

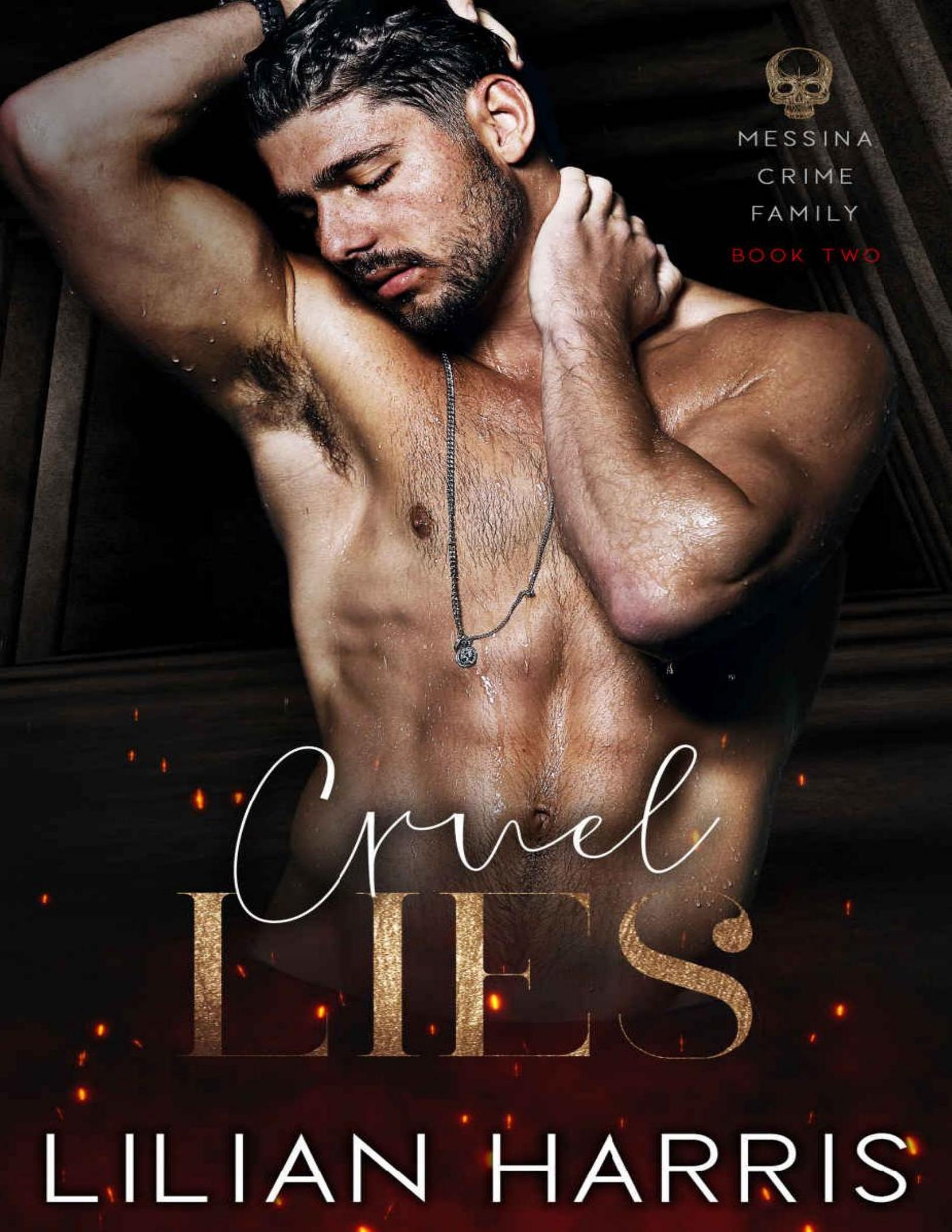


MESSINA

CRIME

FAMILY

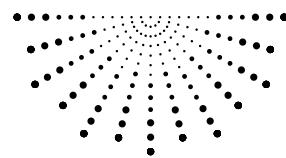
BOOK TWO

A shirtless man with a beard and a tattooed chest is being held by two women. One woman's hands are on his head and neck, while the other's hands are on his shoulders. He is wearing a thin chain necklace with a small pendant.

Cruel Lies

LILIAN HARRIS

CRUEL LIES
MESSINA CRIME FAMILY
BOOK TWO



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LILIAN HARRIS

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

Six Years Ago - Almost 15

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

Four Years Ago - Age 34

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

Two Weeks Later

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

Two Weeks Later

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

Two Months Later

[Epilogue](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Also By Lilian Harris](#)

[About the Author](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

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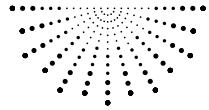
This book is dedicated to all you women out there. Whether you're working, chasing your dreams, or raising a family. Or doing all three while still feeling like you're failing.

I see you. I am you. We're in this together.

You're a badass bitch.

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CHAPTER ONE



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NICOLETTE

SOMETIMES THE PEOPLE WHO HURT US THE MOST ARE THE ONES THAT ARE supposed to love us.

That's how I ended up here—in the woods being chased by a killer. It's impossible to outrun him, and eventually he'll catch up.

The blistering swell of his footfalls echoes through the nearly pitch-black forest, the moon providing me with just enough light.

My breathing comes in burning gasps as I rush barefoot through the darkness, swallowed up into the night.

There's no other sound here at all. Nothing but him.

My predator.

My killer.

My pulse beats in my ears, slamming in my throat.

Run. Just keep running.

I can't believe they found me. I've been running for so long—about a year now since she died—yet I knew eventually my past would catch up with me. That I'd become prey once again.

I've been hiding out from place to place, afraid to stay still for even a moment, afraid of this very thing. But in the end, the villain always wins.

My sister's murderer has found me, and he's planning to take me out next. Or at least one of his men is.

Giancarlo Marino, the boss of the Messina crime family, was my sister's father-in-law...and also the man she'd been foolishly having an affair with. The one she got pregnant by. And that's what got her killed.

I was there hiding in the closet of her bedroom, recording her fight with Giancarlo. And that's when he shot her.

I stayed in that closet, trembling, afraid that if he heard a sound, I'd be next. But he didn't discover me. He walked out as though nothing had happened.

Once enough time had passed, I came out of hiding, and when I saw my sister's blank expression staring back at me, blood pooling around her body, I sobbed. She may have been cruel to me, but she didn't deserve that. Even after all this time, I can't get the image of her out of my mind.

Whenever I go to sleep—and I use that word loosely—I see that night over and over. I hear her desperation right before death claimed her. I hear that pop of his bullet and the silence after.

Bianca and I may not have been close, and she made it her mission to be a bitch to me whenever she could, but I didn't want her dead.

I don't know why Bianca hated me so much. We were almost five years apart and didn't have much in common. But it was more than that with her. She was vicious and she loved seeing me suffer. She had everything: our parents' love, their undivided attention, a man who loved her. But nothing was ever enough. She wanted me to hurt.

It got worse after she met Raph at nineteen. She thought she was even more amazing than the whole world made her out to be.

Raph was older than her at thirty-two, and my parents were ecstatic that a handsome, Italian, wealthy business owner was interested in their pride and joy. Little did they know that this rich man was also Mafia royalty. But that made my sister even happier. She liked the danger. And when my parents did learn this little bit of shocking news, they weren't fazed. He did have money, after all. And we didn't.

My parents gave her everything, while I got crumbs. She was the golden child, while I was the forgotten one. The one ignored, left to her own whims. The one they got around to when they had time. I got that they worked hard. My dad owns a few liquor stores and Mom works as a seamstress. But they never bothered with me. Not like with her. They genuinely cared about what happened in her life, but not in mine.

Why? What made me unlovable?

They may have never said the word out loud, but I think I was a mistake. They didn't want me. They had the daughter they dreamed of, and I was a mere financial burden. Someone they had to feed and clothe.

So, I remained in the shadows...until he came along.

Raph.

The man who changed my life and ruined it at the same time. The man who finally saw me. The man I gave my heart to, even while he remained in the dark. I couldn't tell him how I felt. He was hers, and I was nothing but a child.

When we met, I was almost fifteen and instantly smitten. Think heart-shaped eyes and all. The first time he really smiled at me, I think I forgot where I was or what day it was. But then my sister opened her mouth and ruined the moment. Who the hell knows what she said, but it instantly broke my trance and I was reminded that a man like him—a thirty-two-year-old man at that—would find me ridiculous.

Of course, I now realize how ridiculous I truly was. He was thirty-two, for God's sake. But as more time passed, I realized that in my own childish way, I was falling in love with him.

And six years later, I still am.

I think I always will be. I fought hard to forget him after she died, but the more I tried, the more I failed. I was his, even though he never gave me any indication that he even so much as found me pretty.

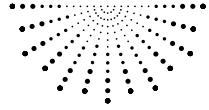
But when I met him, it was the very first time someone cared. Someone worried. About *me*.

No one did that.

Not until Raph

And then I lost him.

CHAPTER TWO



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NICOLETTE

SIX YEARS AGO - ALMOST 15

“MA!” BIANCA CALLS AS THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS SHUT.

I pour some apple juice into a glass while my mother blends mashed potatoes with her handheld mixer.

“I’m in the kitchen, bella,” Mom answers, stopping what she’s doing almost instantly.

The rest of the food is warming up in the oven while we get ready for dinner. Can’t say they really care if I join them. I don’t think anyone would notice if I disappeared off the face of the planet.

“I brought someone for you to meet.” Bianca’s tone grows all giddy as her high heels clack across the linoleum a short distance away.

We don’t have a big house. It’s a modest three-bedroom. Thank God I have my own space. I couldn’t stomach the thought of sharing a room with my sister. She’d probably put something in my water to give me diarrhea just for fun.

My best friend, Brenda, thinks she’s part devil’s spawn. Brenda hates Bianca to her core, and she’s not shy about telling her that, especially when my sister says something hurtful to me. She does that a lot.

What the hell did I ever do to her other than exist? I don’t get in her way. I don’t even talk to her.

Mom fusses with her auburn hair, touched with a few grays. A smile stretches on her face, as though she knows who Bianca brought for dinner. I couldn’t care less. He or she is probably an asshole like my sister is.

I walk over to the adjacent dining room, grab one of the chairs, and plop down on it, sipping on my drink. My back is to Bianca just as she comes in. I can hear her popping her gum.

“Mama,” she says, her voice an irritating sound. “I’d like you to meet my handsome boyfriend, Raphael. But everyone calls him Raph.”

I stop drinking mid-sip, my shoulders tensing.

Did she say...boyfriend?

Someone actually wanted her? This is what the boys out there are looking for? A Bianca? I’m doomed. I’ll be single forever.

I stand no chance against the Biancas of the world. I’m not as pretty as her. Never was. She’s got big boobs—she even had them at my age—while I have tiny ones and a stomach that kinda rolls when I sit. Hers was always flat, and she made it her mission to brag about it to my face.

Is that why my parents like her better? Because she’s prettier? Smarter? She always did well in school while I struggled. I was never good at anything. I’m still not. I can barely make friends. Brenda is my only one. Maybe I’m just unlikable.

Tears prickle in my eyes, but I don’t cry. Not with them around. I don’t want them to know how much their rejection hurts.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ricci.” That rich timbre sends goose bumps threading down my arms.

He sounds older. Way older.

Every part of me wants to turn around. To see who he is. But I stay rooted in place, my fingers fastened around the cup.

What does he look like? Is he tall? Is he ugly? I hope he is. If he’s cute, she’ll gloat nonstop. The sun revolves around her, and the rest of the world is insignificant.

“Where’s Daddy?” The words stretch with a whine. “I was hoping he got to meet my Raphie.”

Barf. I can almost see her scratching his chest, like he’s her puppy.

He’s not the first boyfriend she’s brought home, either. The last one lasted two months. I hope this one lasts less. I’m not bitter, I promise. She’s just not a nice person.

“Oh, he should be home very soon,” Mom says, her voice swelling with excitement. She really wants this to work. “It’s nice to meet you, Raphael. Bianca has told me so much about you.”

She has? When?

Of course I wouldn’t be privy to that information. Unless Bianca was using that information to hurt me, of course.

"I didn't realize she was bringing you over tonight," Mom adds. "I would've made myself look a lot more presentable." She laughs nervously.

"You look beautiful as you are, Mrs. Ricci."

Every word drips with honey. I'm sure my mother is blushing.

"What a sweet boy you are, making an old woman feel nice."

"I told you he's a keeper, Mama." Bianca sighs, all dreamy.

I bet he's rich. That has to be it.

"I hope you're hungry," Mom says. "I made veal cutlet with homemade spaghetti."

"Yes. I am," he tells her politely. "Thank you."

"Did you make any grilled chicken for me?" Bianca asks. "You know I don't eat that fried crap."

She grows irate, and I roll my eyes a little too hard and snicker. Not on purpose. Maybe.

"Umm, did you say something?" Bianca shouts over to me with contempt.

But I just sit there, not wanting to deal with her right now. Maybe she'll forget that I'm here. Kinda wish I had some actual invisibility power right about now.

"Hellooo! I'm talking to you."

Ugh. Crap. I'm gonna have to face the wicked witch.

I huff a long breath, pushing my drink away as I turn, quickly catching her with an ill-tempered gaze.

"Did it sound like I was saying anything, or am I not allowed to dri—?"
The rest of the words die in my throat as I take in the most handsome man I've ever seen in my entire life.

This isn't an exaggeration.

He stands tall, towering over her, definitely taller than six feet. His thick, jet-black hair is coifed back, eyes large and almost just as dark. He looks tough, like he could beat anyone who looks at him funny. And it's not because of the muscles on his body. It's his entire persona. If I saw him on the street, I'd cross to the other side.

He looks at me inquisitively, tilting his head sideways a little, probably thinking how someone as ugly as me can be related to someone as pretty as his girlfriend.

I incline my chin up higher. When they knock you down, you've just gotta brush off the dirt and keep on moving. I think I read that somewhere

once. Or maybe I made it up because my life is a constant cycle of falling and getting back up again.

“You lose your tongue?” Bianca sneers, curling her arm around his lower back with her other palm propped on her hip, her eyes intensifying with rage. “You have a problem with how I eat?”

I don’t care how she eats. What I have a problem with is how she talks about people who don’t eat like her.

“Maybe if you took a lesson from me, you wouldn’t look so...” She gives me a dry once-over. “You know...you. Try dieting.”

She laughs a cruel kind of laugh. Her face upturns with disgust and the back of my throat aches with a fresh coat of pain.

“Or, better yet...” she adds. “Skip that cake at dinner at least once a week. Maybe you wouldn’t be so chun—”

“Bianca,” Raph suddenly warns, his eyes snapping to hers. “Stop that. Right now.” His voice curls with a twinge of well-contained wrath.

Did he just...

Did he just defend me?

My sadness transforms to utter shock.

My mother barely gives me a look, and my heart breaks all over again. This right here is my life.

They don’t care.

No one ever has.

Until this very moment.

Instinctively, I want to run up to my room and cry. It’s what I do at night when no one can hear me. And right now, that’s all I want to do. His eyes connect with mine, and this time, I find them carrying sympathy.

I don’t want to be pitied.

I grind my teeth, trying my best not to expose my pain. But I feel the tears shimmering within my eyes, and the more pity I find in his striking gaze, the more I want to cry.

“What?” she huffs.

“Don’t ever speak to her like that,” he chastises. “That’s a terrible thing to say to your own sister.” His entire face hardens. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’re supposed to protect her from people like you, not be one of them.”

My heartbeat jumps to my throat.

Silence stretches as she stares incredulously at him.

Okay. Wow. I think he just called her a bully. She must be dying inside. She rolls her eyes on a faint smile. “Don’t let her fool you, babe.” She gets all bubbly, but his face stays the same, not an ounce of give. Hard, unblinkingly he stares at her.

“She’s always making fun of me for trying to take care of what I put in my mouth,” she attempts an explanation for her cruelty. “She’s not as nice as you think. Believe me.”

When a tear slips out of my eye, I discreetly brush my thumb past my lower lashes, but when I look up, I find him looking down at me, and my stomach turns. He saw me cry. And I hate that he saw me at my weakest. A man such as him—strong, well put together—probably looks down at weak, pathetic things.

“Honey, I’m home,” Dad’s voice booms through the space around us. I straighten my shoulders, but Raph doesn’t stop staring in my direction with compassion in his gaze.

“Daddy!” Bianca rushes toward him just as he marches in. “Look who’s here.”

She grins at Raph, and when my father greets him, that’s when he parts his attention from me. And I feel all alone again.

Why did he look at me like he cared? Why did he get angry with her when she said those things? He’s her boyfriend. He’s on her side. Not mine.

He probably just feels sorry for me. That’s all that was.

They get to talking, and we finally move to sit for dinner. I try to make myself invisible, which obviously isn’t hard when you’re me. You just have to sit there and exist. They only see you when they need something.

Silently, I take miniature bites of the veal, barely even touching my pasta. Her words echo in my head, and I hate that they do.

But what if she’s right? What if I’m eating badly? Maybe I should stop eating so much dessert and carbs. Maybe they’ll love me more if I look more like she does.

Bianca’s like one of the girls from the magazines: tiny waist, brown eyes that are almost hazel, black shoulder-length hair that seems to always stay shiny. Oh, and she has big lips that match her big chest. The boys love her.

Me, on the other hand? I have pale green eyes and plain brown hair. I don’t dress in tight clothes like the other girls do. No one notices me. Not at home, and certainly not at school.

Dinner finally ends, and Bianca and Mom start clearing the table, while my father grabs a beer and heads to the living room.

“Come join me,” he calls to Raph, settling on the sofa and turning on the TV.

Raph stays seated at the table, though, his eyes darting to my full plate, then to me. It completely unsettles me. My stomach tightens while I start to rise, picking up my plate.

“You haven’t eaten anything.”

My pulse quickens.

He sounds disappointed.

Wait. Did he just talk to me?

“You’ll be hungry later, Nicolette. You should eat.”

Oh my God. He said my name and I never liked it more than I do right now. My heart hammers in my chest. But I can’t make myself look at him. The plate jitters in my hands while I just stand there staring at it, seeming like a nervous idiot.

I clear my throat. “I—I’m fine. This is how much I normally eat.”

Lie. Complete lie.

But if a guy like him likes thin girls, maybe that’s the kind of girl I should be. My thighs are definitely on the thicker side and my butt is too big.

The chair scratches against the floor.

He rises to his feet ever so slowly, coming toward me with gradual steps.

I’m mesmerized as he pulls closer. My heart flutters so loudly, it may rip out of my chest.

When he’s near enough, he speaks on a harsh exhale. “You can’t let people like that control you.”

Both of his hands grip the edge of the table to my left as he leans in to whisper, like he doesn’t want anyone else to hear. His gaze is earnest and true when he looks at me.

“You can’t let them win.” He stresses every syllable like it’s an oath. “Everything she said, it’s untrue.” His jaw tenses. “You’re perfect the way you are. There’s nothing wrong with you. Don’t let her make you think otherwise. Alright?”

My breath catches in my lungs; I force air into them.

You’re perfect the way you are.

Tears instantly flood my eyes.

No one has ever said that to me. Least of all my parents.

But he did. He said I was perfect.

Is he lying? Does he just feel sorry for me?

He pushes off the table and struts toward the living room. But before he goes, he quietly says, “When dessert is served, I expect you to eat it. Understand?”

I nod, utterly speechless.

And twenty minutes later, when that chocolate cake is placed on that table, he cuts me a slice, and I do just that.

He smiles at me the entire time, and I smile right back.

For the first time in my life, I feel a little less alone.

From that day on, he was always there when my own family wasn't. He took the time to get to know me. To help me with homework. To teach me how to cook. To come to my school when my parents were too busy.

Once, I was being bullied and got in trouble for standing up for myself. And he was there, telling that principal off while she looked blankly at him, not knowing how to respond when he threatened to have the school's funding taken away.

Apparently, his family has connections in government too. She was instantly terrified, and I was magically allowed back to school while my bully was suspended for a week. It was a nice week while it lasted.

My God, I miss him. A throbbing sensation hits the center of my chest and I blink rapidly, knowing now isn't the time to think about him, not when someone is after me.

I'll never see Raph again. I've neatly packed him away in the very depths of my heart where I don't dare go, knowing if I do, I'll fall apart. Because he never wanted me, and he never will.

Maybe to him, his kindness didn't mean a thing, but to a girl like me, it meant the world. Someone finally cared. Someone finally looked out for me.

My secret childhood crush had turned into full-blown infatuation by the time I was seventeen. But he had no idea...until one day, he did.

Until I ruined everything.

But he had no interest in me. I wasn't my sister. I didn't have her curves. Her exotic beauty. I was just me. The girl no one desired. The girl everyone else pushed aside to get to the real prize: Bianca.

I lived every year watching my sister have the man I wanted, the one she took for granted with her betrayals and lies. A man who was too good for her. He had no idea the kinds of things she was up to. Or if he did, he didn't show it.

Why would he have married her if he knew?

Before I found out about Giancarlo, I saw her kissing a man while out to dinner with him. She didn't see me. But I saw everything from across the street. After that, they drove off together. I bet there were others.

When I confronted her, she told me she'd tell Raph that I was jealous and making up stories like when I was a child. I did that to get my parents' attention. It didn't work. But I was sixteen when I caught her and not a kid anymore.

I wanted to tell Raph so many times, but I never got the courage. Because I knew that when it came to it, he'd believe her over me. And I'd cause the one person I loved to hate me.

My parents would also despise me for ruining her relationship and her meal ticket. I'd have no one. So I stayed quiet and watched the man I was in love with marry someone else.

But then I went and did something stupid and lost him anyway.

From that day on, he barely spoke to me. Barely even looked at me. I became invisible to the one person who mattered most, and it cut like a knife. Not even my parents' indifference hurt this much.

It made me sick inside to have to face him after the humiliation of his rejection. When we'd have to be around each other at family gatherings, I'd suffer through his ignoring me. My sister noticed the change between us, and she was thrilled if her gloating grins were any indication.

