things. But she's standing at the top of my father's stairs in her bare feet, and she has seen the house under the house, and a lie now would be the last thing I ever got to say to her.

"It's what it sounds like," I tell her.

She looks past me, down into the dark. For a long moment, I think she's going to run. I think I've finally shown her the thing she ran from once, and she's going to take my son and go, and I'm going to let her.

Then she looks back at me.

"He was going to hand me to Luca," she says. "That boy. For money."

"Yes."

She breathes in, and out. When she speaks again, her voice doesn't shake at all, and that is the most frightening thing I have heard tonight.

"Good," she says.

Then she turns and walks back toward the stairs that lead up to our son.

I wash my hands in the kitchen sink until the water runs clear. Then I wash them again. When I turn around, she's in the kitchen doorway. She came back down.

“You missed some,” she says. She takes a dish towel off the rail, wets it under the tap, and wipes a fleck of red off the inside of my wrist that I didn’t see. Her hand is steady. Mine isn’t.

“Stevie.”

“Don’t.” She folds the towel and pushes it down into the trash, under the other trash, like a woman who has done this before for someone. Maybe she has. “I said good. Now I need to go upstairs and figure out what kind of person says good.” She looks at me. “Don’t follow me.”

I don’t.

Upstairs, the hallway is dim and silent. Her door is open a crack. It always is now. She leaves it that way so she can hear Matthew, and because some part of her is testing me, I think. Seeing if I’ll walk through it without being asked.

I don’t do that either.

I pull a chair from the end of the hall and set it against the wall across from her room. I sit. I lay my pistol across my knee.

She knows about the basement now. She knows Dario Ferrante’s face, and what Luca Santini wanted to do with her once he had her alone, and what I do to men who try to hand her to him. Tomorrow, she’ll wake up and fight with me about all of it, and she’ll be right, and I’ll let her be right, because she has to keep choosing this house for the choice to mean anything.

But tonight she said good.

I sit in the dark outside her door until the windows go gray. I don’t close my eyes once.

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CHAPTER 24

STEVIE

Two days have passed since the worst night of my life, and one since the strangest, and I'm still reeling. Luckily, the garden is the perfect place to decompress.

I sip my coffee and try to push it all out of my head. I'd been calling the hospital every few hours, checking on Marcus, so much so that his parents were starting to wonder who the hell I was. He's fine, thankfully.

Matthew's on the swing set Enzo had built for him, calling out to Marta to push him higher, higher. When she's had her fill, he hops off and rushes over to the big wooden playground set, eager to climb up and slide down over and over.

Marta comes over to sit with me on the stone bench, watching him play. "You should make him stop," she says, but she's smiling. "Only a matter of time before he goes down the slide with such gusto he lands in my flower beds, and I'll have to explain that to the gardener."

"He's got good hands. He won't fall."

"No." She watches him a moment. "No, that one doesn't fall."

The door opens, and a voice none of us expects says, "Is that the boy?"

Marta stills and I turn. An old man stands in the garden doorway. I know who he is before anyone says it, because I've seen his face in an oil painting in the library. It shows him standing with a hand on a small solemn boy's shoulder.

Michael Accardi.

He’s smaller than the portrait, bent, a cardigan over his shoulders against the cool morning, leaning on a cane he clearly wishes he didn’t have to use. But the eyes are the same, black and flat and taking in everything, me, the coffee, and most of all the boy on the playground, whom he’s looking at like a man looks at a ghost.

“Mr. Accardi,” Marta breathes, “you came down.”

“Don’t make it an event, Marta.” But there’s no heat in it. He can’t take his eyes off Matthew. “Leave us a minute.”

Marta looks at me as if to wordlessly ask, *Are you all right with this?* I give her the smallest nod, because Enzo and I already decided this. Two nights ago, in the dark, after the shooting, both of us too rattled to sleep, I’d pushed for it and he’d resisted, the way he resists anything to do with his father.

“He should know he has a grandson,” I’d said.

“You don’t know what he is,” Enzo had replied.

“Then tell me, or let him meet Matthew and let me find out for myself.”

In the end, he’d agreed reluctantly on two conditions. The first was that the old man would never be alone with Matthew. When I asked why, Enzo looked out the window for a long time. “Because the last child he was alone with was me,” he said, and that was all. The second was that he couldn’t tell Matthew that he’s his grandfather.

“He’s going to put it all together on his own,” Enzo had said. “He’s bright and observant, but you don’t need me to tell you that.”

“I know. We tell him everything soon but not yet.”

Marta slips inside and Michael Accardi slowly crosses the grass to me, the cane sinking into the soft ground. He lowers himself onto the bench with a grunt.

“You’re the one,” he says. There’s no unkindness to his tone, just certainty. “The mother.”

“Stevie Callahan.”

“I know your name. I know everything that happens in my house, even from all the way up on the fourth floor.” His eyes are still on Matthew. “My son thinks I don’t. My son underestimates how much I know these days.” Then, in a lower voice, almost to himself, he says: “He has the Accardi face, God help him.”

“Mama, watch!” Matthew launches himself off the slide, lands in a tumble on the grass, and pops up grinning, delighted with his own daring. He sees the old man and stills the way he does, studying this new person with his head tipped.

“Who are you?” he asks directly, the way only children are allowed to be.

Michael Accardi looks at his grandson for a long moment, and something happens to the old man’s face that I don’t think happens often anymore. It cracks, just slightly, around the eyes.

“I’m Enzo’s father,” he says.

Matthew considers it seriously. “You’re a lot older than him, huh?”

The corner of the old man’s mouth moves. “Much, much older.”

“Okay.” Matthew accepts this with the total ease of the very young, files it away, and moves on to what matters. “Do you want to see me jump again?”

“I would like that very much,” Michael Accardi says.

For a few minutes, that’s all it is: an old man on a bench and a little boy showing off, and the old man watching every jump, like it’s the only thing in the world, calling out *higher* and *good* and *again*, and something in his hard old face going soft in a way I’d have sworn it couldn’t.

Marta told me he doesn’t come down. But he came down for this, for the first Accardi grandson. At one point he says, low enough that only I can hear, *The first one, after all this*. There’s so much grief in it that I don’t understand.

For one moment, watching them, I let myself feel something dangerous: hope, like maybe this house isn’t only what Genevieve says it is,

like maybe there are better days in it somewhere.

The door bangs open and Genevieve is there, and the morning curdles.

“Well,” she says by way of announcing herself.

She’s not drunk yet, but she’s getting there, a glass already in her hand, and her eyes are bright and glassy.

“Look at this. The old man crawled out of his tomb for the help’s kid.” She laughs. “Thirty-two years I’ve lived in this house, and I don’t think I ever once got you to watch me do anything, Papa. But here you are, in the dirt, for a stranger’s son.”

“Genevieve.” Michael’s voice is flat and old and hard. “Not here.”

“Why not here? She’s family now, isn’t she? She’s sleeping in Enzo’s bed, right?” Genevieve turns to me, and under the cruelty, something is splitting open, something that’s been buried deep for years. “You want to know about better days? Ask him what happened to mine. Ask him about David.”

“That’s enough,” the old man says.

“His name was David Moretti, and I was going to marry him. I was twenty-six, and I was happy, actually happy, the one time in my whole life,” she says, her voice cracking, “and my father decided I’d be more useful unmarried and under his roof than gone and free. Then David had an accident, a terrible, convenient accident.”

She’s crying now, furious, unstoppable. “And when I went to my brother, years later, when I begged Enzo to tell me it wasn’t what I knew it was, he couldn’t. He couldn’t even look at me.”

The garden is silent. Even Matthew has stopped, sensing the thing in the air the way he senses everything. He drifts toward me until I get a hand on his shoulder.

Michael Accardi rises from the bench, slowly and with effort. When he speaks, there’s no denial in it, which is somehow the worst thing of all.

“You were always your own undoing, Genevieve,” he says, “not me, you.”

Then he turns and makes his slow way back toward the house, the cane sinking into the grass, an old man retreating to the top of his tower, and he doesn't look back at his daughter or his grandson.

The door closes behind him.

Genevieve stands there, shaking, the glass trembling in her hand, the fury draining out of her and leaving only the wreckage behind. When she looks at me, her face is almost gentle.

"That's the family, Stevie," she says. "That's what's under all the silk. He took the one good thing I ever had and everyone in this house just let him, including the man you're falling for, especially him." She wipes her face with the back of her hand.

"Gen…"

"Run." Her voice is tired. She says it like it's simple, like she's saying it to herself as much as to me. "You've still got somewhere to run to. I never did. Take your beautiful boy and run while the door still opens, before this house teaches him to be one of them, before Enzo finally starts locking doors."

She drains the glass and walks back inside, leaving me alone in the garden with my son and the birdsong and the empty swing still swaying. The hope I let myself feel a few minutes ago is gone so completely, I can't remember what it felt like.

"Mama," Matthew says, leaning into my side, "is everything okay?"

I pull him close and press my lips to the top of his head and breathe him in, this sweet, serious boy with the Accardi face, and I don't lie to him. I never lie to him.

"I don't know, bub," I say.

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CHAPTER 25

STEVIE

I wait until Matthew's asleep to go find Enzo in his study. It's the typical spot for him at this hour, usually a glass of something amber nearby, the city glowing in the distance through the window behind him.

His eyes flick up to me when I enter. I must be easier to read than I think, because whatever expression is on my face makes him set down his pen and stop working instantly.

"We need to talk about the basement," I say.

"You've been quiet about it all day." He gestures at the chair across from him. "I wondered when this was coming."

I flick my eyes to the chair, then sigh before sitting. "I need to understand what this is, what we're in. Like, what we're *really* in. Because I keep telling myself what I saw down there was a one-time thing, a line that got crossed and won't get crossed again. And I want you to tell me it's true. I want you to tell me it won't happen again."

He's quiet for a moment, and I know him well enough now to know that the quiet is him deciding whether to lie to me and then deciding not to.

"I can't tell you that," he says.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not true." He leans back in his seat. "Men like Luca don't stop because they've failed. They stop when someone forces them to. This ends

with one of us putting the other down.”

“There has to be another way. Lawyers, the elders, some kind of…”

“Luca doesn’t give a shit about any of that.” His voice stays calm and level. “You give men like him mercy, and they read it as weakness and come back harder.”

“How? How can you be so calm about what you’re saying?”

“Easy. The alternative is letting people I care about die so I can keep my hands clean. I’d rather be the monster and have you alive than be a good man at your funeral.”

That’s the thing that’s been circling in my mind since last night, finally said out loud. Enzo built a playground for Matthew and sent a boy to the river. And to him, these are just two facets of the same thing. This isn’t a conflict for him. He said it himself. He’s made peace with it.

What scares me is the peace. What scares me more is that I found some of it in myself, standing barefoot at the top of those stairs.

“Okay,” I say. “Then answer me this. And I need you to actually think about it, not just defend yourself.”

He nods. “Anything.”

I lean forward. “Matthew. He’s four. And even if I didn’t already know, it’s so goddamn obvious that he’s your son. He’s got your face and your hair and that stillness, and he watches everything and forgets nothing.”

Enzo says nothing, but his eyes stay fixed on mine.

“And he’s in this house and in this life. What does he become? Do you raise him in this world so he grows up to think love means bodyguards posted at every door? That shooting people in the head is just something you do for family? Is that what he grows up to think is normal?”

Enzo’s jaw tightens. “He learns to survive.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer there is.”

He leans forward. “You think I wouldn’t give every dollar I have for him to grow up somewhere soft and safe? But he’s an Accardi. People will come for him because of that name his whole life, and the only thing standing between him and them is me.”

“And if it’s bullets?” I cut in. “If protecting him comes down to bullets, is that what you teach him? Is that the inheritance?”

“If bullets are what keep him breathing,” Enzo says, “then yes.”

I can tell by the way his eyes flash that he sees how this statement lands for me. There’s almost something like alarm in his expression, the realization that he’s just said something he can’t take back.

He opens his mouth. “Stevie…”

“No. Don’t.” My voice is quiet, too. “Don’t walk it back. You meant it. It’s the most honest thing you’ve said to me, and you meant every word. I need to actually hear it, instead of letting you soften it for me.”

“I’m trying to keep him alive.”

“I know you are.” And the terrible thing is that I do know it, that it comes from love, that everything broken in this house comes from love twisted into the wrong shape. “That’s what makes it so hard to explain why you’ve got it exactly, completely wrong.”

“You want to protect us,” I say. “I know. But a cage with a playground in it is still a cage. And he’ll grow up thinking that’s what love is.”

Enzo says nothing. For once in his life, the man with an answer for everything has no answer at all. He just looks at me, and I watch him reach for something to say and find nothing that isn’t a lie, and to his credit, he doesn’t lie.

“I don’t know how to be what you’re describing,” he says finally, quietly. He sounds almost lost. “I was raised in this. It’s the only language I have. You’re asking me for words I was never taught.”

“I know,” I say. “That’s the whole problem.”

And we sit in the gold-and-black study, the two of us, with the thing finally said out loud and lying between us like a body, and I feel something shift in me that I've been pushing down for weeks.

"Then try," I say. "Before the bullets. Try the other way first. Promise me that much."

He holds my eyes for a long moment. "I promise."

"I should check on Matthew," I say and stand; my legs hold me up, but just barely.

He rises, too. "Stevie." He doesn't come around the desk. He's learned that much, not to rush to the door and try to block me. "Don't decide anything tonight. That's all I'm asking. Not tonight."

"Good night, Enzo," I say.

It's not a no. But it's pretty damn close.

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CHAPTER 26

STEVIE

After our fight, Enzo leaves for a meeting across the river. Marta says it will run until dawn.

At eleven, I go back down to the study to leave the correspondence folder on his desk, the way I do every night, and I find the top drawer open.

It's never open. It's the drawer with the lock, the only one in this room I've never seen open. Tonight he left in a hurry, and the key is still in it.

I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. I do it anyway.

The ring is in there. My ring, the one from that night, on black velvet in a box that isn't closed all the way. Under it, still folded the way I left it, is the money I wouldn't take. He never spent a dollar of it. Under that is a folder.

Inside the folder is my life.

Photographs. Me outside the diner on Wyckoff Avenue at the end of a double, my apron balled up in one fist. Me on the platform at Myrtle-Wyckoff with Matthew on my hip. My building in Bushwick, my window, the fire escape outside it. Candy on the stoop with a cigarette. Matthew in the window of the laundromat on Knickerbocker with both palms pressed flat against the glass. There are dates on the back in a neat, slanting hand. They go back eight months.

Under the photographs there's a typed sheet with my shift schedule. The five companies that interviewed me and loved me and never called. Two of them have a line through them in black ink.

And at the bottom, a purchase agreement. Paula's agency, bought through three holding companies with names I've never heard of, signed eight months ago by a man whose signature I see fifty times a day.

I sit down in his chair, because my legs have stopped working.

Paula, getting creative with her net. Six candidates sent home in under an hour. A job with no name on it and a salary nobody sane would pay. *I really thought I'd gotten lucky.*

There was no luck in it. He watched me for eight months. He closed the last doors in my face himself, until there was only one left, and then he stood behind it and waited for me to walk through.

I put everything back exactly as I found it. I turn the key to where it was. Then I go upstairs and take the suitcase out of the closet.

I pack the way I learned to pack a long time ago, quietly, smartly, taking only what matters.

I collect documents first: Matthew's birth certificate, his Social Security card, the little folder of paperwork I've kept up-to-the-month current for exactly this kind of situation.

Then the cash. I've been quietly setting it aside since my first paycheck, stashing away what I could, building my cushion back up slowly but surely, because some animal part of me never stopped getting ready to run, even when the rest of me was falling in love.

Matthew's things are next. I can't take all of them, which is part of the cruelty of running. I triage, find the things that matter, his dinosaur book, Mr. Bun, the stuffed rabbit that's more gray than white now, the one he can't sleep without, with a split seam in his belly I keep promising to sew. Mr. Bun stays in his arms until the last minute. Everything else goes in the bag.

I find two changes of clothes and grab a few of those fancy star-shaped fruit pouches from the kitchen. It doesn't make sense, even as I do it. Maybe a tiny luxury will help this all go down smoother.

I think about the phone he gave me. I go through every setting the way Candy showed me once: location, sharing, the apps I don't recognize. There's nothing. Whatever Enzo is, he's a man who watches through a long lens. He doesn't need to be in my pocket, too.

And I think about the boy in the basement, crying out the words *girl in the green dress*. *Alive.* I've turned that word over all day, and I keep landing in the same place. Luca doesn't want me. He never really did. He wants Enzo Accardi's woman, because taking her is the only way left to hurt Enzo. Away from this house, I'm a waitress with a kid and a bus ticket. I'm nobody to him.

Matthew loves it here, and that's what makes my hands shake as I fold his clothes. He loves Marta like the aunt he never had. She saves his drawings; he tells her about his scary dreams in the morning while she makes him comfort pancakes.

And Enzo. God. Matthew looks for him all the time, walks into rooms and scans them for his father, disappointment taking hold when he's not there. He's already attached to him, already orbiting him, as if he knows on some level just who he really is.

And I'm about to take all of it away from him in the dark, because I'm his mother, and the job is to choose his whole life over his happiness right now, even when it breaks both of our hearts.

The worst part is that I love Enzo, too.

I do, and there's no point in lying to myself about it as I pack in an empty room at midnight. I love him, and that's exactly why I have to go. I never doubted the love, not really. That's the problem. A man who loves you like that will watch you through a laundromat window for eight months and call it love. He'll send a boy to the river and come upstairs and wash his hands.

I'm folding the last of Matthew's shirts into the suitcase when the door opens. Marta stands in the doorway in her dressing gown, taking in the bags, the open drawers, the documents on the bed. I freeze, braced for it, the judgment, the alarm, the calling for Enzo.

It doesn’t come. She steps in quietly and closes the door behind her. She just looks at me for a long moment, this woman who has run this house for thirty years and has seen everything that happens in it.

“Are you sure?” she asks. That’s all. No outrage. Just the question.

“No.” It comes out cracked. “I’m not sure of anything, Marta, except that my son deserves better than bloodshed. That’s it. That’s the whole list.”

She sits on the edge of the bed near the open bag and folds her hands. “You think he’s going to become his father, Enzo,” she says. “You think this house turns everyone into the old man eventually.”

“I think it might. I watched Michael today, Marta. I heard what he did to Genevieve. I heard Enzo tell me, to my face, that he’d raise my son to meet bullets with bullets, and he didn’t even see what is wrong with that.” I shake my head. “I can’t unhear it.

“And he watched me, Marta. For eight months before I ever walked in here. There’s a folder in his desk with my whole life in it. Matthew in a laundromat window.”

Marta doesn’t look surprised. That’s the worst part. “I know,” she says. “I told him it was wrong. He told me it was the only way he could sleep.”

“Then he should have told me,” I say.

“Then say that to his face,” she says. “Don’t do it like this. Don’t disappear in the night with the boy and a bag the way you did before. He told me…” She stops, careful. “He’s told me a little about that first night. The ring on the pillow. What it did to him, finding you gone. If you do it again, in the dark, without a word, that ends him, do you understand? Not the leaving, the way of it. Tell him to his face. Give him that much.”

“I can’t.” The words come out of me without thinking.

“But why?”

“Because if I tell him, he’ll talk me out of it. You know he will. He’ll say the right thing, the comforting thing, like he always does. It may take him

some trying, but he'll eventually land on the right combination of words to get me to stay. And then I will. I'll stay because I…"

I almost say the words, almost speak them out loud. But I stop myself. Not that it does any good: Marta blinks away tears, and I understand she knows what I almost said.

"I'll stay because Matthew is happy and the bed is warm and the cage is beautiful. And a year from now, I'll be exactly the woman Genevieve warned me about, telling myself the bars are love because the bars are nice. I already disappeared once, and from a man worse than this. I survived. I know how. But the *staying* is what I *don't* know how to survive."

But I don't put down the shirt in my hands.

I turn to Marta and take her hands. "Marta, please. I need you not to tell him. Not yet at least. Just… just give me until dawn. A few hours. That's all. Let me get clear and then you can tell him whatever you want. Tell him I'm a coward and call me every bad name you can think of. I don't care. Just give me a few hours."

Marta looks at me for a long, long moment, and I watch the loyalty war in her, to Enzo, and to me and my son, whom she's somehow come to love in a few short weeks.

"A few hours," she says at last, heavily. "I'm going against everything I think is right, because I think you're wrong, Stevie. I think you're making the same mistake twice and calling it wisdom." She stands. "But I'll give you the hours on one condition you won't like hearing."

"What?"

"That you know what you're doing." Her eyes are sad and clear. "Secrets are what almost destroyed this already. And here you are, ready to do it again." She sighs. "I don't know if he's going to survive this." She places her hand on her heart. "In here, at least. He won't come after you, after Matthew. He wouldn't want to scare the boy like that, but I truly think this will break his spirit in a way nothing has before."

She goes to the door, then turns back to me. "I hope you're right, child. I hope this ends up being the right thing to do. But I'm afraid you're not.

Good luck.”

The door closes softly behind her.

I sit down on the floor beside the half-packed suitcase in the room that was never mine and let myself break. I sob, doing it quietly so Matthew doesn’t hear me through the doors. I’m going to get him up soon and lead his groggy body out through the back entrance and into a cab. I can already imagine the questions: Where’s Enzo? Where’s Carmine and Marta? Can we still play in the garden?

And I keep packing.

I wipe my face, open the car app, and book a ride for five in the morning to Port Authority. From there, a bus. From there, anywhere.

We’ll leave before daylight. The way I did it the first time. The only way I’ve ever known how.

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CHAPTER 27

ENZO

At one-fourteen in the morning, in the back of a car on the Pulaski Skyway, my phone tells me that Stevie Callahan has booked a ride to Port Authority for five a.m.

I read it twice. Then I tell Carmine to turn the car around.

I'm not proud of how I know. The phone in her pocket has reported to mine since the first night she slept in my house. I told myself it was security, and it was. It was also the only way I could sleep.

I climb the stairs to her room. The door is ajar and the light is on, and there's a suitcase open on the bed.

I see it all in one still moment. Matthew's clothes are there, folded beside his dinosaur book. I see documents, a bank envelope thick with cash.

For a moment, I don't say anything. I can't. The whole world has gone very quiet and very cold.

Because I understand what I'm looking at. She's leaving. She's taking my son and she's going to vanish into this city the way she vanished five years ago, and this time I'll know exactly what I lost, which is so much worse.

Stevie walks out of the bathroom with a stack of Matthew's shirts and stops dead when she sees me. "Enzo."

"You're running." My voice doesn't sound like mine. It's come out flat and arctic, the voice I use right before something terrible happens, and I watch

her hear it. “You’re taking him and running. Again.”

“You weren’t supposed to be home.”

“Clearly.”

“How are you even here?” Her eyes go to the door, to the hall. “Marta promised me…”

“Marta didn’t tell me anything.” I hold up my phone, the booking confirmation glowing on the screen. “You did.”

She stares at it. I watch her understand, and I watch the color leave her face.

“You’re in my phone.”

“I know where it is. I know what it does. Since the day I gave it to you.”

“Since the *first day?*” Her voice drops to something I’ve never heard from her, low and shaking. “You put a leash on me and called it a phone.”

I don’t deny it. There’s nothing to deny.

I step into the room. She tenses, which makes me sick to my stomach, because I’ve earned her acting this way with my behavior.

“And the folder in your desk,” she says. “The photographs. Matthew in the laundromat window. Eight months, Enzo.”

So she found that, too. I left the key in the drawer. I have never in my life left a key in anything.

“Yes,” I say.

“Eight months of his face in your desk,” she says, “and you never once did the math?”

“I did it every night,” I say. “And every night, I stopped before the end. Because once I knew, I could never have let you go.”

Then I reach behind me without looking and turn the lock on her door. The click is very small. She hears it anyway.

“Open it,” she says.

“No.” I lean my back against it. “You’re not walking out of this house with my son at five in the morning without saying it to my face. Say it. Then we’ll see.”