It hurt to know I had lost him. I knew I didn't have him like she did. But I had something. I had his friendship. It may not have been enough, but at least I had that.

After a while, the dread morphed into anger. And every moment I looked at him, every time the back of my throat throbbed with drowning emotions, I stuffed that deeper and reveled in my fury. It was all I had left. He meant nothing. He was just like the rest of my family who didn't care.

After Bianca died, it was easier to leave it all behind and run. In a sick way, I was grateful I had a reason to leave. No one would miss me anyway. Not even him.

I mailed my parents a letter shortly after I disappeared, telling them I needed some time alone to grieve and that I'd be living on my own for a while. I'm sure they were relieved.

The sad thing is, they haven't called my phone once since I've been gone. That stung. It really did. I still carried the hope that they'd love me, but it never came.

He called, though. Many times. But I never answered. Not just because I was hurt, but because I was afraid it would make finding me easier. He'd never give me up, but his father is cunning. He'd find a way to track me. I couldn't take the risk.

"Come on, now. You can't outrun me." The man chasing me shoots my attention back to the present, his chuckling a biting sound.

He increases his speed. The snap of branches beneath my feet crackles through the air. He whistles a taunting melody, firing off a bullet. There's nothing here but trees and darkness. No one would hear my screams.

His laughter pummels my gut with dread.

I gasp, my feet moving faster.

My chest heaves from the onslaught of my shallow breaths.

He's going to get me.

He's going to kill me.

Run. Just keep running.

"I always get the job done," he taunts, voice booming, sounding louder. "And unfortunately for you, the boss wants you gone."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! I'm gonna die! I don't want to die. I want to see Raph again. Tell him I love him. That I'd never hurt him like she did. Fuck our age difference. Fuck it all. Why does it matter anyway when two people are in love?

Okay, maybe he doesn't love me now. But that can change.

Is this what people think about while they're being chased by a killer? Things they wish they could do differently if they got a second chance? Because I'd give him all of my tomorrows without a second thought. There's no one else I'd rather spend them with.

God, Nicolette! Stop focusing on him and figure out how to escape! You can't ride off into the sunset with the man of your dreams if you're dead.

I glance in every direction, hoping to spot a route onto a main road. But there's not even a visible clearing in these woods. I glance over my shoulder, but don't see him at all. Just more darkness. My heart pounds, and when I face forward, my body slams into a wide tree trunk.

"Shit..." I groan, my knees collapsing into the cold, soggy dirt.

I fight the pain shooting down my chest.

"Need help?" His laughter bursts from somewhere dangerously close, his mocking tone reverberating like thunder, grinding up my insides. "Just tell me where you are, and I'll make it better."

I push past the pain and rush up to my feet, running again, not knowing where I'm headed, but knowing I need to keep moving.

Tears blur my vision. I won't outrun him. I'm alone. Helpless. Will anyone even find my body, or will Giancarlo make sure I'm never found?

I'm not stupid. I'm aware of how powerful he is.

But I know if Raph found out what's been happening, he'd help me. He's the only one I can trust. If I could somehow find him and tell him what I know about his father, he'd protect me. Seeing him again would be hard, but it's better than dying.

"I can hear you." He strides even nearer, and the rustling of the leaves and his thundering footfalls cause my arms to break out in a shiver.

I don't even know how he found me. I was careful. I knew about the security cams at my sister's. I also knew that if Giancarlo saw me walk into the house before he got there and not walk out, he'd realize I was hiding and come after me. So I ran before he could do just that.

I had some money in my bag the day I left, hitching a ride to a nearby state, thinking that if I stayed just close enough, Giancarlo wouldn't find me. I was hoping he'd think I ran really far away and not focus his attention nearby.

I stayed at motels no one would ever willingly frequent. I even worked as a cleaning lady at a few just to have a way to make money. But when I got attacked by someone staying there, I knocked him out with a lamp and ran.

Out of pure desperation, I ended up calling my friend Brenda, knowing I couldn't call Raph just in case his father was there and he mentioned my name. She was my best friend and the only other person I could trust. She told me to find a ride to a house she owns in the middle of nowhere, not too far from where I was. It was left to her in her grandparents' will, but she

already lived with her husband, so it was empty after the last tenant moved out.

It was a peaceful two weeks there, but when there was a knock on the door, I just knew. They'd found me.

So I grabbed my go bag off the table and ran out barefoot from the back door. But as soon as I made it into the woods behind the house, he was following me. I don't even know what he looks like, except that he wants me and he won't stop until he has what he wants.

I'm breathless, tightly grasping the handle of the small duffle bag slung around my shoulder while I keep running. My calves ache, the soles of my feet throbbing with agonizing pain. I'd imagine they're bleeding from all of the branches and rocks that have cut into them.

But I have to make it out of here, no matter what condition I'm in when I do. Eventually the woods have to end. Right? Someone has to be on the other side of them.

After running for what feels like a mile, I pause when I see a small flicker of light through the clearing. I don't even know if it's real. My eyes grow wide and hope springs to life, and I dash toward it. My pulse fills my ears with renewed fervor. It's my only chance at survival.

And with every step, the light source gets closer. It teases me, flickering in between the sliver of trees. If I can just get there and beg for help, maybe I can get a message out to Raph and have him come get me.

I can no longer hear the man or his footsteps. Maybe I lost him. But when I take another step, sharp pain registers at the back of my head like something hard and heavy hit me.

I tumble, my eyelids fluttering and my vision growing blurry. I slam to the ground, feeling his weight on top of me. Through the slits in my eyes, I find a shadow looming above me.

Is this how it ends? Dead in the woods all alone? I've barely lived. I've never finished college, never saw the world, never been loved. Never felt his hands on me, never felt him inside me. I'd do anything to hear him tell me he loves me just once before I die.

Raph...

The only man who meant anything and everything. Now I'll never get to tell him how I truly feel. How I felt when he stopped being my friend.

And in this moment, a heaviness settles over my heart. Because in this instant, all I can see is him. Those near-obsidian eyes haunt me as though

they're staring right back at me, his smile warm, that thin stubble around his perfectly sculpted jaw I want to feel beneath my fingertips. It's like he's right here.

I surrender to the vision, my soul carried away to a time and place where we'll laugh together freely and completely.

My heart swells when I recall him telling me to keep my head up when I felt invisible around my family. Because he understood how it felt. His father was cruel to him. We were the same that way. He never had a good memory between the two of them, and it made me sad for him. Because Raph was the best man I ever knew. How could two people with so much love to give feel so unloved?

I'll miss him with my entire heart. Foolishly, I once thought I stood a chance with him. What a naïve girl I was, creating a future that'd never exist. Even in death, he was hers. He'd never be mine. I sometimes regret not telling him about all her lies, but I couldn't hurt him. He didn't deserve that.

But he didn't deserve to marry a liar either.

"Finally," the monster above me whisper-shouts.

His hand snaps to my neck, squeezing it until I lose all ability to breathe. I gasp for air that never comes, clawing at his arm. The burning in my chest spreads until life slowly starts to wither away.

But that gets my adrenaline pumping and my body fighting. I kick up my foot, connecting my knee to his groin. It causes him to drop his clasp off me and gives me the chance to slowly get to my feet. And when I glance toward the light, I realize it's not there anymore.

Damn it. Did I imagine it? Is my mind playing tricks on me?

I start to back away, trying to make a run for it.

"You little bitch!" he roars, whipping out a gun.

When I snap my eyes to him, I finally see what he looks like: black hair slicked back and brown eyes, I think. It's still too dark to make that out. He's huge, though. Tall. Built like a linebacker.

I don't stand a chance.

"Please!" I beg, fresh tears welling in my eyes. "Please don't kill me. I won't say a word. Tell him..." I pant. "Tell him I won't say a word to anyone."

His mouth bends into a horror-filled sneer. "I don't make negotiations." He raises his gun until it's level to my head. "I'll make it quick only 'cause

I like you."

My lower lip quivers on the spot, tears sloping down my cheeks. And that's when I accept it.

The fight...it leaves me. I'm so tired. How long can I run? It's time to accept that even in death, my sister found a way to ruin my life.

Slowly, my eyelids flutter to a tight close, and with a deep inhale, I prepare to die.

One. Two. Three. I count until I get to six, and that's when I hear the sound...

Pop.

A bullet rips through the air, and my left shoulder instantly erupts in the most agonizing pain. I let out a scream as I stumble back, and when my eyes fly toward the hit man, I see someone else there.

A man. Someone I've never seen before. Is he here to hurt me too? He's just as tall as the other one, but his build is leaner. There's something cold in his dark eyes as he stares at me while choking my killer to death. His forearm clutches the man around his throat while the man thrashes.

The stranger keeps his gaze glued to mine and doesn't even blink. Goose bumps scatter down my entire body.

I have someone else to fear now. Maybe Giancarlo sent two men, and this one actually can get the job done faster.

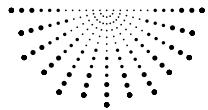
Liquid trickles down my arm, but I don't have time to figure out whether it's blood. I have to get out of here. My heartbeats pump like a stampede.

I step back, once, twice, my chest rising and falling as I do.

But I don't get far. My foot hits something hard, and I fall backward until darkness swallows me whole.

And this time, I think I'm done for.

CHAPTER THREE



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RAPH

FROM THE TIME I WAS A LITTLE BOY, MY FATHER TOLD ME I WASN'T GOOD enough. He didn't sugarcoat it. He told me exactly what was on his mind. He'd remind me of all the ways my middle brother, Michael, was better than me.

It's not my brother's fault. I love my brothers. Both of them. It's my father I can't stand.

I was ten when he knocked me out for not being able to beat the shit out of a kid who was picking on me in school. When my mom tried to intervene, he hurt her too. Badly. But there was nothing I could do to protect her.

In our circle, we don't call the cops. That gets you killed. So I did what I thought could win my father's approval: I became stronger. Tougher. I worked twice as hard, grew thicker skin, and was the best enforcer in the Messina crime family. I did everything my father wanted, hoping that one day he'd love me. That he'd let me take over for him as the head of the family. Because that would mean he finally saw me as someone worthy of our name.

But that day never came. When I was twenty-five, he told me he'd never let me run the family. That I had not proven myself. That I never will.

That was the day I realized my father truly hated me. And it was also the day I pretended not to care.

I still did what I had to do. There's no leaving this life. But I no longer saw myself as a member of the family. Because without my father's approval, I had nothing.

When he announced his seat would eventually go to Michael, I told my brother I was happy for him, that I never wanted the burden of that job. But it was a lie. Eventually, I convinced even myself.

I promised myself that one day, I'd show my father exactly what kind of man I am. That I'd build my own roots. I'd have my own family. A wife I cherished. A child I'd tear out my heart for. Something he never did for me.

When I met Bianca at one of the restaurants our family owns, I didn't push her away, even though she wasn't my type. I'd met other women, but none of them did shit for me either. But I thought maybe I needed to give relationships more time to feel something. And as soon as I saw how my father was looking at her, I knew he wanted her for himself. So I took her instead, even when I shouldn't have. I'm not proud of it.

He had a thing for younger women, and he wasn't shy about flaunting his affairs with them. My mother just put up with it. But as a teenager, I remember her crying every night he didn't come home. I fucking wanted to kill him. I swore that would never be me. I'd love my wife. I'd never stray. I'd fight for my marriage. A marriage is sacred, and I would honor my vows.

There was nothing wrong with Bianca. She was pretty—shoulder-length black hair, brown eyes. But she just didn't do it for me. And worse, she was way too young for me. But she didn't care. She didn't make her desire for me a secret. She practically jumped all over me the night we met, and I'm ashamed to admit I enjoyed the anger on my father's face more than I enjoyed her company.

Once she gave me her number, we began to date. I appreciated our time together for what it was. Liked having someone in my life most of all. So I settled. But that was wrong. I see things more clearly now than I ever did then.

Months turned to years, and I realized that I still never felt that overwhelming sense of passion I thought I'd feel by now. I kept waiting for it to happen, wanting it. But it just wasn't there. So after three years, I owed it to her to find a man who'd love her the way she deserved. We all deserve that. Maybe I wasn't cut out for it. Maybe I wasn't built to feel love and passion and chemistry. Maybe I was fucked up.

But just when I thought I was dead inside, she came along and changed all that. What I felt for *her*...that was something I'd never felt before. And I hated myself for it. Hated myself every second of every day from the

moment her full, soft lips landed on mine. She uprooted everything I thought I knew about myself and lit my whole world on fire.

To this day, it still burns for her. It always will.

But I didn't let her know that. I couldn't. She was barely eighteen, a child with a crush, while I was a man who should have known better. Someone not only too old for her, but far too dangerous.

The forgotten sister went on to fall for the forgotten boy. We were alike that way. But it was our differences that made us an impossibility.

I never intended to feel a goddamn thing when she kissed me. Not for a second. I'd never even looked at her that way before. Not Nicolette. I wasn't supposed to be filled with inappropriate thoughts when she was around. I wasn't supposed to imagine how it'd feel to kiss her—*really* kiss her. But I did. I let it all play out in my head like the bastard I am.

I didn't want to be like my father, interested in women too young for me, but I couldn't deny it once she did what she did. I couldn't deny that, deep down, we were two souls who had forged a bond way before I even realized it.

But none of that mattered. Not for me. She was untouchable. Forbidden. I would watch out for her for the rest of her life. I swore to myself I would. I'd kill anyone who hurt her. But I'd never have her. I'd never touch her. It wouldn't be right. Even when it's all I've managed to think about for years now.

I never did get the chance to end things with Bianca. She threw a curveball that prevented that. So I remained in that family until the day she was murdered.

I avoided Nicolette from the moment she kissed me, hoping that if I did, I'd forget how badly my hands itched to touch her, to run my fingers through her long hair.

But I never forgot a thing. The need only became stronger.

I'd sometimes wonder how different things would have been had I met her first, maybe in a different life. One where she was older, or maybe I was younger.

But that's not the way it works. Nicolette was never meant to be mine. Even thinking about her makes me want to stake my own heart.

I couldn't divorce Bianca, either. We don't do divorce. And the thought of hearing my father gloat about my failures...it killed me. So I stayed and made my marriage work. It was the right thing to do. I'd made my choices

and I had to live with them. She was my wife, and she was owed that respect.

When she was killed, I went to war to avenge her. For her family and for her. They deserved that.

I suspected the Irish killed her because of the casino we wouldn't let them open, so I did what needed to be done. I gathered an army and fought the Quinn family on my own. No one disrespects me and lives to tell about it.

My family refused to sanction the war, so I had no choice but to take things into my own hands. To this day, Patrick Quinn, the head of the Mob, denies it was them, and he wants my head for causing the death of his nephew.

Patrick gave me a few months to grieve before coming after me, but then he came to collect. And instead of fighting him, Michael forced me to hide. I wasn't a coward. I wanted to take them all on. But Michael can be convincing. I knew it'd be a death sentence. The Irish have a lot of people on their side, and I didn't want to die.

Who would protect her if I was gone? I wanted to live. I wanted to see her again, to tell her...

Tell her what? That she's all I've managed to think about? That she consumes me? What good would that do if I can't have her?

But I need my life back. I need Michael to figure this out before I walk up to Patrick myself. Michael promised he could get me out of this. But it's been months since the Irish have been hunting me down, and I'm still here waiting.

They don't know about this place. I had bought it years ago for its location. It's large and off the grid, surrounded by a forest. It's peaceful too. So I hid here, knowing no one would find me.

The property was purchased by a shell corporation, and our lawyer, Hudson Mackay, ensured it was untraceable. He was good like that. His hands are as dirty as ours, but he keeps a squeaky-clean appearance. No one would suspect that he works for us, not even his own wife.

I know Michael is doing his best to protect me. He's always been on my side, even when I was angry with him for not fighting alongside me. But in the end, when my rage faded, I understood why he did it. Sophia was his entire world, and he couldn't risk her life or leave her behind.

Wives are off-limits among our circles. So are children. But some don't play by the rules.

No one but my immediate family knows that I'm living in this house, surrounded by countless foot soldiers and high-tech cams. But if Michael doesn't figure something out soon, I will surrender. I'm done hiding. I don't want anyone dying for my actions. I can pay for them like a man.

When Bianca was killed—when I found her bleeding body—I broke. It was my fault she died. Sure, I may have not loved her the way a husband should love his wife, but she was still my wife. It tore me up that she'd never get to live her life and it was all because of me.

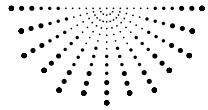
I tried talking to Nicolette, needing her damn bad, but she left as soon as Bianca died. When I called, she never answered. I understood why. I hurt her for years by keeping my distance. But I had to.

She may have wanted to stay away, but I still missed her, still picked up the phone a million times just to hear her voice. Wishing she'd answer just once.

A stabbing pain hits me in the chest. I want to see her again. To hold her in my arms.

I miss you, tesoro mio, wherever you are. I hope you're happy. That's all I ever wanted for you.

CHAPTER FOUR



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RAPH

FOUR YEARS AGO - AGE 34

“YOU LOOK SO HANDSOME IN THAT SHIRT,” BIANCA PURRS AS SOON AS I WALK through her door, the whiff of freshly made tomato sauce and garlic in the air.

Her long pink fingernails glide down my chest as she gazes up at me with hunger waiting there. I smile coolly, gently pulling her hand off. I don’t think it’s fair to encourage her, knowing I’ll be ending things tonight.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I tell her. “I had business to take care of.”

She pouts in a childish way that has me annoyed.

“I missed you...” Her mouth lifts up in a flirtatious smile.

I have a feeling she’s going to make this breakup more complicated than it has to be.

“Well, I’m here now.”

“Is that Raph?” Her father’s voice carries just as I see him strolling into the foyer.

I’m immediately relieved I don’t have to be alone with her.

“What are you two doing in here?”

He comes closer, slapping me on the shoulder, while Bianca’s entire face tightens.

“A man’s gotta eat, Bianca,” he playfully scolds her. “Come on, let’s go sit down. Bettina made lasagna. Your favorite.”

With him on one side and her on the other, we stride into the dining room where her mother, Bettina, is setting the table, her round cheeks bright red, sweat coating her forehead as she lays down a bowl of Caesar salad.

Her eyes jump up to meet my height. “Raph, sweetheart.” She reaches with her arms and kisses both my cheeks. “So glad you could come.”

Gently, she pats my hand. “Have a seat. Food is getting cold.” Dragging out a chair, she settles into it.

We all take our seats while I glance around, wondering why Nicolette isn’t down with the rest of them. She’s nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s your sister?” I turn sharply toward Bianca who drags her chair right up to mine.

“Oh...” Bettina waves dismissively from across the table. “She’s not joining us.”

“Why not?”

Agitation settles in my chest from the way she said that, like she doesn’t give a fuck.

“I called her to come down.” She shrugs. “She didn’t answer. Eh, let her be. She doesn’t wanna eat.”

“So, how’s business?” Elio starts, but I’m rising to my feet, picking up my plate and filling it with lasagna, salad, and bread.

My eyes glare at Bettina from across the table, and she has the decency to look embarrassed. I drop the serving fork I was just using and push my chair back, starting for the stairs.

“Where are you going?!” Bianca shrieks.

I pivot, completely warped in fury. “I’m going to bring your sister some food.”

Her nostrils flare. “Why the hell do you care so much?” Her teeth lock. “She’s not your charity case. You’re supposed to be my boyfriend.”

This is why young women don’t generally interest me. Drama. Fucking drama. Bianca should know better than to behave this way. She’s almost twenty-two. I take a single menacing step forward.

“Lower your goddamn voice, Bianca,” I say.

She pops her mouth open, staring widely while I continue, ignoring the horrified looks on her parents’ faces too. They’ve never heard me speak this way.

“She’s all alone up there while you’re all eating. Did it occur to any one of you...” I pitch them each a steely gaze. “...that maybe she wants her family to act like they care?”

Bettina rubs her throat uncomfortably, while Elio appears ashamed, peering down to his lap. But Bianca? Her face is simmering with resentment.

Don't they care about Nicolette at all? How lonely she is? How betrayed she feels? She told me her family hates her, and even though I told her that wasn't true, I suspect somewhere deep down it is.

I never want her to feel what I have felt my whole life. But at least I had my brothers and a mother who loved me. She has no one. No one but me, and I'll be here for her as long as she needs me.

I march upstairs, ignoring Bianca's urgency for me to come back. When I reach Nicolette's door, I knock a few times, and when she doesn't answer, I slowly open it.

I find her on the bed, her face in a pillow, her body shaking with her muffled cries. My pulse rams in my neck, my feet moving of their own accord.

She doesn't even look up. I don't even know if she heard me. Carefully, I lower the plate of food onto her nightstand and sit on the edge of the bed.

"Nicolette? What's the matter?"

"Raph?" She jerks her head up, her teary eyes full of anguish when she gazes at me. "Wha-what are you doing here?" She frantically swipes under her eyes. "Did my parents send you?"

For a split second, I find hope in her gaze, and instead of extinguishing it, I light it on fire.

"Yeah, of course. They were worried when you didn't come down for dinner."

She narrows a glare. "You're lying." She sits up, glancing at the plate of food. "I can tell when you lie."

I chuckle under my breath. "How?"

She's probably not wrong. We have been around each other long enough for her to pick up on the cues I don't even know I give off. Nicolette is smart and quite intuitive and observant. Things that others may not notice, she does. I could have had the worst day, and no one would be able to tell but her.

"Because your mouth twitches when you lie." She arches a brow, and with a rough exhale, her face falls. She drops her eyes to her lap and tugs on her simple pink t-shirt. "It's okay. You don't have to lie for my benefit. I know where I stand in this family."

I ball my hand into a white-knuckled fist. She doesn't deserve this.

"They're fools if they don't see how special you are."

Her brows tug and her lips tighten, emotions riding her face. “Do you mean that?”

“Of course I do. Someday, you’ll find someone who loves you the way you deserve, who’d do anything for you. I promise.”

“What if I already have?”

I fit her a curious stare. Does she mean that boyfriend of hers?

“Leo?” I ask, picking up the plate and blowing over the steam.

“Never mind.” She sighs defeatedly. “I don’t want to eat.”

“Well, little one, you don’t have a choice.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps. “I hate it when you do. I’m not a child.” She tilts up her chin, a harsh look on her face. “I’m seventeen. Almost eighteen.”

I laugh softly. “I apologize. Now, how about you tell me why you were crying? Is it because of them?”

“It’s nothing.” She avoids me while I place the plate down on the bed.

With a finger under her chin, I tilt her face up to meet mine. “Didn’t seem that way a minute ago.”

Her shoulders drop and she gazes at me like a broken little bird I want to take my time putting back together.

“I ended things with Leo today.” She shrugs.

I don’t know why, but I’m damn happy to hear her boyfriend’s no longer in the picture.

“Why?”

I didn’t like the stupid kid with his shaved head and awful joke-telling skills. He wasn’t good enough for her. I could tell he didn’t care for her. He didn’t realize what he had.

“Because...ugh...” She shakes her head. “I can’t tell you. You’re going to go crazy.”

I instantly harden, my teeth clattering from the sheer force of how hard I bite down.

“I’m already there, Nicolette. What did he do?” I snap, my voice climbing.

I’m going to cut him into tiny pieces if he laid a finger on her.

Her bottom lip trembles, tears slipping down her face. “I...I wouldn’t... you know...with him, and he tried to force me.”

Everything inside me snaps, and all I see is red. Fiery rage swells within me and I buzz like I’m short-circuiting.

“I’m gonna fucking kill him.” My painful heartbeats explode in my chest; I’m on my feet before she can say another word.

I rush toward the door, ready to find him and strangle him with my bare hands.

“Please don’t!” she begs from behind me in that soft angelic voice that would make me do anything she wants.

I dare a look, catching her glistening soft brown hair fluttering around her shoulders, those green eyes listless as she stands before me, tiny compared to my soaring height.

My shoulders rise and fall quicker as I imagine what he tried to do. No one touches her without her permission. He’s lucky he isn’t here. The shit I’d do...

Her palm lands on my forearm. “Please, Raph, don’t do anything. Okay? It’s over, and he didn’t get to...”

She starts to cry, and my arms are instantly around her, holding her against me, hating the sound of her pain.

“Okay...” I try to control my breathing. “I won’t murder him. Only because you asked.”

She backs away with a teary laugh, sniffling as she tugs me back to the bed. She takes the same spot she sat in, and I do the same.

“Are you okay?” I ask, unconvinced. “He didn’t hurt you at all? Because I swear to you—”

“No.” She shakes her head and moves in closer.

Her eyes probe mine, her hand falling to my bicep as she scoots over to my side, and her thigh rubs against mine. I immediately try to push away, suddenly feeling uncomfortable, but her lower lip wobbles and I can’t seem to move.

“Thank you for always caring about me, Raph. You’re the only one who does.”

I keep my hands at my sides even while they want to wrap around her and hold her to me.

“No matter what happens, I will always care,” I vow. “You’re family.”

“But you’re not,” she breathes, rising on her knees, gripping both my shoulders. “Not to me. You’re...”

Before she can finish whatever she was about to say, she smashes her lips to mine. And my heart...it beats. Hard and fast. Every inch of me comes alive like I’ve been zapped by electric wires.

I jump to my feet, gently pushing her away.

“Nicolette!” I practically shout, but when I see her eyes fill with anguish, I cage my tone. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” she cries. “Don’t you realize how much I...” Her tear-stricken voice slices into my chest. “How much I... How much I love you? So much it hurts.” She sniffles. “I’ve been waiting for you to see me, hoping you’d say it first, but—”

“Fuck...” I grind my jaw. “You can’t say those kinds of things to me Nicolette. We’re...we’re family. That’s what you are to me, and you’re seventeen!”

“We are not family,” she angrily challenges. “You’re her boyfriend. And she doesn’t even love you like I do.” Her words fall desperately. “We could be something, Raph. I can wait for you. Just give us time.” Her voice completely falls apart and shatters before my feet.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I run a hand through my hair. “This is inappropriate. I’m your sister’s boyfriend and twice your age. You and I will never be a thing, Nicolette. I’m sorry if you misunderstood my attentiveness for something more.”

She balls her hands at her sides, and even with her tears spilling out, the ferocity is unmatched in her golden-green eyes.

“You’re just upset right now,” I tell her. “It’s okay. One day you’ll meet someone more appropriate for you. Someone who will cherish you. Someone who won’t force you when it comes to your first time, but takes care of you through it.”

I try to move a step closer, but she flinches with disgust.

“You think I’m a virgin?” She laughs ruthlessly. “I’ve been with plenty of guys, Raph.”

She eyes me defiantly.

Fucking hell. She’d better be lying.

She’s far too young. Far too innocent.

“I hope that’s not true.”

“Well, it is.” She sneers, her stare filled with indignation, and I welcome it.

She should hate me. There’s no room for anything else between us anymore. Not after that kiss. Not after how it made me feel. I have to push her away. I can’t let that happen again.

“Look, Nicolette. I date women, not little girls. So, whatever that was, you’ll never do it again. Do you understand me?”

“Fuck you,” she spits out venom.

I’ve never heard her speak that way to anyone, least of all me.

I move on her and grip her chin in my palm, forcing her face up to mine.

“Say you understand. I need to hear you say it.”

I know I’m doing the right thing, no matter how sick I am seeing her upset like this.

“Yeah,” she grits, shoving my hand away. “I understand everything.”

Suddenly, the door barges open and Bianca struts in, glaring at me.

“Why the hell are you still here?” Her shrill voice is like nails on a chalkboard. “You’ve kept me waiting long enough.”

She darts a look at Nicolette and scoffs. “What’s her problem?”

“Leave her alone. Her boyfriend and her split.” I instantly go on the defensive.

Nothing more unattractive than someone who picks on someone else, and Bianca has no trouble doing that to her sister. If our lack of connection wasn’t enough reason to end it, her constant mistreatment of Nicolette would do it. It’s gotten even worse in this past year. I can’t be with someone like that.

Bianca laughs, shaking her head, while Nicolette flares her with a tight glare.

“Should’ve listened to me.” She eyes Nicolette with contempt. “If you actually did something with that hair of yours and put on a little blush, maybe you’d actually be pretty.”

Nicolette’s eyes instantly water over again. All that anger toward me from a second ago vanishes...and in its place is a girl who’s wholly and completely crashing into pieces.

I could just strangle Bianca.

All I want is to hold Nicolette. But I can’t do that anymore. I can’t afford for her to take anything else I do the wrong way. We can’t be how we were.

I guess it’s a good thing I’ll be breaking it off with Bianca. Won’t have Nicolette misinterpreting anything anymore. I can keep her safe from a distance. I’ll get a twenty-four-hour bodyguard on her, and she won’t even know.

I walk up to Bianca until we’re chest to chest. “Apologize to her. Now.”

“What?” she scoffs. “Are you fucking serious right now? Stop coming to her rescue like you’re her knight in shining armor.”

“Apologize, Bianca,” I growl. “Don’t piss me off even more.”

She must notice something on my face because for a moment, I see fear in her eyes.

“Yeah, whatever. Sorry.” She barely even looks at her sister.

“No,” I spit back. “Apologize nicer.”

Her eyes grow as big as saucers, and I swear I see Nicolette’s mouth twitch into a barely there smile.

Bianca’s chest jumps up with her monstrous breaths, and she strikes me with a gaze filled with her ill-fitted temper. But one more look at me, and she’s turning to Nicolette.

“Sorry, dear sister.” Her lips wind into a fake grin before she turns on her heels and marches out the door and down the stairs.

This seems like the perfect time to end it. I can’t even stand the sight of her.

I wander a stare at Nicolette and her face is pale.

Thank you, she mouths.

All I do is nod once.

“Eat,” I demand with a controlled tone.

But inside I’m anything but composed. First that boy tried to hurt her, then I hurt her, and now Bianca is doing it.

She picks up the plate, holding my gaze, and stuffs a piece of lettuce into her mouth.

“Good girl.” My lips jerk, unable to contain that smile. “I’ve gotta go, okay?”

She suddenly looks alarmed, and her entire face crumbles. It’s now that I really realize this may be the last time I see her, and something in me cracks. Who will protect her from her family? From all those damn boys who try to hurt her? What if I can’t do enough from a distance? What if a guard isn’t enough?

Is that why I’ve stayed with Bianca for as long as I have? Did I subconsciously stay to protect Nicolette?

But I can’t worry about that now. I can’t stay with her sister just to protect her anymore. It wouldn’t be right.

Her mouth flutters as though she’s about to say something, but in the end, she doesn’t. She peers at me with those doe eyes, and I feel myself

shattering, but I know I have to go. I have to leave her behind.

And it kills me.

With a grunt, I walk out the door to find her sister, to end this relationship once and for all. I locate her in the laundry room, pacing with a hand on her hip, muttering something. As soon as she spots me, she puts on one of her fabricated smiles, the ones I see right through. Closing the door behind me, I hope her parents don't hear the fight we are about to have.

“Look, Bianca...” I start.

Her hand goes to my bicep, and she massages me there.

“I’m sorry about before.” She laughs nervously. “My sister is just such a pain in the ass, making everything about her. She even managed to rope you in with her ‘woe is me’ act.”

“Bianca, listen to me.” I fling her touch away. “This isn’t working for me anymore. I’m sorry if this hurts you, but we’re done.”

She gasps. Her mouth falls open, her hand flying to her chest.

“You...but...I...” She shakes her head, her heaving breaths spilling out of her mouth. “You’re not thinking. You don’t mean it. You love me. I know you do. I need th—”

She pauses, sucking in a breath and tipping up her chin. The desperation is suddenly gone, and in its place is a woman who is quite different than the one she just was.

“You need what?” I fold my arms over my chest, the sleeves of my suit jacket straining. “Say what you were about to say.”

She clears her throat. “All I meant was that I need you, silly.” Her mouth lifts with a tight smile while she tries to act all seductive, rolling her fingers over my shoulder. “Plus, I was going to give you some news today, but now, I’m not even sure if I should tell you.”

She backs up a step and removes her palm from my shoulder.

“What news is that?” My chest grows heavy.

I don’t like her tone. It’s like she has something up her sleeve. Something that’s going to piss me off.

“Well, this is a crappy way to tell you, but...” She inhales a long breath, holding her gaze steady to mine, and says the words I never saw coming. “I’m pregnant. You’re going to be a father.”

I’m not sure if my heart has stopped beating. This can’t be happening. Not with her, of all people. Not like this.

Fuck!

“Are you sure?” I keep my tone even but inside I’m near my breaking point.

I can’t leave her now. I can’t have a child out of wedlock. Not in our circle. I’ll be expected to marry her. My parents will demand it, and so will hers.

Fuck!

And if I do leave her, my father will use that against me too. I can already hear his cruelty in my ears. I’m stuck with her now, aren’t I?

“Of course I’m sure, darling,” she purrs like this is the best news ever. “I found out this morning and couldn’t wait to share this happy news. But now...” She wipes under her eyes, but there are no tears there. “I guess I’ll have to do this on my own.”

I grind my jaw. “You won’t have to. We’ll get married. We’ll do this right. We have to.”

God damn it. I’ll be trapped with someone I don’t love for the rest of my life. Everything I once envisioned for my future...it’s gone, just like that. I wanted something real. I wanted someone I loved with all my heart.

Her lips flap with a smile she tries to fight. “I was hoping you’d say that.” She throws her arms around me and grips tightly. “We’ll be happy. You’ll work for your family. I’ll become a nurse practitioner. We’ll make a life for our baby. Together. Without any interferences.”

I’ve been paying for her nursing degree. It’s something I wanted to do, and I have no problems paying for more schooling, but I don’t have to marry her to do that.

“What interferences?”

She backs away, pitching me with a knowing look. “Isn’t it obvious?” Her mouth bends with loathing. “My sister. She has a crush on you.” She rolls her eyes. “I don’t want you around her just so she doesn’t get any stupid ideas about whose man you are.”

“She doesn’t have a crush on me.” I remove both her arms from around my neck and pace a few steps, eyeing her sharply. “She’s a seventeen-year-old kid. I would never go there.”

“Well...” She smirks. “I was nineteen when we met, and you were what? Thirty-two? She’s not much younger.”

“Bianca, I don’t cheat.” My nostrils flare. “If you think so low of me, then why the hell would you want to marry me?”

She widens a stare and laughs with a wave of her hand. “Of course I trust you. It’s her I don’t trust. She’s got her claws out for you, and I can see right through her little innocent act.”

“Let’s not discuss this any further.” Rage ripples through every one of my muscles; I hate how she’s speaking about Nicolette.

She’s not acting. She’s suffering, and Bianca is too stuck up her ass to ever take the time to care. Even when Nicolette had issues with bullies at school and the principal called her parents to come down and pick her up, they didn’t. They called Bianca, who called me to go deal with it. I sure fucking did.

I told that principal where to shove it when she got in trouble for defending herself. When we got home, I told her I was proud of her. When her parents got home, they didn’t even ask her what happened. They didn’t care that she had a bruised cheek from the fight. That’s what kind of life she’s had. But Bianca could stub a toe, and they’d act as though she lost a limb.

I felt that level of hurt. I knew the pain all too well.

“I guess we should announce our engagement to our families today.” She flips a hand through her hair. “Can you get a ring before we do? And make it big and flashy, will ya?”

“Fine.”

“Smile.” She presses her thumbs to the corners of my mouth and pushes them up. “You’re making me think you don’t want this.”

I don’t.

We did get married a month later. My mom has a knack for planning events quickly. With all the connections we have around the globe, that comes as no surprise.

The Messina crime family is the most connected one in New York. We are the Casa Nostra here. All the other families look up to us and the legit enterprise we have built. And with Michael leading that front, I was able to work directly with him and my youngest brother, Gio, to make it all happen.

And that baby? Bianca lost it a week after our wedding. She was sad about it for maybe a day, but then she got back to work like nothing ever

happened, while I was crushed for weeks.

I was starting to want that baby. Wanted to be a dad. To love someone with everything I had. I was going to give him—or her—the world. But instead, I had nothing.

I considered divorce right before she died, even though I knew the stigma it would impose on me. I even told Michael about it. But in the end, it was death that took her.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, heading to pour myself some scotch, when my burner rings.

The only person who calls me on that phone is Michael. He never does unless it's an emergency.

“Yeah?”

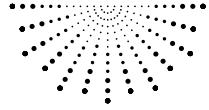
“Come to our place. Now,” he says, his voice carrying urgency. “Make sure no one knows where you’re going, not even your men.”

A muscle in my neck twitches. “What happ—”

“Just get here. And hurry.”

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CHAPTER FIVE



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NICOLETTE

“WHERE AM I?” PANIC GRIPS ME AS I GROAN, CAUSING MY BODY TO JOLT.

I fight to get away, but I can’t seem to move. My head pounds at the back, my arm throbbing as someone sits beside me. Through the slits of my eyes, I can make out a man, maybe my father’s age, hair gray at the sides, brown at the top.

“I’m a doctor. You’re safe.” His voice is kind. Soft.

I relax into...a sofa? Yes, definitely appears to be one.

“Where am I?” I question once more, the distress evident in my own words.

“You’re in a safe location, Nicolette,” another man replies.

I instantly gasp.

Oh my God. No... He found me.

A rush of breaths pounds through my rib cage, my lungs heaving, and when I try to push myself off the couch, a heavy hand drives me back down.

“P-p-please don’t kill me...” I beg, looking up at him.

Michael.

Inexplicable dread rushes over my arms, cold as the darkest storm. He’s terrifying. That scar on his right cheek, those hard features...

I gulp as he assesses me.

If his father wants me dead, surely Michael does too. Maybe they’re working together. But Raph wouldn’t allow my sister to die. Maybe Michael is covering up for his father. It wouldn’t be so far-fetched. Isn’t that what Mafia people do for each other? Hide each other’s skeletons in their own closets?

“Why would I kill you?” He narrows a curious stare, a gun sitting in his waistband.

And even through the fog, all I can do is stare at it, wondering if he’s going to pull it out and shoot me. Better yet, maybe Giancarlo will jump out and finish the job himself.

“Because of...” My upper arm burns with brutalizing pain while the doctor wraps it.

Oh, fuck. I got shot, didn’t I? Great. I bet I’ll get a lovely scar to look back on.

Michael cant his head to the side while glaring at the doctor, who immediately jumps to his feet.

“She should recover just fine,” he explains in a hurry. “The bump to her head will go down, and her feet, by some miracle, only have some superficial cuts. Just keep an eye on her, and if there are any signs of a concussion like we discussed, you’ll have to take her to the hospital.”

“And the bullet wound?”

“It’s only a graze. It’ll heal. She’s lucky it didn’t hit an artery.”

Lucky. Ha. He has no idea how *unlucky* I am.

Why did my sister have me come over that day? She didn’t even tell me what she wanted, because a few minutes later, Giancarlo showed up. I wonder if she knew he was coming and wanted me to hide there on purpose. We all knew how dangerous he was. Maybe she was using me as a witness.

A chill runs down my nape. I was so stupid thinking she called me because she wanted to improve our relationship by spending some time together. I’m naïve sometimes. But I still carried that tiny hope. Hope that I finally mattered. That she loved me.

“Thanks, Doc.” Michael walks him to the door and shuts it behind him. Once it is, he marches toward me and gives me a hard-edged look. “Now, you’re going to tell me exactly what’s going on, Nicolette, and who you’ve been running from.”

When my lips start to move, fear ebbing and flowing through my veins, he casually takes out his gun and keeps it at his side.

I shiver.

“And don’t you dare lie to me, because I *will* get it out of you.”

Tears ache in my eyes. “Just please promise me you won’t kill me. I—I won’t say a word.”

“Whether you die depends on you. What did you do? And to whom?”

“Me?” I groan as I scoot back against the pillows at my back. “I didn’t do anything. It’s what I saw. Do you not...”

When confusion lines his brows, I realize that it’s possible for Michael to be in the dark about his father. That would make sense. He hasn’t killed me. Yet.

“Do I not what? Speak.” Seething madness settles behind his eyes.

“Um...my bag. Where’s my bag?” I dart a stare around the room, not seeing the small duffle I had with me.

He struts over to the corner of the room, kneeling down, and when he rights himself, I see it. He gently places it next to me, and I rummage inside, looking for my phone. I managed to steal a charger from one of the guests at the motel I worked for. Not my proudest moment, but I needed my phone and I couldn’t waste money on a charger. I had to save every penny I could for food and toiletries. The money I was making at those places was shit.

When I finally find the cell under some clothes, I remove it and turn it back on.

“If you were running from someone bad enough to want you dead, it was foolish to have your phone with you,” he says. “That’s how they must’ve tracked you.”

“I was careful. I only turned it on for emergencies.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He clenches his jaw. “What do you have to show me?”

Quickly, I open my gallery and find the video.

“I thought you knew,” I tell him as I outstretch my hand and give him the phone. “I thought you were here to kill me like he wants to.”

“Who?” His brows furrow just as he presses play.

When the voices of Bianca and his father come through, talking about sleeping together and then about her being pregnant, he curses roughly over and over. His free hand balls tightly as he watches them.

“How long have you known?” he asks, pausing it.

“For a few months before she died. I caught her coming out of his car one night while he kissed her. Like, full-on make-out kind of kiss.”

“I get the visual.”

Revolted, he shakes his head, watching the video, and my stomach bottoms out when I hear the gunshot.

“Fucking bastard.” He scrubs his face with a palm as he paces, the phone no longer playing the recording. “Okay, listen.” He finally stops and stares at me with concentration. “Raph is on his way, and—”

“What?” I gasp, almost falling off the sofa with how hard I shudder. “Why? I...I can’t see him.”

I gape down at my appearance, knowing I look like I’ve just been dug out of dirt. I can’t see him after all this time looking like this. Nor do I actually want to see him after the kiss.

That kiss, though. The mere thought of his lips on mine sends a shiver coasting down my body. He kept them there for long, breathtaking seconds before he pulled away. It was as though he was kissing me back without actually doing it.

I’ve measured every man that came into my life against Raph. He was perfection, and no one came close. It’s why my relationships only lasted a couple of months. My heart wasn’t over him. It never would be. I loved him in silence then, and I continue to love him in silence now. Love doesn’t simply cease to exist just because we want it to.

“Like I said...” he stresses. “He’s on his way, and we’re going to tell him what’s been going on. But...”

He presses his fingers into his temple and closes his eyes for a moment before staring back.

“You can’t tell him about this recording or the baby. It will kill him to know that not only did our father fuck his wife but got her pregnant too.”

“I—I agree. I won’t tell him. I promise,” I hurriedly say. “I wouldn’t want to hurt him either.”

My vision clouds at the thought of hurting him in any way. He didn’t deserve what my sister did. She was a bitch, through and through.

“Good.” He pushes some buttons on my cell, then stuffs it back into his pocket.

“Hey! I need that.” I attempt to get to my feet, but instantly succumb to a dizzy spell. With my eyes forced shut, I breathe in and out.

“You won’t need your phone anymore,” Michael counters. “Not unless you plan to die.”

I straighten myself and shoot him an irritable look as he goes on.

“I’ll be destroying your phone, along with your copy of that video. But a copy will remain with me.”

From the look on his face, I can tell there's no use in fighting him. Maybe it's better this way. Who do I have to call other than Brenda?

Suddenly feeling chilly, I retrieve a beige cardigan sweater from my bag and slip into it. My shoulder aches as I do, but other than the bullet wound, I feel mostly okay. I've always had a pretty high tolerance for pain, and I can definitely use that right now.

Exhaustion settles behind my eyes, and I kinda want to sleep, but before I can think better of it, the door flings open.

I'm suddenly spinning, round and round like a merry-go-round. My mind, my heart...right down to my soul. I prickle everywhere when a pair of deep, dark eyes finds mine and holds me still in a waking dream.

He's here. Actually here. In this room.

And I only see him. Everything else simply vanishes. We're both frozen in time, staring at one another—or more like into each other. My heart lurches, as though wanting to run into his arms and stay there for the rest of my days.