She doesn’t say it. So I do. “Five years ago, you left me a ring on the pillow and money you wouldn’t take. Tonight, it appears you’re going to leave nothing at all. I suppose that’s progress of a kind.”

Her chin comes up. “Don’t you dare make this about your feelings. This was never about you.”

“My son’s life is in that suitcase, Stevie. How is it not about me?”

“Because I’m his mother, and I’m trying to save his life!”

“By stealing him from his father a second time?” The words come out like something breaking. “You did it once. You took the first four years of my son’s life from me. And now, the moment I’m finally in his life, the moment he’s started lowering his guard around me, you’re going to rip him away again, in the dark, like a thief. All because you got scared.”

“Scared.” She laughs, and it’s terrible. “You think this is me being scared? This is me being his mother. I watched you kill a man two nights ago, Enzo. I watched you break a boy’s fingers in your basement and send him to the river. I held a kid’s leg as his blood poured between my fingers. And I listened to you as you told me you’d kill again and again for Matthew.”

“To keep him alive.”

“To make him you!” Her voice cracks the air. “That’s what I’m running from, not Luca, not the danger I can see: you. I’m running from the version of my son that grows up in this house and learns that love is a smoking gun held up in front of a dead body. I won’t give him that.”

I step closer now, the fury carrying me, but she doesn’t step back even an inch. “So, instead, you give him no father at all. That’s your better plan: a boy with no father, raised on the run, taught that the second anything gets hard, you pack a bag in the middle of the night and leave. He’s going to learn *something*, Stevie. Is that the lesson you want to teach?”

I see it hit her. But she comes back swinging.

“At least running keeps him breathing.”

“You never gave me a chance!” It’s the thing under all of it, torn out of me before I can stop it. “Five years, Stevie. You decided, alone, that I didn’t get to know my own son. You judged me without even giving me a chance to speak in my defense. You just decided, for him and for me, like God, like you had the goddamn right.”

“You know why I ran?” She’s shaking now. “You really want to know?”

“I do.”

“Because the night we made him, I learned that his father was a crime lord who kills.”

“Mama?” The word drops into the room and stops everything.

Matthew is in the bathroom doorway between their rooms. He’s in his dinosaur pajamas, and his hair is sleep-mussed, and his eyes are big and alert. He looks at his mother, who’s paler than she was a moment ago. Then he looks at the suitcase, and then he looks at me. I can see something working behind his eyes, a question taking shape. I realize what it is before he asks it.

“Is Enzo my daddy?”

Across the room, I hear Stevie make a sound like the floor opened up beneath her. Her hand flies to her mouth and I see years of held breath whoosh out of her all at once.

But I’m only dimly aware of it, because my whole world has narrowed to this little boy in dinosaur pajamas, asking the only question that could possibly matter. All the fury, the cold, the betrayal, the suitcase, all of it, drains out of me. Gone. Burned off in an instant by the sight of his frightened face, leaving something so much rawer underneath that I can barely hold it.

I slowly drop to one knee so I’m not towering over him, so I’m at his level, so the man he’s looking at isn’t the one whose voice was filling the house a moment ago. When I speak, it comes out nothing like that man. It comes out the gentlest thing I have ever heard in my own voice.

“Yes,” I tell him. “I am. I’m your daddy.”

Matthew takes this in with that grave, careful look of his. “Why didn’t you come before?” he asks. “Where were you?”

I could hurt Stevie with the right answer, and it would be so easy. I could drive a wedge between them that she might never remove. I don’t reach for it. I find I don’t even want it.

“Because your mother loves you very, very much. And she wanted to make sure you were safe and taken care of. Your mother thought I wasn’t ready to be your daddy, and she was right. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” he asks.

“I’m so sorry, Matthew. More than I know how to say.”

He thinks about this. Then, with the devastating simplicity only children have, he offers me a way to understand it that a child can grasp.

“Were you lost?”

And God help me, my voice nearly goes. I have faced men with guns without my voice changing. This four-year-old asking if I was lost almost finishes me.

“Yes,” I manage. “I was lost. For a long time. But I’m not anymore. I found you.”

Over his head, I see Stevie, both hands pressed to her face as tears run between her fingers. I see the understanding reach her, that I had the killing blow in my hands and I set it down and chose peace. Standing in the middle of the proof that she was leaving me for good, I chose not to hurt her.

She gathers him up, and he goes to her easily, the question answered, the world re-sorted into something he can understand.

“Come on, bub,” she whispers into his hair. “Back to bed. Everything’s okay. Enzo and I were just talking loud.”

“Loud is scary,” Matthew informs her.

“I know. We’re sorry.”

She carries him out. I stay on one knee in the middle of the room for a moment longer, until I trust myself to stand.

When she comes back, the fight is gone from both of us, burned out. What's left is just the wreckage and the two of us standing in it, and the suitcase still open on the bed.

"When I saw the suitcase," I say, "I locked that door. You watched me do it." I make myself say the rest. "I wanted to lock every door in this house. I wanted to make it so you couldn't leave, and for a few minutes tonight, I did."

She flinches. I watch it happen, that full-body recoil, and it's the worst thing in the room, worse than the suitcase.

"There," I say quietly. "That flinch. That's why you were right to pack."

"Enzo…"

"No." I cut her off. "Listen to me, because for one second, I became the exact thing you've been afraid of since you walked through my gate: the man who locks doors, who controls. My father's son, all the way down."

I drag my hand over my face. "I've spent my whole life believing that if I made the world scared enough of me, the people I love would be safe. It's the only protection I know how to give."

My voice drops. "It just doesn't work on you. All I did was make you afraid of staying. I was too damn stupid to see that my old strategy wouldn't accomplish anything but driving you away."

I cross to the bed. I close the suitcase and pick it up. I carry it to the door. I turn the lock back, open the door all the way, and set the suitcase down there, where she can reach it. And I step back. Three steps, four, until there's a whole room between me and her.

"If you leave tonight," I say, "I won't stop you. I won't follow. The door is open."

I keep my hands at my sides, open, empty. "Guards if you want them. Money if you'll take it. I'll be his father on whatever terms you set, from as

far away as you need me to be. Even if it kills me."

She stares at me, at the suitcase by the door, at the space I've put between us.

"But I'm asking you to stay." My voice is steady, the way it only gets when everything rides on what I say next. "Not forever. I haven't earned that. Just long enough for me to become someone you don't have to protect yourself from."

"I don't know how to be that man yet. But I swear to you, I'll spend the rest of my life learning."

The room is silent. The suitcase sits by the door. She could pick it up. We both know she could pick it up, that I'd stand here and let her, that I mean every word.

She looks at the door for a long, long time. Then she looks at me and she doesn't pick it up.

"Barely," she says, her voice a whisper. "I'm staying, but just barely. Don't you dare mistake it for trust."

"I wouldn't," I say. "I don't deserve it yet."

"No," she agrees, "you don't."

But she's still here. The suitcase is by the door and she's still standing in the room, and it's not because she's stopped being afraid of the world and it's not because I've convinced her it's safe.

It's because, for the first time, I understood that keeping her was never going to be something I could do with power.

And I finally stopped trying.

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CHAPTER 28

ENZO

Eight days since the suitcase.

She gave me her terms the next morning, standing at my desk before I'd finished my first coffee. She had written them on a legal pad in her neat little hand, and she read them to me like a contract. I understood that if I argued with a single line, she would be gone by lunch.

A lock on her bedroom door and on her side of the bathroom door, and the only keys in her pocket. The locksmith came at noon. I handed her both keys myself. Every night since, I have stood in the hall and listened for that bolt, and every night it has turned, and every night I have gone back to my own room and not slept.

The folder. She wanted it gone, and she wanted to watch it go. We burned it in the study fireplace one photograph at a time. I held on to the last one too long, Matthew in the laundromat window with his palms against the glass. She held out her hand. I gave it to her. She dropped it in the fire.

On Sunday, she took Matthew to Bushwick to see Candy. No car. No guards. She switched her phone off on the platform at 242nd Street, and the blue dot I have been living on went gray and stayed gray for five hours and eleven minutes. Anthony came to my door twice to ask if I wanted a man on the train. I told him no twice. I sat at my desk and watched a gray dot and did not send anyone, and it was worse than the basement, worse than anything I have ever done in this house.

At six-forty, the dot came back. She texted one word. *Home*. I sat there with the phone in my hand until it stopped shaking.

The last line on her list was Matthew. He gets breakfast with his father. Breakfast, with her at the table, and nothing she doesn't see. So I get forty minutes a day across a plate of eggs. He tells me about dinosaurs. I have never in my life worked so hard for anything.

She hasn't touched me. She hasn't said my name except at work. I haven't asked her to.

Tonight was supposed to be the night the elders blessed my succession. A month ago, it was a formality. Now the restaurant is closed to the public, and nobody at this table is in the mood to bless anything.

The place is one of mine, an old shop on the back streets of the Upper East Side, with white tablecloths, no sign out front, and the kind of private back room where real business in this city has been done for nearly a century.

Stevie sits at my right, folio open, the way she did at the meeting in Luca's tower. Part of me didn't want to bring her, but the truth is, I've stopped being able to navigate these sorts of things without her. And I want the elders to see her at work, to witness with their own two eyes just how formidable she is.

"Enzo," Vittorio Manfredi says in greeting. He sits at the center of the table, the others arranging themselves around him, the way iron filings arrange themselves around a magnet. "It's your night, Enzo, so talk. We're old and we don't stay up late like we used to."

I sit up straight, my hands folded on the table in front of me. "Thank you for coming, all of you. I'll be direct out of respect for the hour. As I'm sure you all have heard, ten days ago, armed men came into one of my properties during a private event and opened fire."

"Carmine and I put two of the shooters down. Two others ran." I let that sit. "This wasn't a robbery. It was professional, financed, and planned. It was an attempt on my life in a roomful of witnesses, and I'm certain every man here knows whose hand was behind it." I don't tell them about the green

dress. A man who tells this table his enemy came for his woman is telling them where he bleeds.

“We know what you’re going to say,” says Tommaso Greco, sitting to Manfredi’s left, thin, sharp, the money man. “Say it anyway.”

“Luca Santini.”

The name settles over the table. Nobody looks surprised. Nobody looks convinced either.

“He was a guest that night,” I say. “He left an hour before the shooting and was at a precinct giving a statement before the bodies were cold.”

“You’re implying an alibi,” Vittorio says.

I nod. “An alibi built so cleanly, it’s almost insulting.”

I turn to Stevie, and she slides a folder, the one we put together over the last few days, across the table.

“And that’s only the beginning,” I say. “Santini operations have moved into three areas of my territory over the last few months: Sutphin, the waterfront, and a distribution line through Ozone Park that goes right past his casino, the Gilded Crown. He’s not hiding it, by design. He wants to see whether or not anyone will stop him.”

“A lot of maybes,” Greco says finally. “He was there, but so were two hundred other people. He left early. So did others. His people are moving into your streets.” He gives a small shrug. “Streets move. That’s the business. You want us to go to war with the Santini organization over circumstantial paper and a gut feeling?”

“Not so many,” Stevie says. Every head at the table turns. She doesn’t look up from the folio. “Mr. Santini’s people moved onto Sutphin on the ninth. The shooting was on the fourteenth. His men were already standing on those corners when the guns came through the service door, Mr. Greco. Page four. Streets don’t move that fast on their own.”

Greco turns to page four. Then he looks at her for a long moment, the way a man looks at a chess piece that has just moved on its own.

“I want you to acknowledge what’s in front of you,” I say.

“What’s in front of me,” says a third voice, belonging to old Dellucci, sitting at the far end, “is a man whose house is not in order, asking us to take his side in a fight that, for all we know, he may have started himself.”

Dellucci speaks gently, which is what makes his concern land. “You’ve had trouble at your door for months. Your sister is losing money at Santini’s own tables and is still battling with her demons.”

“Your father,” Dellucci says, more gently, “whom none of us have seen in over a year. Not at a wedding, not at a funeral, not once.” He leans forward just a bit, spreading his hands. “Michael Accardi built something we all respected. And if he were sitting where you’re sitting now, telling us some upstart like Santini was trying to have him killed, we wouldn’t need a folder, no matter how well put together it may be.

“But Michael isn’t here. You are. And forgive an old man, but it’s still uncertain whether or not the son is the same as the father.”

“You want to know if I’m my father’s equal.” I keep my tone even. “I suppose that’s fair. The right question, even. I’ll answer it honestly.” I look down the table, making eye contact with each man. “My father would have settled this with a body in the river. I’m asking this table to settle it another way. Call Santini in. Sit him down in front of all of you, the old way, and make him answer for what happened in my building. Let him pay whatever this table decides he owes.”

That request is met with only silence, so I continue. “Do that, and my guns stay in their drawer. Refuse, and I’ll handle it myself, and none of you can say I didn’t come to you first.”

Manfredi, who has said little since the folder came out, finally leans forward. The others quiet the moment he moves. “A reasonable request,” he says. “Which is exactly why we can’t grant it. Put Santini on trial on the strength of a folder, and every man at this table is next, the first time one of his rivals gets nervous.”

A dry smile forms on his lips. “Asking nicely isn’t the same as strength, Enzo. And it’s certainly not the same as trust. So, here’s what this table will

give you.”

Finally. The answer I came here for.

“We’ll wait,” he says, “and we’ll watch. If Santini moves the way you say he will, and if you handle it in the way a man with weight handles it, then we will consider this in our evaluation of you as the next official head of the Accardi operation. But if you’re wrong, then that’s for you to answer alone. This isn’t a no, but it’s not a yes. It’s the most an unproven man gets.”

“Understood,” I say. It is. It’s also infuriating. I’ve run this family for six years, and to them I’m still unproven.

“Good.” Manfredi rises, and the others follow, old men gathering their coats and canes.

Then he pauses beside me, taking advantage of the fact that no eyes are on him or me. He lowers his body and voice, speaking at a volume only Stevie and I can hear.

“A word off the record, man to man?”

“What is it?”

“Produce your father, Enzo. I don’t care how. Sick or dying or mad, it makes no difference. Get Michael in a room where these men can see him breathing and standing behind his son. Or find a way to bury the question for good. Right now, his silence is the loudest thing about you, and Luca Santini knows it. Until there’s an answer to the biggest question in the Camorra, who is truly in charge, there will be chaos. And Luca will take advantage.”

“Understood,” I repeat.

“Good.” He pats my shoulder once. “Give him my regards if he’s still in there to receive them.”

Then he’s gone, and the others with him, and the closed restaurant empties out into the night. Stevie and I are alone with the folder nobody needed and the low lights.

For a moment, neither of us says anything.

“That went about as well as it could have,” I say finally.

“They didn’t believe you.”

“No, they believed me. That’s the problem.” I begin gathering papers, giving my hands something to do. “They don’t doubt Luca. They doubt me. As long as my father’s name is still on the chair, I’m a boy playing pretend.”

“So you’re on your own.”

“Right. And the only way to prove I’m truly in charge is to handle Luca myself.”

“The bloody way,” she says quietly.

“The bloody way.” I don’t dress it up for her. She’s earned better than that. “I came here tonight to try to talk them into the other way, the reasonable one. I promised you I’d try it first, if I could. And I did.” I look at her. “I want you to know I tried.”

“I hate it,” she says. “Everything in me says there has to be another way.”

She chews her lower lip. “But I was here. I listened to those men. You tried, and they didn’t go for it. And if Luca ever finds out who Matthew is…”

She trails off, not wanting to say the words. I take her hand and she squeezes it hard, and then she finds the rest of it. “Luca’s not going to be talked down. He has to be stopped. I’ve known it since he and I were together. I knew that one day, somehow, he’d need to be stopped. Because he’ll never come to his senses on his own. I prayed Matthew would never have to know about this world, and I’m going to keep praying. But it’s looking like the only way out is through. And I don’t know of anything else we can do.”

It’s the most honest thing she’s said to me since the suitcase. And I don’t have an answer that squares it, because there isn’t one.

“I don’t know either,” I tell her. “But I’m going to try to be the man who ends this, and the man you’d let near him after. I don’t know if it’s possible. No one ever taught me how. But I’m going to try, because you’re the first

thing I’ve ever wanted badly enough to attempt something I don’t already know how to do.” I pick up the folder, and I offer her my arm, the way I did at the party. “Come on. Let’s go home to him.”

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CHAPTER 29

STEVIE

We don’t go home.

A few blocks in, I notice the car turning the wrong way, away from the house, and Matthew and Marta, deeper into the city instead. The old wariness flares, because I’ve learned the hard way that when a powerful man takes you somewhere you didn’t agree to, it’s rarely a good surprise.

“Where are we going?”

“One stop. Ten minutes. Then home, I promise.” Enzo doesn’t look at me; he’s watching the street go by. “I’d have told you in advance, but I didn’t want you deciding how to feel about it before you’d seen it. It’s not a trick. It’s just easier if I show you, rather than tell you.”

The car pulls up outside of a ten-story building I don’t know. It’s a nice building, discreet, with brass letters on the front glass of a pair of last names. Just an office. The longer I look, the more it looks like a lawyer’s office. He opens the car door for me, and I get out. We enter a small, tasteful lobby and walk into a quiet elevator that goes up to the sixth floor. The doors open, and a pretty, middle-aged woman in a nice suit is there to greet us.

“Mr. Accardi. Miss Callahan.”

She shakes my hand and leads us to a conference room, where a stack of documents is waiting for us on the center of the table.

“Sit,” Enzo says. “This won’t take long, and then you can ask me anything you want.”

I sit. The lawyer introduces herself as Ms. Osei and slides the first document toward me.

Enzo says quietly, “I’ll let her explain it. It’s yours to read, not mine to sell.”

“The first document establishes three accounts in your name,” she says. “Not joint. Yours, solely. Mr. Accardi has no signatory access and can’t reverse or freeze them. They’re already funded, and the figure is on the summary page here.”

She turns one of the documents toward me, and I look at the number, but I have to look away, because it’s more money than I have made in my entire life, several times over, sitting in an account with only my name on it.

“The second set of documents concerns your son, Matthew. A trust, independent, with an appointed trustee who’s not in Mr. Accardi’s organization. He’s a lawyer from a court-supervised, neutral firm.”

“A trust?”

“A trust. It funds his care, his education, his security, anywhere, whether or not you stay in contact with Mr. Accardi. By design, it can’t be made contingent on your relationship with him.”

“The third set of documents concerns guardianship and contingency.” Her tone has changed, as if she’s realizing how stunned and speechless I am, and is slowing down, being just a little gentler. “It secures your sole legal custody of Matthew. It establishes housing in your name. There’s a property already held in trust for you, separate from any Accardi asset, and it cannot be traced through his holdings.”

“I don’t know where it is,” Enzo clarifies. “I made sure of that.”

“And this,” she touches another folder, “is what Mr. Accardi referred to as the emergency file: identities, secure contacts, funds, an extraction plan. This is in the event you need to leave quickly and be genuinely impossible

to find. It’s designed to protect you and your son from anyone, even from Mr. Accardi, should it come to that.”

“Thank you, Ms. Osei. Give us a minute, would you?” Enzo says to her, and she nods, gathers herself, and goes, and then it’s just the two of us and a table full of papers that make no sense.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “What is this?”

“It’s exactly what she said it is.”

“No, I…” I press my hands flat on the table because they’ve started to shake. “Enzo, this is… you’ve given me everything I’d need to leave you: money you can’t touch, a house you can’t find, a trust for Matthew that pays out whether I ever speak to you again or not, a file designed to hide us from you.” I look up at him. “So what’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch.”

“There’s always a catch.”

He shakes his head. “No. Not this time.”

He’s seated across from me, but he doesn’t reach for my hands, doesn’t crowd me. “You’ve told me that my protection feels like a cage. And you were right. So…” He gestures to the papers, and for the first time since I’ve known him, Enzo looks uncertain. Like he knows that what he’s done, he can’t undo. “These are doors, doors only you possess the keys to. All of them open outward, and all of them open whether I want them to or not. And you have the choice to lock them behind you, should you feel the need.”

“If you leave, that’s your choice,” he says. “But you do it safely. Funded, housed, untouchable. Never again the way you were before, pregnant and alone and surviving on diner tips.”

“But why?” My voice is barely a whisper. “Why would you give me everything I need to leave? You don’t give away power, Enzo. It’s the one thing you never do. Why hand it all to me?”

He’s quiet a moment. Then he uses the plainest words I’ve ever heard him say. “Because if you stay now, after this, I’ll know it’s because you chose me. Not because you were trapped, or broke, or tangled in my money and my name.”

He spreads his hands. “So the only reason left to stay is the only one I actually want.”

I can’t speak. In twenty-five years, no one has ever handed me anything without a hook in it, and I’m sitting at a conference table at nine at night, looking at the one exception, and my whole body doesn’t know what to do with it.

And then he does the thing I didn’t know I’d been waiting five years to hear.

“I owe you an apology,” he says. “A real one. When I found out about Matthew, all I could see was what I’d lost. His first cry. His first step. I kept an inventory of everything stolen from me, and I never once stopped to think about the other side of it.”

“Enzo…”

“Let me finish. I’ve owed you this for weeks.

“You’re the one who lived those moments. Alone. Three in the morning with a screaming infant and no one to hand him to. His first fever, with no money for a doctor.

“I made your survival my grievance. You didn’t steal any years from me, Stevie. You spent them keeping him alive, at a cost I’m only beginning to understand. And all I did was make you feel like a thief.”

That is what gets through, past the money and the papers, to the place I keep locked. In four years of raising my son alone, during every long night, and every skipped meal, and every terror I swallowed so he wouldn’t see it, not one single person ever once said to me: That was hard, and you did it alone, and I see what it cost you.

“I don’t forgive you,” I say. And I don’t, not all the way, not yet. Five years doesn’t wash away in one apology at a lawyer’s table. “You should know

that. This doesn’t fix it. One good speech and a pile of paper doesn’t undo what’s happened.”

“I know,” he says. “I’m not asking you to forgive me. I’m asking you to believe me and to see that you now have options.”

“Something has shifted now,” I quietly admit. It’s the most I’ve got, and it costs me to give it. “That’s all I can tell you right now. Not forgiveness. Just… something moved. That’s more than there was an hour ago.”

“Then that’s enough,” he says. “That’s more than enough. I’ll build on it.”

He asks for my phone. I hand it over, the one from the desk drawer, the one that told him where I was going the night I packed, and he sets it on the table beside a second phone, new, still in its plastic.

“That one is clean,” he says, nodding at the new one. “Nobody can see where it is. Not Luca, not the police, not me. Say the word, and the old one goes in the river tonight.”

I look at the two phones for a long time.

“Keep it on,” I say.

He goes very still.

“Not so you can watch me.” I slide the old phone back into my pocket. “So that if anything ever happens to us, you can find us. That’s my call, not yours. The day I want it off, I turn it off myself, the way I did on Sunday, and you don’t say a word.”

“I won’t say a word,” he says, and his voice is rough.

I leave the new one on the table, still in its plastic.

I look at this man across the table, this dangerous man who watched me through a laundromat window for eight months and has just handed me every key I’d need to leave him.

“You bought Paula’s agency,” I say.

“Yes.”

“You crossed two of those interviews off yourself.”

“Yes.” He doesn’t look away. “I needed every other door to close so you’d walk through mine.”

“You did all of it to get me into your house,” I say slowly. “And now you’re handing me everything I need to walk out of it.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I got you here the way my father would have,” he says. “I won’t keep you here that way.”

I should be furious. Part of me is. There’s a smarter version of me who stands up right now, takes the folder with the extraction plan, and never looks back.

But nobody ever looked for that version of me. Nobody spent five years trying to find her. Nobody ever closed every door in the city just to open one for her.

The worst part is that it doesn’t frighten me as much as it should.

And some dark, starving thing in me is thrilled.

“Let’s go home,” I say.

The house is asleep when we get back. Enzo walks me up the stairs the way he has every night since the suitcase, one careful step behind, and stops at my door the way he always does.