His mouth parts and his brows bow with intense unspoken emotion, and I start to wonder if he feels what I feel in this very moment. The gnawing in his gut. The crescendo of his heartbeats.

He can't peel his eyes off me, while my heart flutters and soars and dances to a song only he knows the lyrics to.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I ache to confess it out loud. To show him. To make him feel it the way I do. Loving him in silence should be easy by now, but seeing him again after so long, I realize it'll never be easy. This is the most painful thing I've ever felt.

“Michael?” He finally snaps his eyes away, his voice harsh, like he doesn't want to see me at all.

And I'm suddenly ice cold, my entire body drowning and suffocating and dying under the waves of my tumultuous emotions.

“What is *she* doing here?”

She...

He says the word as though it's a disease he wishes to eradicate from his body. Yank it clean off until it withers away and dies.

Even after all these years, even being twenty-one now, I know he still wouldn't want me. I may no longer be the girl who kissed him at seventeen,

but he still doesn't see me, does he? He never will. I never stood a chance with him.

My nose burns. It hurts. It fucking hurts.

His rejection hurt then, but somehow it hurts more now.

"She's here because she has info, and you're going to need to sit down for it."

His chest expands as he hardens a stare my way. "What could she possibly have to tell us?"

"Go ahead," Michael urges with a quick glance. "Tell him."

But I can't seem to speak, my lower lip quivering from my broken heart. The tears pool in my eyes as I gaze at him, wishing for the man who was once gentle and caring. Not this hardened version of him.

It's like he hates me. What did I do except love him? Fine, I kissed him. And maybe I shouldn't have. But I was young.

No, you know what? I don't regret it. Fuck him. He wants to be this way. Two can play that game.

I blink away the tears and flip on my mask. I'm good at that. I had a lot of practice living with my family.

"Hello to you too, Raphael." I call him by his full name, one I have never used with him.

Everyone close to him calls him Raph. But we're not close. Not anymore.

"Pleasure to see you after so long." I rake him with a scoff. "Nice beard. Do you own a razor these days?"

Fine, he doesn't exactly look like a sasquatch or anything. The beard is a little longer than I remember, and it's quite sexy. But I refuse to make myself seem like I'm attracted to it or anything having to do with him.

Michael fights a smile, and it looks odd on a man who barely ever does.

"Why are you here, Nicolette?" Raph's bulky bicep ripples beneath his navy-blue long-sleeved t-shirt.

My core instantly pulsates, and I fight to extinguish the maddening way my body still won't give him up.

"I suggest you speak now and save the jokes for someone else."

"Wow, was that supposed to be an insult?" I release a barely there laugh. "Consider me wounded. Ow...fuck," I mutter, gently rubbing my injured shoulder and peering down at the spot on instinct.

In lighting speed, he's right in front of me, looming over me, making me forget the pain once again and remember the passion dripping through every vein in my body. My pulse thumps in my ears as I nervously look up at him.

His brows tug, concern etched in the darkened pools of his gaze. "Are you alright?"

He reaches a hand for me, and more than anything I want him to touch me, to feel his hands against my skin. But he stills and clenches a fist.

"Are you hurt?" He sucks in an inhale like the idea pains him.

"I'm fine." I glance down to my lap for a moment. "Even a bullet couldn't stop me."

"You were shot?" His eyes grow.

Worry traps his features, and my pulse batters in my throat.

He cares?

"Who shot you? Give me a name, Nicolette," he breathes in a frightening way, and a cold trail rushes down my spine.

I hold his eyes to mine.

"Your father's man did," I whisper.

All the color drains from his face, and he snaps his attention to Michael. "Where the *fuck* is he? Tell me right now."

His body shudders. It's like every inch of him will snap at any moment.

"Raph. Sit. There's more," Michael says solemnly. "A lot more. And I need your weapons before we tell you."

From Raph's intense stare at his brother, I can tell he wants to refuse. He wants a fight. But Michael shoots him a look just as dark and depraved.

"Fuck," he grits, removing the gun from his waistband and another around his ankle, then walks over to the round wooden table, dropping both against it with a clank.

He flashes a wrathful gaze at Michael. "One of you better start talking before I find him and kill him for this."

At that last word, he pitches me a tender look that has my heart hammering. It unearths all the feelings I've tried so hard to bury. How does he manage to uncover it all with just a gaze?

"Why do you care what happens to me?" My mouth moves before I can make it stop. "You've spent years pretending I didn't exist, and now suddenly you're my hero?"

Pain pounds in my chest and the back of my nose burns, but I fight the emotions with a tight smile.

His gaze is unrelenting, and suddenly he's in front of me again, his palm clasping the side of my throat, his thumb stroking my jaw in the gentlest way. Goose bumps spread across every inch of my skin, and my body awakens with a relenting need.

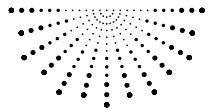
"Because I won't let anyone hurt you," he stresses. "Ever."

I suck in a breath. For a moment, he sounded like the old Raph. The one who'd protect me. I'd do anything to have him back again.

But when he drops his hand away, I'm cold and alone.

Reminded once again that he'll never truly want me.

CHAPTER SIX



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RAPH

“WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO TELL ME, NICOLETTE?”

She swallows nervously, her mouth parting on a tremble.

Fuck. I’m being an asshole, aren’t I? I don’t mean to be so harsh. But seeing her after all this time...everything inside me snapped. I wanted to grab her and ask her where she’s been. Why she never answered my calls. Why the hell she’s so damn beautiful.

Those thoughts of kissing her, of burying myself inside her, came barraging. And I did what I always do when I feel those things for the one woman I can’t have: I fought them.

Being cold and aloof is how I do that. How I show her I don’t feel a damn thing when she’s around. But that’s a complete lie. I feel *everything*. My heart beats faster. My skin comes alive. Everything is brighter and louder as soon as she walks into the room. That’s how it’s been in these past years, suffering in utter silence when all I want is to confess my sins.

What’s worse is she thought I didn’t care. That I didn’t spend every goddamn day in those years wishing we could have the kind of relationship we used to before she kissed me. When things between us were simpler. At least for me.

All I want is to find out what she’d do if I really kissed her. If I really touched her. Like the devil inside me has been craving to.

“I...uh...” She fidgets with her fingers, tugging at her bottom lip, staring into her lap.

“Just start at the beginning, little one.” Standing before her, I stroke the back of her head, and that has her staring up at me, brows tugging, eyes filling with tenderness.

And all it does is make my heart beat faster.

Fuck.

“The reason I ran, after Bianca...” Her voice trails.

“Yeah?” I keep touching her, massaging her scalp, wanting her to keep talking.

“Oh, God, Raph. I don’t know how to say this.” Tears swell into the rims of her eyes as she continues to look at me, and I don’t ever want her to stop.

“Whatever it is, just tell me.”

She nods nervously, a large breath whooshing out of her. “I’m just gonna blurt it out, okay?”

“Alright.” My mouth flickers with a small grin. I just can’t help smiling when she’s around.

“So, your father and my sister were screwing around.”

“What?” My eyes grow wide, and I jerk back a step, dropping my hand off her.

“Yep. She’s evil. Him too.” She nods, mouth pressing tightly. “He killed her, Raph.”

“He what?” Blood rushes into my ears, pumping loudly.

“I was at the house that day,” she explains nervously. “But once he came inside, I hid in the closet while they talked about the affair. Then they got to arguing about it, and he shot her. I saw it, Raph.” She presses a hand to her mouth, eyes growing wet. “I saw her die.”

“Oh, fuck...” My heart constricts in my chest.

No. This can’t be. I went after the Irish. I started a war. For nothing?

“Raph?” she calls, like from a distance.

But it’s like I’m drowning. I can barely hear it.

“Sit.”

A hand clasps my shoulder.

“Just sit, damn it,” Michael says while I feel myself being pushed down, and I don’t fight it.

What have I done?

“I’m sorry,” she cries softly, and that has me looking back at her.

Fucking hell. How could he do this to me? Does he really hate me that much?

Then he had Nicolette shot? He was going to kill her for being a witness? I’m going to kill him. I’m going to take everything from him.

"You've been running all this time, and you didn't tell me?" I can barely get the words out.

She nods. "I was afraid he'd find out."

"If I knew..." I shake my head before dropping my face into a palm.

"It's not your fault," she whispers.

"Like hell it's not." I grind my teeth. "I would've kept you safe. I would've done anything to make sure no one hurt you."

Her gaze lowers to her feet, and it breaks my heart to know she had no one out there. She was alone. Scared.

Fucking hell!

I know I should care about what Bianca did, but all I can seem to care about is her. My Nicolette.

I keep staring at her, not even able to believe she's here with me, still as breathtaking as I remember. She still looks the same as she did a year ago. The last time I saw her was at Michael's house for dinner when Bianca was alive. But somehow she looks different too. Like she's gotten older.

Maybe it's all in my head. I'd make any excuse to be with her, to profess that since the moment she kissed me, all I can do is think about her.

Does that make me a bastard? To feel something for someone else while I was married? To her sister of all people?

Maybe I am. Maybe I deserve that title. But I know I never deserved someone as beautiful and innocent as Nicolette. She needs safety, not bloodshed, and that's what being mine would get her. Just look at what happened to her and her sister already.

I'm not a good man. Not by any decent standards. I'm a killer. A ruthless one. I've ended more lives than she's had birthdays, and I did it without a shred of guilt. She's never been right for me, whether I was a single man or not.

But as she glances at me, rosy cheeks, short little thing, pinning her nervous gaze at me, I imagine...

What if? What if she were mine? What if I were a man worthy of her? Would she welcome my touch? Or would she push me away?

My pulse thumps at the mere thought of waking up beside her every single morning.

What am I doing?

I scrub both hands down my face. I despise myself for even thinking of her the way I'm doing right now. Hate that I had to marry a woman I wasn't

in love with because it was the right thing to do. Hate that I wasted years with someone who wasn't even faithful. Who betrayed me with my own goddamn father.

Fury rattles inside me like a sleeping beast, wanting—*needing*—the blood of its enemies. Bianca is dead, so I can't do a thing to her, but my father is very much alive.

"Look," Michael interrupts. "I'm going to figure out what the hell is going on, but in the meantime..." His eyes fall to mine. "She has to stay here with you."

"No, that's not a good idea." I rise to my feet.

There's no way I can keep her. No way that I can stay in this small cabin with this beautiful woman and not do a thing about it.

My heart, my body... She owns every goddamn part of me. How am I supposed to keep my feelings to myself when we're alone? When all I want is to love her?

"What? No!" Nicolette wraps her arms around herself, shaking her head. "I—I can't stay here. I mean...I..." Her mouth quivers, her eyes jumping between Michael and me.

"You're staying here, and that's final." Michael's tone grows irate, and he's back to looking at me. "Until he's no longer a threat to her, she has to stay with you. It's the safest option. He won't know she's here. He'll think she's still on the run."

I hate it when he's right. "Fine. Okay."

"Good." He nods. "I have to go." He starts for the door. "You call me if there's a problem, yeah?"

"Okay."

He sighs and claps me on the back. "We'll figure this out. I swear."

"I know."

But I don't. How will he get me out with the Irish and save Nicolette at the same time?

He's supposed to take over for my father once he retires, but that won't happen until my brother finds a wife. But he doesn't want one. Doesn't want to get married just to put someone else in danger. I get that more than he realizes. Our life is like a curse to all the people around us. Because in the end, they're the ones who get hurt.

But once Michael takes over, the men will be loyal to him. Not all of them, of course, but most of them, and that's all we'll need to destroy my

father.

Michael inches toward the door before he's gone, leaving me alone with the woman I've fought like hell to stay away from. But now that'll be impossible.

My breathing heaves out as I imagine my father and Bianca. She was still my wife, and that was my father. What they did was unforgivable.

I can't believe she was having an affair with him right under my nose. Was I that blind? I was beginning to get suspicious that she might have been having an affair about a month before she died, but I never thought it'd be with him.

I showed up at her job to take her to lunch one day, but the girls at the hospital said it wasn't her shift. When I called her, she found an excuse. Claimed she was planning a surprise date for us and didn't want to ruin it.

The crazy thing was, there really was an elaborate date planned. I wanted to believe her. But something inside me told me she was lying. I didn't confront her, though. I didn't want the humiliation if it were to come out that my own wife was fooling around. But with my father? That would've been worse.

I knew he hated me, but I didn't think he'd go this far. I knew he had a thing for her from the moment we all met, but I thought that stopped when we began dating. But maybe she was sleeping with him the entire time.

I didn't even know my own wife. Who was she really?

I could kill him for this, but especially for hurting Nicolette. It's lucky that the cop Michael has on his payroll lives in that area and heard the struggle. I don't even want to think of what would happen if he hadn't been there.

It's a damn pity he killed the son of a bitch who put that bullet in her. I would've loved just five minutes with him.

My chest stiffens, imagining what she's been through. If I for one second thought she'd left because she was afraid, I'd have brought her right back and sliced my father's throat right in front of her. That way she'd know that I'd do anything for her.

She lowers onto the sofa and eyes me with a tight face. "There's no way I'm staying in this tiny cabin with you."

I snicker, matching the intensity of her gaze. "You are until Michael says it is safe. Until we can extinguish the threat."

"You mean your father?" She bows a brow.

“That’s right.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Could be weeks. Months.”

“Months?!” She jolts, practically jumping to her feet. “I’m not staying with you for months.”

I take a step forward, a smirk lifting one side of my mouth, while my heart pounds, wanting to erase that adorable expression off her face with my tongue.

She inhales sharply as her lips part, those eyes pinned to mine. I can feel the weight of them on me, like they own me. In the space between us, the intensity grows until it swallows us both.

“And where do you think you’ll be going, little one?”

“Somewhere you’re not.” She tries hard to keep a brave face, but she doesn’t stand a chance with me this close. She feels this just as much as I do.

And that’s trouble.

Her nostrils widen with a breath. Her chest expands. And fuck, that flush in her cheeks when she rakes me down with her gaze has my dick doing what it’s not allowed to do: getting hard.

Her desire for me is practically etched into every move she makes, every look she gives me. Even the ones she pretends are full of hate. It’d be easier if she truly despised me. It’d be easier to let my feelings die. But how can they when she looks at me that way?

It’s a brutal existence to live in a world with someone you can’t have. And sharing a small space with her day in and day out will be a form of cruel torture.

“And one more thing, Raphael,” she adds, rising to her feet, her face grimacing, and I’m enraged all over again from the mere thought of her suffering.

She nears me until we’re almost chest to chest.

“If you want to cohabit peacefully for however long we’re supposed to be stuck here...” She lifts a hand and digs her forefinger into my chest. “I suggest you stop calling me by that horrifying nickname.”

She sears me with a venomous gaze, and I welcome the burn as long as she looks at me. The sheer thought of her not looking at me at all sends me completely over the edge.

If those eyes are all I get to have, I'll gladly take them until the day I die. Because with her, the way she brings my heart to life, the way it beats for her... It's something I'll never feel with anyone else. I'm forever hers, even when she doesn't realize it. Even when it's wrong.

The emeralds of her eyes have my gaze running down the length of her, taking in her small frame hiding beneath that cardigan she's tucking around herself.

Her long hair curls around both sides of her chest, and staring at her is like staring at a gift you're excited to unwrap.

"I'm not little, Raphael." Her voice drops almost to a whisper; I watch her pretty pink mouth move. "If you'd like, I can take off my clothes and show you."

My dick is really enjoying that damn feisty mouth. It's heavy and throbbing and wanting her heart-shaped mouth around it. I can't get the image of her bare for me out of my damn mind.

What would she feel like? Would she beg? Would she spread wide for me and take every inch? I bet she's tight.

"Fuck," I mutter, turning away sharply, giving her my back.

"What happened, Raphael?" Her fingertips slide down my shoulder blade, and I clench my jaw from the warmth that immediately glides up my arm. "Afraid to admit you might actually want to fuck me?"

Her touch continues to run up and down, and I slam my eyes shut, attempting to control myself. I'm this close to forgetting why it'd be wrong to rip off her clothes and take her bent over the sofa.

"Fucking Christ, Nicolette..." I sharply pivot and snatch her delicate throat in my palm, curling my fingers deeper.

This is her damn fault.

I grind my molars, my breathing raging out of me as I stare intensely into those eyes I've come to love.

My large hand practically engulfs her, and I squeeze a little at a time, giving her just enough room to breathe. I drop my face so close I can taste the wildness of her heaving exhales. I search her widened gaze, her panting growing unsteady as my lips hover right above hers.

"You don't know what you're doing, little one." My tone is rough, filled with pent-up desire. "The things I could do to you..." I use the nickname on purpose, loving the lustful rage on her features. "If I wanted to fuck you, I'd

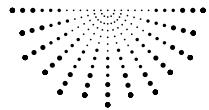
have already done it by now. And every other bastard who's been inside you would be instantly forgotten."

She gasps, her lips trembling, begging me to taste them.

"Don't push me again, Nicolette," I stress, delving my thumb into her trembling pulse. "You won't like the beast that comes out when I'm pushed hard enough."

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CHAPTER SEVEN



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NICOLETTE

THE BEAST IS WHO I WANT. I'M NOT THE DELICATE LITTLE FLOWER HE remembers. I've been on the run, and that has taught me to be strong, to not cower at the devil's touch. And Raph is every inch the devil that has been my demise.

I promise that by the end of this, I will have him just once, and then I'll leave him and never think about him or the way he makes me feel again.

Nope. Never.

I roll my eyes at myself.

Who are you fooling? You're doomed.

Well, at least once I'm gone again, I won't have to be around him. It's much harder to be in his presence while drowning in my chaotic emotions.

Gradually, he lets go of my throat, but keeps his body almost flush to mine. My fingertips flutter to where his touch has just been, wanting to have it there again. His gaze bores into mine, a magnetic force that has the butterflies in my stomach bursting into flight.

"I don't know why staying with you is even necessary," I struggle to speak, my core tightening with an ache. I'm so turned on, I could come in an instant. "I don't need you, Raphael Marino." I clear my throat. "I've been fine on my own for the past year."

He leans into my mouth once more. His warm, intoxicating breaths fan across my lips as I stare at him, unable to do anything but that.

"That bullet in your arm says otherwise, little one." His lopsided, knowing smirk both irritates me and sets me further into a sinking wave of carnal need.

I hate hearing him call me little now even more than I did then. It's the same word he used when he told me he didn't date little girls. I could never forget that and how much pain those words caused.

I draw in a quick breath, my body shivering, betraying me layer by layer.

The hunger for him remains unquenched. Unsatiated. Unmatched.

No one has ever come close to making me want the kinds of things he does, even while he's doing nothing but standing just close enough.

I back away, a bit at a time, like my mind is trying to run away from his imposing effect, while my heart thumps wildly, wanting to grab his face and kiss him.

"Where are you going, little one?" He matches my steps, a hooded look in his eyes. "One second you're promising me a view of your bare body, and the next you're trying to get away?"

I hit the wall behind me with a gasp. And like a predator, he follows me, marching up with gradual strides, his gaze roving down my curves like he's already picturing me naked.

My chest rises and falls with quick, jerky breaths, and when I make out the bulge through his gray sweats, my insides curl. My nipples grow taut. My mind wanders into dangerous territory, one where he flips me around and takes me up against the wall.

His fists ball at his sides when he's a few inches away. His darkened expression is haunting, like he's fighting his own desire, like he's on the cusp. There's a momentary shift in his eyes and then he's stalking toward me until his chest is pushed up against mine, my back pressed up across the wall.

"You're maddening." His exhales spread across my lips as he deepens his eyes into mine. "Taking me to a place I swore I wouldn't go. Now look at me," he grits. "I have you pinned to the wall, and I don't even regret it."

My breath quivers when he pushes his hard-on into my stomach, and knowing that his body wants me has me in a state of frenzy. I've waited so long for this, yet it's not enough. I need to hear him say he wants me. Really wants me. That he feels what I do to him in his heart.

The pulsing between my thighs only grows ravenous. I need to feel myself come undone. To feel it with a man for the first time in my life. To feel it with *him*. Just him.

My virginity was completely unintentional. I've had boyfriends, and they've tried, but I stopped it before it could go anywhere. Because every time it did, I saw him. Wanted him.

None of them would ever be Raph. None of them would come close to the man I knew. To the one who knew me, took care of me. I wanted that kind of man to be my first.

No, I'm lying to myself. I wanted *him* to be my first.

So here I am, a twenty-one-year-old virgin, whose only experiences with sex are with her own fingers. But I've never gone more than touching my clit. I think I was saving that for him too.

How stupid of me.

Even now, I can sense him pulling away, denying what we could have. Fighting it with every ounce of strength. I don't need that. I don't want games. I want the real Raph.

Anger pools in my gut, stamping over the hunger that waits there for a man who was never mine to begin with.

I attempt to push him away with a right palm against his muscular chest, but the man is like a damn statue. All big and hard and sculpted to perfection, right down to those high cheekbones and round glistening eyes that are like two black diamonds, shining brightly at me.

He laughs off my attempt, and even the sound of his voice does things to me. How is everything about him so awfully sexy?

He drags his body even closer until his cock nudges deeper. An unintentional moan slips from my lips and my core pulsates with desire, wondering what it'd feel like, wondering what *he'd* feel like. My God, he's huge. It's no wonder my sister would be screaming when they...

Ugh. No. You're not going there.

His thumb massages the corner of my mouth, while those eyes stay aligned to mine, and I swear I just had an out-of-body experience.

Could I be dying? Is it possible for one's heart to stop from overstimulation?

My skin prickles and shivers, sensitive from the barest touch he gives me—like oxygen. I never felt this kind of hunger. Not ever. Only with him.

I snap my gaze away from his, afraid I'm about to cry or beg him to touch me. Just once. So I can finally know what I've been missing.

He languidly reaches a hand for my jaw until he's got it in his rough, masculine grip. He tips my chin up to meet his steely gaze, his fingertips

biting into my flesh. My body shudders with a cold current washing over me.

“Nothing to say, little one?”