Except tonight, I don’t go in.

I turn around, and he’s closer than I expected, close enough that I have to tip my head back to see his face. The hall light is off. There’s only the city through the window at the far end, gold and gray across his jaw.

“Stevie.” A warning. Or a question. With him, lately, I can’t always tell the difference.

I put my palm flat on his chest. His heart is going hard under my hand, harder than I’d have guessed a man like him would ever let it. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t touch me. His hands stay at his sides, curled into fists, like he’s holding something down by force.

“All those keys,” I say.

“They’re yours.”

“Do you know what that means?”

“It means you can lock me out.”

“It means I get to decide which side of the door you’re on.” I let that hang, and I watch it land. His eyes go dark. His breathing goes uneven. “Not tonight.”

His jaw tightens. “Then when?”

“When I decide.”

Something in his face slips, just for a second, and I see the man underneath all that restraint, the one who kissed me in front of a whole room without asking. He leans down until his mouth is a breath from mine, close enough that I can feel the heat of it, close enough that all I’d have to do is lift my chin.

He doesn’t close the gap. He waits for me to.

I don’t.

“Good night, Enzo.”

I step back into my room and turn the bolt, and I stand with my back against the door, shaking, listening to him not leave for a long, long time.

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CHAPTER 30

STEVIE

A few days later…

Genevieve finds us in the kitchen a little after seven, which is early for her by about five hours.

Matthew's sitting at the kitchen island working through a plate of eggs and toast cut into strips the way Marta does for him, and now he won't eat them any other way. I'm seated next to him, my coffee still steaming, half ready for work, the day's calendar running through my head.

Genevieve rolls in like a weather front, in silk, hair loose, not drunk yet, with the scraped-raw look of someone who didn't sleep.

She pours her coffee black and leans against the counter, watching Matthew over the rim of her mug.

"He eats like a little soldier," she says.

Matthew, sensing he's being discussed, holds up a strip of toast. "You want some toast? I have lots."

Something flickers across Gen's face. "No, thank you, sir. I'm all right."

He shrugs, unbothered, and goes back to his breakfast. I watch her watch him with a look I can't quite name.

I've been wanting to talk to her since the garden. So while Matthew's busy with his toast, I take the opening.

“Gen, what you said. In the garden about your fiancé?” I keep my voice low. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it.”

Her face closes like a door. “There’s nothing to think about. It’s an old story. Everyone in this house knows it. You’ll learn.”

“I don’t want to learn that; I want to understand it.” I turn my cup in my hands. “Can I ask you something about Enzo? When it happened, did he know?”

She’s quiet for a moment, and I brace for the door to slam. But she doesn’t slam it. Maybe it’s the hour. Maybe it’s the boy. Maybe she’s just tired of holding it all alone.

“No,” she says finally, “not at the time. I’ve made my peace with that much, or near enough. He had his hands full keeping the business alive, and the old man still ran this house. But Papa didn’t tell Enzo everything. I don’t think he realized what Papa had done until long after.”

She takes a slow sip of her coffee. “But he knows now. He’s known for years. And what did he do about it?”

I don’t answer. I don’t think I’m meant to.

“Nothing. He never once said it out loud, because that would’ve meant war with our father.”

“Maybe,” I say carefully, “but wanting your father to be someone better than he is, that’s not the same as being him, Gen.”

She shrugs. “Does it matter? It sure feels close enough from where I’m standing.”

She looks out the window at the garden and the playground and the walls. Matthew is over in the nook now, drawing.

“You know what I’ve decided?” Her voice is flat and strange. “Maybe this family’s just finished. Luca wants to burn it all down. Maybe putting us out of our misery wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

“Don’t say that in front of him.” It comes out sharper than I mean, and I tip my head toward Matthew, who’s mercifully absorbed in his drawing. “I

won’t have him growing up thinking he’s part of something evil.”

Genevieve looks at me, really looks, like I’m a piece that doesn’t fit the puzzle she already finished.

“Huh,” she says softly. “He finally found someone who argues back.” A strange, crooked almost-smile appears on her face. “That’s new. That’s very new.”

“I’m not arguing. I’m just…”

“You’re arguing. It’s good. God knows this house could use it.” Something in her softens. “But for what it’s worth, you don’t need to lose sleep. Whatever else my brother is, he takes care of his own. The women and children are kept safe in this family. Tucked away. Just like me.”

She means it warmly. It hits me like cold water anyway, because I hear exactly what’s underneath it. Tucked away. Looked after. A comfortable, well-funded nothing, in silk, in a beautiful house.

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“I don’t want to be looked after, Gen,” I say gently, because I can see now that she’s offering me the best thing she knows how to offer. “I want to be part of it. Whatever gets rebuilt here, if anything does, I want my hands on it. I don’t want to be hidden away from it.”

She studies me for a long, long moment. “Yeah,” she says at last. “Yeah, I’m starting to see that.” She pushes herself off the counter, coffee in hand, and pauses beside Matthew on her way out, looking down at his artwork. “Good drawing, kid,” she tells him. “Keep at it.”

“I will,” Matthew says gravely.

She drifts back toward whatever she does with her days and leaves me in the gold kitchen light with my son and a cold cup of coffee and a terrible, uneasy sense of dread in the pit of my stomach.

That night, Candy calls me at eleven-forty. She never calls. She texts, she sends voice memos, she sends me pictures of men's terrible shoes at the club. She does not call.

"Don't freak out," she says, which is how I know to freak out.

Someone was in her apartment when she got home from her shift. The door wasn't forced. Nothing was taken except every photograph she had of me and Matthew, the ones stuck to her fridge, the strip from the photo booth at Coney Island, the drawing he made her of a dinosaur in a tutu. On her bathroom mirror, in her own red lipstick, someone wrote *TELL BUNNY I SAID HI*.

And when she went back down to the street to wait for the cops she didn't want to call, a man in a Yankees jacket was leaning on her stoop. He asked her, very politely, what day Matthew's birthday was. When she told him to go to hell, he put her shoulder into the doorframe hard enough to tear her jacket.

"I'm fine," she says. "I'm fine, I swear, it's just a bruise, I just thought you should…"

I'm already walking. Down the hall, down the stairs, to the study, where the light is on under the door.

Enzo looks up from his desk the second I come in, and whatever is on my face makes him stand.

I put the phone on speaker and set it on the desk between us, and Candy tells it again. He doesn't interrupt. He doesn't ask a single question until she's finished, and then he asks just one.

"Did he touch you?"

“He shoved me,” Candy says. “Into the door. Who is this?”

“Someone who’s sending a car for you,” Enzo says. “It will be outside your building in twenty minutes. The driver’s name is Anthony. Pack for a week. Don’t open the door to anyone else.”

When the call ends, he picks up his own phone, and I watch him become the other man. The one from the basement. He gives three orders in a voice so quiet I have to strain to hear it, and one of them is a description of a man in a Yankees jacket.

“Enzo.”

He lowers the phone.

“Don’t send me to bed,” I say. “Not tonight.”

He looks at me for a long moment. Then he pulls out the chair beside his desk, and I sit, and we wait together until Anthony texts that Candy is in the car.

The next morning, there’s a small white box on my desk. I know what kind of box it is before I open it. I open it anyway.

Inside, on a square of black velvet, is a gold pinky ring with a crest I’ve seen on a lobby floor in Midtown. The Santini crest. There’s a card under it in Enzo’s slashing black hand.

The man who put his hands on your friend. He won’t again.

I sit with the box in my lap for a long time. I wait to be horrified.

I close the lid and put it in my drawer, and I go and make sure Candy has eaten breakfast.

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CHAPTER 31

STEVIE

Enzo and Carmine are in the living room having coffee, papers spread across the low table between them. They're trying to build a picture of Luca's support, who's with him, who's watching, and who's waiting to see which way the wind is blowing before they commit.

My job is technically supposed to be sorting the week's correspondence in the chair by the window while I watch Matthew and Marta play in the garden. I last about ten minutes.

"Donati's a maybe," Carmine's saying, tapping a name. "He's old Santini money, but he's careful. He won't move on nothing."

"He was at the party," I say, before I've decided to.

They both look up.

"The party at the tower," I say, setting down the letter in my hands. "The night of the shooting. Gray hair, wife in a silver dress, who wanted to be anywhere but there. He spent the whole evening near the doors on the east side."

The men watch me, not quite sure what to make of my comments.

"If you ask me, he wanted to be close to an exit. You don't stand that close to a way out unless you think you're going to need it."

"You remember where a man stood?" Carmine says slowly after a moment of awed silence. "At a party two weeks ago, when a shooting occurred soon

after.”

“I remember where everyone stood.” I say it plainly, because it’s true. “It’s a thing I can do.”

“A *thing you can do*,” Carmine echoes, an eyebrow lifted.

“Well, it’s a skill foster care gave me, and waitressing paid me for. Luca’s world just sharpened it. When you’re around men like his friends, you learn to remember who gets too drunk, who gets too handsy, who’s lying about where he was last night. Put enough of that together and you start to see who’s scared of whom.”

Enzo sits back. Something is kindling behind his eyes, not surprise, exactly, more like recognition. “Go on,” he says. “How about the masquerade five years ago? How much do you actually remember?”

“All of it.” I close my eyes and let it come to the front of my mind, the night I’ve spent years trying to forget in every way, except this one. “Luca stood up to do his little routine about me. The microphone. The fat jokes.” My voice is even; it’s an old wound, so it doesn’t bleed like it used to. “And a lot of people in the room laughed, but not all of them, Enzo. That’s the thing I’ve never told anyone because no one ever asked. Not everyone laughed.”

I open my eyes. “There were maybe forty men in that room who mattered. When Luca went after me, I watched them. About half laughed. They were the loud ones, the ones desperate to get on Luca’s good side. They’d laugh at any idiotic thing he said.”

Enzo and Carmine listen in silence, both leaning forward just a bit. I have to admit, it feels nice to put such a horrible memory to good use.

“But there were these guys near the bar who didn’t laugh, like three or four men who went still. They looked at Luca making cracks about my body, and even behind the masks, I could tell they weren’t at all amused. They didn’t care enough to put a stop to it, but I do remember that when you came to my side, I looked at those guys and they seemed almost relieved.”

Carmine has frozen in his seat.

“Those men,” I say. “I bet they’re not Luca’s. Not really. He always had men who hated him and couldn’t get free of him, because he’d tied them into his businesses. They don’t respect him. I don’t know their names, but I bet they’d be good targets if you wanted to break up Luca’s support.”

“Describe them,” Enzo says quietly, “the four at the bar.”

I close my eyes and I go back to that night. Instead of just a bad memory, it’s a map. I give him all the details I can, builds, hair color, the heavy gold ring one of the men wore. Carmine writes it all down, and he writes fast. When I open my eyes, he’s looking at me in a way he never has before.

“The man with the ring,” Carmine says. “Was he wearing it on his left hand or right hand?”

“Right. It was gold, worn, old crest, not Italian, I think, or not only. I figured he was left-handed, though; he held his glass in his left hand the whole night and shook hands with his right only when he had to.” I catch the look on Carmine’s face. “What?”

He shakes his head, then comes back to the moment and speaks. “That’s Emilio Vasari,” he says, to Enzo, not to me. “Right-handed men don’t drink with their left unless they were taught to keep the gun hand free. It’s old-country training. His father ran with…” He stops. “She’s just described a made man’s tell without knowing what it was.”

“I know it was something,” I say. “I didn’t know what. I just filed it away because it was different. When details are weird, they’re usually important.”

“Vasari hates Luca,” Carmine says, half to himself. “Has for years. Luca cheated his family out of their share of the Red Hook piers and dared him to do something about it. Vasari didn’t. Everybody figured he was scared.”

“Or patient,” Enzo says.

Carmine sets down his pen and looks at me for a long moment. Carmine, the man I’d been certain considered me mainly a complication, as nice to me as he might’ve been, is now looking at me like I’m an equal. It’s strange. But I like it.

“Boss,” he says, still looking at me. “I owe the lady an apology. I had her figured for…” He chooses his words carefully, and to his credit, he says it to my face. “For someone you’d picked up, a soft spot, a liability we’d have to work around.”

He nods once, slowly, like it’s a formal thing. “I was wrong. She’s not a liability. She’s an asset we haven’t been using.” Then to me he says directly: “That’s the highest compliment I know how to give about a person, Miss Callahan. If I say it twice a decade, that’s a lot. You’ll forgive me for taking so much damn time to get there.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say with a wry smile. “You were half right, anyway. I am a complication.”

The corner of his mouth moves, the closest thing to a smile I’ve gotten out of the man. “The useful kind, those we keep.”

Enzo hasn’t said anything. When I look at him, he’s watching me with an expression I’m coming to know and still don’t have a word for, like I’m something he can’t believe he gets to have in the room.

Enzo leans forward. “Skills like this, reading men with just a glance, took me decades of training to learn. And you just showed me you’ve got the ability like it’s second nature to you.”

I find myself blushing just a little. “Well, not *just* second nature. I had to learn a lot of it.”

“Still,” Enzo says, “you just handed us the crack in Luca’s foundation. And you did it from the memory of one of the worst moments of your life.” He shakes his head slowly. “Just when I think I know what you are, you keep surprising me.”

“I’m the help, Enzo,” I say, doing my best to suppress a smile. “That’s what Genevieve called me on my first night here, anyway. And that’s what I was working as that night. Nobody ever thinks to hide anything from us, because, to men like that, we’re invisible. They think we don’t matter, that we vanish at the end of the night.”

Carmine smiles just a little. “Remind me never to underestimate you again, Stevie.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

Enzo gestures for me to sit next to him. “Come here. I’ve got some more info I could use a fresh pair of eyes on.”

He doesn’t need to tell me twice. I hop up from my chair and am soon seated next to him.

Outside, through the window, Matthew shrieks with laughter as Marta chases him across the grass. Inside, the three of us bend over the papers together, and for the first time since I walked back through that gate, I’m not a secret being managed, or a woman being protected, or a complication being worked around.

I’m at the table.

My hands are on it.

It’s a good feeling.

I decide not to examine how frightened I am that it won’t last.

Ten days after the lawyer’s office, the house is asleep when I go to him.

I check on Matthew first. He’s sprawled sideways across his bed with the rabbit under one arm, breathing slow and deep. I pull the blanket back over him. Then I walk down the hall in my bare feet and push open the door to Enzo’s room without knocking.

He’s awake. Of course he is. He’s sitting in the chair by the window in an undershirt and slacks, a glass of something untouched on the table beside him, the city light cutting across his face. He doesn’t get up. He doesn’t say a word. He just watches me, the way I now know he watched me for eight months from somewhere I couldn’t see.

I close the door behind me.

Then I reach back and turn the lock.

The click is very loud in the quiet room. Something moves behind his eyes, hot and dangerous and starving.

“Every lock in this house is mine now,” I say. “This is the first one I’ve turned to keep myself in.”

“Stevie.” My name comes out rough.

“Eight months.” I cross the room slowly. “Eight months, you watched me. Every night, you went home and thought about me.”

“Every night.”

“Tell me what you thought about.”

He doesn’t tell me. He shows me.

He’s out of the chair before I reach it, one hand at my jaw and the other at my waist, and he kisses me like a man who has been holding something behind his teeth for a very long time. I fist my hands in his undershirt and drag it over his head. He gets my sleep shirt off in one pull, and then I’m bare in the city light, and he stops to look, the way he always does, like he wants to memorize every inch of me before he ruins it.

“I thought about this,” he says against my throat. “You. In my room. Choosing it.”

He walks me back to the bed and lays me down. When he catches my wrists and pins them above my head with one big hand, he pauses, his eyes on mine.

“Yes,” I tell him, before he can ask.

He holds them there and takes his time. His mouth on my breasts. His teeth at my hip. His tongue between my thighs, slow and merciless, until I’m arching off the bed and pulling against his grip just to feel him not let go. Every time I get close, he eases off and looks up at me, dark eyes glittering, and waits.

“Please,” I finally gasp.

“Again.”

“Please, Enzo.”

“That’s my girl.”

He lets me come then, his mouth sealed over me, and I shake apart so hard I see stars.

He’s inside me before the aftershocks fade. One long, deep stroke, and he holds there, buried as deep as he can go, my wrists still caught in his hand, his forehead against mine.

“Five years,” he says, his voice wrecked. “And I still remembered you wrong. You’re better.”

Then he moves, and he stops being gentle, and I don’t want him to be. He fucks me hard and deep, the headboard knocking the wall, his free hand gripping my hip hard enough to leave marks I’ll find in the morning and press with my fingertips just to feel them. I wrap my legs around him and meet every thrust.

“Mine,” he growls into my neck. “You hear me? Mine.”

“Yours,” I hear myself say, and I mean it.

The second orgasm tears through me, and it drags him over with it. He groans my name into my hair and empties himself deep inside me, hips grinding, his whole body shuddering against mine.

Afterward, he lets go of my wrists and kisses each one, the inside, where the pulse is.

I lie in the dark with my head on his chest and the locked door across the room, and I sleep without listening for anything at all.

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CHAPTER 32

ENZO

Emilio Vasari takes his coffee black, in a bakery in Bensonhurst that has been run by the same family since Truman, at a table in the back where he can see the door.

He's in his fifties, silver at the temples, with the soft, forgettable face of a man who sells insurance. The ring is on his right hand. Gold, worn smooth, an old crest that isn't only Italian. He holds his cup in his left.

Stevie would be insufferable about it if she were here.

"Accardi." He doesn't stand, and he doesn't offer his hand, which I respect. Handshakes are for men who need to prove they aren't holding anything. "You came alone."

"Anthony is across the street pretending to read a newspaper. I'm told he's very bad at it."

That earns me the corner of a smile. I sit.

"Five years ago at the Velvet Room," I say, "Luca Santini stood up with a microphone and told jokes about a waitress. Half the room laughed. You didn't."

His cup stops halfway to his mouth. "That was a long time ago."

"You were at the bar. Ring on your right hand, glass in your left. Three men with you. None of you laughed."

He sets the cup down very carefully. “Who told you that?”

“The waitress.”

A long silence. Then he laughs, quietly, and it sounds real. “Of course she did. Nobody looks at the help, and the help looks at everything.” He shakes his head. “My mother cleaned houses on Staten Island for thirty years. She could tell you which husbands were cheating from the laundry.”

“Then you know what she’s worth.”

“I know what she’s worth.” He studies me. “What I don’t know is what you want.”

“Luca took the Red Hook piers from your family.”

His face doesn’t move. That’s answer enough.

“He’s coming for me,” I say. “Soon. He’s loud, he’s borrowed against everything he owns, and the men behind him are there for the money, not for him. When it breaks, I want to know where you’ll be standing.”

“You want me to turn on him.”

“I want you to wait. Stay right where you are. Smile at him. Take his money.” I lean back. “And when I call, I want you to remember who didn’t laugh.”

“I already do.” Vasari turns his cup a quarter turn on the saucer. “Every month, his people ask to rent my crews. Muscle for hire, cash up front. Luca doesn’t trust his own men anymore, so he pays mine.”

Then he’s quiet a long time. Outside, a bus groans past, and the front windows shiver in their frames.

“Santini is strong right now,” he says finally. “If I move early, I’m a dead man, and so is my family. I won’t do that. Not for you. Not for anybody.”

“I’m not asking you to move early.”

“Then here’s what I’ll give you.” He writes a number on a paper napkin and slides it across the table. “When it comes to it, and it will, you call that number. Not before. If you call before, I never heard of you.”

I fold the napkin into my breast pocket. “Fair.”

He drains his coffee and stands, dropping a bill on the table. At the door, he stops.

“Tell your waitress something for me.”

“She isn’t a waitress anymore.”

“Tell her anyway.” He doesn’t turn around. “Tell her I was ashamed of that room. I’ve been ashamed of it for five years.”

Then he’s gone, and the bell over the door jangles behind him.

We follow Donati because Stevie told us to.

Not in those words, not exactly. But her map led us here, her memories of a nervous man hovering near the east doors of my party. Vin Donati is one of Luca’s lieutenants, but going by what Stevie told us, he’s a lieutenant with a weak stomach for violence.

“Think about it,” she’d said. “He’s on Luca’s side. So why would he be so eager to get out if he wouldn’t have even been a target?”

Carmine had smiled with recognition. “Because he was scared. And scared men can be worked.”

So we’re off to find a way to turn him. If you turn a man like that, then you don’t need a war. You need an hour alone with him and the right leverage. That’s the plan. A quiet approach. We’re going to try the reasonable way one more time, because I promised her I’d keep reaching for it as long as reaching was possible.

Donati’s routine takes him to a parking structure off Northern Boulevard every Thursday, a card game on the third level, same time, same men. Carmine and I are waiting on the second level when the plan comes apart.

I feel it before I see it. Decades of this kind of work teach your body to know a room that’s gone wrong. And this parking structure has gone *wrong*.

It’s too quiet. There are no men coming and going. And Donati’s car is sitting empty like bait.

Which is exactly what it is.

“Carmine,” I say. “We’re leaving. Now.”

We don’t make it to the stairwell.

The men come out from between the cars, four, five, maybe more. Muzzle flashes bloom in the concrete dark before I’ve even finished turning, and the sound is enormous in the expanse of the garage, a flat, percussive hammering that makes it impossible to think.

Carmine’s gun is up before mine, as always, his old reflex, and he drops the first man coming at us and shoves me down behind a nearby SUV as the windows explode in a shower of safety glass.

This is not a hit. A hit is quick, clean, meant to end before you know it started. This is a message. Luca wants us to feel it.

“Count,” Carmine grunts, back against the wheel well beside me, feeding rounds into the gun with hands that have done it ten thousand times.

“Six. Maybe seven. Two o’clock and spread.” My own weapon’s out now, the cold coming down over me the way it does, the thing Stevie saw at the party and couldn’t unsee, the thing with no softness to it. “They’ve got the stairwell covered. We go for the ramp.”

“The ramp’s open ground.”

“The stairwell’s a coffin. We go with the ramp.”

We move from cover to cover, the two of us laying down suppressing fire as we hurry from car to car. It’s the ugly strategy of a gunfight in an enclosed space, the desperation for distance between you and the shooters, and the life-or-death need for just a few feet of concrete barrier.

Carmine fires with precision, buying me time to move. He switches out his magazine, always prepared with backups. I put a man down at the base of the ramp, but they keep coming. Carmine takes one on our flank.

The air is full of concrete dust and the smell of gunpowder. For a few seconds, it almost works; we're nearly clear…

Luca steps out onto the ramp above us. He's here, himself, in a good coat, a pistol in his hand in a way that suggests he's actually ready to get his hands dirty for once.

It's almost respectable, almost.

He wants us to see him this time. He wants us to know before we die that it was him.

"Enzo!" He's grinning. "You brought the old man! I was hoping. Do you know how long I've wanted to do this? Since before you even knew there was a fight."

"You missed," I call back. "You sent boys to my party for her, and they died on my floor."

"I'm not missing today."

He fires. I'm already moving, but the shot still nearly finds a place on my body that would put me down for good. It's a hammer blow across my left shoulder that spins me half around, and I drop to one knee. The arm goes hot and useless, blood coming up fast under the ruined suit. It's not center mass, so likely it's an in-and-out. He got greedy, hoping for the kill shot, but his hands are probably shaking with glee and the round went wide.

But Carmine's stepped into the gap. He does it without thinking. He steps up to cover me while I'm down, and Luca's second shot hits him in the side.

I hear it. You can hear it when a round goes into a man. It's a sound unlike anything else. Carmine grunts, the air rushing out of him. But he's not down. He staggers, keeps firing, one hand pressed to his side and the other emptying the gun up the ramp, pushing Luca back behind cover.

"Carmine…"

"Move, Boss," he says through his teeth. His skin is gray already, going grayer. "I'm not done yet. Move while he's ducking."

We get a stroke of luck, or the closest thing to it on a night like this. Headlights turn into the structure two levels down, probably some ordinary car, some poor bastard looking for an overpriced spot to park. The beams sweep up through the concrete, and behind them, I hear the wail of a siren somewhere outside. Can't say if it's coming here, but it's close enough.