“I told you, don’t call me that,” I bite back on a whisper.

“I will call you anything I want,” he promises, and I believe him. “In this place, I make the rules, and it’s your job to obey them.”

“And if I don’t?” I challenge through my battering pulse. I’m surprised my mouth still works.

A devilish smirk picks up both sides of his mouth. “Then it’ll be my job to punish you.”

I groan almost to myself, my core a fiery blaze at the image of my ass his to do with what he wants. I’d let him too. I’d let him do anything to me.

He inhales sharply, a muscle in his jaw twitching, the hollows beneath his cheekbones straining as he lowers his hot gaze to my lips.

“Go get cleaned up,” he husks out in a deep-chested baritone. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

But he hasn’t backed off of me at all. Not even a little.

RAPH

Being cold and aloof isn’t working quite as well as it did in my head. But I can’t seem to control myself when I’m this close to her.

Goddamn, I want her. Need her. What we could be together... I know it would be something special. Yet it’s wrong. She’s the forbidden fruit dangling right in front of me, tempting me until I succumb.

But I have to resist. I have to fight it.

Her brows furrow as she stares up at me, and it’s like a hypnotic pull, the way she has a hold on me.

Is this what it’s supposed to feel like? Is this what I’ve been missing all my life? This infuriating sensation in my chest, like my heart is ready to detonate right out of my rib cage just from the mere look into her eyes?

Tesoro mio.

My heart’s wanting things it shouldn’t. Wanting to kiss her so damn bad, I’d die for it, like a hit of a drug I’ve been craving.

I didn't intend to have her sandwiched between the wall and my body, but it was that challenge in her eyes. She doesn't know me. Not all of me. And she doesn't want to. Yet here I am, letting my emotions win instead of logic.

My pounding pulse fills my ears, while hers thrashes beneath my fingertips. I can't seem to let her go, my thumb running circles around the curve of her jaw.

My cock's stiff and pulsing, wanting to do the kinds of things to her body she's never even dreamed of.

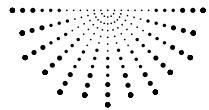
I'm playing with fire. I know that well. I can't show her how much I actually want her. There's too much standing in our way for anything to come of this. She has to be with someone her own age, someone safe. While all I'll get to do is watch from a distance.

But unfortunately, the very thought of anyone but me touching her sends me into a homicidal rage.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



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NICOLETTE

IT'S WELL PAST MIDNIGHT, AND I'VE JUST FINISHED THE BEST MEAL OF MY life. When he said he'd make me something to eat, I was thinking more like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, not the best chicken Caesar wrap I ever had. Who knew the fridge had been stocked?

"That was good. Thank you," I tell him casually as I walk my plate to the sink, trying to avoid his intense gaze as I brush past him.

He's leaning against the nearby wall, those well-defined arms crossed against his chest.

He sucks in an audible breath when my arm accidentally rubs against his forearm, and my skin tingles of its own making. It's like he has the only switch to my body. Like he's the only one who knows which buttons to push. He presses into me from behind and reaches a hand for the plate.

"Let me. You need to rest." The cadence of his voice spreads through my insides like liquid fire.

I burn everywhere. Hurt everywhere. Want everything. This isn't fair. This is pure torment.

"Uh, thank you."

My heart thumps as I scurry behind him, watching his back flex while he scrubs the plate with a sponge. My fingers feather across my collarbone; I'm unable to peel my eyes off his body.

"How's your shoulder?" he asks, still not looking at me.

The faucet turns off, and he's drying the plate, taking his time like he doesn't want to face me.

"It's okay. The meds the doctor gave me are helping."

He drops the plate gently and turns, bracing his palms on the counter, eyes slowly scanning mine. “If you’re still in pain, you tell me and I’ll give you more.”

“I’m fully capable of taking my own meds.” I fight the overwhelming feeling of those eyes on me. “I’m a grown woman.”

He scans his molten gaze from my lips right down to the apex of my thighs, then up again.

“I’m fully aware of that,” he drawls. “But I want to take care of you. So stop fighting me and let me do that.”

His voice is warmth and honey and everything safe.

He wants to take care of me...

My heart grows heavy. I know I’m reading too much into that. But I wish it meant more. Wish I could be his and he could be mine.

“I don’t need you to take care of me, Raphael,” I lie. “The last time you did, you told me I misunderstood what it meant. And believe me, I’ll never make *that* mistake again.” I cut him with a glare. “Now, point me to the bedroom. I’m tired.”

His face hardens, and he motions with a finger to a door on my left. This log cabin is modest, not like the mansions he’s used to. The main areas are comprised of the small white kitchen set to one side and the living space with black couches on the other. A burning fireplace sits in the center of the living room with a white shaggy rug that looks soft enough to sleep on.

By the looks of this place alone, I’d imagine the bedrooms are tiny, yet I only see two other doors, one of which is the bathroom.

I probably won’t be able to sleep much anyway. It’s hard to fall asleep and stay asleep these days. Being on the run, constantly looking over my shoulder, it’s like my mind can’t shut down. The only way I can sleep is if I’ve been without it for days. Then I’ll pass out wherever I am.

But here, now, with him...how am I supposed to close my eyes and pretend I’m okay? That *we’re* okay? That we’re not stuck together because someone wants to kill me? But maybe having Raph close will somehow help ease my subconscious long enough to get even a few peaceful hours.

“Where’s your room?” I’m hoping it’s right next to mine. I’ll feel safer with him near.

“You mean, where’s *our* room?” He chuckles. “There’s only one bed here.”

Wait, what?

Okay, I'm pretty sure this is the part where I stop breathing. There's no way I heard him right. It's one thing to want his room to be next to mine, but it's a whole other thing to share a bed with the man.

"I'm sorry, what?" I narrow my gaze and slant my head forward. "Can you repeat that? Because it almost sounded like we'd be sleeping together."

When he takes in my horrified expression, he chuckles all low and deep. "In the same room. Not the same bed. I'll take the floor."

Relief and sadness wash over me all at once. "Can't you sleep on the couch where, you know, I don't have to look at you?"

Or think about getting into bed with you?

I shiver, and it's not the chill in the air. Definitely not getting any shut-eye tonight.

Gripping my cardigan, I tighten it around myself. "It's going to be freezing on the floor."

I don't want him to suffer because of me. I may hate his guts at the moment, but he's still Raph and I still love him.

Me and my stupid heart.

"Are you worried about me, little one?" His mouth curls, and my stomach dips.

"No." But that absolutely didn't sound believable.

His smirk widens.

"Don't worry about me," he says, his expression slowly turning intense. "Where you go, I go." He slashes the distance between us and stands before me, concern etching through his brows. "I stay where I can keep an eye on you at all times. Or did you forget you almost died?"

He eyes my shoulder, and his jaw tics.

If I wasn't pretending I had no feelings for him, I'd throw my arms around him.

"Fine." I incline my chin. "But I hope you don't snore. 'Cause that's a deal breaker."

I spin on my heels and march toward the bedroom, and I register his laughter trailing as I do.

RAPH

“Are you decent?” I knock on the door, waiting for her to finish changing so we can both get some sleep.

“Come in.” Her tone is light, a complete turnaround from earlier.

I was kind of getting used to her being pissed off at me. She’s too damn cute when she’s all angry, probably thinking of ways to kill me.

I push the door open, expecting to see a fully clothed Nicolette, but instead...

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, my heart racing as I trace my gaze up and down her barely covered body.

If she thinks she’s going to be walking around in tight shorts that hardly cover her round, perky ass, then she’s highly mistaken. It was difficult to restrain myself while she was all covered up. There’s absolutely no way I can hold back when she’s looking like *that*.

“What the hell are you wearing?” I toss out with barely contained wrath.

“Clothes.” She shrugs, all innocent and doe-eyed, but I know better.

She turns sideways as she rummages in her duffle, teasing me with the view of her ass. She nonchalantly fluffs up the pillows while my eyes zero in on her bare inner thighs, my fingers itching to feel that skin beneath them, wanting to shove those tiny shorts to the side. I bet she’s soft and wet there.

I pinch my temples, shutting my eyes, attempting to temper my thoughts.

But it’s no use. My cock grows stiff at the mere sight of her. Her breasts are more than a handful, practically spilling out of her white tank.

She peers up at me, her lips twitching. She’s doing this on purpose. She’s trying to kill me, that’s what she’s doing. And she’s doing a fine job of it.

“Those are not clothes,” I snap. “You’d better find something else to wear.”

“Pretty sure these...” She glances down at herself, then back at me with a challenge in her gaze. “...are considered clothes.”

“Not to me.” I slam her with a ruthless stare. “Change. Now.”

“Nope.” She pitches me a fiery gaze. “Plus, I don’t have much on me. This is what I slept in while I was gone.”

“Fucking hell, Nicolette.” I march up to her and her chest expands with an inhale, those nipples popping through her shirt.

It'd be so easy to yank that tank top down and taste them. It's what she wants, isn't it?

I grasp her chin. "If you think I'm going to sleep in the same room as you while your ass is practically begging for my palm, then you're mistaken, little one. You're going to cover that gorgeous body before you get both of us into trouble."

She stares up in complete bewilderment, her breasts trembling beneath that thin scrap of material I could easily tear off with my teeth. I can make out the small, round shape of her pink areolas too, wanting to suck them into my mouth.

Fuck.

I grit my jaw. Why did I agree to keep her here? I should've let Michael deal with her. I can't be around her without losing my mind.

Removing myself from her proximity, I march up to one of the drawers and yank out one of the white t-shirts already folded inside.

The cabin is one of our safe houses. But only Michael, my youngest brother, Gio, and I know of this place. My father likes to use our other safe houses as his personal fuck pads. When Michael found out, thanks to the security cams, he bought this place and swore us to secrecy. He didn't want my father polluting another place like he did the others.

The cabin comes fully stocked with clothes and shoes in various sizes, but it's all for men. Unfortunately, there's nothing here for her.

"Here." I walk it back to her, extending my hand.

Her brows tighten with a vulnerable look, and I want more than anything to throw her onto that bed and bury myself so far inside her, she'll always remember what it felt like.

Eventually, her fingers snatch up the shirt, and she glides it over her body while I stare at her the entire time, my heart twisting in my rib cage. This is hell on earth.

"Better?" She bends her face in a spiteful kind of smile.

"No..." My sinful gaze paints a path up her body until I land on her mesmerizingly green eyes. "Now, get under those covers. It's cold, and you need rest."

"Is this how it's going to be?" Anger tangles in the wave of her words. "You telling me what to do and expecting me to listen like a puppy?"

I chuckle. "That's right. Except you're not a dog. Now stop being stubborn and get into the damn bed."

She huffs, but does what I said.

I wander toward the fireplace and open the door, throwing more logs into it. The crackling echoes through the room while I shut the door.

I'll definitely need to cut more tomorrow. It's always colder here in the woods, and having her with me means I have to keep the place warm. I want her to be comfortable while she's under my care.

She glances at me as I walk over to the closet. "Are you really going to sleep on the floor?"

"You think I'd leave you alone so you can run off on me?"

"I'm not running, Raphael." Her gaze is soft and broken and utterly beautiful. "You were the one who did the running."

I pull in a shallow breath, unable to tear my eyes away, wanting to confess every pure and dirty thought I've ever had about my sister-in-law. But once I remember who she is, how old she is... I despise myself all over again.

You're not your father.

Aren't I, though?

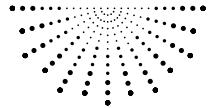
"Don't, Nicolette. Let's not talk about this. It's better that way." I open the closet door and grab a sleeping bag, taking out a pillow and blanket too.

This time, I avoid her as I settle on the floor and throw the pillow down, sinking my head onto it. Thankfully, I no longer see the ache drenching her eyes, nor the brief glimpses of pain on her features.

"Better for who?" she breathes and my heart pounds.

Why does it feel like I'm letting go of something that's already mine?

CHAPTER NINE



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NICOLETTE

WELL, HAVING HIM SLEEPING ON THE FLOOR DID NOTHING BUT KEEP ME UP all night. I might have gotten a solid twenty minutes of sleep. Catnaps were another way I survived on the run. I'm used to them. I can survive on them.

I'm sure he has no idea I was staring at the ceiling for the entire night, reliving the horror of the forest in my head, remembering that man on top of me, ready to kill me. My stomach rolls as I recall it all in vivid detail, as though it's happening like a movie playing right before my very eyes.

Inhaling, I force the panic of that night away and instead concentrate on a much better view that's currently out the window.

Peering out, I watch Raph wield an ax so well it's almost sinful. That man is utter perfection. His large palms grip the handle as he slams the blade into a severed tree trunk, splitting it in half like it's the easiest thing in the world.

My gaze dances over his bare tanned back, his muscles rippling, the veins in his triceps popping out from beneath his glistening skin. Who cuts wood without a shirt on?

Raph, apparently.

It's like he's taunting me. Kinda like I was when I put on those shorts. Didn't work out as well as I had hoped, though.

I intended for him to lose his inhibitions, but instead all I got was a sleepless night. I could've worn the one pair of leggings I have in my bag. I never kept too much in my go bag, so it wouldn't be hard to run with.

I sigh. Mission failed. The man is too hard to break.

I continue gawking. Maybe he'll come through those doors, realize what a stubborn idiot he's being, and finally kiss me.

Delusional as always. He's never going to want you that way. He'll fight it until his last day.

My body coils with a vengeful kind of need, wanting to sink my nails into his back. Wanting to know what he sounds like, moves like, when he lets go. When he takes a woman. When he takes *me*.

Stretching my fingers around the warm mug of hot cocoa he made me after we had pancakes together in utter silence, I continue to watch him.

It's become our thing, quietly existing in each other's space while I pretend it doesn't matter. That I'm not hurting inside. That I don't wish for him to talk to me like he used to. There's been an invisible wedge between us for far too long, and I don't know if we can ever break down its wall and get back to how it once was.

Once he's done, he grabs a bunch of pieces of wood and strides toward the cabin. But as soon as he spots me here, ogling him, he freezes, and my breath catches in my lungs.

Silently, we stare at one another as though nothing and no one exists but us.

The warmth around my body is replaced with a chill, goose bumps riddling my arms. I can't look away, and neither can he. We remain entrapped in each other's mutual gaze, the shared attraction undeniably sizzling between us. Long, aching seconds only make me want him more.

He peers into my eyes as though he can see inside my very soul. It transports me to a time when he cared, when we could talk and laugh and be friends. I miss that desperately. Miss *him* desperately.

Tears fill my eyes, and I quickly look away, strutting toward the kitchen, placing the mug down, and gripping the edge of the counter.

The door opens and clicks behind me.

The thud of the wood crashing against the floor fills my ears. Slowly, he nears. I can feel the heat of his body, and my heart slams in my chest. My panting sounds louder the closer he gets and it's almost too much. This feeling. This desire.

"Are you all right, tesoro mio?" he asks, and those words have me gasping for air.

His treasure. His love. That's what he called me.

The tendril in his tone is laced with genuine worry, and every time he sounds that way—like he cares, like I matter—my heart leaps. My chest

tightens. How can I hear him say that and still live in a world where he isn't mine?

Rough, calloused fingers roll down my arms, and my body shivers. I come completely undone. Because that's what he does to me. Every single time.

The tidal wave of emotions battles within me—hating him, wanting him, loving him. It's all too much.

But I don't truly hate him, do I? It's a manifestation of my pain, of my unrequited love for this man I want more than anything.

The prickling of my skin returns. A traitorous thing. I know he can feel it and see it.

His exhales rival his inhales—heavy, pouncing up my nape—as his fingertips trace up and down my arms in the barest of touches. Like he's committing the very feel of me to memory.

My head falls backward against his sweat-ridden bare chest, my eyes drifting to a close, and I groan like the whore I'm not.

But with him, I want to be.

He doesn't stop. His feathery touch glides up to my shoulders, drawing circles there. Under his breath, he growls, the vibration of the sounds shooting through me.

I let out a moan, imagining that this is real. That we're together. That he loves me. I'm afraid to open my eyes, knowing that with our height difference, I'd be able to see him.

“Nicolette,” he groans, all raspy, tortured. Every syllable filled with longing and regret.

My hand finds his thigh, and I grip hard, massaging the solid muscle beneath. I can't believe I'm even touching him this way.

He groans, and my pulse comes alive, faster now.

Every part of me is awakened with hope and desire. With dreams of being his. Loving me. Accepting me. But if he won't do that, if he doesn't want something real, then I want one thing instead.

I need him to be my first. I need it badly. I refuse to give that to someone else. Would he even do that for me? Would he give me that one thing?

I finally take the risk and flip my eyes open, and there I find him pinning me with a hungered lull behind his gaze.

His jaw muscle spasms, and the bulge pushing into my back is the only indication that he's not just hungry, but ravenous.

Will he give in? Will he take the first bite?

He roughs his hips into me, and another sound of pure ecstasy slips from my lips. I don't even care. I'm not myself right now.

I want him desperately in this very moment. He's insanely hard, and I wonder what he'd taste like. I've never done that either. I'm pathetic. He'd probably internally laugh at my inexperience. A man like him has definitely had his fair share of women. He wouldn't want someone who doesn't know what to do.

He continues to touch me, to look down at me while his body is pressed up to mine. There's an insatiable thirst building in his eyes as they continue to hold me in their inexplicable grip.

A tantalizing hum of something wicked, something warm, courses between our bodies.

It's palpable. Tastes sweet on my tongue. I shudder with desire for his touch.

His hand clenches and unclenches around my arm. He fights this yearning between us, holding on to his self-control like it's the most important battle of his life.

"What are you doing to me?" His throat bobs with a deep sigh, his gaze unrelenting.

"The same thing you've been doing to me," I murmur.

He shifts back as those heavenly eyes of his drift to a close. And I can feel it. That connection between us severing, like a thread gradually unraveling.

"You have to take your meds." He clears his throat and slowly backs away until he's completely off of me, leaving me lonely.

Just like I've felt every moment of every day since he stopped being my friend.

I don't even have time to process what just happened or when he had time to get my meds, but he now appears before me with two pills in hand and a glass of water. My heart still races as I take the meds without eyeing him and drown them in my mouth with a gulp of icy-cold water.

He takes the cup from me, then stares at my shoulder.

"I need to change your bandages." He places the back of his hand on my forehead.

“I don’t have a fever, Raphael. I’m fine. Just a little pain. You don’t have to worry about me.” I try to control my breathing, but my heartbeats still thrash in my rib cage, and this time, I can’t escape the desire to glance up at him.

“I’ll always worry about you, little one.” The back of his hand trails down my cheek as he intensely stares right into my eyes, his voice a soft gentle sway, unearthing all my deep-seated emotions. “Worrying about you is what I’ve always done. What I’ll always do, whether you realize it or not.”

“Liar,” I breathe, and I don’t know if he even heard me.

If he did, he chooses to ignore it, marching off to the bathroom to retrieve the things the doctor left behind.

He returns a few seconds later. “Sit.”

He motions toward the sofa with a slant of his head. I follow him there and lower onto the soft cushion below, right beside him.

“Take it off.” The commanding grip of those words has my head spinning.

I realize he means just my cardigan, but my body hasn’t caught up yet, thinking he wants me naked. The idea of being bare for him makes me shy, yet thrills me.

I wonder if he’d find me pretty. It was hard growing up with a sister who constantly made me feel like I was ugly. That I wasn’t as thin or as pretty as her. I think if it wasn’t for Raph and his constant support, I would’ve developed an eating disorder. He saved me in that way. He made me accept myself the way I was.

I pull out one sleeve, and when he sees me wincing and struggling with the other, he drags it off with care.

“I’ve got you,” he reassures me, holding my hand in his, staring into me like he never wants to let go.

Squirming a little, I shift uncomfortably.

“Does it hurt?” He pitches me a concentrated stare as his jaw tics. “Do you need more pain meds?” He peers at my shoulder, starting to unwrap the gauze.

I shake my head, the concern stitched on his features has my stomach tightening with knots. I’ve been without it for so long—his affection—it’s almost foreign, yet comforting all at once.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, glancing to catch his eye.

“You can ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.” His mouth tugs up just a little and my insides quiver when he smiles at me that way, all roguish and manly.

“Why is Michael next in line to take over and not you?”

I’ve always wondered since I found out years ago. He’s the oldest. He’s supposed to take over for his father as the head. Michael and his other brother, Gio, are younger. Why does Raph get to be ignored?

His hands still on my arm, but for only a second, and the vein at his neck twitches. Continuing to work, he doesn’t speak for a bit, and when he does, it breaks my heart.

“You know my father hates me. You’ve seen our fights. He’s never loved me, and I’ve accepted that.”

The casual way in which he uttered that shatters me even more.

“How could anyone not love you?” I question with a tear-filled voice.

“Maybe I’m just not easy to love.” The words crumble out of him, and it’s the saddest thing. “Look at your sister.”

He wraps a fresh bandage around my wound and secures it with medical tape.

“She was an idiot,” I admit as he holds out my cardigan to slip into.

If I were her, I’d never betray you.

There’s no way she ever loved him. Not with the way she behaved behind his back. If anything, she used him for money. Once she started dating him, he paid for every single thing. She was more than happy to spend his money on expensive shoes and bags. He never said a word. He treated her well. Better than she deserved.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?” he says. “She’s not here. I can’t ask her why. Why, of all the people in this world she could’ve fucked, did it have to be the one man who despised me?”

Whatever’s left of my heart rips right out of my chest. “Maybe she inhaled too many fumes at the hospital.”

I tighten my mouth with a smile, and he does something crazy, and beautiful and utterly perfect.

He cradles my cheek and grins. Really grins. And not even the sun and the stars can outshine the magic of it.

“You always knew how to make me forget, didn’t you?” he asks, his eyes growing softer.

“Forget what?”

My skin comes alive, every body part awakened to the soulful, desperate tug of our unexplainable, yet deeply woven connection. Like if I reached just far enough, I could grab it and hold on.

“Forget all the awful things.” And those eyes—those big, brown eyes—do something that completely breaks my heart: they grow sad.