Luca can't tell which either way. I glance up to see him do the math from behind his pillar, the witness, the siren, the fact that we're minutes into this damn thing and still firing back at him.

"This isn't finished!" he shouts down the ramp. "Tell your whore I said…"

Carmine fires in the direction of his voice and blows a chunk of concrete out of the pillar by his head. Whatever Luca was going to say, he doesn't finish.

Then he's gone, pulling back with his men through the upper level, unwilling to be here when the witness arrives. The gunfire stops as suddenly as it started, leaving a ringing in the air and the scent of blood, mine, and too much of Carmine's.

"Up," I tell him. "Come on. Lean on me. We're going." My left arm won't take his weight, so I get my right shoulder under him. He's heavy; he's always been a big man, and now he's a big man losing blood. I half carry him down the ramp toward the car as fast as his legs will move.

"Just a graze," he lies. His hand is soaked where it presses his side. "Thirty years and this is the first time you've had to carry me. Don't get used to it."

"Shut up and walk, old man."

I get him into the passenger seat, doing my best to hide my worry at his injury. Then I'm behind the wheel one-handed, the other arm dead weight. I pull the car out of the garage and into traffic before the sirens get close enough for me to tell if they're for us.

We're moving through the city with two bullet wounds between us and the knowledge that the war is on.

My phone's ringing. I answer it on the dash speaker, because I need my one working hand for the wheel.

“Accardi.”

It’s Dellucci from the elders’ table, and I know before he speaks why he’s calling. News travels fast in this city; word of a shootout in a parking structure travels faster.

“I’m hearing things,” Dellucci says. “Northern Boulevard. Tell me they’re wrong.”

“They’re not wrong. Luca just tried to kill me and my consigliere in person. Carmine’s hit. I’m hit.” My voice is flat. “This is what you asked to wait and see. You’ve seen it. He’s declared himself in the open, with his own hand on the gun. Does the table move now, or does it need us actually dead first?”

A pause. I hear the old man’s breathing on the line. “You know it’s not that simple, Enzo.”

“It’s exactly that simple. It’s only complicated for men who’ve decided to be cowards and want company with them.”

“Careful, Enzo.”

“No, I’m done being careful. Careful is what got me and my oldest friend shot.” Carmine makes a sound that’s half protest, half laugh. “Here’s what happens now, Dellucci. And you can tell the others. I’m going to end this, my way, on my own. And when it’s over, when Luca Santini is finished and I’m the undisputed head of the Accardi family, I’ll convene another meeting and ask you to your faces why you didn’t help when you had the chance.”

I hang up before he can answer. It’s not how you talk to an elder, but I’ve stopped caring about the traditions, because there’s only one thing in my head now, past the pain and the blood and the war, and it’s the thing Luca started to say before Carmine shot the words out of the air.

Tell your whore…

At the end, with a gun in his hand and murder in him, the last thing on Luca Santini’s mind was Stevie. Which means the picture in his head of how he hurts me runs straight through her and the boy.

And for the first time, I feel something I haven't let myself feel in years. Not for me. I've never once been afraid for me.

I'm afraid he'll get to them first.

He thinks I'm vulnerable now. Bleeding, isolated, the elders sitting on their hands, my consigliere shot. He thinks he's found the weakness, the opening, the vulnerable spot.

He's wrong. He has never been more wrong about anything. A cornered man with something to protect isn't weak. He's the most dangerous thing there is, and Luca has spent his one chance on a message, showing me that the gloves are off. That was the one mistake he can't take back.

But wrong or not, the fear is real, and it rides with me the whole way.

"Take me to the house," Carmine says, reading me the way he always does, even now, even gray and bleeding. "Take me nowhere but home. I'll have Marta wrap it. No hospitals. You know the rules. Hospitals mean questions, cops, a record. I've dug worse out myself in the kitchen."

"You're going to the ER."

"Enzo…"

"This isn't a discussion." I turn toward the hospital, not the house, and I can feel him glaring. "You've been bleeding for ten minutes from your torso, and it hasn't stopped. This isn't a kitchen table wound, and you know it. If something happens to you, Marta would never forgive me. And I'd never forgive myself."

He says nothing. Maybe he still thinks I'm wrong but doesn't have the strength to argue.

"You took a bullet for me, again, so you don't get a vote in this. I'm going to keep you alive. Got it?"

He's quiet a moment. The city slides by, red and gold, the same city that's about to catch fire.

"The boy's going to worry," he says finally, quieter. Not arguing anymore. "Matthew. When he sees me hurt. Tell him… tell him you should see the

other fellow.” A rough breath. “He’ll like that.”

“You’ll tell him yourself,” I say, “after they patch you up. That’s an order.”

I drive my oldest friend to the hospital through the first night of the war, one-handed, bleeding, terrified for the two people at home.

It ends now. It ends with Luca. And God help anyone standing between me and my family.

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CHAPTER 33

STEVIE

I get Matthew down at eight, and then I do something I've been building up to for days. I ask Lena, one of the maids, to sit outside of Matthew's door for a bit while he drifts off to sleep.

"Going out?" she asks, pulling up a chair next to his door.

I shake my head. "Nope. Going *up*."

I take one breath to steel myself and start climbing the stairs to the fourth floor, to the room where Michael Accardi sits in the dark, pondering everything he's done.

I knock once and walk in without waiting, because if I wait, I'll lose my nerve.

The space is enormous and dim, smelling of old paper and the sort of staleness you only get with sealed windows. And it's hot. So *hot*. God, why the hell is it so hot up here?

Michael is seated in a wingback chair by a fireplace with no fire, a book opened on his knee. As I approach, he looks up at me with those flat black eyes that are so like Matthew's and Enzo's. He doesn't look surprised to see me.

"The mother," he says. "Come up all this way. Marta know you're here?"

"No."

“Brave, then. Or stupid.” He closes the book. “Which is it?”

“I haven’t decided.” I don’t sit. I remain standing, because sitting is for guests and I’m not here as a guest. “Your son is nearly at war, Mr. Accardi, right now, tonight. Luca Santini shot up his party to drag me out of it, and he’s going to try again, and the elders won’t move to help him because of you.”

Emotion flickers in the old man’s face. “Because of me.”

“Because you’ve made yourself a ghost. You have to know that a son who can’t produce his own father for a meeting looks weak, and the whole city knows it. You *know* what it means that you’re still in charge but letting him do all the work.”

He lets out a derisive laugh, one more powerful than I would’ve expected from him. “And now you’re the expert on Camorra affairs. Spare me.”

“I don’t need to be an expert. The elders told him to his face. To our faces. They said produce you, or bury the question. Your absence is putting your son’s life at risk, and you know it.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He says it without heat, tired, an old man reaching for an old dismissal.

“Then tell me, because from my perspective, it looks *very* simple.” I step closer. “You built this. All of it. The empire and the name and the whole organization. You spent forty years making the Accardi name into something people were scared of. And then, when it got heavy, you climbed up here and pulled the ladder up behind you, away from your son. And now he has to carry the whole thing himself, but you won’t even make it official. You won’t even say a single word in support of him when it matters the most.”

“I gave that boy everything…”

“Not when it mattered!” The words come out harsher than I’d anticipated, but I don’t take them back. “Do you want to know what Enzo is, Michael? Since you won’t come down and see for yourself? He’s a man who learned to protect the people he loves the only way you ever taught him: by making the world afraid of him. Because that’s the only love he ever saw in this

house. He learned it from you, and he’s spent his whole life trying to learn a better way.”

Michael stares at me, still.

“I have a son,” I tell him, my voice cracking just a bit on it. “A little boy. You’ve met him. You know him. And God help him, but he’s got your face and eyes, and I hope that’s all he took from you.

“I won’t have it.” I’m close to the chair now, close enough to see the old man’s hands tighten on the book. “I’m trying to break this sick tradition, and Enzo’s trying to break it. But we won’t be able to make a single crack while you’re still up here, pretending you’re in charge.”

“You think I don’t grieve what I made?” It comes out low, rough, dangerous. “You think this is self-pity?”

“Whatever it is, you’re hiding behind it.” I hold his gaze. “I think you did something years ago that you can’t take back.” I don’t say David Moretti’s name, but it’s in the air. “And I think the guilt of it has eaten you alive for years. And you’ve decided this, this hiding away, is a kind of penance. But it’s not. It’s just abandonment.

“Real penance would be coming down those stairs and doing something useful with whatever power and love you have left before it’s too late to matter.”

For a moment, his face darkens, his eyes flat, and I see clearly the man who built all of this, the tyrant and the killer all in one. Then it passes, and what’s left is just an old man. Just tired. Just a man looking at a truth someone’s finally had the nerve to carry up his stairs.

“He chose well,” Michael says finally, quietly. “My son. Whatever else he’s got wrong, he chose well with you.” He looks at the cold fireplace. “Nobody’s spoken to me like that in twenty years. They’re all too frightened. Even Genevieve, underneath the noise, she’s frightened. You’re not.”

“I’m terrified of you,” I say. “I’m doing it anyway. There’s a difference.”

Some awful approximation of a smile moves across his face. “Yes, there is.” He sighs. “My daughter never learned it. My son did.”

A moment passes, and he turns his attention toward the empty, cold fireplace. “Go back down, Stevie Callahan. Let an old man think. You’ve given me a great deal to ponder. I’m not used to it these days. When you’re older, you get set in your ways.”

It isn’t a promise, but it’s something. It’s the first crack of light I’ve seen in the whole cursed top of this house, and I’ll take it.

I’m halfway down the stairs when I hear voices, too many of them, sharp and fierce. It’s the particular sound of a place filling up with alarm, a sound I know way too well. I hear doors opening and closing, footsteps running. My heart lurches, and I take the stairs down two steps at a time.

The ground floor has become a different place. There are men everywhere, security, more than I’ve ever seen here. They’re grim-faced and armed, moving with stoic purpose. And in the middle of it, by the doors, I see Marta. She’s in tears, her coat half on and her hands shaking, being helped toward a waiting car by two guards.

“Marta!” I catch her arm. “What’s happened?”

“Carmine.” Her face is destroyed. “They shot him, Stevie. They shot my Carmine. He’s at the hospital, and they won’t tell me on the phone if he’s… I have to go, I have to be there…” The guards have her, gently guiding her out to the car, and then she’s gone into the night with a security detail around her.

I turn, and Enzo is there. He’s upright, which is the first thing I notice. He’s upright, on his feet, alive. But his left arm is bound against his body, a sling under his ruined jacket. There’s dried blood at his shoulder. And his face… I’ve seen Enzo cold and I’ve seen him dangerous and I’ve seen him gutted. But this is different. I’ve never seen him like this before.

“You’re hurt.” I’m across the room without deciding to move. “You’re shot, that’s… Enzo, that’s a bullet hole!”

“It went through clean. Missed the bone. It’s nothing.” His good hand comes up, but he doesn’t quite touch me. It hovers there, wordlessly asking

for distance. It's hard. All I want is my arms around him. "Carmine took the bad one. He stepped in front of…"

His voice falters, something that's never happened before.

"It should've been me," he murmurs. "He put himself right in the thick of it, the way he always does. And now he's in surgery and Marta is on her way there, and I don't…" He stops and tries to compose himself. "It was Luca. He ambushed us and was hoping to kill us both. But he failed. At least, I hope he failed. But it's war now. There's no getting around it, no more pretending."

Behind him on the stairs, Genevieve has appeared. She's pale, her arms wrapped around herself, a drink for once nowhere in sight. She looks at her wounded brother and the armed men and the open door that Marta just went through. And for just a moment, despite her nihilism, she looks scared.

"Enzo," she whispers, "is Carmine…"

"I don't know yet, Gen. I don't know."

She sinks down onto a stair and says nothing else.

Enzo turns back to me, and his good hand finally lands, lightly, carefully, on my arm. "You and Matthew need to be moved. Tonight. Now."

My whole body stiffens, braces, waits for the order, the command, the *you'll do as I say* that every man in my life has always reached for.

"That part isn't a question." He doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't have to. "Luca had his one shot to get me head-on tonight, and he failed. Now he's going to attack through softer targets. That's you. That's Matthew. He talked about you tonight in the middle of trying to kill me, and he's already guessing who Matthew is. So you're leaving. Tonight. The only thing you get to decide is where."

It's an order. I wait for the old panic to come, the one every man in my life has taught me. It doesn't. Maybe because for the first time, the man giving it is standing between us and the gun instead of holding it.

"Okay." My mouth is dry. "Where can we go?"

“Candy first,” he says. “Anthony drives her to her aunt’s in Scranton tonight, with two men who stay. Then you and Matthew.”

“There are two options, yours to weigh: There’s a place in the city, a penthouse, secure and close. I can get men there in minutes and myself to you just as fast if necessary. Close is safer in some ways. But it’s closer to Luca, too.”

“And the other option?”

“A cabin upstate on a lake. Three hours away. It’s farther from the city and, therefore, farther from help. But it’s also farther from Luca. It’s isolated, with one road in, nothing around for miles, so it’s easy to see someone coming.” He holds my gaze. “The penthouse keeps you near to me, but the cabin keeps you far from him. And I have my own opinion.”

He leaves me the where. I think about it the way I think about everything now: the way that keeps my son alive.

“The cabin,” I say. “One road in, you said. Nothing around for miles. I want to be far from him. If someone comes up the road, I’ll see them coming, and I’ll have time. Close to the city means close to the man who wants us dead. I’ll take the miles.” I lift my chin. “That’s my choice, the cabin.”

Something eases in his ravaged face, not relief, exactly, but something like it. Respect, maybe. It’s the look of a man who handed over the one choice he could and got exactly the answer he would have given.

“The cabin,” he agrees. “Good. That’s the right call. It’s what I’d have said.” His good hand tightens on my arm. “Pack light, just what you and the boy need for a week. Pyke drives you. He’s the best I have, and Carmine trusts him, which means I do, too. Three more men go with you. Nobody gets up that road without Pyke knowing. I’ll come to see you settled in, but then I have a war to end, and I need to know you’re alive while I end it.”

“Enzo.” I catch his hand before he can turn away, hold it, this bleeding, stubborn, terrifying man. “End it and come back. Those are my terms. You don’t get to keep me safe and die doing it; that’s not the deal. You come back.”

He looks at me for a long moment, and whatever's between us, unfinished and unforgiven and utterly real, is all there in his face at once.

"That's the first time," he says quietly, "you've ever asked me to come back."

"Don't make me regret it."

And for the first time in the middle of the worst night yet, we're just two people, frightened out of our minds, deciding together what to do about it.

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CHAPTER 34

STEVIE

The cabin surprises me.

I'd been ready for another fortress, something cold and hard and expensive, just like everything else in Enzo's world tends to be. But the place Pyke drives us to, three hours north of the city and on the east shore of Lake George, where the Adirondacks begin, is nothing like that.

It's small, wood-built, warm, with a stone chimney and a porch that looks out over black water and dark trees. There's one road in, just like Enzo told me. It winds through the pines. Inside smells like cedar and wood smoke. There are quilts on the bed and books on the shelves and a kitchen that looks like somebody meant to use it.

It's the kind of place a family goes, not the kind of place where you hide from a war.

"Whose is this?" I ask, while Pyke does a slow circuit of the windows, checking sight lines with the slow thoroughness of a man who's done it a hundred times.

"Mine, technically." Enzo eases down onto the arm of a chair, favoring the bound shoulder. "Bought it years ago. Told myself it was a safe house. I've never once used it as one." He looks around the small warm room like he's seeing it for the first time. "I think I bought it because it was the opposite of the house I grew up in. I never let myself come here. It felt like admitting I wanted something I wasn't allowed to have."

I don’t know what to say to that, so I don’t say anything. I just carry Matthew, asleep against my shoulder, worn out from the long dark drive, toward the little back bedroom.

Pyke’s there before me, turning down the quilt. I’ve barely spoken ten words to Pyke Langham. He’s a big, quiet man, one of Carmine’s best. But he takes one look at Matthew slumped and fretful against me, and something in the big man gentles.

“May I?” he asks. “Got three of my own. Youngest is about his age. I know the drill.”

I smile, nod, and hand Matthew over. Then I watch this enormous man settle my son into the bed with a tenderness that undoes something in me. He tucks the quilt just so and finds the gray rabbit in the bag and tucks it against Matthew’s chest.

When Matthew stirs and whimpers, “*Mama?*” Pyke’s low voice answers before I can, easy and certain.

“Mom’s right here, little man. Two feet away. Nobody’s going anywhere. You’re safe. Go on back to sleep.”

Pyke straightens, catches my expression, and shrugs almost as if embarrassed. “Kids can tell when you’re scared,” he says quietly. “So you learn not to be. Or at least not to let them know. It’s the same thing to them, really.”

He nods at the door. “I’ll take the front room. First watch is mine. You two,” he nods to me and Enzo, “have some downtime. He’s got to leave early.”

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With that, he goes to sit up in the dark with a gun so he can keep my son safe.

Later, when the cabin's quiet and Matthew's deep under, Enzo and I end up on the porch. The lake is black glass. The cold comes off it clean and sharp. He stands at the rail with his good shoulder toward me and watches the water, and through the window behind us, we can both see Matthew, a small mound under the quilt, the rabbit's ear just visible.

"I used to think he ruined us by being cruel," Enzo says. He doesn't look at me. "My father, I mean. I spent my whole life thinking that was the wound: the coldness, the fear, the things he did. I thought if I could just be less cruel than him, I'd have broken it."

"And now?"

"Now I think the cruelty was never the worst of it." He keeps his eyes on the water. "The worst of it was that, never once, as long as I've been alive, did he ever admit he was wrong about anything. Not David, not Genevieve, not what he made me into."

I say nothing. I just listen to him speak.

"He built his whole self out of never being wrong, and it turned everyone around him into ghosts." He finally turns to look at me. "That's the real inheritance. Not the violence. And I'll never pass that down to Matthew."

"My mother tried to leave him once," he says. "I was eleven. She got as far as the Verrazzano before his men brought her back. She never tried again. She stayed in her room on the third floor for six years, and then she died in it, of pneumonia, at forty-one, and he stood up at her funeral and called it a tragedy and meant it." He's quiet for a moment. "Genevieve was right, that night at the party. The women in this house don't get happy endings. I watched it happen to my mother. I won't watch it happen to you."

He tips his head toward the window, toward the room where Matthew is sleeping. "I won't do to Matthew what was done to me." He pauses, swallows. "And I won't do it to you."

On a cold porch, looking out at a black lake, with our son asleep behind the glass and a war waiting three hours south, something in me that has been

clenched tight for five years finally, quietly, lets go.

“When I come back,” he says, “I’m not bringing the war with me. It’s going to stay in the city, and that’s where it’ll end. When you see me come up this road, know that that means it’s over.” He glances at the cabin, the lake, the sleeping boy. “This is what I’m fighting to get to. And I’ll make damn sure it doesn’t follow me.”

His hand finally lands on my face, warm and careful. “This is what I’m fighting for.”

I lean into his hand. I let myself, for one night, believe in the thing he’s describing.

For one night, I let it be real.

And then I reach up and take a fistful of his shirt the way I always do, because the choosing is mine and I want him to know it.

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CHAPTER 35

STEVIE

The kiss that follows is nothing like the others.

It's slow, gentle, his mouth pressing against my lips as I rise onto my tiptoes and pull him closer by the fistful of fabric in my grasp. His good hand cradles the back of my head. The cold air from the lake has made its way to the cabin, but between us, there's only the warmth of his nearness.

His tongue finds mine, and I moan into his kiss, letting his taste wash over me. His hardness presses against my middle, and I feel a pulse of heat and wetness between my thighs.

He breaks the kiss, his forehead resting against mine. "Inside," he murmurs, "before I forget we're not the only ones here."

He hauls me against him with his good arm, and I feel the hitch in his breath as the movement pulls at his wounded shoulder.

"Easy," I say. "You just got shot, in case you forgot."

"I did forget, in fact," he says. "You have a way of distracting my thoughts like that."

I take his good hand and lead him back through the door. The cabin is dark except for the low glow of the dying fire from the living room, where Pyke is seated in his chair, watching the grounds.

He follows me to the guest room that doesn't look like it's ever been used. The door clicks shut behind us, and Enzo turns the lock.

He reaches for the lamp and turns it low, the light warm and small. He stands in front of me, and for a long, lovely moment I just let myself savor the nearness of him, the way he looms over me in a way that makes me feel small and loved and protected all at the same time.

“I almost lost you,” I say, my voice small.

“But you didn’t. And you won’t.”

Part of me wants to reality-check him, tell him there’s no way he can know that for sure. But I push those thoughts to the side and step closer to him, my hands finding the buttons of his shirt. I undo them one by one with careful fingers. When they’re all undone, the gorgeous planes and lines of his chest and stomach are on full display, and I gently ease the fabric from his shoulders. He winces just a bit but shakes his head when I stop.

When his shirt is gone, I press my mouth to the edge of the shoulder bandage, just above his heart.

“Tell me if it hurts.”

He smiles. “Nothing hurts when you touch me like that, *tesoro*.”

I undress for him slowly, letting him watch and savor. I peel the soft layers away until I’m bare in the low light. His eyes move over me in the reverent way I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of, like he can’t believe he gets to see me like this, hunger and gratitude mixed.

He places his good hand on the curve of my hip, moving it slowly over the soft skin. “I’m not wasting a second of tonight. I want you. I want all of you.”

“Then have me.”

We move to the bed, and he sits on the edge. I climb onto his lap, his cock hard and straining between us. His good hand falls onto my hip again, the other tucked against his side. My breasts press against his chest. I lean forward and let our foreheads touch again, reaching down and wrapping my hand around his shaft. He groans, shifting his hips a bit as I stroke him.

“You feel how hard I am for you?” he asks, his voice low. “No other woman could ever make me feel this way.”

A wave of heat moves through me, and I glide my fingertips up his length, slow, until his breath catches.

“*Mia*,” he whispers against my lips. “Look at me.”

I do, and he pushes my hand slightly, guiding his cock to my entrance. I shudder at the sensation of his head resting between my lips, ready to enter. He nods, and I lower myself. The stretch is slow, and I close my eyes, focusing on each hard, warm inch pushing into me.

We breathe out at the same time as I take the last bit of him. He’s seated perfectly and we’re pressed together as closely as possible. His eyes stay on mine as I move gently, rolling my hips, still worried I’m going to hurt him.

“Don’t hold back,” he says. “I can tell you’re holding back.”

I grind a bit harder. “You say that until your wound opens up again.”

“It’d be worth it.”

I rock down on him, and his breath catches. His thickness grinds against my walls, and all I find myself wanting is to coax the orgasm out of him, to make him feel good after what he’s been through, to greedily savor that feeling of warm release inside me.

His good hand tightens in my hair and I chase the pleasure, my grinding turning to bounces. He moves his lips closer, wrapping them around one nipple and then the other.

“Come for me, *tesoro*,” he says, his good hand cupping my breast. “I want to feel it.”

I’m bouncing and moaning, and part of me wants to stretch it out a little more, to savor it for just a bit longer. But when his hand lands on my ass, squeezing and guiding and pressing, I give up. I come quietly, gently even, leaning my head on his shoulder and letting out soft sobs of pleasure.

Enzo follows with one hard upward thrust, buried to the hilt, my name torn out of him. That feeling I’d been craving, needing, of his warm release

filling me, soon follows. Our climaxes peak and fade and we stay like that for a long time afterward, breathing the same air, his heartbeat steady and slow.

“Stevie,” he says against my hair, and then nothing. I feel the next word sitting in his chest, heavy, right there under my palm. He doesn’t say it. Neither do I. But I feel him almost say it, and I hold on to that instead.

Later we’re tangled under the quilt, the small fire Enzo started in the bedroom fireplace crackling and popping. My head rests on his good shoulder, his chest rising and falling.

“Matthew starting school.” The words tumble out of me, and I’m not even quite sure what they mean at first. “A real one, one with other kids. No one watching the gates. No bodyguards, no need for them. Normal school.”