I place my hand on top of his and draw in closer, so close that he could kiss me at any moment. His gaze drops to my lips, and my pulse quickens.

Will he do it? Will he give in? Will he kiss me?

“You made me forget too. You made me feel seen.” My voice drifts with a whisper.

“I still see you, little one.” His thumb rubs the corner of my mouth.

A chill scurries down my spine.

“Just not in the way you want.”

And there it is. There’s that slam to my gut I was waiting for.

RAPH

I see the instant her face hardens, the very moment I say those last few words.

But I had to. I can’t make her believe there’s a future for us, even while every damn molecule inside my body screams to make her mine.

It’s difficult to stop my body from reacting or my heart from wanting her. My mind isn’t strong enough to resist this pull between us.

Her arms fold around her small frame while we’re both still seated, as though protecting herself from me.

That would be wise. Doesn’t she realize how dangerous a life with me would be? Just look at Bianca. My own father killed her. Why would she want to be tied down to a life like that? Even if our age wasn’t a factor, that alone would be.

“This is for you,” I tell her, reaching into my pocket and handing her a burner phone.

Michael supplied me with a lot when I first began to live off the radar. I’ve gotten used to being on my own. But I miss working alongside my brothers. Miss my family, especially my six-year-old niece, Sophia. She’s

the light of the family. Years beyond her age. The stuff that comes out of her mouth...I don't know where she comes up with it.

I still remember when Michael brought her home. She's been part of our family ever since, as though she was born of our blood. But blood doesn't mean shit to me. My father is a prime example of how little that matters.

"Why do I need a phone?" Her eyes flash with worry.

"Just in case I have to go somewhere and need to reach you."

Alarm settles behind her gaze as it widens a fraction. "You're planning on leaving me alone?"

"Hey..." I place a palm on her shoulder.

There I go, touching her again when I have no business doing it. Not with what both of us are clearly feeling for one another.

"You're safe here. I promise. He doesn't know about this place. He thinks I'm still at the house I bought in the woods."

Her brow arches. "Wait, you live in the woods now?"

"Not in the woods." I chuckle at her incredulous expression. "Just past them."

"Do you sleep on the floor there too?" She lets out a laugh that jumpstarts my heart and sets all the reasons why we can't be together on fire.

"No, little one." I find myself sliding up to her, looking right at her. "I've got lots of bedrooms to choose from."

And I'd like to fuck you in every single one.

"It's too bad we aren't hiding out there," she says with amusement slinking in her stare. "That way you wouldn't have to sleep the way you are now."

"No matter where we are, tesoro mio..." My fingers glide down her arm until I hold her hand in mine. "I'll still lie right on the floor at your feet."

"Why?" Her gaze penetrates through me, searching for an answer I can only give in half-truth.

"Because...your safety is all that matters to me."

Because I wouldn't allow myself to sleep beside you. Because being away from you would be pure and utter torture.

She drags her hand away and glances down at her lap, playing with her fingers.

"Yeah...my safety. Right." She rises to her feet. "I need to take a shower. Do you have anything I can use?"

Her features turn cold. She's hiding again. Hiding from me. And knowing I did that...it kills me.

"Yeah..." I reach for her, fingertips almost gliding up her skin, not wanting her to go. But before I can touch her again, I pull away. "I have soap."

"Just soap?" She slants her head. "Do I look like a cavewoman to you?"

No. You look like a lot of things, baby. But a cavewoman is definitely not one of them.

With a long inhale, I grant myself permission to rake my eyes down her body like the animal I am. My cock jerks, needing inside her warmth, wanting her taste on the tip of my tongue.

"I'll take you to the store now if you want. They should have things for you to stock up on."

Her eyes pop. "We're allowed to leave this place?"

"Only for emergencies, and only with me." I don't want her getting any ideas. "There's one store out here that's within walking distance. It's got food and clothes too. That way you don't have to sleep in those tiny shorts anymore."

Even when I get hard every time I picture you in them. God help you if you wear them for another man.

She purses her mouth, smothering a laugh, but her smile seeps through. "So you mean you didn't like my shorts?"

She plays with the ends of her hair, and her eyes drop to my cock like she's begging me to pry her mouth open and have her choking down on it.

"Because I think you did, Raphael. I think you loved it." Her unbending gaze fastens to mine.

I grit my teeth, barely holding on. Barely able to maintain my own damn sanity. And all she does is push my buttons, waiting for me to pounce.

Instantly, I grab her arm and pull her up against me. She gasps from the quick jerk, fisting my shirt.

"What are you doing?" I ask, lowering my mouth to hers until there's barely anything separating us. "Is this what you're going to do the whole time you're here?" My voice simmers. "Drive me insane?"

I cup the back of her head, and she groans for me while desire roars to life on her features. With a drag of my long and shallow breath, my forehead drops to hers.

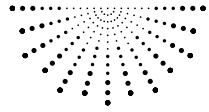
“Stop calling me Raphael,” I whisper, my heart pounding. “Call me what you always did.”

“Why should I?” She pushes me back with both palms, and I let her. Her expression turns pained. “That name is reserved for your friends, and you and I? We’re not friends anymore.”

And those words? They cut into me like a sword of my own creation.

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CHAPTER TEN



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RAPH

SILENTLY, WE LEAVE OUR HOUSE AND HEAD THROUGH THE WOODS, TOO much distance between us in every sense of the word. When we were good, we always had something to say. She'd talk to me about school, about her dreams of becoming a vet one day. I'd listen to it all. It's what I did.

I wouldn't dare tell her about my own problems. She was still a child. But I knew Nicolette needed someone to hear her. No one else did. She had one friend—can't remember her name—but other than that, she was alone.

It gutted me that I had to stop listening, stop talking to her like we once did. And I know that hurts her still. I'll always be sorry for hurting her, but I can't be sorry for how I did it.

She winces in a pair of sneakers I found in the closet that were only a size bigger.

I stop mid-stride and face her, a hand cupping her hip and the other cradling her jaw. "I'm gonna carry you all the way there."

When her mouth moves, I lift a finger and press it to her mouth.

"You hush now. I make the rules, remember?"

She instantly closes her trembling lips.

"Stop being so damn brave all the time," I tell her. "I'm right here, ba... Nicolette."

The word I wanted to say vanishes into thin air. I couldn't say it. I just couldn't. But damn, do I want to.

I turn around and kneel. "Hop on my back."

I hear her exhale sharply before she does. Grabbing right under her knees, I secure her against me, while she curls her arms around my neck. And together, we start deeper into the woods.

For a few minutes, we're both silent until she breaks it.

"Where are we exactly?" she asks as we brush past shrubs on both sides of us.

"About an hour and a half from the city. This area is pretty dead. One of the smallest towns in the state. That's why Michael purchased the cabin to use as a safe house."

The cabin had gone to foreclosure, and like with mine, our lawyer, Hudson, arranged the purchase under a shell corporation.

Her forearm tightens around my shoulders and every protective molecule in me wants to tie her up to my bed and keep her there.

"How did I end up here? The only thing I remember was seeing a guy hurting the one who was chasing me."

I clench my teeth at the reminder, wanting to spill my father's blood for ever hurting her.

I stop in my tracks, tugging my face back so I can look at her. "He will pay, Nicolette. When this is finally over, he will suffer, and he will regret ever hurting you."

Her eyes widen. "I believe you."

My pulse pounds, my gaze slinking down to her pretty full mouth. So damn kissable.

I want to throw her up against a nearby tree and bury myself inside her.

Fuck.

I bend my hand into a fist. Here I go again, unable to maintain a single thought without thinking about fucking her, being with her. Having her in every way.

Not just her body. That's not what this is about. Not with her.

I start for the trail again, needing to hurry to the store so we can get back unseen. The less we're noticed, the better our survival. My father could have eyes everywhere. It's why I didn't want to drive. Didn't want either one of us to be caught on any traffic cams. My father has people who could hack them.

"Who was the guy who found me?"

"He's a cop who lives around there. He's on our side. He found your name on your license and immediately called Michael, who told him to bring you to him."

"Are you sure he won't tell your father where I am?"

"If he does, Michael will know of it. But he's loyal. He's been tested, and he always passed. He won't talk. Michael pays him well."

She sighs as we finally reach the clearing, finding a long-abandoned road, the large shopping mart right across it. A single car slowly drives off playing a country song, an elderly man waving to us as he whizzes past.

"Keep your head down when we're inside and don't talk to anyone."

"Okay." When we're across the street, I place her on her feet and grab her hand on instinct.

And I feel it—that instantaneous bond. I feel it in every single part of my body. Like she's the pump that keeps my heart beating.

I open the door and let her go in first, following her. My eyes glance over our surroundings. A single camera is pointing toward the entrance. A young man, maybe twenty, with spiky black hair and a black sweater is by the cash register to our right, and two elderly gray-haired women with shopping carts are talking to each other. Going to have to have Michael wipe that camera clean.

"Okay, come on," I tell her, heading toward the aisle with shampoo and all that other stuff she needs. I tug her closer and grab a shopping basket. "Make it quick."

"Crap. I didn't bring my money," she whispers, eyeing me nervously. "I completely forgot to take my wallet."

I chuckle. "Come on, now. How long have you known me? You think I'd ever let you spend a dime?"

Her long eyelashes flutter, and a smile dances on her lips.

"Thanks," she says, turning away.

And when she stops looking in my direction, my heart misses her already.

She's it for me. No matter how much I deny it. These feelings won't stop.

I watch her pick up a few bottles of stuff and throw them into the basket I'm holding. And as she does, as I watch her, all I think about is her living a life without me. Someone else touching her, making her happy, giving her a family. I can see it now. Her with a baby inside her by some other asshole who'd never care for her the way I do.

"I'm going to go grab some more things." Her sweet voice zaps me out of my ill-fitted thoughts.

“I’m coming with you.” I start to follow, not giving her a chance to protest.

“Uh...no.” She grimaces, growing uncomfortable. “I’m pretty sure you don’t want to watch me pick out tampons.”

“Doesn’t bother me, Nicolette.”

“But it bothers me.” She gently places her hand on top of mine. “Just stay here for a minute, okay? I’ll be right back.”

I swear I hate the idea of letting her wander without me, but I won’t be far. “All right. Go. But I’ll be watching you the entire time.”

“I’m sure you will.” She scurries off like she’s afraid I’ll change my mind.

And believe me, I’m about to.

Space grows between us as she goes two aisles away. I can see the top of her head. I throw in a six-pack of soap and razors while my eyes scan the store again, making sure no one new has walked in.

“Can I help you with something?” A guy’s voice trails off from beyond, but I don’t see him.

And suddenly I’m moving toward her, my pulse picking up speed.

“Not really,” she answers him. “I’m just...”

I appear just as she’s about to finish that statement. It’s that prick from the cash register. As soon as she sees me, her eyes expand. She must see something in my expression.

Good.

“Let’s go,” I tell her, my tone tight, and that has the little jerk looking my way.

I don’t like how close to her he’s standing. I could break his hand in an instant and shoot off his trachea so he can’t scream.

The more she looks at me, the more her expression turns from shock to amusement. Her mouth curls at the ends, and instead of leaving with me, she faces that asshole.

“Actually...” Her tone goes all syrupy, and I already know she’s going to pay for what she’s about to do. “Do you think you can help me find some new shorts?” She giggles, side-eyeing me. “The ones I own are a bit too tight.”

“Nicolette,” I call with a low and savage growl.

“What kind of shorts?” The kid grins, completely ignoring me, while subtly checking her out. “Like jeans or...”

“You know, the short, sporty kind I can sleep in.” She gives me a wicked look, and my hand itches to throw her ass over my lap and teach her a lesson.

“Sure.”

He’s still smiling at her like he’s got her in the bag, while my blood fucking boils.

“Come with me,” he tells her.

I’m on their tail, my palm on the waistband of my sweats, rounding my fingers on the pistol. I grip the basket harder with my other hand.

“Nicolette…let’s go,” I mutter, barely able to suppress my rage.

They both ignore me, and he wraps an arm around her back.

I’m suddenly there, snapping it away, bending his hand back.

“Ow!” he screams, both of them sharply turning. “What the hell, bro?”

“Get your damn hands off of her.”

No one gets to touch her. To have her. No one but *me*.

I drop the basket with a loud thud, and my face lowers to his, my chest heaving with ravaging breaths, not letting go of his hand.

He cowers, fear slinking in his eyes. I’m taller, a good six inches on him and a lot more power. I could break him like a twig.

“You ever touch her again…” I grit, “and I will cut off both your hands and gouge out your eyes for merely looking at her. You understand me, *bro*? ”

“O-okay. I was j-just helping.”

“With your hands?” I husk.

His mouth shudders wordlessly.

“That’s what I thought,” I clip out. “Fuck off and go help someone else.”

I’m close to losing my temper. If I wasn’t concerned about my father finding her, I’d have done so much worse. But I can’t have this piece of shit reporting us.

He raises both his hands in the air while I reach into my pocket and remove my wallet, taking out a wad of cash and throwing it on the floor by his feet.

He peers over at a shell-shocked Nicolette, whose gaze is locked to mine. I can see it from the side of my face. I’ll deal with her later.

When my nostrils flare and I practically bare my teeth, his eyes bulge, and he scampers off after picking up the cash in a hurry.

Once he's out of view, I rush up to her, wrapping my palm around her nape and pushing her backward until her body hits the wall of neatly folded clothes.

I drop my mouth until my lips brush the corner of hers, the tip of my tongue begging for a taste. "You ever let another man touch you like that again, and the things I'll do to him will be on you."

My other hand slips down her hip, rounding a palm to her ass, squeezing hard. My fingers deepen into her flesh, and her skin breaks with prickles.

"That's not fair," she says breathlessly.

"Never said I was."

NICOLETTE

His jaw is locked, and his eyes flare every time they find mine. Like beneath his calm façade, there's brooding chaos ready to erupt.

He was jealous at the idea of another man flirting with me. Touching me. That has to be it, right? I didn't imagine it? Why else would he threaten other men if that wasn't the case?

I admit it was pretty stupid on my part to talk to that guy. What if he somehow leads Giancarlo's men to us?

But the second I saw Raph's eyes on me when I was talking to him, I couldn't help myself. He appeared deadly. I don't doubt Raph was close to killing him. I've never seen him that way. It excited me to know I did that. That I have power over his emotions.

I'd do anything to make him realize that the only man I want is him. That no matter how many years have gone by, how many conversations we didn't get to have, he's still the one my heart wants.

I thought if I could make him jealous, he'd see that. I know he feels something for me. He wouldn't have gotten hard otherwise. All I need is to give him a reason to give in just enough to try. Just a kiss. One where he finally kisses me back.

His rough exterior is all kinds of arousing, and I instantly want to run my hand over his thick stubble. He's god-awfully masculine.

“You know...” I pick up some black leggings and matching tank tops and throw them in the basket. “If you don’t want us to get caught, threatening some young kid is probably not the best idea.” I lower my tone so no one overhears.

His howling breaths from beside me would scare anyone else, but not me. I know him too well.

He glares. “Should’ve thought of that before talking to him like that.”

“He was just helping.” Of course that wasn’t all he was trying to do, but...

He inhales long, deep, those eyes holding mine as he takes a single step closer. I practically hold my breath as he does. Waiting. Hoping. For something. Anything.

His arm swoops around my lower back. He drops his mouth to my ear, his lips feathering against it and I gasp at his proximity. At his compounding nearness that has every inch of me in blistering heat, and want, and utter devastating longing.

“Just because I won’t let myself have you, little one, doesn’t mean I want anyone else to.”

I gasp at yet another confession. He just admitted he wants me. Kind of. Sort of.

I can’t move. Can’t speak. And while my heart beats, the back of my nose burns. Because that confession? It’s both remarkable and utterly heartbreaking. I can’t go on like this, wanting him and not having him.

His fingers squeeze around my hip, and my throat goes dry, my heartbeats crackling like fireworks in my heaving chest.

“Your body’s made for sin,” he goes on, his lips brushing softly against the curve of my ear.

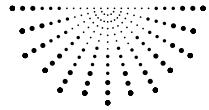
His breaths are intoxicatingly warm, cascading down my throat in unhurried waves of ecstasy. I instantly grow tight between my thighs, aching with need, wanting him to touch me so badly, I’d beg.

“Maybe you should be a sinner, then,” I whisper.

He sighs and gradually moves back a fraction. The intense longing in his eyes only devastates me.

“I’ve been a sinner all my life, tesoro mio. But some sins you can’t come back from.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



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RAPH

AFTER WE RETURNED BACK TO THE CABIN HOURS AGO, THE UNEASE between us grew palpable. She barely looked at me. And I did everything I could to avoid her. But it's been difficult. There are only so many places one can go in this tiny cabin. I hate this awkwardness between us. I want us to be ourselves again, like we once were.

It was easier to keep my feelings well-guarded all those years before, when I didn't have to be alone with her. But now, in this place? Fuck, I'm struggling. I'm struggling not to grab her and kiss her, and hold her, and tell her I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasted all those years without telling her how I felt.

But that's a fantasy. I could never do it.

Yet, even still, with just a single look, she breaks through the wall that's been keeping my feelings for her well-guarded. I can't seem to keep them buried long enough without uncovering tiny fragments of my true intentions. I can't seem to stop touching her, not when we're alone with no one to witness what we could be in the dark.

She's my earthquake while I'm quicksand. I'm slowly sinking into our mutual attraction, and soon enough no one will be able to save me from myself.

She readies for bed, roughly pulling the comforter up with her uninjured arm while getting in under it. And this time, she's in a sweatshirt she picked up at the store and a pair of those leggings. But that doesn't matter to me. She could wear whatever she wanted, and I'd still get hard.

I'm hard right now, daring a glance even when I shouldn't be. Being around Nicolette is like being in a constant state of shouldn't and couldn't.

She peers up from beneath a sweep of golden lashes, silently taking me in while I stand there at the foot of the bed, watching her watching me.

Seconds feel like hours in the stillness of this room.

My heart flips inside my rib cage.

Her brows tighten, and her chest rises and falls steadily. The wounded look in her eyes has my heart lurching.

I need you. I want you. You're the only one who ever felt like home.

Before my lips start saying those words out loud, I get into my bed on the floor where I belong.

She shuffles for a bit until she quiets, until she falls asleep. I lie there staring at the ceiling remembering when we were ourselves. When I could laugh with her.

When we weren't strangers, but friends.

FOUR YEARS AGO

AGE 34

“Hey, is anyone home?” Nicolette calls as she walks through the door while I’m busy starting on dinner for her family.

“I’m in the kitchen,” I tell her. “Your mom isn’t home yet.”

“Raph!” she bursts with excitement, shuffling into the foyer before she’s rushing over to me with a huge grin, throwing her arms around me.

I hug her tightly, smiling in return. “How was school?”

I pitch back, uncuffing the sleeves of my shirt and pushing them up to my elbows while she watches my hands move.

She clears her throat, running her fingers through her long, brown hair.

“You know, the usual.” She shrugs. “Annoying teenagers complaining about everything and anything.” She rolls her eyes and exhales dramatically. “I can’t wait until I’m done with high school forever.”

“Don’t rush it.” I grab a bowl from the cabinet above my head. “Being an adult isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Neither is being a teenager,” she scoffs.

“Fine.” I chuckle. “You’re not wrong about that.”

“So, what are you making?” she asks, her gaze dropping to the carton of eggs, tomatoes, and a bowl of ground beef I need to prepare.

“Meatballs and spaghetti.”

“Classic.” She laughs. “Need help?”

“Always. Go wash your hands.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” She salutes me while I shake my head.

She’s always telling me I treat her like a child. But that’s because she is a child, and I’m here to look out for her. Always.

She heads for the sink, quickly scrubbing her hands right before she strides up beside me. “Reporting for duty, sir.”

“Don’t be a wise-ass.” I elbow her shoulder, and she giggles.

“It’s hard not to be. You’re always telling me what to do.” She narrows a playful stare.

“Yeah, yeah, come on. Get started on beating the eggs while I make the sauce.”

“See!” She laughs. “There you go again.”

“You’re impossible.” I shake my head, taking out three eggs and cracking them into the bowl, unable to keep the damn smile off my face.

I never even smile this way for Bianca. But it’s different with Nicolette. I can be myself.

“I coulda done that.” She rolls her eyes and is the one elbowing me this time.

“Maybe you should’ve done it instead of talking so much.”

I hit her with a wink, and she gasps, pretending to be horrified.

“Raphael Marino. I cannot believe you just said that.”

“Believe it.” My mouth quirks. “Now get to cooking, or I’m gonna throw you out of this kitchen.”

“I live here. You can’t kick me out of my own kitchen.”

“Watch me.” I force myself to look all serious, but she sees right through me.

Her lips curl and body shakes with more laughter.

“Fine.” She pushes at my chest with a palm. “Now go away and let me concentrate.”

I chuckle my way toward the other end of the counter, nearing the stove with the pan already simmering with fresh garlic and oil.

I start cutting the tomatoes, and once I do, I toss them in the pan, getting damn hot. I should’ve changed before I got here like I normally do,

but it was getting late and I didn't want to drive all the way home just to come back here.

Fuck it. I start unbuttoning my shirt, keeping the sleeveless white tee beneath.

Her eyes go to me as she frantically beats those eggs like her life depends on it, her hands moving swiftly while I place my dress shirt over one of the dining chairs. She follows my every step, looking straight ahead at me, barely paying attention to what she's doing.

Her hand starts to slip, and before I can stop her, the bowl tumbles off the counter.

"Oh my God!" she cries as it crashes onto the floor, while I rush over to pick it up. She stares horrified, her cheeks beet red. "I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, little one." I kneel, my eyes on hers as I get the plastic bowl back on the counter.

She rushes to get some paper towels, throwing them over the mess, like she's waiting for me to finish the job.

I pop a brow. "Really?"

"What?" She flips her hands in the air. "Maybe next time, don't be so... uh...you know...distracting."

"So this is my fault?" I shake my head.

"Umm, obviously."

"Oh, Nicolette, I swear..." I laugh, really laugh, and she bursts into one of her own.

I release a sigh, the memory hitting me right in the center of my chest. I rub at the gnawing ache, as if I could erase it. But there's nothing I can do to make it hurt any less.

I miss her.

After a while, I try to get some rest, but something stops me. I swear I heard her sniffling. My pulse spikes.

"Nicolette?" I whisper. "Is that you?"

Definitely sniffling.

She's crying? Fuck.

I'm on my feet in a split second, forgetting that I shouldn't be on that bed. Shouldn't be anywhere near her. But nothing can stop me when she's hurting.

I settle on the other side of her and turn on the lamp. Her body trembles with quiet sobs, her back to me.

"Hey..." I lower a palm to her shoulder, and her skin prickles across the length of her arm.

Fucking hell...to know I affect her that way...it does something unspeakable to me. I grow even more possessive over her than I already am.

"Talk to me," I tell her. "I'm right here."

She pants heavily, and after a few seconds of silence, she says, "It—it's not the same anymore. I can't talk to you."

I squeeze her shoulder, rubbing my thumb on her velvety skin.

She breathes heavier.

"Yes you can, tesoro mio. I'm right here. Right beside you."

And instead of turning around and letting me hold her, she cries harder, and my heart...it cracks into pieces. I can't watch her in pain without feeling it too.

So I do something I'll probably regret, but right now that doesn't matter. I push those covers up and get in the bed, slipping my body behind her. And with my arm curled around her stomach, I pull her up against me as she cries.

"I've got you. You're not alone. I'm still here." My lips press to the back of her head, and my heart beats faster. "I still care. I always will. No matter what."

"Raph..." she whispers with a teary breath, and she turns to me, ripples streaking down her cheeks, those eyes full of anguish.

She called me Raph.

I pull her in closer.

"I've got you, baby," I whisper, that word slipping out like it's only been made for her.

My knuckles trace down her damp cheek. The overwhelming desire to kiss her, to worship her, becomes insurmountable.

Her brows knit, and her bottom lip trembles.

So beautiful. So very much mine.

Fuck. No, she isn't.

But when her arms jump around my neck, it feels like she is. It feels like she always was. And I don't regret a single thing about this moment because she's holding on to me just as much as I'm holding on to her. And the only thing I want to do is keep her.

I bring her up against my chest and let her soak my shirt. Let her pain seep into my soul and stay there. I'd take it all just to know she's no longer hurting. I'd suffer through anything to watch that girl smile.

"I thought..." She mumbles the words. "I thought he'd kill me. The man in the woods. I thought he'd get to me. I—I thought..."

Her tearful voice has me surging with an insane amount of protectiveness. She could've died...

That rage for my father only builds.

"You thought what?" I ask gently.

"Never mind." She shakes her head, refusing to look at me.

Pulling back, I tilt her chin up with the back of my hand and lift her face up to mine. "Don't do that. Don't hide." My pulse speeds. "Tell me what you wanted to say."

"I thought..." Her palm finds my cheek, and she cups me there, staring intently into my eyes.

There she goes, making me want things I have no business wanting. But with her like this, it all somehow seems possible.

"I thought I'd never see you again, Raph, and that thought alone broke my heart."

That breaks my heart too.

"When he was there on top of me, trying to end my life, all I saw was you," she tells me, her brows pinched tight, raw emotions spilling out her gaze.

Fuck. Why can't this be simple? Easy. She wants me. I want her. But I can't be with my sister-in-law, a woman too young for me. A woman who'd probably lose her life if she were ever mine. Being who I am, my father is not the only enemy I'll have to face. More will come, and they will come for her.

I drag in a long breath, her eyes boring into mine, my knuckles stroking down the side of her face. My mouth lowers, just a few breaths away from her lips. I can almost taste them. Her exhales grow louder, my inhales tight and shallow.

I could have her. Right here. Right now. No one would know.

She groans as my lips brush against hers, just a little touch. That's all it is. Her hands fist my shirt, and she pushes her mouth closer. And I taste her. Fuck, I taste her.

And I want more. My name slips out of her mouth on a moan, as though I deserve for it to be there.

“Fuck,” I whisper, my heart beating so loudly I know she can hear it.

What the hell am I doing? I’m a man who should know better. I’ve known her since she was fourteen, for fuck’s sake.

You bastard.

I grab her face with both palms and lift my mouth up to her forehead, kissing her tenderly. My lips remain there for long, agonizing seconds.

“You’ll never lose me,” I tell her, pulling back. “I’ll always be here for you.”

I peer back down at her, and her expression tightens, mouth formed in a thin line.

Harshly, she swipes under her eye and clears her throat. “Thanks for comforting me. I feel better now.” She releases a quick breath. “You can go.”

By the sound of it, all I did was make her hate me even more.

I know.

I was asking for it.

NICOLETTE

Hours later, and I haven’t slept a wink. Not when all I can think about is his lips almost kissing mine. But I felt them. Firm, soft...

He was close to breaking, but of course the bastard has to keep his resolve.

But that doesn’t stop me from replaying it over and over, pretending we actually kissed. That he gave in to me like a starving man would. But he never will. I realize that now. Because if he didn’t kiss me or touch me after that moment, he never will.

He’s never going to let himself have me, is he? He’ll always be fighting it every step of the way. It’s like he’s made up his mind, and nothing and no

one can change it. I know there are things standing in our way. I know how people may see us. But none of that matters, not to me. Nothing compares to the future I know we could have.

If I let myself imagine it, I can just see it: a house big enough for our four children, somewhere secluded. I become a vet and Raph does his Raph things.

I'm not naïve. I know what a man like him does. I know he probably has blood on his hands. But I know his heart, and that's all I care about.

We have a future. It's there. Waiting for us. If only he could see it too.

I huff out a breath, turning to my side.

"Nicolette?" he whispers. "Are you still up?"

My eyes widen, and a knot forms in my gut. What the hell is he still doing awake? Seconds drift by and I stay frozen, shutting my eyes, hoping he thinks I was making noise in my sleep.

I hear him shifting, and suddenly my bed moves. I'm not facing his direction, but I think he's on the bed.

Crap.

I can't handle another close encounter with his mouth.

"I know you're up." A single finger brushes up my arm, and every hair there bristles in response. "How long are you gonna lie there and pretend to be asleep?"

I groan internally.

Damn it. Might as well get it over with.

I roll over and face the looming shadow of the man haunting all of my waking dreams.

He reaches for the bedside lamp and the room's illuminated. He curiously assesses me with a tight expression.

"Have you slept at all?"

"I could ask you the same thing." I pop a brow.

"Well, you didn't ask. I did." He narrows a concentrated gaze. "Now, tell me, have you been sleeping at all, because I could've sworn I heard you up last night too."

"Don't bark orders at me." I sit up. "I'm not a child."

"No..." His eyes harden. "You're not. So start acting like it."

"Fine," I say, my voice defeated. "I haven't been sleeping much."

His gaze softens. And the way he's looking at me...chills roll down my arms.

His chest widens with a breath. “Come on, put on your coat and shoes. We’re going for a ride.”

I jerk back. “Um...where exactly?”

He grabs a pillow and blanket. “When I was young, maybe six or seven, I went through a time when I couldn’t sleep well. So my mom would take me in her car with my pillow and my favorite blanket and she’d drive around until I fell asleep. Then she’d carry me into my bedroom, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up for school to the smell of freshly made muffins and pancakes.”

“She sounds like she was a great mom.” A smile flickers on my face.

“She was the only real parent I had.”

The way his eyes stare into mine. The way he’s hurting. I can feel it. And I find myself hurting with him.

“It’s okay.” The back of his hand strokes my cheek, and I shiver. “I’ve accepted long ago that I didn’t have a father.”

You have me, I want to remind him. To scream it out loud until he finally hears it.

But I do no such thing.

RAPH

She’s in the back seat. I can see her from the rearview, huddling her head on the pillow against the window, the blanket flung over her body.

“I really don’t think this is going to work,” she challenges.

I just chuckle. “Why don’t you close your eyes and give it a try instead of fighting me at every step?”

“I kinda like fighting you.” Her mouth flirts with a hint of a smile.

“I can see that.”

Kinda want to watch you fight me while you’re pinned down on the bed.

Blood rushes to my cock, and it’s my own damn fault. With every passing minute, all I do is want her more.

I turn on the radio, playing quiet instrumental music, and get us on the road.

“Isn’t this dangerous?” she asks. “Won’t they find us?”

“Let me worry about that. Right now, all I’m concerned about is getting you to sleep.”

She sighs all dreamy as I stare at her through the mirror.

“How long have you been having insomnia?”

“It’s not insomnia.” Her brow arches, and her eyes gleam in challenge.

“Right.” I laugh. “So, what do you call it, then?”

“Ummm...” She concentrates with a playful look on her face. “A well-calculated attempt at staying alive? You know...with all the psychos trying to kill me?”

I blow a sharp breath. “How long has that been going on?”

“Give or take a year.”

“Jesus...” Anger spirals through the pit of my stomach. “I’m sorry.”

Her eyes grow with melancholy, as though wilting like a flower. “It’s my life now, whether I like it or not.”

“Well, I’m here now, tesoro mio, and I’m going to take you on a nightly drive if that’s what it takes for you to sleep.”

“Then what?” she whispers with a yawn.

“Then I’ll carry your pretty ass to bed and tuck you back in.”

“You think my ass is pretty?” Her teeth snag onto her bottom lip as she fights a grin.

“I think all of you is pretty.” The confession just slips out before I can stop it.

“I think all of you is pretty too, Raph.”

“Don’t ever put me and pretty in one sentence.” Amusement spreads across my face, and I smirk.

“Oh, shut up. Don’t ruin the moment.”

There I go laughing again. But that’s what she does: makes me happy.

Her eyes start to drift, and minutes later, she’s asleep, and this time I know she’s not faking it.

I drive for an hour before we return to the cabin. As quietly as possible, I reach for the handle and gently pull the car door. Carefully, being sure not to wake her, I scoop her up into my arms, and I swear she smiles as she burrows into my chest.

And here in the chill of the night, I watch her sleep. Nothing has ever looked so beautiful. It’s like she’s been created just for me. To love. To cherish. To protect. And I want to do all of those things.

With a sigh, I swing around, walk a few steps to the cabin, reach for the keys in my pocket, and open the lock. Gently parting the door, I move inside and lock up before placing her onto the bed. Somehow, she stays asleep while I remove her shoes.

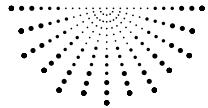
It's then that her hand reaches for mine, like she's thinking about me even in her dreams. And instead of returning to my spot on the floor, I kick off my shoes and slide in beside her.

Just this once. Just tonight. That's all it'll be.

Lying on my back, I softly pull her up against me and loop an arm around her. Before I know it, sleep gets me too, and it's the fastest I've been able to fall asleep in a while.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



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NICOLETTE

HE'S BEATING EGGS SHIRTLESS. WHILE I'M STARING INTO MY MUG FILLED with coffee, glancing up at him all nonchalantly, pretending I'm not shamelessly checking him out.

My God, look at me, practically salivating like a teenager. Teenage me was definitely salivating all the time. And I do mean *all* the time.

Raph shirtless in front of a stove, with gray sweats hung low on his hips, is a stuff of dreams. Teenage me would obsess at this sight. Adult me isn't faring any better, either.

He wipes his forehead with the back of his hand and the vein in his mountainous bicep twitches. Do women require cold showers? Because I may need one right about now.

I also think I smell a little like his aftershave. Did I sleepwalk into his bed after the car ride or did some of it rub off on me when he carried me in? I honestly don't remember anything after I fell asleep. All I know is I woke up extremely well-rested this morning. I feel brand new. I can't believe the drive actually worked.

"Do you want to help me?" he asks from over his shoulder, his lips curling on one side. "Or are you planning on checking out my ass the entire time?"

Okay. So he noticed. No big deal.

My cheeks heat up. "Umm..." I shove the rim of the mug into my mouth and take a huge gulp to give myself time to come up with a decent reply. "I was so not checking out your ass."

He lifts a brow with a heart-warming smirk.

“But I was definitely checking out your hair,” I lie, and I can tell by his amused expression, he can see right through me. “I mean, how many products do you use to get it to stay that perfectly still?”

“That’s okay, little one, you can check out my ass any time you want.”

I feel my cheeks physically heat up, and he only chuckles.

“So, you gonna help me like old times or what?”

My chest grows warm. This is how it was between us. We’d crack jokes and have fun. Cook together all the time at my house. He’d come over after school when my parents were gone and my sister was busy at work, and he’d cook me food and teach me how.

It was that or I figured out what to eat when there were no leftovers. My mom didn’t always have time to cook meals with her work schedule, so Raph would step in and make our dinners for us. No one asked him. He volunteered to help out. That’s the type of person he is.

You’d think a man who does what he does would be hard and uncaring, but he was the opposite. He was always the one there for everyone else.

“Not sure if that’s a good idea,” I say, grimacing, remembering what happened the very last time I did in fact help.

“Why?” He faces me full on this time, leaning back against the counter, folding his arms over his bulky chest. His mouth jerks. “Afraid you’ll drop the bowl again?”

Of course he remembers my very humiliating moment. It was a month before I kissed him, and I really hoped he had forgotten all about it.

“That was *one* time.” I pin my eyes closed for a moment, fighting a smile.

“Yeah, and who had to clean that mess?” His tongue swipes across his bottom lip when I peer back up, and it’s the sexiest thing.

“Um, hi, I helped too, remember?”

His gaze bounces from my eyes and down to my chest, and for a quick second, his jovial expression turns brooding.

My cheeks heat up. Does he notice how hard my nipples are? Oh, crap. He must.

His hand flexes across the top of his bicep, his jaw hollowing with a strain. But then like a switch, a smile returns to his face and his eyes hold mine again.

“Yeah, you helped, alright.” He chuckles. “If you consider throwing a bunch of napkins down on all those eggs you dropped as cleaning.”

“I tried.” I pinch my lips tight and let out a small laugh.

“Such a clumsy little thing.” His tone grows husky.

His gaze roves down my entire body, and I inhale sharply, feeling suddenly bare. Chills spread down both of my arms, and my nipples tighten under his perusal. My skin prickles with awareness, as though his hands are there, touching where his eyes had just been.

Discreetly, I squeeze my inner thighs, attempting to quench the aching need now coursing down to my toes. The molten look in his eyes stays there as he drags in a long inhale, his gaze hooded.

“Come on, now, little one,” he drawls. “Get your pretty ass up here and help me. Unless you forgot everything I taught you.”

I swear, this is like foreplay. Or at least my body thinks so. His husky voice, the way he keeps looking at me... It’s like he’s inviting me into his bed, and the man would never have to ask me twice.

I slowly rise to my feet, trying to shake off this tingling that’s currently occupying my whole body.

Okay. I can do this. I can act all casual.

I place my mug down and clear my throat, approaching him.

He sidesteps, allowing me access to the counter, and lets me take over whisking the eggs.

Casually, he comes to stand behind me, and I become hyper-aware of his proximity. His rough, calloused hands greet my arms, slowly riding up until heavy palms land over my shoulders.

“You’re doing much better this time,” he whispers against the crook of my neck, his breaths brushing up my throat.

I hold air in my lungs, my stomach swirling.

What’s happening right now?

“Come on, now, keep mixing.”

Did I stop?

I go faster, even as he reaches over and picks up a cup full of diced tomatoes and tosses them into the bowl.

The sound of the mixer does nothing to drown out the low groaning sounds coming from deep in his chest.

His hand slides down to my upper leg, fingers deepening into my inner thigh, and behind me he’s hard and thick.

He wants me. I can feel how badly he does.

I arch my ass into him, and he hisses up against my ear, his fingertips biting into my flesh as they greedily climb higher, almost at the spot where I'm wet and craving him. My pulse pounds like a steady beat of drums in my ears.

His lips lower to my earlobe.

"You're incredibly beautiful, tesoro mio," he says gruffly, fingers slowly rising, inching closer to my bikini line.

And when they rub me there, I let out a moan, tossing my head back against his chest, dropping the mixer with a loud bang.

Shit.

The bowl starts to slip off the counter.

He reaches for it just in time.

"Oh my God..." I whisper, turning from the counter. My face heats up. I'm mortified.

"God damn it, woman." His deep laughter swells through the room and right into my heart. "That's two times now. Lucky I caught it this time." He pushes away from me.

My teeth sink into my lower lip when I find his erect cock practically pointing in my direction. Swallowing over the lump in my throat, I glance back up at him, my heartbeats firing out of me in an upsurge.

His face turns wildly intense as he takes a single step forward until my body's pinned between him and the counter behind me. A finger hooks into my lip and he releases it from my teeth.

"Don't do that." His deep-chested rasp has my insides flipping. "Don't bite your lip like that."

"Why not?" I breathe, holding his animalistic gaze. "Why not, Raph?"

There I go, calling him that name again. The one I used to use with ease. I let it slip on purpose because right now, he feels like the old Raph.

His chest expands with a long, shallow breath, his eyes pinned to mine as both hands come to cradle my face within them. His brows furrow, and emotions—unspeakable, terribly beautiful emotions—riddle his features.

"Kiss me..." I say without realizing I did. "Kiss me...just once."

I beg and plead and hope. I wrap my hand around his forearm and squeeze.

He seals his eyes shut, then stares up at the ceiling for long seconds that tell me what I already know.

I thrust past him, roughly shouldering him aside, and storm off toward the bedroom.

He's not going to give in, and I'm sick of waiting for him to fall.

RAPH

I follow her against my better judgment, knowing I was this close to throwing her right on top of that counter and stripping off every bit of her clothes.

Nicolette is my greatest test and my ultimate weakness. She brings me to my knees without even knowing she holds the power.

"Get away from me, Raphael!" she shouts, her body seeping with rage. "Just get out! I'm over this hot-and-cold game you're playing." She throws both hands in the air. "If you won't even kiss me, then stay the hell away."

She was attempting to sound brave but the crack in her voice gives her away.

"I don't want your arms, your body, the way you look at me...I don't want any of it. It isn't fair." She exhales a rough sigh. "Just leave me alone."

She's right about all of it. I'm not being fair, and I know that. I just can't seem to stop. And I do try. But once she's close to me, all I can do is touch her. It's as though she's built into my DNA. My very being. And it fucking kills me that I can't have her.

Her chest swings rapidly, her eyes broken and bruised. And I'm the asshole who caused it.

"I don't mean to hurt you," I profess, shattering right along with her like I'm being punched in the heart.

"But you are." Her lips tremble and her brows gather tightly. "You're never going to see me. Not the way you saw *her*. Not the way you loved *her*. And I have to accept that."

I never loved her.

"But she never loved you, Raph. Not the way I could if you ever opened your eyes and saw me. *Really* saw me."

I see you. I've seen you for so long it hurts.

“When are you going to finally see that maybe I’m the one you should be with?” she cries, tears drawing down her cheeks.

I do see that, but it’s wrong to want you the way I do. Fuck, baby. You have no idea.

“When will you finally realize that I can make you happy?” she asks, staring sadly.

You already make me happy. All the time. Even when you’re not here to do it.

“When will you finally stop denying that I could be the one for you?” She swipes under her eyes with the back of her finger.

You are the one for me. Always will be. There’ll be no one else as long as I live.

“Fine! Stay there and say nothing!” Her infuriated words hurl out with a sniffle. “I’m so done.”

I clench my jaw. “You were seventeen.”

My body stiffens remembering her full lips on mine that very day.

She snickers. “Would it have even mattered if I was older?” Her features twist with raw emotion. “Would it have changed a single thing?”

I pause for a moment as her glistening eyes singe into mine, waiting for an ounce of truth, and I finally give it to her.

“Yes. It would’ve changed *everything*.”

Her eyes fill with renewed tears as they flicker shut, and slowly, she shakes her head. And when she looks at me again, her expression hardens.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, does it?” Her smile is bitter, rotting through my soul. “Because I’m done. I’m over you, Raphael Marino. Truly. Completely. Unequivocally over you.” Her chin rises, as though she really needs to get that point across.

My heart races as I gaze down at those rosy cheeks, her skin naturally kissed by the sun. Absolute perfection from her head to her toes.

And it’s here in this moment, I truly realize I’m in love with her. Truly. Completely. Unequivocally in love. And there’s not a goddamn thing I can do about it.

She attempts to brush past me, but my hand slices through the air and grabs her wrist, yanking her hard into my waiting body.

I ignore that voice in my head telling me to stop and tug her closer with a sweep of my arm around the small of her back.

I drop her wrist, and with a tilt of a finger, I tug up her chin, meeting the vulnerability seeping in her hooded gaze. “Don’t you dare walk away from me.”

She practically melts.

Warm.

Soft.

Begging to be mine.

Our breaths. The silence in between them. That’s all I hear as my eyes land on her lips. She parts them as though on instinct, as though they’re asking me to taste them, so we can end this torture once and for all.

I drop my face closer to them, unable to take my eyes off her. My tongue darts out for a quick lick across her lips, daring both my body and my heart.

She lets a tiny little moan slip out, begging with those eyes to give her all of me. My heart echoes with deafening beats as I bore my gaze deeper into hers.

“Raph...please,” she chokes out.

But in that instant, I see his face and I hear his laughter.

You’re no better than me, my father mocks. She’s going to die too. You’ll have nothing.

My teeth clench and I pitch back, dropping both hands off her.

“There it is. That regret.” She releases a pained laugh. “I knew it was coming.”

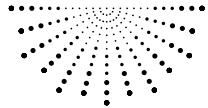
“Nicolette...I’m sorry.” I palm the back of my neck and squeeze it until it hurts.

“Aren’t you sick of apologizing?” She gives me an empty stare. “It’s not wrong, Raph. We’re not wrong.”

Yes, we are. We’re wrong in every damn way.

Tears swell in her eyes, and my heart slices in two. My hands itch to touch her, to hold her again. But I stand where I am and let those tears track down her cheeks without doing a damn thing about it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



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NICOLETTE

THE SUN FILTERS THROUGH THE IVORY CURTAINS AS MY EYES STRAIN against the blistering light. I slept like shit again, and there was no way I was going to let him drive me around like the other day. I'd rather sleep like utter crap than be in the same car as him right now.