He’s confused at first, then smiles. “Teaching him to fish off the dock here, letting him get dirty, watching him pull a wriggling bass out of the lake for the first time. Letting him be loud and wild. A birthday party with all of his friends.”

“And no metal detector,” I add with a smile of my own.

“Naturally.”

I pause, the conversation affecting me more than I’d expected. “You being there. Not protecting us from a distance but actually being there as a dad. Teaching him to ride a bike or throw a baseball or shave and all the things dads do.”

“Shaving’s a while off, I think.”

I laugh, playfully swatting his chest. Then he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me close, his expression serious.

“You, with a life that’s yours, a name that’s yours. Work you choose out of want and not necessity.” He leans and kisses me. “No running, not anymore. Matthew grows up soft in all the right ways, never has to learn what his last name used to mean. Never has to think the answer to anything is violence.”

The words land between us like something fragile. They are. They're precious and perfect and, for now, only a fantasy. I want them to be true more than anything.

"Just for tonight," he says, "we get to want it all out loud."

I kiss him. "Just for tonight."

I close my eyes and let myself believe it. I press another kiss to the edge of his bandage, right over his heart. "Come back to us. That's all I'm asking. Please."

His hand stills in my hair. For a long moment, neither of us moves. There's peace, for now, but we both know it's temporary, a brief respite before whatever horror comes next.

For tonight, in this small room, with our son sleeping safely down the hall, we enjoy it.

I wake to early light and a small, warm body wedged against my side. Enzo must have unlocked the door on his way out, because Matthew padded in before dawn, his rabbit tucked under one arm.

Enzo's side of the bed is cold. There's a note on the nightstand in the slashing black hand I know from a hundred documents.

Stevie,

Gone to end it. I'll be back up this road before you've even had time to miss me. And I'll come back clean, the way I promised. Give Matthew a kiss for me, tell him his dad loves him. Keep yourself safe and calm. I'd walk through hell to see you two again. Before this is all over, I just might have to.

E

Down the hall, Pyke is at the stove working a pan of eggs, a dish towel over one arm and a gun on the counter, pushed far back where little hands can't

reach it. He’s a dad. He thinks about those things.

Pyke glances over his shoulder and nods. “Morning.”

“He get off all right?”

“Yep. Headed out a little before five.”

He jerks his chin at the window. “Danny’s got the truck at the bottom of the road, and the Kowalski brothers are walking the tree line in shifts. Nobody comes up that road without me knowing. Radio check every hour on the hour. Miss one, and I call the boss. Back of the property’s the lake, two miles of water and nothing on the far shore but state forest.”

“Don’t worry, I made him eat something first. No sense going to war on an empty stomach.” He sets a plate in front of me. “He’ll be fine. This is what he’s good at.”

“You’ve got three, right?” I ask. “Kids?”

He nods, and his face goes soft. “Girl’s twelve. Thinks I’m a total jerk. Then two boys, seven and four. Like yours.”

From the bedroom, a sleepy voice calls for me, asking if there are eggs, and Pyke is already cracking two more.

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CHAPTER 36

ENZO

"Come to see if I'm dead yet?"

Carmine looks wrong in the hospital bed. I don't like it at all.

"You kidding? At this point I'm starting to think you *can't* die."

Marta's in the chair beside him, his hand in hers, like she's worried he'll leave the world of the living if she lets go even for a second.

"They tell me you're being stubborn." I pull a chair next to the bed and look him over. "How bad?"

"Bad enough," Carmine says. "But not *that* bad." He shifts and winces. "Bullet clipped me a little too deep, but they dug it out. I'll live. But I'll be useless to you for a month."

"That's good. Useless is good. You've earned useless."

Carmine's face is serious; it's time to talk shop.

"Tell me what's going on. Tell me you didn't leave them unguarded while you came to kiss my boo-boo and make it better."

Then he nods to Marta. I can tell she doesn't want to leave her husband's side, even for a second. But business is business, and the less she knows, the better.

"I'll get some fresh coffees," she says. She rises, leans over, and kisses Carmine, then leaves, giving my good shoulder a gentle squeeze on her way

out.

When she’s gone, I tell him about the cabin, three hours north, and about Pyke watching them, the best man I have now that Carmine’s out of commission.

Carmine takes a moment, processing it all in that way he always does. “Good,” he says finally. “Good. Pyke’s solid. He’d die before he let anyone past him. And he’s smart enough to not let it get that far.” He settles back. “Now you. What’s your move? You ready to end it?”

“That’s exactly what I’m planning to do. It’s one thing for Luca to attack from the shadows, but announcing himself out in the open the way he did back at the garage?”

“That’s a goddamn declaration of war.”

“Precisely. Luca wants the attention of the entire Camorra on him. And he’s got it. He put himself in the open, shot you, and made it about Stevie. There’s no reasonable way left, Carmine. I tried to be reasonable, and it got you shot.”

“It got both of us shot.”

“So now, it’s the hard way. Luca wants a war? He’s got one. I’m going to put him in the ground, and I don’t care what it costs me to do it.”

Carmine shakes his head against the pillow. “No. Not like that. Go at him with guns blazing, and to the elders it looks like two dogs fighting in an alley. Do it the way your father did. Luca sent gunmen into your party to drag a woman out the service door. That isn’t a territory dispute. That’s Luca telling every old man at that table that their wives and daughters are fair game too. Make them see that, and you’re not fighting Luca alone. You’re enforcing the rules.”

“Then I don’t go to the elders asking for help in a war,” I say. “I show them Luca already declared war on them, the moment he went after a man’s woman.”

Carmine smiles and sinks back on his pillows. “Now you’re thinking like a Don instead of a soldier. Took you long enough.”

A knock sounds at the door, and it opens. Marta steps in with a tray of coffees. “Sorry to interrupt,” she says. “It’s just… Enzo, I need to speak to you about Genevieve. I’m worried about her, more than usual.”

Just the mention of my sister’s name sends a tinge of frustration through me. “Marta, I don’t have time to…”

“I know, I know you don’t. But I’m telling you anyway, because someone has to and it won’t be her.”

She passes out the coffees before speaking. I take mine and sit back, nodding.

“She’s been off. The last few days, before all of this. Not too-much-to-drink off. Believe me, I can recognize that by now. More like something else. Secretive. She’s been on her phone at strange hours, going quiet when I come into the room. It’s almost like she’s frightened.”

“What do you think it is?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Just that I’ve been running this house for thirty years, and I know when someone is off, in trouble, *something*. And something is going on with her. Just check on her, okay? Whenever you can. Promise me you’ll check on her.”

“I’ll check on her,” I say. “When this is done. I promise.”

I turn my attention to Carmine. “Heal. Rest. That’s an order. I need you.”

“Go win,” he says. “And do it the right way. Make the old man proud in spite of himself. And Enzo, call Matthew. Do it as soon as you can. He’s a tough kid, but he’ll want to hear that his old man is all right. Kids need to hear their dad’s voice.”

I leave the hospital with a plan in mind. I’ll work with the elders, not against them, using pressure and leverage, just like my father did. They’ll see who Luca really is.

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CHAPTER 37

STEVIE

Three days at the lake, and it's peaceful. So peaceful that it doesn't feel like my own life.

The afternoon has the perfect amount of chill in it. From the bedroom window I can see gold light slanting through the pines and the lake throwing it back in pieces. Down at the bottom of the road, Danny sits in the black pickup with the engine off. The Kowalski brothers walk the tree line in slow, bored loops, rifles slung, breath steaming. Every hour on the hour, Pyke's radio crackles and each of them checks in. I've started counting the check-ins the way other people count sheep.

Matthew is napping, worn out from an afternoon of hunting frogs along the shore while Pyke trailed us at a polite distance and pretended to be interested in rocks. He hasn't asked many questions yet. For now, he believes this is a little vacation his dad planned for us. But Matthew notices everything. Any day now, he'll notice that vacations don't usually come with men carrying rifles.

Enzo texted at noon. *Dinner. I'll call.* Three words, and I've read them maybe forty times.

I realized this morning, out on the dock, that neither of us has said it yet. I told him I was his, in a room with a door I locked myself, and he called me his, and neither of us said the word that actually matters. I know what I feel. I like to think he's somewhere in the city, kicking himself for not saying it first.

And if he never comes back up that road, I'll never know.

The thought comes the way they've all been coming since he left, sideways and sharp. I make myself breathe through it. I picture the black car coming around the last bend, and Enzo stepping out, and the look on his face that says it's over.

In the front room, the radio crackles. Top of the hour.

I wait for the check-ins. Pyke's low voice first. Then the truck.

Nothing from the truck.

Pyke says Danny's name again, sharper. Then the brothers, one after the other.

Nothing. Nothing.

Then the front door comes off its hinges, and Pyke's voice roars down the hall.

"Stevie! Back window! *Now!*"

I'm already moving. I'm in Matthew's room before the first shot, scooping him out of bed, blanket and rabbit and all. He wakes with a startled cry against my shoulder.

"Mama?"

"I've got you. Hold on to Mr. Bun."

The shots in the front room are close and enormous. Two guns, then three, then too many to count. Pyke shouts something I can't make out. A body hits the floor. Then another.

I get the window halfway up before I see them: men at the tree line, where the Kowalski brothers should be. Four of them. Five. Coming across the grass in no hurry at all.

Behind them, down at the shore, there's a boat I've never seen, nosed up against our dock.

There's nowhere to run. I know it the way you know you're about to fall.

So I do the only thing left.

The phone is in the back pocket of my jeans. The phone Enzo put in my desk drawer on the first day, the one that tells him where I am every minute of every day. The night I found out, I wanted to throw it in the river. A week later, in a lawyer's office, when he offered to do it for me, I told him to leave it on.

Mr. Bun still has that split seam in his belly. For once in my life, I'm glad I never got around to sewing something. I jam the phone into the stuffing, all the way in, and pinch the seam closed with my thumb, and tuck the rabbit back into Matthew's arms.

"Hold him tight, baby," I whisper. "Whatever happens, don't let anybody take Mr. Bun. Okay? That's your job."

His eyes are huge. He nods. He wraps both arms around the rabbit like it's the most important thing in the world.

It is.

The front room goes quiet.

Then footsteps in the hall, unhurried, and a voice I've heard in every nightmare I've had for five years.

"You'll break an ankle jumping out that window, Stevie. And then where would we be?"

Luca fills the doorway, two men with rifles behind him. There's blood on the cuff of his good coat, and none of it is his. He looks at me, at my son, at the open window and the men waiting under it, and he smiles the way he used to smile right before.

"Hello, Bunny," he says. "Did you miss me?"

Then his eyes drop to Matthew, and stay there.

He looks at my son for a long moment. At the dark hair. At the eyes. At the grave way Matthew looks back at him over the rabbit's ears.

“I had a guess,” Luca says softly. “Four years old. The Accardi face. Enzo’s little houseguest he never lets out of the garden.” A slow, delighted smile spreads across his face. “But I wasn’t sure until right now.” He crouches, eye level with my son. “Hello, little Accardi.”

Matthew presses his face into the rabbit. I have never wanted to kill anyone before. I want to now.

“How did you find us?” My voice comes out steadier than I have any right to.

“Somebody always talks.” He leans on the doorframe like he owns it. “Somebody always has their own reasons. You, of all people, should know running isn’t that easy.”

“Pyke…”

“Was very good at his job.” Luca glances back toward the front room with something like professional appreciation. “Took two of mine with him. You want to see? I can arrange it.”

I don’t look. I won’t give him that.

“You know what tonight is, Stevie?” He steps into the room. “Tonight, every family in New York finds out what Enzo Accardi really is. The old men want to know if he’s strong enough to hold his father’s chair?” He spreads his hands. “I’m going to show them. Live. On every phone at every table in this city. Enzo on his knees, begging me for a waitress and her brat.”

“He won’t beg.”

“He will. And then I’ll take everything he has, and the old men will hand it to me, because that’s how it works. The strong take. The weak kneel. They’ve just forgotten, because they’ve been watching Accardis sit in that chair for too long.”

“You’re doing all this,” I say, “because a man in a mask embarrassed you at a party.”

His jaw flexes. “Careful.”

“No. You’re a spoiled little boy with a lot of money and a lot of guns, and the only thing you’ve ever been good at is hurting people smaller than you.” I lift my chin. “So go ahead. Show the whole city.”

For one long second, I think he’s going to hit me.

Instead, he smiles. It’s worse.

“God, I missed that mouth,” he says softly. “It’s going to be such a pleasure, shutting it.” He nods to his men. “Take them. The kid stays with her. Search her.”

Rough hands pat me down from shoulder to ankle. They take my keys. They take the hair tie off my wrist, for God’s sake. One of them reaches for the rabbit in Matthew’s arms, and Matthew screams, a sound I’ve never heard him make, high and furious and enormous, and wraps himself around Mr. Bun like a small wild animal.

The man jerks his hand back.

“Leave the kid his toy,” Luca says, bored. “I don’t want to listen to that for three hours. Phone. Where’s your phone, Stevie?”

“In the lake.” I don’t blink. “I threw it off the dock when I heard the first shot.”

He studies me for a long second. Then he laughs. “Smart girl. Doesn’t matter. He’ll get my messages.”

I hold my son, and my son holds the rabbit, and they march us out through the front room.

I cover Matthew’s eyes. I tell myself not to look, and I look anyway, just once, at the edge of my vision. Pyke is on his side by the door, exactly where he planted himself to keep them from the hall. His eyes are open. He went down facing them.

They put us in the back of a van, and the doors slam, and the dark closes in.

I put my mouth against Matthew’s hair.

“Daddy’s coming,” I whisper. “You’re holding the map, baby. You’re holding the map.”

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CHAPTER 38

ENZO

Three days after the garage, the mansion is a war room.

The elders heard me out yesterday, thanked me for my patience, and asked for a week to consider. Old men always want a week. Leverage only works with a fist behind it, so every hitter I have is here. They fill the dining room and spill into the hall, grim and armed and quiet, waiting to hear how we take Luca Santini apart. I spread the map across my mother's table and mark it by hand: his warehouses, his cash houses, his transfer points along the expressway.

"Same hour," I tell them. "Every target. He can't reinforce what he doesn't know is burning."

I'm halfway through the third target when my phone buzzes against the wood.

It isn't a call. It's an alert from the app I check more often than I would ever admit to anyone. The first night, I drew a fence around the cabin on the map, a quarter mile in every direction, and the small blue dot that has lived inside it for days has just crossed the line.

The dot is moving.

Not walking. Driving. South on the Northway at eighty miles an hour.

The room goes away. I'm dialing Pyke before I know I've picked up the phone. It rings. And rings. I call Danny in the truck. Nothing. The Kowalski

brothers. Nothing. I don’t call her. If that phone rings in a car full of Luca’s men, they find it, and I lose the only map I have.

“Anthony.” My voice is very calm, and everyone in the room hears what’s under it. “Who do we have near Lake George?”

“Bobby Tesca. He’s got a bakery in Glens Falls. Twenty minutes out.”

“Send him. Tell him to call me from inside the cabin.”

Nobody moves. Nobody speaks. I stand at the head of my mother’s table and watch the little blue dot crawl down the map toward my city with my whole life inside it, and I think, very clearly, that if it stops moving, I will burn New York to the waterline.

Every part of me wants to send twenty cars north to run them off the road. I don’t. A car full of Luca’s rifles forced off a highway at eighty miles an hour is a coffin with my son inside it. Wherever Luca is taking them, he means to stop there. So I let the dot crawl, and I wait.

Twenty-two minutes later, the phone rings.

Bobby Tesca’s voice is shaking. He has three kids and a bakery, and he hasn’t done this kind of work in a long time. “Boss. It’s bad. Pyke’s in the front room. He took two of them with him. Danny’s in the truck. The Kowalski boys are out back by the trees.” He stops. “There’s a boat tied up at the dock, aluminum, outboard, no numbers on it. Nobody else. Her stuff’s still on the bed. The little one’s shoes are by the door.”

I close my eyes.

One road in. I said it to her like a promise. I put a man on the road and two in the trees, and I never once looked at the water. They came up the road for Danny and across the lake for everyone else, timed to the check-in, so by the time Pyke heard nothing but static, they were already at the door.

Pyke, who made me eat eggs before dawn. Who has a twelve-year-old daughter who rolls her eyes at every word he says.

“Stay with him,” I say. “Don’t let anyone touch him until I send people. And Bobby. Close his eyes.”

When I hang up, the room is so quiet I can hear the clock in the hall.

That's when I see Genevieve.

She's at the top of the stairs, one hand on the banister, and her face is the color of ash. She's looking at me the way people look at a firing squad. Marta's words come back to me all at once.

Something is going on with her. Promise me you'll check on her.

"Fifteen minutes," I tell the room. "Out."

They go. I climb the stairs to my sister, and she doesn't run, which tells me everything before she says a word.

"Gen."

"I know." Her voice is barely there. "I know what you're going to do. Do it. You should have done it years ago."

"Tell me."

So she tells me.

The tables at the Gilded Crown. The debts. Luca, charming and patient, telling her she mattered when no one in this house had said it in years. The affair. The questions that started small. Where will he be on Tuesday? Who is he meeting? And the leash, once she understood what she'd done: keep talking, or he tells our father everything.

"I stopped for a while," she whispers. "After the night Stevie found me on the stairs and put me to bed like I was worth the trouble. I didn't answer him for almost three weeks. Not until he figured out why his information had gone stale."

The Bracco date. The source that went cold. It was my sister all along.

"Then he started threatening me, and I was so scared, Enzo…" She presses the back of her hand to her mouth. "Northern Boulevard. I heard you and Carmine talking about Donati in the living room. I told him."

The garage. Carmine on a hospital bed with a tube in his arm.

“And the cabin,” I say.

She nods. Tears run straight down her face, and she doesn’t wipe them away. “He asked if there was anywhere outside the city. I remembered when you bought it. I remembered you saying you’d never been brave enough to use it.”

“He asked about the boy, too. Whose he was.” She shakes her head hard. “I never told him that, Enzo. Whatever else I did, I never told him that.”

I don’t hit her. I want to. I have never wanted to put my hands on anyone the way I want to put them on my sister right now, and I don’t, and I will never be able to explain to anyone what that costs.

“I never wanted them hurt,” she says. “Stevie was good to me when she had no reason to be. And Matthew…” Her voice breaks clean in half. “I would take it back. I would die to take it back.”

“Maybe you should.”

The voice comes from the landing above us.

My father stands at the top of the staircase that leads to the fourth floor. He’s wearing a navy suit I haven’t seen on him in ten years, a white shirt, his good shoes. He has his cane, but he holds it like a man who might decide to stop needing it.

“But not today,” Michael Accardi says, coming down one slow step at a time. “Today she’s going to be useful. For once in her life, my daughter is going to help this family instead of bleeding it.”

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CHAPTER 39

ENZO

My father takes the head of my mother's table like he never left it.

He has summoned me to his rooms a hundred times since I was grown, and I have always left the door open behind me, whatever he says about the cold. The last time it was closed with the two of us inside, I was nine years old, and I walked out of it with two broken fingers and a lesson about lying. I learned it very well.

"Your woman came up to my floor a few nights ago," he says. "Did she tell you?"

"No."

"She stood in my room and told me I built all of this and then abandoned it. Nobody has spoken to me like that in twenty years." His mouth twists. "I sat with it. I decided it was too late. That my punishment was to sit in that room and watch it all rot." He lifts his eyes to mine. "Then I heard my grandson was in a van on the Northway, and I found out I was wrong."

My phone buzzes.

A photo. Stevie in the back of a van, pale, chin up anyway, my son in her lap with his face buried in that gray rabbit. Under it, a message.

Midnight. Alone. One car. Hands empty. Address at 11:30. I see anyone else, the kid goes in the creek. Wear something nice. You're going to be on camera.

A minute later, a second message.

I sent the old men an invitation. They'd hate to miss it.

He hasn't told me where. He doesn't know he doesn't have to. On the screen behind his photo, the blue dot is still crawling south.

I hand my father the phone. He reads it twice, the way he used to read reports from the docks when I was a boy: slowly, looking for the thing underneath.

"He invited the jury," he says at last.

"He wants them to watch me kneel. Then he wants them to hand him our territory, because a man who kneels can't hold it."

"And they would." He sets the phone down. "That part he has right. A Don who can't protect his own blood isn't a Don." His black eyes come up to mine. "So we give the jury a different verdict."

"How?"

"You want the elders to ride in with you. They won't. To them, this is still two young dogs in an alley." He picks up the house phone. "But Luca has done something very stupid. He took a woman and a child out of their beds and told every old man in this city to come and watch. He thinks he's inviting witnesses. He's inviting a trial." He starts to dial. "Every one of those men has grandchildren. By the time I'm done, they'll come to wherever he is to see whether the rules still mean anything."

"And if they just watch?"

"Then you'll have to win it yourself." He doesn't look up. "That was always the job, Enzo. I just used to be too proud to stand next to you while you did it."

He calls Manfredi first. Then Greco. Then Dellucci. I listen to my father work the way I haven't heard him work since I was a teenager. No threats, no shouting. Just favors, called in one at a time in that dry, patient voice, and the story of a little boy carried out of his bed at gunpoint.

It takes him most of the evening. Somewhere in the middle of it, the blue dot stops. Queens. The edge of Newtown Creek. An old Santini warehouse I could find with my eyes closed. My father writes the address on the back of an envelope and calls all three of them back.

While he talks, I take a napkin out of my breast pocket. The number on it has gone soft at the creases.

Vasari answers on the first ring.

“It’s come to it,” I say.

A long breath on the line. “He hired my people for his outside crew tonight,” he says. “He thinks I’m flattered. He still hasn’t told us where. He’s being careful.”

“Newtown Creek,” I say. “The old Santini warehouse. He’ll tell your men at the last minute. Now you know first.”

“Then we’ll be early,” Vasari says.

“When I walk in there, I’ll be alone.”

“Then you’ll be alone inside,” Vasari says. “Outside is mine. The first shot fired in there, my men come through that door. Until then…” He pauses. “I can’t start a war with his men inside that building, Accardi. I can only finish one.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“One more thing,” Vasari says. “He’s got spotters on both roofs across the creek and a man on the Kosciuszko with binoculars. Anything with more than one person in it comes within a mile of that building before midnight, he knows in thirty seconds.”

So that is the answer to the question every man in my dining room has been too afraid to ask. Why I don’t go now. Why I let my son sit in that building for five hours. There is exactly one way through that door that ends with him breathing, and Luca wrote it himself. Alone. Midnight. I spend the five hours putting everyone else where they need to be.

When I hang up, my father is watching me.

“They’ll come,” he says. “All three. They’ll stand at the door and they’ll watch, and that’s all I can promise you.” A beat. “It’s more than I’ve given you in fifteen years.”

“It’s enough.”

“There’s one more piece.”

Genevieve is standing in the doorway. I didn’t hear her come in. She has washed her face and put her hair up, and she’s wearing the black dress she wears to funerals.

“Luca doesn’t know you know about me,” she says. “He thinks I’m still his. If I call him, he’ll let me in. He likes an audience, and he likes it more when the audience is me.” She swallows. “I’ll tell him you’re coming alone. That’s the truth, so he’ll believe it. And then I’ll be inside, near them, when it starts.”

“No.”

“Enzo.”

“You gave them to him.”

“I know.” She doesn’t look away. “That’s why it has to be me.”

I look at my father. He looks at his daughter for a long time, longer than I think he’s looked at her in years.

“She’s an Accardi,” he says finally. “Let her be one.”

At eleven-thirty, the address comes. Old Santini warehouse, Newtown Creek. Exactly where the dot has been sitting since a little after seven.

At eleven-forty, I put my gun in the glove box of the car and leave it there.

The blue dot hasn’t moved in more than four hours. It sits on the edge of Newtown Creek like a heartbeat. I watch it the whole drive into Queens. As long as it’s there, she’s there. As long as she’s there, she’s breathing.

She did that. She took the leash she let me keep, and she put it in our son’s hands, and she made it a map.

I park where Luca told me to park. I get out with my hands empty.

I walk in alone.

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CHAPTER 40

STEVIE

The warehouse is the worst place I've ever been.

It's vast and rusted, half the lights dead and the other half too bright. Rainwater has puddled under the broken skylights. The air smells like rot and creek water and diesel. Somewhere in the dark, something drips, steady as a clock.

In the middle of the concrete floor, under the best of the lights, Luca has built a stage.

There's no other word for it. Three phones on tripods, all angled at an empty patch of floor marked with a strip of tape. A ring light. A laptop on a folding table, its screen a grid of little boxes full of older men in good suits. Some at kitchen tables. Some in the backs of cars. An audience.

"Isn't it great?" Luca says, when he catches me looking. "Wedding videographer setup. Nine hundred bucks. Best money I ever spent."

Matthew stopped crying an hour ago. That's the worst part. He's just quiet now, curled in my lap on the cold floor with his face in the rabbit, and he won't look at anything. I've been singing under my breath for hours. Every song I know. Some I don't.

"Mama," he whispers. "Is Daddy coming?"

"Yes." I don't hesitate. "He's coming."

"Is he lost?"

“No, baby. He knows exactly where we are.”

Luca drags a folding chair across the concrete, the scrape loud enough to make Matthew flinch, and sits down in front of us, too close, the way he always used to.

“You keep telling him that,” he says. “It’s cute. He can smell the lie on you, you know.”

“Don’t talk to my son.”

He leans in until I can smell the whiskey on him, and he drops his voice so his men can’t hear.

“Here’s how it goes, so you’re not surprised. He kneels. He begs. I let him beg for a while, because the old men need to see it. Then I put one in him while you watch.” His eyes slide to Matthew. “And then it’s just you and me again, Stevie. Like old times. Only this time, if you run, I don’t chase you. I chase him.”

Every drop of blood in my body turns to ice.

For the first time since the cabin, I’m afraid in a way I can’t hide, and he sees it, and he smiles like I’ve handed him a present.

“Now we’re talking,” he says.

My hand moves before I tell it to. The slap cracks across his face loud enough to echo off the rafters.

The warehouse goes still.

Luca touches his cheek. Then the back of his hand comes across my face so fast I never see it, and my head snaps sideways, and I taste copper. Matthew screams.

“Hey.” A woman’s voice, bright and bored, from the dark at the edge of the floor. “Luca, baby. Don’t mark her up before the show. It looks desperate.”

Genevieve Accardi walks into the light in a black dress and heels, like she’s arriving at a party.

My heart stops.

“Gen.” Something in Luca’s face loosens, pleased and possessive. “You came.”

“You said there’d be a show.” She doesn’t look at me. She steps right past me and lets him pull her in by the waist and kiss her, and I want to be sick. “And I wanted to see my brother’s face.”

I stare at her, and all of it lines up at once. The cabin. The garage. *Somebody always talks.*

“You,” I say.

Her eyes finally slide to me. Flat. Nothing in them.

“Me,” she says.

Luca laughs, delighted. “See? Everybody in that family sells everybody else, sooner or later. It’s practically tradition.” He nods toward the rusted glass office at the side of the floor. “Make yourself useful, Gen. Take the kid in there and keep him quiet. I don’t want him screaming over the good part.”

“No.” I wrap myself around Matthew. “No, you’re not taking him…”

Gen crouches in front of me. Up close, her face is calm as glass, and her hands, reaching for my son, are shaking so hard I can see it.

She leans in to lift him, and for one second her mouth is beside my ear.

“When it starts, I lock the door,” she breathes. “Trust me or don’t. Just let him come.”

Then she’s standing, with Matthew on her hip and the rabbit crushed between them, and she walks him into the office and shuts the door. Through the dirty glass I watch her set him on the desk and crouch in front of him and say something that makes him, impossibly, nod.

I don’t know whether to trust her. I don’t have a choice.

The door at the far end of the warehouse opens.

Every gun in the room comes up and swings toward the sound.

Enzo walks in.

He doesn’t hurry. His hands hang empty at his sides, the left one stiffer than the right, the sling gone. He’s wearing a black suit and no tie, and he walks the length of that cold, rotten room like it’s the hallway of his own house. He looks at the guns. He looks at the cameras. He looks at Luca.

Then he looks at me, at my split lip, and something happens to his face that I have never seen happen to it. Not once. Not even on the night he found the suitcase.

Behind him, the doorway is empty. Nothing but dark.

He came alone. Just like Luca told him to.

Luca starts to laugh.

“Look at that. The great Enzo Accardi, right on time, empty-handed.” He taps the laptop, and the little boxes of old men lean toward their screens. “Say hi to the elders, Enzo. They’ve been waiting.”

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CHAPTER 41

ENZO

There are fourteen men with guns in this warehouse. I count them on the walk in, the way my father taught me to count exits before I was old enough to know why.

Fourteen guns. Three cameras. One laptop full of old men.

One woman on the floor with blood on her mouth.

I have never wanted to kill anyone the way I want to kill Luca Santini right now. I keep it behind my teeth.

“On your knees,” Luca says. “Right there, on the tape. I want the good light.”

He has marked my spot on the concrete like a stage manager.

I could refuse. I could make him force me, and his men would do it with the butts of their rifles, and the old men would watch me fight and lose, and it would look like strength.

But Stevie is ten feet away, and my son is behind a pane of dirty glass, and every one of those fourteen guns can turn toward them faster than I can cross the floor.

So I kneel.

I hear Stevie make a sound, low and broken. I don’t look at her. If I look at her, I won’t be able to do the rest.

The concrete is cold and wet through my trousers. Luca walks a slow circle around me, savoring it. He stops beside the center camera.

“You see this?” he asks the laptop. “This is the man you were about to hand the Accardi chair. Five years ago, he stood up in a mask in front of every one of you and made a fool of me over a fat waitress. Look at him now.” He crouches in front of me. “Beg, Enzo. Beg for them. Say please.”

I look past him, into the center lens.

“Vittorio,” I say. “Tommaso. Dellucci.” I say their names slowly, the way you say names at a funeral. “You know me. You knew my father. For months you’ve been asking whether I can hold what he built.”

“That’s not begging,” Luca says.

“Tonight, this man took a woman and a four-year-old boy out of their beds at gunpoint,” I tell the camera. “He killed the men guarding them. He put his hand on her face. He told me that if I brought anyone with me, he would put the boy in the creek. And he invited every one of you to watch.” I let it sit. “You all have grandchildren. Ask yourselves whose door he knocks on next, if you let this stand.”

On the laptop, one of the little boxes goes dark. Then another. Then all of them.

Luca’s smile slips. “What are you doing?”

“Answering your question,” I say. “You asked them if I’m strong enough. I’m showing them what strong looks like.”

“*Beg.*” He has his pistol out now, pressed to my forehead. It’s cold and smells of oil, and his hand is not steady. “Beg, or I swear to God I do her first. Right now, on camera, and you watch.”

He swings the gun away from me, toward Stevie.

Three things happen at once.

In the office, the lock snaps over with a crack like a gunshot, and Genevieve drags the steel desk across the door with my son underneath it.

Stevie comes up off the floor with the folding chair in both hands.

And I move.

She swings the chair like she's been waiting five years to swing it, and it catches Luca across the forearms. The pistol goes off into the rafters. Rust rains down over all of us, and I come up off my knees and into him before the echo dies.

I take the pistol out of his hand. I break his wrist doing it. I don't mean to. I don't mind.

Then I spin him around, get my right forearm across his throat, and put his own gun to his ear. Every one of his fourteen men finds out at the same moment that the man who's paying them is the only thing standing between them and me.

"Anyone who wants to get paid tonight," I say, "lower your weapon."

Most of them do. Two don't.

The one by the laptop swings his rifle toward Stevie. I shoot him through the chest over Luca's shoulder. The second one fires at me, and Luca jerks in my grip, and something punches into my left side low down, hot and then cold. I shoot the second man twice, and he goes down across the strip of tape where I was kneeling.

The doors at the far end of the warehouse bang open.

Vasari's men come in fast, forty of them, every one holding a gun Luca Santini paid him to carry tonight, and they do exactly what Vasari promised. They don't start anything. They finish it. Inside of ten seconds, every one of Luca's men is face-down on the wet concrete with his hands laced behind his head.

I let go of Luca. He drops to his knees on his own tape, in the good light, cradling his ruined wrist.

My side is wet. I can feel it running down into my waistband. It doesn't matter yet.

“Wait,” Luca says. His face is wet, and his voice has gone high and young. “Wait, Enzo, no. We can talk. I’ve got money, I’ve got the whole operation, you can have it, all of it, you can have her, I’ll never…”

“Five years ago, I asked her which part of you to remove first,” I say. “She said none. She was being kind. I swore this time I wouldn’t ask.” A beat. “I’m not asking. Tonight she decides.”

I walk to the center tripod and turn the camera off. Then the other two. The little red lights go out one by one. Whatever happens next belongs to us, not to a lens.

I look at Stevie.

She’s ten feet away with blood on her lip and the chair still in her hands, her chest heaving. I turn Luca’s pistol around and hold it out to her, grip first.

She sets the chair down. She looks at the gun for a long time. Then she looks down at the man who called her fat into a microphone. Who blacklisted her and hunted her and carried our son out of his bed, and told her what he’d do to that boy if she ever ran again.

She takes the gun.

“Stevie.” Luca is crying now. “Stevie, please. Baby, please.”

She doesn’t move. And I watch the begging curdle in his face, the way it always did when pleading stopped working.

“You won’t,” he says. “You never could.” His eyes slide past her to the office, to the dirty glass, to the shape of the boy behind it. “And when you don’t, I’ll find him. Wherever you hide him. I’ll find that boy, Stevie.”

“You wanted to see who begs,” she tells him.

Her hand doesn’t shake. I watch it not shake.

She shoots him once, in the good light he paid nine hundred dollars for, and he goes over backward and doesn’t move again.

For a moment, nobody in the warehouse breathes.

Then she holds the gun out to me, grip first, the way I gave it to her. I take it. She turns and walks to the office and doesn't look back.

Genevieve shoves the desk aside and opens the door. She has both hands clamped over Matthew's ears, and she keeps them there until Stevie lifts him out. He comes up into his mother's arms with the rabbit crushed in his fist and his face buried in her neck.

"Take them outside," I tell Vasari.

He falls into step at Stevie's shoulder, and Genevieve takes the other side. They walk her the length of the warehouse, past the cameras and the men on the floor, out into the night.

Then it's just me and the body on the tape and three dark cameras.

I lift the three phones off their tripods, one by one, and put them in my pocket. Whatever is on them belongs to me now.

Then I wipe the grip of Luca's gun with my handkerchief, close my own hand around it, and put it in my coat. If anyone in this city ever asks who killed Luca Santini, the answer is me. Luca's men on the floor saw what happened. Every one of them owes me their silence now, and every one of them knows what it costs to forget a debt to an Accardi.

When I turn around, the elders are in the doorway.

Manfredi in a long camel coat, Greco at one shoulder and Dellucci at the other, and behind them, leaning on his cane, my father. They take in the room. The men on the floor. The two I shot. The thing on the tape. Last of all, they look at me, standing in the middle of it with blood soaking through the left side of my shirt.

They came to watch a verdict. They're too late. It has already been handed down.

"Does anyone," I ask, "have a question about who holds my father's chair?"

Nobody does.

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CHAPTER 42

STEVIE

Outside, the cold hits me like a slap, clean after the rot of the warehouse.

Floodlights. Black cars. A long line of men on their knees along the fence, Luca's drivers and lookouts, the few he didn't hire from Vasari, hands behind their heads while Vasari's people stand over them. Across the black water of the creek, the Manhattan skyline glitters like nothing happened here at all.

Matthew lifts his head off my shoulder.

"Mama, what was that bang? Gen held my ears."

"Nothing, bub." I kiss his hair. My voice is steady. My hands are steady. I didn't know they could be. "Just a door closing."

Standing in the floodlights with my son in my arms, I realize it's the truth.

Ten minutes ago, I killed a man. I keep waiting to feel it.

I keep checking myself for it, the way you check a pocket for keys. Guilt. Horror. Anything.

What I find instead is his face in the last second. Not afraid of me. Surprised. Like after two years of telling me what I was, he finally saw something he hadn't counted on.

My hands are steady because there's nothing left for them to shake about. He's never going to stand in a doorway again. Matthew is never going to

see his face again.

It’ll come later, I think. Some night at three in the morning, it will find me, and I’ll let it. But not tonight. Tonight, I’m holding my son.

Beside me, Genevieve lets out a breath like she’s been holding it since the cabin. Her hands are shaking so hard she folds her arms to hide them.

I look at her. She doesn’t look at me.

“You let me think…” I start.

“I needed him to believe it. I had about five seconds with you, so I made them count and let you decide. Then I just let you hate me.” She stares straight ahead at the creek. “You should. It was me. All of it. I told him where the cabin was.”

I should be furious. Part of me is. Pyke is lying on the floor of a cabin three hours north because of the woman standing next to me.

She also locked herself in a glass box with my son and dragged a steel desk across the door.

Pyke, who made me eggs and pushed his gun to the back of the counter so little hands couldn’t reach it. Who saw them coming and spent the last thing he had yelling my name down a hallway so I’d have time to run. I never even thanked him for the eggs.

I press my face into Matthew’s hair until my eyes stop stinging. Later, I promise Pyke, wherever he is. Later, I’ll cry for you properly. And your kids are going to know exactly what their father did.

“He held on to the rabbit the whole time,” Genevieve says quietly. “I told him the rabbit was a secret agent. He said he knew.”

I don’t forgive her. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

She holds out one shaking hand, just a little, like she isn’t sure she’s allowed. I look at it. I don’t take it. Not tonight.

The warehouse door opens.

Enzo comes out alone.

He stops a few feet away, under the floodlights, close enough to see that we're in one piece and far enough to give us room. The whole left side of his shirt is dark and wet. His hands are empty.

"Can I?" he asks.

Even now. After everything. He's asking.

My face crumples. Everything I've been holding since the radio went quiet at the cabin comes out of me at once, and I cry like I haven't cried in years.

"Yes," I say through it. "Yes. Please."

He closes the distance in two strides and drops to his knees in the wet gravel and gathers us both up, bad shoulder and bleeding side be damned. He presses his face into my hair and says something in Italian, over and over, that I can't understand and don't need to.

Matthew's arms go around his neck. "Daddy. You came."

"Of course I came." His voice is wrecked. "I'll always come."

Matthew pulls back to look at him, grave and enormous-eyed, and holds up the gray rabbit with both hands.

"Mr. Bun had the map."

Enzo looks at the rabbit. Then at me. Something breaks open across his face that I don't have a word for.

"Then Mr. Bun," he says solemnly, "is getting a medal."

Later, there are medics in hospital blues, and a blanket around my shoulders, and someone cleaning my lip with something that stings.

Two of them are trying to make Enzo lie down on a stretcher so they can look at the hole in his side. He lets them, finally, but only if the stretcher stays close enough for him to keep one hand on Matthew's foot.

Emilio Vasari stops a few feet away, lighting a cigarette with his left hand. Up close, his ring is gold and worn smooth. That night, I watched it from across a ballroom, on the hand of one of the men at the bar who didn't laugh.

"Miss Callahan." He inclines his head. "You noticed my ring. Nobody ever looks at a man's hands but the help." Smoke drifts up into the floodlights. "I told your Don I was ashamed of that room. I wanted you to hear it from me. Consider tonight the first payment."

Then he walks back toward his men, and the dark swallows him.

Near the warehouse door, Michael Accardi raises his cane and raps it once against the side of a car, and every voice in the lot goes quiet.

"You all saw it," he says. His voice is old and dry, and it carries anyway. "Every one of you. My son walked into that building alone and empty-handed, for his family, and he walked out." He looks around at the elders, at the soldiers, at Luca's men on their knees. "For too long, I let this city wonder who sits in the Accardi chair. That was my doing, and it was shameful. It ends tonight."

He lifts his chin.

"Enzo Accardi is the head of this family. Not my stand-in. Not my heir. The Don. Whatever respect you gave me, you give to him, though I think tonight he earned it without my help." A dry pause. "As of now, I'm retired. So leave me alone."

A ripple of laughter goes through the lot, low and surprised.

Enzo doesn't even look up. He's on the stretcher with one hand still wrapped around Matthew's foot, and he isn't letting go.

He has everything he came for, right here.

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CHAPTER 43

STEVIE

Four days later…

Detective Reyes came back two days after the warehouse. He sat in the front parlor with a cup of Marta's coffee he never touched and asked Enzo about an old Santini warehouse on Newtown Creek that burned to the waterline the same night, about the three bodies the fire department pulled out of it, about a cabin up near Lake George where six men had been found dead. Enzo's lawyers answered every question. Reyes left with nothing, and on his way out, he looked at me for a long moment, like a man filing something away for later.

I looked right back.

Jack Ketch, Luca's smooth-voiced counselor, was on a one-way flight to Palermo before the sun came up that night. Nobody stopped him. Nobody needed to.

Vin Donati walked into Carmine's hospital room the morning after the warehouse, hat in hand, and swore he never knew his Thursday game was the bait. Carmine believed him. Enzo let him keep his hands.

I'm looking out of the study window one morning when I see Michael and Genevieve sitting on a bench in the garden. They've been out there for at least twenty minutes so far, sitting side by side, staring at the same middle distance, not speaking.

The familiar, heavy click of Enzo's shoes against the wood floor sounds behind me, and I turn to see him enter.

He's moving slower than he wants anyone to notice, a dressing taped over the hole in his side under his shirt.

"You seeing this?" I ask, using my thumb to point over my shoulder toward the window.

"Yeah, I saw." He comes to my side and looks out.

I open my mouth to speak, but before I can, Michael's voice comes through the open window. "I killed him."

I go rigid, and so does Genevieve. I see her back stiffening.

His tone is dry and steady. "I didn't hold the gun, didn't pull the trigger. And for years, I told myself that mattered, that I wasn't the one who actually did the deed. But it doesn't matter at all. I decided it, I gave the word. And I let you spend years not knowing for certain."

Genevieve says nothing.

"I've had a long time up in that room to consider my sins. And this is the greatest among many."

"Why?"

"Because you were going to leave. It's as simple as that. You were going to marry a man I didn't trust, and you'd be gone forever. You and your brother were the only family I had left. And you'd made it abundantly clear that your marriage would be all but the severing of your connection to this house."

"So you took that away from me."

"I've never been a man used to not getting what he wants. I had plans for you, Genevieve. I was going to install you as one of the top figures in the family. You were brilliant. Are brilliant. You could've done so much for the Accardi name."

"But that's not what I wanted."

“It wasn’t. But I wasn’t thinking about such things back then. And I had no idea what his death would do to you. I’d imagined when he was gone, you’d remember your family and your place. Instead, I killed a man who didn’t deserve it and nearly broke this family apart.”

Gen’s voice is shaking. “Don’t act like you’re sorry and that this is something you can just apologize for. You don’t get to…”

“I know. I don’t get to. I’m not asking to be forgiven. I’m telling you because you deserve not to live in doubt. You deserve to know exactly what happened and why.”

She puts her face into her hands and sobs.

Beside me at the window, Enzo is frozen. “He’s never once in my entire life admitted what he did to her.”

Out in the garden, Genevieve wipes her face with her hands. “I’m not one to talk,” she says. “I suppose whatever moral high ground I had I gave away when I…” She trails off, not even able to finish the words.

“What you did,” he says, “was unforgivable. You could’ve led to the destruction of this family. You very nearly did. A child could’ve died because of you. And not just any child. Your nephew.”

Genevieve lets out a choking sob, as if the reality of what happened, almost happened, is finally hitting her. “I don’t have any excuse,” she says. “There’s nothing I could say that could make it better.”

“You’re right. But I could say the same about myself.”

“Am I out for good?” she asks.

“Tell me what you think should happen next,” Michael says.

“I don’t know. But I did the only thing that made sense. This morning, I called a place upstate, a clinic. And not one of those resort-type places. This is a place where you focus on getting clean above everything else. They don’t coddle you.”

“Go on.”

“Ninety days inpatient. I’m not saying this is my atonement and everything is going to be better after. This is just table stakes. I do this, get clean, come back, and then we can talk about what happens next, if that’s all right with you.”

Michael’s shoulders rise and fall with a deep, slow breath. “Ninety days. Table stakes. I think I’m good with that. We’ll see how the three months go. I’m not even ready to begin thinking about atonement. And I don’t think they are either.” He nods toward the window.

“He knows we are listening,” Enzo says, not surprised at all. “He wanted us to hear.”

Genevieve looks back toward the window, and I see red. Part of me wants to go out there and strangle her for what nearly happened to my son. But ninety days is enough time for all of us to breathe.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Michael says. “And you need to take the time to think about how you want to move forward with the other thing, if you want to move forward at all. We both have quite a bit to think about.”

Gen doesn’t answer. She stands, smooths her skirt, and walks back into the house without looking at him, and he lets her go.

“Come,” Enzo says, “let’s give him a little privacy. Some things have happened over the last few days, and I want to tell you about them.”

Together, we leave the study and go out to the other side of the garden. Michael is still on the bench, alone. He offers a weak wave, and I return it.

“What is it?” I ask, Enzo at my side as we make our way around the grand stone fountain.

He takes a breath. “Half Luca’s territory is mine by right,” he says. “When families battle, that’s the old rule.”

“So take it,” I say. “That’s what you want, right? Growing and expanding?”

“No. It’s not what I want.”

He clears his throat. “We go legitimate. Let the elders buy the dirty half of the business, and move everything else into the clean half, slowly.”

“Why?” I ask. “I thought the messy parts were the whole point.”

“They were.” He takes my hand, and I melt a little the way I always do. “Then you and Matthew happened. And maybe more kids to come. When Matthew grows up, he won’t need to know anything about the old world. He’ll grow up soft in the right places and hard in the right ones. He just won’t grow up like me.”

“I like it,” I say. “I’m just scared it can’t be done.”

“It’ll be harder than I’m making it sound,” he says. “But it can be done. The killing stops being the business.”

Violence. In that moment, Pyke appears in my mind’s eye.

“What happened with Pyke’s family?” I ask. “I’m sure this is hard for you, but he died protecting us.”

His lips press into a hard line.

“I spoke to his wife, Denise,” he says. “One of the hardest things I’ve ever done. There’s a trust for her and the kids that holds even if something happens to me tomorrow. But money can’t replace a husband and a father. Sitting in her kitchen, I made the decision. I will never put you through what Denise is going through. Never.”

We walk a few more steps around the fountain.

Before either of us can say anything else, I hear the grumble of the front gate motor starting up.

“Expecting someone?”

“Not expecting,” he says, turning his attention in the direction of the noise. “But hoping.”

We round the west side of the house just in time to see a car, a sleek black thing, easing through the open gate and stopping at the foot of the walk.

I grin like crazy, knowing who it is.

Marta gets out first. She goes around the passenger side before any of the rest of the staff can approach, and I can hear her scolding the person inside. “No, wait. Sit. I said *wait*.”

The door opens and Carmine gets out under his own power, and it’s about the most wonderful sight I’ve ever seen. He’s a little thinner and grayer, but the way he’s absolutely refusing to be helped puts a big, happy smile on my face.

Marta gives up trying to help him, and he straightens himself tall and turns toward the stairs with an expression of grim determination.

“Getting out of the car is one thing, you stubborn old mule,” Marta says, “but if you think I’m letting you walk up those stairs by yourself…”

“Look at him,” Enzo says. “He’s going to try the stairs himself.”

“You think he can do it?” I ask.

“Without a doubt. It’ll take him twenty minutes, and he’ll bite the head off of anyone who tries to help, but he’ll do it.”

“Then let’s let him.”

“Oh, I intended to. I’d like to keep my head.”

We watch Carmine take the first stair, then the second, Marta scolding him the whole way.

“When this is done,” Enzo says, “I’ll be a man who owns a few construction companies and a great deal of property. If we’re lucky, Matthew will grow up thinking his old man’s work is a little on the dull side.”

I laugh. “I’d like that.”

“On paper,” he adds.

“On paper?”

“The elders will still come to me when something needs settling. Accardi Holdings will file its taxes on time, and every man in this city will still cross the street when he sees me coming.” He kisses my knuckles. “I can give up the business, *tesoro*. I can’t give up being the reason nobody touches what’s mine.”

I should probably mind that more than I do.

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CHAPTER 44

STEVIE

Six weeks later…

"Wear the new dress and be ready at eight."

That's all he said, and he refuses to tell me where we're going.

I have to admit, that makes it all a bit more fun.

Marta spent two hours on my hair, the particular smugness on her face of a woman who knows something interesting but refuses to say a word.

But when the car pulls up outside the club, I get it.

"I know this building," I say. "I worked here. Enzo."

He smiles just a little. My stomach tenses, and I'm not sure if it's because I'm excited or nervous or both.

"I know." His hand finds mine in the dark of the backseat. "Trust me. Ten minutes."

I turn toward the club and watch men and women in gowns and tuxedos walking in. They're all wearing masks of lacquer and feathers and gold, all of them pouring into the same ballroom where a man whose name I don't even like to think about made me a punchline and started a grudge that nearly destroyed everything I had.

"You brought me to the masquerade."

“It’s *a* masquerade. Not the same one as that night. Different. No auction, for example. And the evening can be different, too.”

He reaches into the console between the seats and takes out a box. Inside, on black velvet, is a mask. It’s a gorgeous, emerald-green one to match the dress, delicate and gold-trimmed at the edges. It’s nothing like the cheap thing I had on that night so many years ago. It’s beautiful.

“That night was a wonderful night for me. It’s the night we made Matthew, after all. But it was complicated, too.”

“Yeah. Complicated. That’s one way to put it.” I turn the mask over in my hands.

“But this night, I want to be very uncomplicated. We enter and we have a wonderful time. And when we’re done, we leave. And years from now, when you think of the night of the masquerade, you think of this *one*, not the other.”

I look down at the mask again and take a deep breath.

“Ten minutes?” I ask. “That’s it?”

“If all you want is ten minutes, then ten minutes it is.”

One more deep breath. I watch him take another box out of the center console, another box for another mask, this one simple and dark and plain.

“Ready?” he asks.

“As ready as I’m ever going to be.”

With that, he leads me out of the car and through the doors. Security waves us through, and we’re soon walking into the same space, that big open room with hundreds of men and women in masks.

The place goes silent. I guess I’m a little more famous than I thought, because even with the mask, people recognize me. A hush rolls across the floor, faces turning, the same collectively held breath. For one horrible second, it’s that night again. I see myself standing there in a dress that’s too small, and my hands are shaking holding the tray of drinks.

But it’s not the same. I make myself look, and it’s not the same at all.

First of all, they’re not laughing. No one’s laughing at me like they did that night. Every pair of eyes is on me but without contempt or mockery. No, it’s more like awe.

They know I’m the woman who stood toe-to-toe with Luca Santini, who was taken prisoner by him and lived to tell about it. They know I’m the woman who works at Enzo Accardi’s side.

The same roomful of people who laughed at me before are now dead silent, as if I alone hold their fates in my hands.

“Word travels fast, it seems,” I say quietly.

“Indeed, it does. Now, ready?”

I smile just a bit. “Ready.”

We move through the crowd and they part. I stride across the same room where I was humiliated, and with each step, I understand more what Enzo wanted to show me.

This is different. My mask is gorgeous, my dress is made for my body and mine alone, and Luca? Luca’s nothing but a bad memory.

As we reach the middle of the room, Enzo stops. He gestures to the musicians, who guide their song to a close. He takes off his mask and tucks it into his inner jacket pocket.

“Enzo,” I say. “What on earth are you…”

“Five years ago,” he says. He’s not talking to me. His voice has lifted, and it carries through the expanse of the room, filling the silence. No one is saying a word; all eyes are on him.

“Five years ago, I stood in this room and watched a petty, small man try to humiliate a woman. And I did something about it. I stood at her side and put a ring on her finger and told you all she was mine.” He looks around at everyone, letting his gaze sweep over them in the same way his father does. “I meant every word. But I never asked her, and some of you saw that.”

My heart is pounding so hard, it feels like there's a little person in my chest trying to sledgehammer his way out.

"I said it to protect her. I'd stand beside her again a million times." He pauses, lets the words sink in. "I thought I was being so heroic, coming to the aid of the charming and beautiful damsel, whisking her away from the evil monster. But here's my mistake, the one I was too blind and arrogant to see."

Everyone in the room seems to be holding their breath. God knows, I am.

"I put a ring on her hand without asking. I told myself it was rescue. It wasn't. The asking I never did, I've regretted every single day."

Then he turns to me. In front of hundreds of people, in front of the elders, in front of the entire underworld of this city, Enzo drops to one knee.

The room takes a collective gasp.

"So," he says, "tonight, I'm asking."

He reaches into his jacket and takes out a small box and opens it, and my breath stops. It's the ring. The same cool, heavy ring he slid onto my finger five years ago, the one I left on a pillow before dawn and found again on black velvet in his drawer.

"Stevie Callahan." The perfect steadiness to his voice has broken just a bit. "Five years ago, I told a room full of strangers you were mine to protect you. Tonight, I'm asking you to make it true, and to be my wife for entirely different reasons. You gave me a son. You came into my home and looked me right in the eye and told me just who I was. You saw the worst things in my soul and challenged me to become something better. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving to you that I can be.

"No locked doors. Not ever. Stevie, I love you more than I can bear. And I want to love you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?"

I look down at this man on one knee, standing in the exact room where I was made to look like an idiot. But also, where all of this began. I can feel those old memories fading, turning into little blips of insignificance, replaced by what's happening right now, this very moment.

“Ask me again.”

He blinks. “What?”

“Ask me again. I want all the bad memories of this room gone forever. And turning it into the room where you asked me to marry you twice is what I need for them to go away.”

“Then I’ll ask you again, as many times as it takes. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I say. “God, *yes*.”

The room explodes. Hundreds of people are on their feet and cheering. Enzo climbs to his feet and wraps me in his arms and pulls me close. But he doesn’t put the ring on my finger. Instead, he presses it gently into my palm.

“Put it on yourself,” he says.

“I want to.”

So I do. I put it on.

“Smile, *dolcezza*,” he murmurs, so only I can hear. “Let them see.”

This time, nobody in the room is laughing at me.

And we all dance.

Later, much later, when the room is slowing down and I’ve been congratulated and embraced by more people than I can count, Enzo takes my hand into his and nods toward the stairs.

The stairs leading to that room.

“That night five years ago,” he says, “was a night of good and bad. But there was one part that was, without a doubt, one of the best moments of my life.”

I grin. “You mean the night you wouldn’t take off the mask?”

He laughs. “Can I interest you in revisiting a very, very good memory?”

I glance over my shoulder and look at those stairs, and I think about the woman who climbed them that first night, starting a journey that’s still

going on. That was the night we were together for the first time. The night we made our son.

“Yeah,” I say. “I think that’s one trip down memory lane I wouldn’t mind taking.”

I take his hand, and together, we climb the stairs.

Because I want to.

Because it’s mine to choose.

We reach the same room. Enzo shuts the door behind us, and the lock clicks, and when he reaches for me, I put one hand flat on his chest and stop him.

“No,” I say. “My turn.”

His eyes darken. He lets me walk him backward to the armchair across from the long mirror, and he sits when I push. I take the plain dark mask out of his jacket pocket, the one he wore through the ballroom, fold his pocket square over the eyeholes, and tie it back over his eyes. Now he’s blind.

“Stevie.”

“Hands on the arms of the chair,” I tell him. “You don’t move them until I say.”

His fingers close around the carved wood. His jaw goes tight. A man who has never in his life been told to keep still, keeping still for me.

I take my time with the green dress. I let him hear the zipper. I let him hear the silk hit the floor. He can’t see any of it, and I watch what that does to him, his chest rising faster, his knuckles going pale on the chair.

“Tell me what you’re doing,” he says, rough.

“No.”

I kneel between his knees and open his belt, and he says my name again like a prayer and a threat at the same time. When I take him in my mouth, the whole chair creaks under his grip. I go slow. I make him wait, the way

he made me wait in his bed with my wrists in his hand, and every time his hips lift, I stop, and he swears in Italian and puts himself back down.

“Please,” he finally says.

I’ve never heard Enzo Accardi say that word. I sit back on my heels just to listen to it.

“Again,” I tell him.

“Please, *tesoro*.”

I stand, turn my back to him, and lower myself into his lap, guiding him into me inch by slow inch until I’m full and shaking. Like this, I can see us both in the mirror: the masked man in the chair, his knuckles white, and me on top of him, the ring on my hand flashing every time I move.

I ride him slow and deep, my hands braced on his knees, and I set every second of it. He doesn’t touch me. He holds that chair like it’s the only thing keeping him from coming apart, and I take him right to the edge and keep him there.

“Now,” I say. “Touch me now.”

His hands are on me before the word is finished, one splayed hot across my belly to pull me down onto him, the other between my thighs, and he thrusts up into me so hard I see stars. The control I had snaps clean in half, and I don’t want it back.

“Mine,” he says into my shoulder. “My wife.”

“Not yet.”

“Mine,” he says again, and makes me come so hard I cry out loud enough for the whole Velvet Room to hear it. He follows me over a heartbeat later, buried deep, his arms locked around me, my name breaking in his throat.

For a long time, neither of us moves.

Then I reach back and pull the mask off his face. His eyes are wet. He doesn’t hide it.

“No more masks,” I say.

He kisses the back of my neck, and then my hand, the finger where the ring is.

“I love you, *tesoro*,” he says.

“And I love you.”

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EPILOGUE

STEVIE

The twins are four months old on the day I marry their father, and they give me the best wedding gift a couple of babies can give, sleeping through the ceremony.

Eleven months ago, I told him in his new office at Accardi Holdings, forty floors above the city, holding a glass of champagne I hadn't touched. I said the breakfast table was too small. It took him almost a full minute to understand. Then the great Enzo Accardi, who has faced down guns and elders and Luca Santini, sat down on the edge of his own desk like his legs had quit, and laughed until he couldn't breathe. The pill, my doctor told me afterward, is ninety-nine percent effective. Enzo has decided this is the most Accardi thing that has ever happened.

On paper, the man I'm marrying today is very boring. Accardi Holdings builds things and owns things and files its taxes on time. I run its foundation, which pays for lawyers and apartments for women walking away from men like Luca. Every man in this city still crosses the street when Enzo comes down it. Nobody believes the paper. That's the point.

Pyke and Serafina, our babies. Pyke, with his father's dark hair already coming in, and those Accardi dark eyes that Enzo, Matthew, and Michael all have. And maybe I'm imagining things, but it seems like he already has that Accardi watchful stillness, where he notices everything.

And Serafina, Fina, as we call her, named for Enzo's late mother. She came out looking like no one had expected, with a head of fuzzy, pale blonde hair

and gorgeous blue eyes. *The first Accardi in generations to look like the mother's line,* Michael had said.

The wedding is in the garden, not a ballroom or a grand cathedral, but our garden. My idea. I wanted a simple and small but beautiful ceremony. And that's just what I got.

No one is giving me away today. I was clear about that. Nobody gives me away because I'm not anyone's to give.

So I walk in myself.

Well, *almost* myself. Matthew's with me, dressed in an adorable powder-blue suit he picked out, with Marta's help, naturally. Matthew's carrying the rings on a tiny white pillow, an adorably serious expression on his face. He keeps glancing down at the rings, making sure they haven't bounced off.

"Still there, bub," I assure him quietly.

"I know. I just want to be sure."

We walk along the path in the garden together, music playing from the string quartet, and I turn my attention to the man waiting for me.

Enzo looks like something out of a dream in that tux. Carmine stands next to him as his best man. Marta is my matron of honor. Enzo isn't crying. Not yet. But there's a softness in his eyes, a slight shimmer, that makes me think he's close.

Everyone's here.

Candy is in the second row in a dress that's absolutely too short for a garden wedding, already crying, waving at Matthew with both hands.

Michael's in the front row, a twin in the crook of each arm. He'd insisted, saying he couldn't imagine a greater honor than holding his grandchildren on the day of his son's wedding. Something about the sight of this man who did terrible things and has been spending every day since that night trying to atone for them, holding two babies, makes my emotions spike in spite of myself.

He told Genevieve the truth about David on a garden bench more than a year ago, and she hasn't said a word to him since that morning that wasn't strictly necessary. Every Sunday, he has Marta set a place for her at dinner. Every Sunday, it stays empty. He has it set anyway.

Genevieve is in the third row, by herself, thirteen months sober. She asked if she could come. I said yes the second time she asked. She hasn't held either of the twins yet. She hasn't asked to, and I haven't offered. Carmine still leaves a room when she walks into it. Some things don't get fixed by a wedding. Maybe they get fixed by years.

I reach the altar and gaze at my handsome fiancé. Up close like this, I can see the shimmer in his eyes. Definitely tears. The closest Enzo will come, anyway.

"Let's begin," he says. "I don't want to wait another second for you to be my wife."

The string quartet slows to a stop as the minister raises his palms. He begins, but I can't take my eyes off Enzo. When it comes time for vows, he goes first.

"I spent my whole life," he says, holding both of my hands, "believing the only way to keep the people I cared about safe was to make the world afraid of me. My father taught me that, and his father taught him that, and all the way back, longer than anyone in this family can remember. But you changed that, Stevie. You came into my house and made it clear right from the start that you weren't afraid of me and would not be owned or kept."

He goes on, and now my eyes water.

"Just by being who you are, you broke hundreds of years of family tradition I didn't even know was tradition. And for that, I make you a promise. Everything bad that I inherited stops here today. Our children will inherit not fear, but strength, loyalty, and love offered with an open hand. But you've got work ahead of you, my love. Just as you taught me these things, now they have to be taught to our children. And my vow is to be right there with you, teaching, loving, protecting. I love you more than words can say, and I'll spend the rest of my life keeping this vow."

I quickly wipe my tears away and take out my vows and begin.

“I ran from you once,” I say. “I was right to, and I’d do it again if you were the man now that you were then.” I squeeze his hands. “But you’re not. The man you’ve become has the same strength as the one I ran from, but a strength built around protecting those he loves. He has the same brilliance, but the brilliance put into building a company that can be passed down from generation to generation. And he’s just as scary, except his scariness is aimed at getting Matthew to brush his teeth and eat his veggies.” Light laughs sound from the crowd.

“So, as I stand before you and everyone else, here’s my promise: I won’t run again. Not because I can’t. You made sure I always could. But because I don’t want to. We built this together, and we choose it and each other every day. And as long as we keep choosing it, I’ll be here for the rest of my life. That’s my vow. And I’ll spend the rest of my life keeping it.”

I’m a mess by the time I’m done. Matthew, sensing his moment is here, hurries over with the ring cushion.

The ring goes on my finger, and the minister starts to say, “You may…”

But Enzo’s already pulling me close, already kissing me, the garden erupting with joy and celebration. Fina chooses that moment to wake up and start howling in Michael’s arms, and that sets her brother off.

Later, when the dancing’s started and the babies are being passed around, Enzo tucks me against him, and I think about the woman I was, the woman in the too-tight dress.

I wish I could reach back in time and tell her not just that it gets better, but that she’s the one who makes it better.

And I’d tell her this: *They’re going to laugh at you tonight.*

Let them.

Because one day, you’re going to walk back into that room, and everything will be different. And it’ll be different because you made it different.

I'd say, *Hold on, sweetheart. I know it doesn't feel like it, but you're already free. One day, you'll never have to run again. And one day, you'll build a place called home with the most amazing man and make the most wonderful family ever*.

Because that's just what we did.

And it's the choice I make, *we* make, every single day.

THE END

Still not over Stevie and Enzo's tantalizing romance?

You don't have to be. If you're craving that same dark, obsessive intensity, readers say *Billionaire's Plot Twist,* **an Amazon Top 100 bestseller**, **delivers it, and then some.**

★★★★★ "Freaking aaaaaaamazing read!!!!" – Goodreads Review

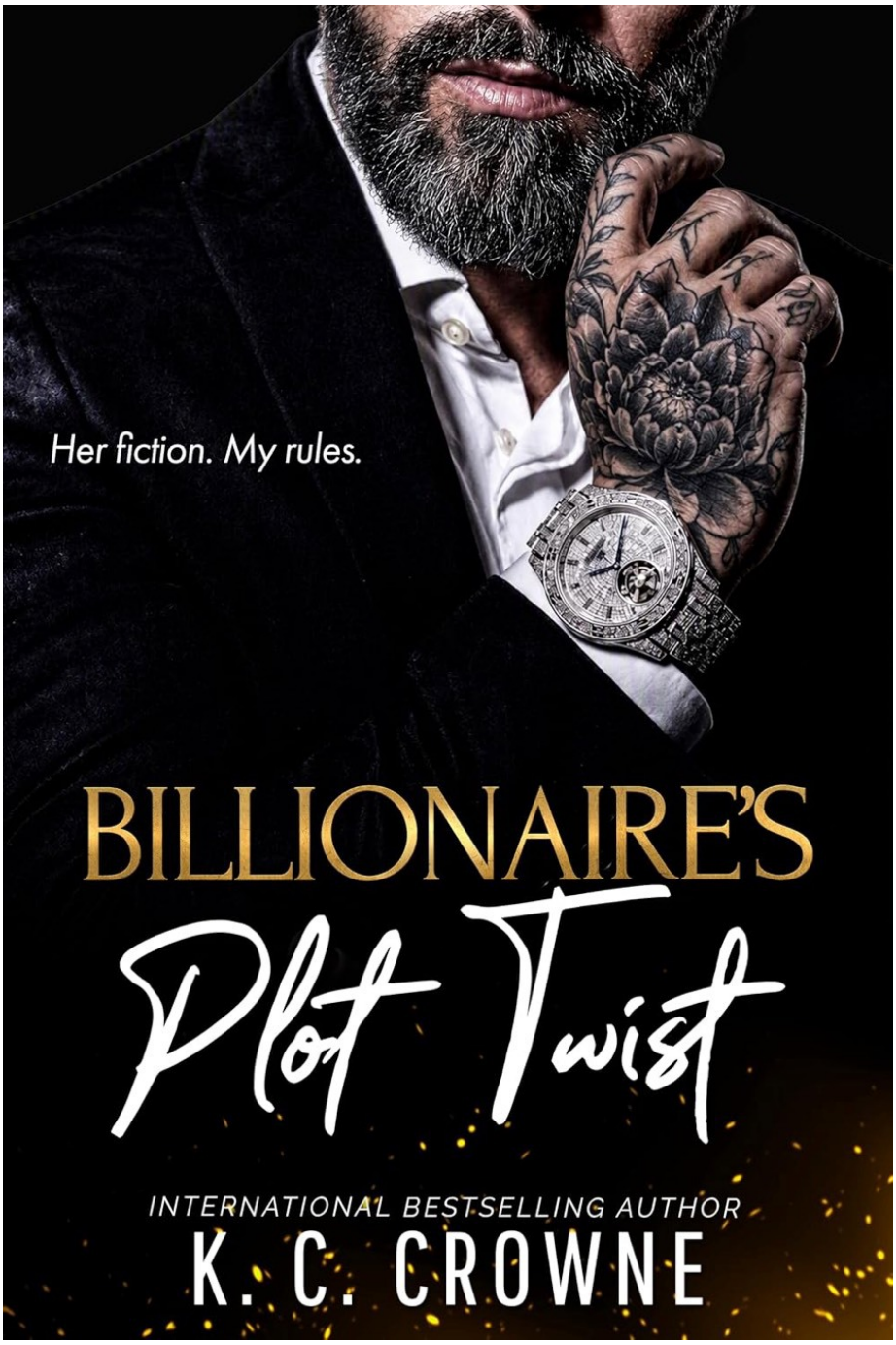
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★★★★★ "An intense, absolutely fantastic story with plot twists, betrayals, jealousy, and gritty danger. What's not to love about a gruff, morally grey crime boss turning out to be the hero Violet needs. Another winner from this author!" – Goodreads Review

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BILLIONAIRE'S PLOT TWIST (PREVIEW)



Wanting my curvy employee was never part of the job.
Then the shy single mom accidentally sent me her filthy novel.
In it, I tell her what to do. She begs me not to stop.
I was trying to be professional.
That ends today.

She thinks I've called her to my office to fire her.
Instead, I make her an offer:
"***Finish the book. I'll help with the research.***"

She has no idea who she's been writing about.
Behind the suits and the billion-dollar empire, I run this city from the shadows.
I end careers, and sometimes lives.

But she's hiding something too: a past she ran from,
and a monster with a badge who knows exactly where to find her and her little boy.

He's coming for them.

He doesn't know they're mine now.

She wrote me as the villain.
For anyone who threatens my family, I'll gladly prove her right.

This is a full-length standalone. Tropes: Billionaire Boss · Secret Crime King · Curvy Single Mom FMC · Office Romance · Spicy Mix-Up · Morally Gray Alpha · Dark Protector · Corrupt FBI Ex · Instant Daddy / Found Family · "Touch Them and Die" · Obsessive Possessive Hero · Romantic Suspense

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CHAPTER 1

VIOLET

"Come in."

Low. Controlled.

A voice that has never once needed to be loud. I've heard it in meetings, in elevators, in the few moments he's crossed the main floor and everyone within thirty feet has mysteriously forgotten how to type.

I've also heard it much lower and much dirtier in my own head at eleven o'clock at night, while writing things I will one day have to explain to God.

I open the door.

I've heard stories about Gianni Russo's hobbies. None of them involved gardening, birdwatching, or anything else that would make a woman feel comforted by a closed door.

Most of the stories are probably exaggerated. Stories people say about powerful men when they are afraid of them. They turn money into menace, and one man's bad temper into a body count.

Gianni Russo stands behind his desk with Midtown burning gold in the window behind him, and *God.*

Six-foot-something of dark suit and dark hair and the kind of contained physical power that makes common sense feel optional.

The three-piece fits too well.

The silver at his temples makes him look less softened by age than sharpened by it.

A jaw you could cut yourself on.

Hands that look capable of signing a contract, breaking a neck, or doing the things I have personally made them do in chapter twelve.

Those hands have caused me measurable problems.

I have lost sleep over those hands.

I have written approximately nine thousand words that could legally be classified as evidence.

His cuffs flash silver when he moves. A heavy gold ring glints against one hand. His office is all charcoal, glass, and sharp lines, but he is the darkest thing in it. The kind of man who makes a room look built around him.

Looking at him has always been a bad idea. I've simply never been especially committed to good ones.

He lifts his eyes to mine. Once. Briefly. The way he looks at everything, like a man assessing value and risk and ownership in a single glance.

Then his face gives me nothing. No anger. No amusement. Nothing.

For one stupid, hopeful second I think maybe this is about the audits. Maybe the folder on his desk is just a folder. Maybe I'm about to receive a lecture about vendor invoices and not die of humiliation in front of the most terrifyingly attractive man in Manhattan.

"Miss Wolfe." He nods at the chair in front of his desk. "Close the door."

Every hopeful thought I have ever had puts on a tiny hat and jumps out a window.

Nobody says *close the door* before a casual workplace conversation.

I shut it. The latch clicks behind me, too loud and too final, and I cross the room with my heels striking the floor in hard little beats and stop behind the

chair. I put both hands on the back of it, because the way he is looking at me says this isn't a meeting.

This is an execution.

A very well-dressed execution.

He comes around the desk. In his hand is a stack of loose pages, and the edges are soft. Handled. Read. Reread.

I know before he says a word.

I know from twelve feet away, because I know my own margins. One-inch. Ragged right. That hideous serif I've used since I was nineteen because it makes a draft look like a book instead of an accident.

That is not a report. That is not an HR complaint.

That is chapter four through chapter eleven of my novel. The one where a woman with green eyes and a fake name falls into bed with a dangerous man who looks exactly like Gianni Russo.

My lungs forget their job.

My nipples, traitorous little opportunists, tighten under my blouse. This is not helpful. This is not even biologically reasonable.

He leans against the front of the desk, close enough that I catch leather and citrus and something darker underneath it, warm skin and expensive whiskey and trouble.

Then he begins to read.

"'He watches her from across the room with the patience of the tide,'" he says. "'A man who has learned that everything he wants comes to him eventually. That it is only ever a question of when.'"

My heart stops.

Not metaphorically. For one clean, spectacular second, I am medically deceased.

He turns a page.

Good God. There’s more.

"'She feels his gaze on her skin like a caress. Like a promise. She wonders if he knows, if he has always known, that she has been writing him into her deepest wanting since the day she walked through his door.'"

The room tilts. My knees give, and I sit down hard.

There are deaths with more dignity than this.

He turns another page. His eyes lift and lock on mine and stay there.

"You're a compelling storyteller."

I open my mouth. Nothing comes out.

Fantastic. Fourteen months of writing in secret, and the one moment I need a sentence, my brain evacuates the premises.

"Page forty-seven," he says, tapping the corner of the stack. "Of a document you attached to the quarterly expense summary and sent to the Russo Industries distribution list at nine-forty Friday morning."

The floor disappears.

Not just beneath me.

Everywhere.

The entire concept of flooring has been revoked.

The distribution list.

Two hundred and forty people, every one of them one search away from a pen name that is not supposed to have a face attached to it.

Because a pen name sitting next to Violet Wolfe in an email header becomes a searchable record. A searchable record becomes a trail. And trails are how people find you.

The stupid secret and the dangerous one, tied together by one rushed attachment on a Friday morning.

I'm going to be sick.

"IT flagged the attachment in four minutes and killed the message in the queue," he says.

My breath catches. "Nobody opened it?"

"Not from the distribution list."

Not from the distribution list.

That is a strange way to say nobody.

"Except you," I say.

His expression doesn't change.

Of course the one person who opened it is the man I've spent nearly a year fantasizing about. That feels statistically rude.

I push my glasses higher on my nose. "Mr. Russo, it was an accident. I was attaching the expense report, and the files..." My voice is coming from somewhere outside my body. "I'm so sorry. I can explain."

"Tell me about the elevator scene."

I blink. "I'd genuinely rather not."

"I'm sure."

He flips through the manuscript without looking for the page, because the corner is already folded down.

Dog-eared.

The man dog-eared porn about himself.

No. No, no, no.

I straighten anyway.

If I am about to be fired for fictional misconduct, I will be fired upright.

He opens it flat, and in the margin is a pencil mark beside one paragraph. Then another, four lines lower.

He didn't skim it. He read it with a pencil in his hand. He marked it. He came back to it.

Half of me is panicking. The other half is located much lower in my body and is not panicking at all.

The corner of his mouth shifts. Not a smile. A warning that a smile might be possible under laboratory conditions.

"Stand up, Miss Wolfe."

I don't decide to stand. I simply discover that I am standing.

Traitor knees.

His gaze drops. Over my chest, my hips, my thighs, and then back up to my face, slowly, deliberately, like he has finally decided to see what has been standing in front of him for eleven months.

It is not the look he gave me when I walked in. It isn't an assessment. It isn't professional.

Heat floods my face.

Not shame. I refuse to give him that. Something far more dangerous moves through me instead: the bright, dizzying knowledge that he likes what he sees.

He starts reading again. And he walks as he reads, and it takes me two seconds to understand that he is walking me backward.

"'He follows her into the elevator and presses the button for the top floor. The doors sigh closed. She doesn't look at him. She doesn't have to. She can feel the heat of him everywhere, all along her body, like standing too close to a fire. He steps in behind her, so close his breath stirs the hair at the nape of her neck...'"

My shoulders hit the wall.

"'...and then he takes her by the hips.'"

He stops. There is perhaps a foot of air between us. Maybe less.

The space between us tightens until it feels less like distance and more like a held breath.

"'A shiver runs the length of her. He pulls her back against him and she feels the hard evidence of how badly he wants her. And when his hand slides beneath her skirt, when his fingers trace the lace edge of her panties, she doesn't move. She doesn't breathe.'"

He lowers the page.

"Tell me, Miss Wolfe." His voice has gone quieter. "When he pins her against the elevator wall..."

He lifts one hand and plants it flat beside my head. Not touching me. Not quite.

"...like this. What happens next?"

His eyes are not black. Not up close. They're a deep brown shot through with gold, and there is a pale scar above his left eyebrow I have never been close enough to notice.

His mouth is five inches from mine. Maybe four.

My brain, a normally reliable employee, stares directly at that mouth and clocks out for the day.

"She..." My voice cracks. "He... they..."

"Use your words." Low. A little amused. "You're a writer, aren't you?"

"An unemployed one."

"Not yet."

And there it is. The word that returns the floor beneath my feet.

Not the threat. The *yet.*

And the fact that he has read the line wrong.

"You put the stress in the wrong place."

His brows lift. Barely. It's the first thing I've said all afternoon that surprises him.

"Did I?"

"'She waits.'" I swallow. "You stressed *waits*. It isn't the verb. It's *she*. She is the one deciding. That's the point of the sentence."

For one terrible second I consider biting off my own tongue. Instead, apparently, I continue.

"If you're going to read my work aloud while I'm standing against a wall in your office, at least read it correctly."

Shit. Did I just say that?

Silence.

Something crosses his face. Fast. Gone before I can name it.

But it isn't anger.

It's delight.

"Noted," he says.

Then he leans closer. Not enough to touch. Enough that the warmth of his breath grazes my mouth.

"Answer the question."

"You've asked about six."

"The one about the elevator."

My pulse is everywhere. In my throat, between my thighs, at the spot where his hand is still braced beside my head.

"He kisses her."

The words come out lower than I intend.

His jaw tightens.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

Then, slowly, he turns the heavy gold ring on his right hand with his thumb.

Once.

I have seen him do that twice before. Both times in meetings, both times about a minute before someone's badge stopped working and an executive stopped coming to the office.

In my book, the hero does it before he tells a man to go wait in the car.

The men in my book always come back from the car.

The sick twist low in my stomach says that detail might be fiction too.

The look on Gianni's face suggests that may be where I've made my largest fictional error.

“Violet.”

My name. Not Miss Wolfe. Not an order wrapped in formality. My name in that low, impossible voice.

"Yes?"

"She's already wet," he says. There's gravel in his voice now. "Before he touches her."

"She is."

"Why?"

Because she's been thinking about it. Because she's tired of being frightened. Because she's tired of being overlooked. Because a man like him looking at her feels like the exact opposite of safety, and some broken, hungry part of her wants it anyway.

Because she has spent too long surviving and remembers, suddenly, that wanting is not a weakness.

I could lie. I'm very good at lying; it's probably the second-best skill I have. But he is holding forty-seven pages of evidence, and I have never once written a heroine foolish enough to lie to a man holding the receipts.

"Since the day she walked through his door."

He doesn't move. For a long moment, he doesn't move at all.

Then his free hand rises, and one knuckle touches the hinge of my jaw.

Just that.

Nothing more.

It travels slowly down the side of my throat, to the hollow at its base, and settles against the fabric over my sternum.

Right over my heartbeat. Like he can feel exactly how badly I'm betraying myself.

Or exactly how fiercely I am choosing this.

He tips his head.

His mouth comes close enough that I can feel the shape of it against the corner of mine without any part of him actually landing.

I inhale.

He does too, slowly, like he is memorizing something.

A small sound slips out of me.

Soft, mortifying, involuntary.

I hate that he hears it. I hate more that I want to make it again.

He stops five inches from my mouth.

He does not close the distance.

Instead, he steps back. His thumb returns to the gold ring and presses down hard, as if he's physically holding something in place.

He is trying not to do something.

The deeply concerning part is that I want to know what.

"Eleven months," he says.

"What?"

"You've worked here eleven months."

Eleven. He knows it to the month, like he has been counting.

"And you push your glasses up when you're hiding something." His voice is even again, almost too even. "You did it before you told me you could explain. You do it in every meeting where you take notes. Usually twice."

My fingers freeze near my frames.

That is not in a personnel file.

Nobody puts that in a personnel file.

That is from watching.

Eleven months of believing I was the most invisible woman in the building. Eleven months of believing my disguise had worked.

And the whole time, he noticed.

There is a difference between being watched and being seen.

There is also a difference between a man noticing your glasses and a man noticing the exact moment you hide behind them.

The second one is not casual. The second one is a problem.

He picks up the manuscript and looks at me over the top of it.

"You wrote him patient, Miss Wolfe."

His gaze drops to my mouth. Then lower. Stays there.

"You got that part right. Eleven months of it."

My breath turns shallow.

"You also wrote a man who slides his hand under her skirt and waits."

A pause. His eyes come back to mine.

"That's the part you got wrong."

He takes one measured step closer.

"When I'm done waiting," he says, "I don't trace the edge of anything."

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CHAPTER 2

VIOLET

He walks back to the desk.

I stay on the wall, because the wall is the only thing in this room currently holding me up, and I watch him go. Six-foot-something of restraint in a three-piece suit, walking away from me like he didn't just tell me, in his own voice, in the first person, exactly what his hand does when it's done being polite.

I don't trace the edge of anything.

I'm going to hear that sentence every night for the rest of my life. I already know it. My body has taken it down as a formal announcement and filed it somewhere that will never, ever be audited.

He sets the pages on the desk, and I get one second, one, where I see his hand.

It isn't steady.

Then it is. He's behind the desk, and the man who was breathing against the corner of my mouth ten seconds ago has been filed away somewhere I can't reach, and the CEO of Russo Industries looks at me like I'm the next item on an agenda.

"I didn't know you were a writer."

I stare at him.

That's the sentence. That's what he leads with. Not *get out.* Not *you're fired.* Not *let's revisit what happens when I'm done waiting.* He has just rearranged my entire nervous system, and he wants to talk about my hobbies.

Air comes back into the room. I peel myself off the wall with as much dignity as I can locate, which turns out to be none.

What was I supposed to say? *Good morning, Mr. Russo. By the way, in my spare time I write filth about a man who looks exactly like you. See you at the quarterly.*

I could barely get him to approve a reimbursement without sweating. The idea of casually mentioning the fictional handcuff scene felt optimistic.

"It's a side thing." My voice is steadier than the rest of me. "And it's under a nom de plume."

"A pen name."

Of course he knows what it means. "Right. Which is the point. It's separate. It has nothing to do with this building."

"It has a great deal to do with this building." He straightens the pages, taps the edges square. "And I have notes."

"Notes."

"The hero. Dark hair with silver in it. Italian. Built like..." He checks, though I'd put money on him not needing to. "...'a man whose body is as good as they come, and who knows it.'"

He looks up.

"Am I wrong to recognize myself?"

I could lie. Composite character. Pure fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead.

The standard disclaimer, except mine came with cheekbones, a bespoke suit, and an employee badge that could apparently ruin my life.

But he's read every line, and he's been sitting with it since Friday, and there is genuinely no version of this where I get away.

"You're not wrong."

He doesn't gloat.

That's almost worse.

"How much is observation," he says, "and how much is imagination?"

"More observation than I'm comfortable admitting."

The ghost of a smile.

"You're observant."

"Professional hazard."

"For an office manager?"

"For a writer."

He goes quiet, and it should be uncomfortable, and it isn't.

It's the air before weather.

The kind that makes sensible people go inside and me wonder whether I have time to make a dramatic exit before lightning hits.

"Which part did you object to?" I ask.

"I'm sorry?"

"You've got a pencil in there. You marked things." I nod at the manuscript. "You've told me it's compelling twice and that I got something wrong once, and you haven't said which. That's very bad editorial practice, Mr. Russo."

He looks at me for a long moment.

"You're going to be difficult," he says, and he sounds pleased about it, and something warm and stupid unfurls in my chest.

Excellent. I've managed to turn impending professional ruin into flirtation. My therapist would need a whiteboard.

He flips to the last page and turns it over.

Blank.

"It isn't finished."

"Sixty percent. Then edits."

"Finish it. I want to see how it ends." In exactly the tone he'd use to approve a capital expenditure: "I'll comp your hours. Move whatever you need to Chance."

Of everything I'd braced for on the ride up, fired, humiliated, reported to HR, weighted and dropped somewhere off Red Hook, this was not on the list.

Mostly because I try not to make contingency plans involving severance packages and dockside cement shoes. It feels pessimistic.

"Mr. Russo, I can't possibly..."

He lifts one finger.

Just the finger.

My sentence dies in my throat, which is embarrassing for both of us.

Then he says something I don't expect.

"You can say no."

"...What?"

"No is available to you." He sits back. "Say it, and this conversation is over. Your job is unaffected. You'll have my word on that, and my word is not a small thing. Nobody read the file. There's no one to tell."

He waits.

And here's what I'll be thinking about at two in the morning for the rest of my natural life: I don't say it.

The word is right there, one syllable, free of charge, and I stand in his office and I don't say it.

He watches me not say it.

He knows exactly what he's watching.

Which is annoying, because I would prefer to be mysterious and unknowable while I make objectively terrible decisions.

"There's a caveat," he says.

Of course there is.

He comes around the desk again and stops in front of me.

Close.

Too close, given everything.

"Your intimate scenes."

"What about them?"

"They're good." He tilts his head. "They could be better."

"Better how?"

"*A shiver runs the length of her.*" He says it flat, without inflection, and hearing my own sentence in that voice is like hearing it read back in a deposition. "*Something inside her melts.* You have the wanting, Miss Wolfe. You have it in every line. What you don't have is the having. At present it reads like a very talented woman describing a room she has looked at through a window." A pause. "And a writer of your ability shouldn't have to guess."

My mouth has gone completely dry, partly because he's right.

Which is deeply inconvenient. I would have preferred him to be a terrible editor and a worse man. Life has given me neither courtesy.

"And how exactly do you propose I stop guessing?"

The second it's out, I realize I'm afraid of the answer.

And that the fear isn't the main thing I'm feeling.

He looks at me, and for the first time I see the whole weight of what lives underneath the tailoring.

Not a CEO.

Something older than the corner office and considerably less civilized.

"I'll help you," he says. "With the research."

The word lands somewhere south of my navel and detonates.

"Help me write sex scenes."

"Help you write *better* sex scenes." He doesn't blink. "From experience instead of imagination."

I should say absolutely not.

I should say this is wildly inappropriate, you're my employer, this crosses every line in the handbook and several that nobody's bothered to write down.

I should say a lot of things. Instead, my brain is spinning up a slideshow titled *Reasons This Is a Terrible Idea*, and every slide is somehow just his mouth.

"Keep writing," he says, before I can find any of it. "Don't stop until it's done. I'll be in touch."

He turns to a file on his desk, and that's that. Dismissed with the efficiency of a man who has rearranged my entire life and doesn't consider the matter to require further discussion.

I push up out of the chair.

My legs are unconvincing.

I smooth my skirt, push my glasses up my nose, and get most of the way to the door before I turn around.

"Mr. Russo?"

He looks up.

"I should warn you. The man in the book doesn't always get what he wants."

Amusement, and something hotter under it.

"Some men always get what they want, Miss Wolfe."

That should have annoyed me more than it did. It definitely should not have made my pulse flutter like a Victorian heroine with poor judgment and no chaperone.

I make it fourteen steps down the hall before I put my back against the wall and let out a breath I've been holding since four o'clock.

Three men in dark suits come out of the legal wing carrying banker's boxes. A fourth is holding the elevator, checking his watch.

The box nearest me has a printed label I read without meaning to, the way you read a license plate: a long number with hyphens in it, then *SDNY*, then a date four weeks out.

I don't know what it means.

I know what the four men look like, and they look like the end of a very long quarter.

Or the beginning of a very bad episode of television, right before someone says, "You need to see this."

The doors close on them.

Chance, my supervisor, is packing up when I come out onto eight, coat half on.

"Nadia's downstairs, I'm out." He takes one look at me. "You're not fired."

"I'm not fired."

"You look fired."

"I look," I say, "like a woman who has had a very strange afternoon."

Which is technically true. It is also what I'd say if I'd been abducted by a cult with excellent tailoring.

My phone buzzes.

Kylie: *well?? are we fleeing the city or not*

Most best friends don't ask that.

But most best friends haven't erased a woman down to the studs and rebuilt her.

I type: *not fired. worse. it went to the whole company list. IT killed it but he read it.*

The dots start.

Stop.

Start.

Kylie: *the WHOLE list*

Kylie: *vi call me tonight. not tomorrow. tonight.*

And there it is, the thing under the embarrassment that I've been outrunning for twenty minutes.

For four minutes on Friday morning, the name I publish under and the name I answer to sat in the same email header, on a server, with a timestamp.

Four minutes. Long enough to ruin a life. Long enough for coffee to get cold. Long enough for one very dangerous man to open a file.

The clock on my monitor says 4:52.

I have eight minutes to make the train, because Patrick has swimming on Tuesdays and he will tell me about it in the same eleven sentences whether I'm listening or not, and Rudi will have him fed and damp and still furious about the splashing.

He'll start with the injustice, move to the betrayal, and end with a detailed reenactment involving his arms. I'm expected to react at the correct

intervals.

A year ago, I'd have already been packing.

That was the whole system: a bag, a bus, a new name by Sunday.

But there's a cubby at his kindergarten with his name on it in his own handwriting, the P backwards, and he checks every morning to make sure it's still there.

Running used to cost me a security deposit.

Now it costs him that.

And I can survive almost anything. But I will not make my son pay for my fear.

I catch my reflection in the mirrored wall of the elevator on the way down. Red hair pinned flat, thick frames, a blouse two sizes too generous.

My costume.

Eleven months of being the most forgettable woman in a building full of sharks, and it worked.

It has always worked.

Being unmemorable is the only real skill I have.

Gianni Russo read forty-seven pages of my filthiest, most private thinking, and he didn't flinch.

He wanted the rest.

I have a terrible, wonderful, catastrophic feeling that invisible isn't going to be available to me anymore.

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CHAPTER 3

GIANNI

Spackman doesn't knock. He's the only man in the building who doesn't.

"You rang."

"Sit."

He doesn't. He stands inside the door with his hands in his pockets and looks at the desk, at the pages, at the glass of Amaro I poured twenty minutes ago and haven't touched.

"Your office manager came out of here looking like she'd been hit by a bus," he says. "Should I be worried about the bus?"

"No."

"Because she was pink to the collar and walking like the floor was moving." He finally sits. "And you've got a drink you're not drinking. In thirteen years I've seen that twice."

"Tell me about the street."

He lets it go. That's why he's still alive and other men aren't.

"Grey sedan, west side, since July. Black Suburban on the corner of Forty-eighth since Monday. They're not hiding, Gianni. They're advertising."

"Because the twenty-eighth is four weeks out and they want me sleeping badly."

"Are you?"

"I don't sleep badly. I sleep early." I go to the window. The man in the sedan lifts a cup to his mouth and puts it down. "How's Marino?"

"Loud. Busy with the unions. Same as last week, only more of it." Spackman studies my back. "That's not why you called me up."

"No."

I turn around.

"I need you to look at somebody. Off the books. Off the system. Nothing written down."

"Who?"

"Violet Wolfe."

He doesn't react, which is a reaction. "The office manager."

"Eighth floor. Eleven months. I want the whole life. School, employers, the mother, the credit file, where she was before New York and who she was standing next to."

"Any particular reason, or is this a question I don't ask?"

"She knows something she shouldn't."

A long pause. When Spackman speaks again the voice is different. Flatter. The one he used for thirteen years on the other side of the table.

"Then why is she still on payroll?"

The light on Forty-eighth changes. Nobody moves.

"Because I want to be wrong."

"That's not an answer I like."

"It's the one you've got."

He stands. At the door he stops with his hand on the frame.

"If somebody built her, they built her clean, and clean takes time to pull apart. I'd rather be slow than noticed." A beat. "And your hand's shaking."

"I know."

"That's twice," he says, and goes.

When the door shuts, I sit down with the pages.

Eleven months. That's what she said. A woman on eight thinking about my hands while I walked past her desk and didn't look.

I didn't look on purpose. Looking is the first step to touching, and I don't touch soft things. So I walked past her desk eleven months running and kept my eyes on the elevator, and I called it discipline.

Then she put forty-seven pages in my inbox and told me, in writing, that she'd been looking the whole time.

That's not an invitation. It's a door with the lock already off.

I've been fixing eleven months since Friday.

She thinks the glasses do something. The blouses. They don't. A fence tells you one thing: somebody planted something they didn't want in the road. Under all of it she's soft everywhere a woman is meant to be. Heavy in the breast, wide and deep through the hips, a waist that goes in like a hand was made to go around it, a mouth that's been the whole problem since four o'clock. I stood five inches from that mouth and breathed her in and did not put mine on it, and I would like a medal, and there isn't one.

Twenty-five years across tables from men who'd have opened me up on a dock for the fun of it. Hands like stone. Tonight a copy editor in flat shoes put a crack in me by objecting to my line reading.

You put the stress in the wrong place.

I laughed. Out loud, alone, an hour ago, standing at this window. Like an idiot.

I have no business touching her. Let's say it plainly while nobody's here.

Men who get close to me get audited or photographed or buried. My mother lit candles for thirty years for a husband who was already in a barrel. She was lighting them the week she died. That's the standing offer. That's what a woman gets on my arm.

Soft things don't survive me. Not pity. Arithmetic.

So I should have said no. I had the word. I handed it to her instead and watched her not use it, and God help me, nothing in my life has felt that good.

Page one hundred and twelve.

Not the marked pages. There are eleven of those and I could say them from memory and none of them is why I sent that Post-it down to eight.

It's an ordinary passage. Her don has a man brought to him in the back of a restaurant. A page of dialogue that's too clever, men in that room don't talk like that, she'll cut it, and then this:

"He listened to all of it. He didn't raise his voice, because he never had to. When the man was finished, the don turned the ring on his right hand once, with his thumb, the way another man might check a watch. Then he said, quietly, that Tommaso should go out and wait in the car."

I read that Friday at nine-fifty-one. I haven't been comfortable since.

Four people know I do that. Spackman. My mother, and she's in Greenwood. The other two are dead for the same reason they noticed. It isn't a habit. It's the last second of a decision, and it happens where a man can see it if he's close enough to be looking, and by then it's not usually much use to him.

She put it in a romance novel. In italics. As a flourish.

Her file bothered me in month two. Too clean. I let it sit, because a clean file isn't a crime and I had a grand jury to think about. Page one hundred and twelve is what turned a curiosity into a problem.

Either she's the most observant person in this building and it's never once occurred to her that any of it is dangerous, because to her it's character. Or

somebody sat her down and told her.

The second one has an old shape. Put someone soft inside the perimeter. Let her file the expense reports. One day she's in your office with the door closed and there's a wire in her bag.

Except a plant doesn't accidentally send the operation to a company-wide list. A plant doesn't shake so hard her glasses move. A plant doesn't forget herself and correct your grammar.

Unless she's very good.

The clean move is a severance package, a non-disclosure, a car home. Never think about it again.

I turn the last page over. The blank one.

Finish it. I want to see how it ends.

There's the whole disease in one line. I want to know what she knows. I want to know who she is. And under both, running hotter than either: I want to be in the room when she writes the next part, because in four months of the worst pressure of my life she's the only thing that's made me feel anything at all.

I fold the corner of one hundred and twelve down.

Thirty-four floors under me a woman with green eyes and a name I'm no longer sure of is on a train, thinking about my mouth.

She wrote me as a dangerous man a determined woman could save. It's beautifully done. It's the worst research in the manuscript.

I'm not the man she wrote.

I'm the one on page one hundred and twelve.

His name wasn't Tommaso. She got that part wrong. She got everything else right.

And he never came back from the car.

END OF PREVIEW

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