My eyelids weigh a million pounds from all the crying I did last night. The pillow is still damp with my tears.

He never even slept in the bedroom last night. I don't know why it hurts knowing he never came. It should make me happy that he stayed away, that he didn't hear me crying. But it doesn't. It only makes me sad.

I wish I could keep my distance, but it's nearly impossible here in the small confines of this space. The bedroom is one square room with a black king-sized four-poster bed and a plain wooden dresser. A shaggy ivory rug sits at the foot of the bed.

I actually love this cabin. It's nice and cozy. If it wasn't for the fact that I have to share it with a man who wants nothing to do with me, I might actually enjoy it here.

I don't need a large house to make me happy. All I want is somewhere I can call home with someone to call it home with. But I can lie to myself all I want...the only home I've ever known was him.

Telling him I was over him was the biggest lie I ever told. Being over Raph is like being without air. It's an impossibility. Something I'll never live without. He's always going to be a part of me, and it's time I came to terms with that.

Years from now, he'll still be holding my heart in his palm. Because it's been his for as long as I can remember.

Begrudgingly, I sit up, stretching and yawning before I swing my feet on to the floor, knowing I have to face him eventually. May as well get it over with. My stomach growls as I head for the door, and as soon as I open it, a whiff of eggs and coffee hits me all at once.

Stepping out, I hear the clacking of something, and his rummaging grows louder. Turning the corner, I find him with a plate in hand, and as soon as he hears me, he pivots.

“Coffee?” he asks in a guarded tone, lowering his gaze to my chest, where my fingers nonchalantly swipe across my collarbone.

“Sure,” I murmur, my skin pebbling with wanton need.

It’s unfathomable to be around him and not grow insanely aroused. Which is really unfair, if you ask me.

He heads toward the coffee machine, and I release a silent exhale, pulling out one of the chairs and sink into it.

By now, he knows just how I enjoy my caffeine, adding some milk and sugar while I watch the muscles of his back ripple from beneath his white t-shirt. When he returns his attention to me, there’s not only the coffee in his hand, but a plate for me too.

“What did you make?” I attempt some small talk to stop myself from thinking inappropriately about him.

“Your favorite.” His gravelly tone is a sure-fire way right into my panties.

My body grows tight and aware. And when those eyes hold mine, it’s as though there’s something unspoken within them, like he wants to spill his heart. But knowing Raph, I know he won’t.

He places the food and coffee before me. And when I glance down at the steaming plate, emotions instantly clog the back of my throat.

“You remembered?” I stare at him in disbelief.

My favorite breakfast is something I’ve told him in passing once or twice. I can’t believe he remembered. Two eggs over easy with a side of hash browns. That’s a way to my heart.

“I remember everything about you, little one. Every single detail.”

The way he says that, it’s as though the fact that he does remember it at all tears him up inside.

“I’m sorry, Nicolette. For everything.” He sighs, grabbing his own plate and sitting across from me. “You’re right. I haven’t been fair in the way I’ve been acting around you. It’s going to stop today.” He plays with his

food, gazing down at the table. “I’m not right for you. I never was, and I never will be.”

My heart squeezes vengefully, and I grab the fork and stab at the eggs, popping a piece of it into my mouth, refusing to venture a gaze at him. Knowing if I do, my emotions will spiral.

“Are you listening to me?” he calls. “I hurt people. Kill them. I know you don’t want to hear it. But I’m not the one you want.”

I grind my teeth, wanting to say so much, it’s practically dripping out of my lips. Seconds trickle by, and I’m unable to keep silent for another moment more.

I drop my fork with a clank against the plate and sear him with a glare. “How about you stop deciding what’s right or wrong for me? How about I make that decision?”

“Nicolette...” he whispers, dropping his head into his palm.

“No, don’t do that,” I clip out and he peers back at me. “If you’re seriously unwilling to give us a shot, then how about you stop saying things like you’ll hurt any man who touches me? How about you stop calling me your fucking treasure, for fuck’s sake! Way to send mixed signals.”

The muscle in his jaw tics as I go on, staring right at him. How dare he torture me this way?

“And while we’re at it...” I snap. “How about you stop looking at me like I mean something to you.”

My tone ignites, breaking with every word, pain rippling through me like wave after wave of heartbreak. A sea of never-ending loss and drowning grief.

In one swift move, he’s on his feet, towering over me, filling my body with heat. With a quick jerk, he turns my chair so that I face him, and I gasp from the sudden movement, from his all-imposing presence as he looms over me. His chest rises with compounding breaths, his gaze slowly slinking to my parted mouth. His hand balls into a fist on the table before he grabs my jaw, the pads of his fingers delving into my flesh as he forces my face up to meet his feverish stare.

“You *do* mean something to me, God damn it,” he growls low under his breath, his words carrying the timbre of a man losing control. “Do you know how insane it makes me to want you the way I do and not be able to have you? To picture some other man’s hands where mine belong? To want to kill any of them who dares to touch what’s mine?”

His?

I swallow the knot in my throat, gasping for breaths that never come.

“Once you kissed me...” he continues. “It was all I could think about.”

He drops his hand away, and suddenly he’s scooping me up and placing me on top of the table, cupping my face in between his hands. His eyes search mine, and there’s so much emotion drawn up on his features, it swells inside my chest. I can feel it beating through me.

My legs wind around his thighs, not wanting to let go. Afraid that if I do, I’ll let go of whatever is happening between us.

His knuckles brush down my cheek as those eyes take in every inch of my face.

“I don’t know how to live without constant thoughts of you.” His voice cracks, and my own emotions come seeping out.

I close my eyes, unable to get a hold of myself, needing to pretend this isn’t happening. Because I know he’ll regret it again. He’ll regret touching me.

But instead the next thing I feel is the sensation of his firm lips slowly brushing down my neck, his hot breaths tickling up my ear. I stifle a moan.

Can this really be happening?

The thrill of it fills my bloodstream, my gut coiling with maddening need. I rub my core on the table as the span of his large hand grips hard around my nape.

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted,” he whispers, his fingertips biting into me like he’s marking me for life. “And I’m fucking tired of trying to do the right thing. This right here...” He kisses the underside of my jaw, teeth scoring my skin, groaning as he does. “This is me being weak.”

Sparks ignite and sizzle down to my clit, my body drumming with every bit of pent-up lust I’ve ached with all these years.

His lips trail roughly down my throat, my pulse thrumming beneath his skillful mouth. “I’m not used to being weak, Nicolette.”

He sucks and nips and tastes. I force my eyes shut, feeling everything he does to me, buried in carnal heat.

Touch me, I want to beg, but I’m afraid all it will do is make him stop.

“Oh, God,” I cry, snapping my eyes open when the back of his hand traces the underside of my breast.

“Not God,” he groans, yanking my hair in his powerful fist. “Me. This is me and you, and don’t you forget it.”

Don't think I possibly can.

I drink in his fired gaze, and the possessive way he holds me has me wanting to feel him sink inside me, right on this table, or maybe pinned down on the floor like an animal.

I gasp when he draws my earlobe into his hot mouth and groans, and the sounds coming out of me don't even sound like me.

He peppers kisses around the edge of my jaw, his lips landing on the corner of mine, so close, I can almost taste him.

"You're all I want too..." I confess, my hand snapping to the back of his head, fingers curling in his thick hair, driving him closer.

My body and mind haven't caught up to what's happening. Can this be real? My heartbeats explode in my chest, my hips gyrating on the table.

He jerks my head back, until I have little choice but to meet the fiery blaze burning in his eyes.

"Don't say that," he rasps, lowering his other hand to the top of my thigh and squeezing, his jaw tensing as he pins me with a sinful stare.

"I won't lie to you, Raph. I want you so badly I ache. All the time. Everywhere. Just for you."

"Fuck," he rasps, tightening his fist in my hair.

The back of my hand strokes down his cheek and he closes his eyes, inhaling long and deep.

"Please, Raph." I slide my other palm under his shirt, and feeling his muscles twitch under my touch sets me off even further.

My touch affects him just as much as his affects me.

His gaze pins me deeper, his breaths plundering out of him. And in his eyes, I find a man lost. Someone who wants to give in to the fire only we can create. If only he'd throw the match and watch the flames engulf us.

He inches closer, fitting his hips in between my thighs, and that bulge is hard to miss. He grinds his jaw, his eyes searching mine.

I want to win the war that's brewing in his heart. I want him to choose me. Just this once.

"Please," I plead once more, seeing the indecision on his face. "Ple—"

And this time, he smashes his mouth against mine and ends all the days of torture. All air leaves my lungs and there's nothing gentle about the way he takes me. Raw passion spills between us, and he kisses me like he's released every ounce of longing he's carried for years.

My fingers ride up his back, wanting to tear off his shirt, and he groans when I scratch up his spine, my own moans vibrating against his heady lips.

He curls my long hair around his wrist and tugs my head back, his fierce eyes blazing with wicked, unspeakable things.

“Tell me this is okay.” His voice strains. “That I can have you.”

I fight his grasp, wanting to kiss him once more, desire pooling in between my willing thighs.

“Yes,” I say. “You never have to ask.”

Then his mouth is on me again, his palm rounding my quivering throat, his thumb driving deeper into my pulse as his tongue circles mine.

His teeth nip my bottom lip, his cock thick and hard against my belly. The sensation pulses through the length of me. What I wouldn’t do to touch it. To feel it inside me. I’m so ready to lose my virginity. I know he’d be gentle. He’d care if I was feeling good. He’d make sure of it. Maybe if I told him, he’d want to be my first so that no one else is.

Isn’t that what most men want? To be a woman’s first?

“So beautiful,” he rasps, right before sucking my lower lip into his mouth, his other hand slipping into my hair. “I need to taste you. Everywhere.”

My body coils from his confession, and I’d wish on every star in the sky for Raph Marino to be mine.

“Have me,” I breathe.

And with nerves and lust and all these feelings surging inside me, I tell him the one thing I never told anyone but Brenda.

“Touch me,” I pant desperately. “Be my first.”

My heart pounds in my ears when the words slip out.

He groans, his fingertips massaging my scalp right before he stops abruptly. Forcing himself back, he peers at me, confusion upturning his features.

“First?” He loosens off of me a little, his hands falling gradually to his sides. “Are you saying...”

I nod, tugging on the corner of my lower lip, cheeks burning with humiliation.

“Fuck,” he mutters, stepping backward until there’s too much space between us. “Fuuuck.” He pauses, shaking his head. “You’re a virgin?”

His incredulous voice has shame slapping my cheeks.

“How?” He roves me with a hungered gaze. “How the hell is that possible?”

Shame fills my face.

“You told me...” He shuts his eyes and drags in a long breath through his nostrils. “You lied?”

“Yes...” I admit on a whispered sigh.

He stares up at the ceiling as he tugs his hair with both hands.

“I was angry when you rejected me,” I explain. “And I wanted you to think...I don’t know, that guys wanted me? But there’s been no one.”

He dares a glance, a troubled expression on his face.

“Don’t reject me,” I say. “Not again.”

“God damn it...” He swiftly moves right up against me and clasps my cheeks. “Tesoro mio, I can’t be the one who takes your virginity. I can’t be that man.”

His voice is soft and tragic. He drops his forehead against mine. And when he stares back at me, I know he’s going to crush my heart all over again.

“Losing your virginity is something you’ll look back on and remember. And the last thing I want you to remember is me. The man who’s never going to be worthy of you.”

Pain throbs in my chest and tears sting my eyes even as I fight like hell not to cry. But they force their way out, and his thumbs are there, wiping them away.

“Please forgive me, little one.” Emotions fill his own eyes. “I never meant to be the one to hurt you. I—”

My stomach churns.

Say it. Just say you love me.

“You what?” I cry. Waiting. Hoping...

Just need to hear you say it.

“I’m sorry,” he says instead. “I thought I could go through with this.” He angles back. “I wanted you desperately enough to give in, just once, but knowing you’re a virgin... I can’t.”

His finger traces tenderly under my eyes and he kisses my cheek, his tormented gaze boring into mine.

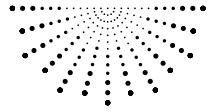
“Don’t say another word.” My grief-stricken words fill the hollowed space between us, my heart splitting into two.

He sighs with hopelessness.

“Be happy.” He says the words I once said to him so long ago.
It’s funny and poignant how things come in full circle that way.
Being happy without you is impossible.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



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RAPH

HOURS LATER, AND I WATCH HER ON THE SOFA, FLIPPING FROM CHANNEL TO channel, tugging up the blanket around her, avoiding me even while I'm seated on the other side.

She's so beautiful, it hurts to look at her. To want her as much as I do without being able to be selfish and claim what's mine.

I was this close to shredding her clothes. This close to forgetting why it'd be wrong. Because nothing about kissing her was wrong. And that in itself is a problem.

How could she not tell me she was a virgin? That changes everything. The knowledge that no one has touched her, that I could be her first and last... Fuck, the possessive bastard in me wants her all to himself.

But I could never take that from her. I don't deserve it.

Years from now, she's going to look back on her first time and wonder why it had to be me. Why did I hurt her by not wanting more than one night? I can't do that. Not to Nicolette.

But the thought of her giving herself to someone else, maddens me with insane amounts of jealousy.

But I'll endure. As long as she's safe, I'll endure watching her create a life with someone who isn't me. Her safety is all that matters. And keeping her away from me and my family is the only way to get her there.

Nicolette Ricci will never be mine, no matter how much I want her, no matter how good it feels when she's near.

My burner rings in my pants pocket, and I immediately retrieve it, seeing Michael's number on the screen.

"Yeah," I answer and her eyes immediately jump to mine.

“Listen,” Michael says in a hushed tone. “I had a hit on me the other day.”

I sit up straighter. My pulse slams in my throat.

“I’m fine,” he continues. “They didn’t get me.”

“Could’ve led with that...” I run a hand down my face. “Fuck. I thought you were shot.”

Nicolette throws her blanket off her and scoots closer, her gaze widening.

And even now when I look at her, my heart stirs to life, and all I want to do is erase every shred of doubt I have playing in my head. Because fuck, I want her. In my life. In my heart. In my bed.

I could love her. Really love her like no one ever has. With me, she’d never know a day without being cherished, without being appreciated. I’d give her everything.

Michael says something, but I can’t hear him anymore. Not when she’s looking at me, all pink-stained cheeks and wide-eyed.

She places a palm on my knee. “Is that Michael? Is he okay?”

And the fact that she still cares about my brother even after everything my father did makes me want her that much more.

My hand falls over hers and I squeeze it. “He’s okay.”

“Did you hear me?” Michael calls. “I said he wants you dead.”

“Who?” Our eyes stay connected as I go on. “The Irish? I know that already.”

“No, Raph. Our father. He’s looking to pin the hit on me on you.”

“What?” My nostrils flare, my breathing intensifying.

“Yeah. He’s blaming it on you. Trying to plant the seed in my head that you’ve gone against the family.”

“Fuck,” I grit.

My father really hates me. Why does that shock me anymore?

“But he has no idea that before I killed the guy, he talked,” Michael continues. “The hit came from him.”

I crack a knuckle. “He tried to kill you?”

My muscles tense with undulated rage. I rise to my feet.

Michael sighs harshly. “Look. I’m going to see what else he does. He’s talking to the men too. Trying to get them all against you. That’s why I need to take over.”

“Any closer to finding a wife?” I ask, knowing that he has to in order to take my father’s throne.

“I’m working on it.” I register a clank of glass and realize he’s most likely drinking. “He’s probably scared Nicolette will find you and talk. He thinks if you’re gone, she won’t have anyone else believe her.”

Every inch of me wants to go find him. To extinguish him for all the sins he’s committed against our family.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Michael warns, as though hearing my thoughts. “Just...just keep her safe.”

I know he also wanted to add that I should keep myself safe too. I know my brother, and I know how much this family means to him. To all of us but one.

“I’m not afraid of him, Michael.”

“Never said you were, but right now, he’s in charge and the men are loyal to him. Once I take over, most of them will give their loyalty to me and we can figure out how far we want to take this.”

“He came after her, Michael.” I pause, staring back at Nicolette, her gaze softly assessing me. “There’s no coming back from that. He has to pay for this and everything else he’s done.”

I grind my teeth. It was his fault I went to war with the Irish. That Patrick’s nephew died. He has to pay for it all.

“I promise, brother, I will get you out with the Irish,” Michael assures me. “I will make it right. Just sit tight for a little more.”

“I won’t wait forever, Michael.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to.”

“Does Gio know about any of this yet?” I wonder.

“No.” He sighs. “And I don’t think we can tell him. I’m afraid if he finds out what our father did, he won’t be able to hold back, and our plan will fail.”

I consider that. He’s right. Gio is thirty about eight years younger than me and every bit the killer. He takes family loyalty seriously, and he won’t like what my father did.

“Okay. Let’s keep it between us for now.”

“Daddy!” Sophia calls.

My heart melts, a smile fastening to my face.

“I want to make calzones for dinner. Can we? Please?” she begs in her adoring little way.

That girl is my whole heart.

“I’ve gotta go,” he tells me.

“I know.” I nod. “Tell her I love her and miss her like crazy, will you?”

“You know I will. I’ll be in touch.” He ends the call.

My bastard father took that from me too. Being with my family. He took so much from me, and I want to take everything from him.

“Are you okay?” Nicolette’s tender alto penetrates through my tunnel vision.

And when she appears behind me, pressing her body against my back, her arms fastening around me, I instantly remember she’s the one who matters now. Not my need for revenge. That can wait. She’s the one I have to protect. I’ll hide out here for as long as it takes to make sure she’s safe.

I tug her hands to my chest and clasp them in mine. Her long fingers slide through my thick ones, and I stare at the difference between them. She’s a delicate little thing. How the hell did she survive on her own all this time?

I should’ve been there. I should’ve protected her. My heart tightens like a vise. She makes me vulnerable, and with her, I want to be. I know with painful truth that I’ll never want anyone as much as I want her.

“I called you,” I whisper, bringing her fingertips to my lips and kissing each one. “When you were gone. I called you to make sure you were okay. If I knew you were running because—”

“I know.” She squeezes my hands, leaning her cheek into the center of my back. “I couldn’t hear your voice without breaking, Raph. I had to cut the ties between us. It was easier.”

“None of this is easy,” I profess.

Wanting you as I do will never be easy.

“I know,” she breathes.

“I wish I’d been there with you. Knowing you were all alone... Fuck, Nicolette. It kills me.”

I can’t anymore. I can’t keep avoiding her beautiful face staring back at me. I slowly turn around, and my hands immediately cup her cheeks, cradling her soft skin, peering deep into her soulful eyes that always clutched on to my heart and refused to let go.

“I wish you’d been with me too.” Her eyes glisten like two achingly beautiful stars. “It would’ve been easier.”

Blood rushes into my head. A muscle in my jaw pops.

“Did someone hurt you?” My pulse pounds as I ask the question, afraid of hearing the answer.

She smiles dolefully. “Some tried.”

I shut my eyes and my throat closes in.

I can’t fucking breathe.

“It’s not your fault.” She places a gentle hand around my neck.

When I stare at her, all I see is a woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. One I couldn’t protect.

“Of course it’s my fault,” I tell her. “My father did this to you. *My family.*”

“You’re not your father, Raph. You never were and you never will be.” Her brows furrow, and she clasps her hand tighter around me.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Falling for a girl too young for me is a prime example. Marrying a woman I didn’t even love is another. I know at the time I felt I had no choice, but... Fuck, I don’t know what’s right or wrong anymore. Maybe I am somewhat like him. Maybe I can’t escape who I truly am.

“Can I ask you something?” Her eyes search mine as she waits for an answer.

“Anything.” My heart pummels in my chest as she bores her gaze so deep into mine, I feel my damn soul springing to life.

“Did you do something to Leo when I told you what he did to me?”

I jerk my head back, surprised at the question and why she had asked it all of a sudden. I haven’t heard that punk’s name in forever. Not since she told me what he did to her. I don’t want to lie to her, and I don’t know how she’ll take the truth.

“Tell me, Raph. Did you hurt him?”

“Do you care?” My heartbeats slam in my chest.

It’ll kill me if she feels anything for him. For any man.

I know that’s selfish. All I’ve been is selfish since the moment she walked back into my life. One second, I tell her I can’t be with her, and the next, I have her in my arms, wanting to confess every sin I’ve ever committed, every thought she’s owned. My emotions are like a damn jigsaw puzzle, and nothing quite fits where I think it should.

“About him?” She lights my heart on fire with her small laugh. “No, not at all. But I remember that two days later he came to school in crutches and

a busted-up nose.” She bows a brow. “And I always wondered. Always hoped it was you who did that.”

I chuckle, clutching the back of her head and bending my mouth lower. I’m not even sure why, other than I badly want to kiss her again. Because that kiss we shared... My God, it was incredible.

I rub my nose against the tip of hers instead, inhaling her flowery scent. I don’t know if it’s her shampoo or just her, but damn, she smells like heaven.

“My, my, little one. Who knew you had a vicious side?”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Raph Marino.” Her slinky tone has my cock already getting hard.

Tell me everything about you. Don’t skip a detail.

I inhale long, placing my lips to her forehead. “I love it when you call me Raph.”

Hearing her call me by my full name felt like there were more miles between us than there already were.

“So you didn’t like me calling you Raphael?” Amusement wafts her tone.

I groan, because how the hell can I not when she sounds like that? She narrows a playful look as I peer back at her.

“Not at all, tesoro mio. Not ever.”

Her gaze softens, and my knuckles roll down the soft contours of her cheek.

“Don’t ever call me that again.”

“Okay,” she murmurs, her eyes glued to mine, her palm rolling from my neck down to my shoulder.

This is what it was always supposed to feel like.

Being in love.

“And yes, little one,” I confess. “I did beat the shit out of that asshole.” A grin spreads over my face. “And I enjoyed every fucking second.”

Her mouth falls open and she laughs. “I knew it!”

She drops her hand from me, and I’m suddenly cold. But then her palm is there around my hip and she’s looking up at me with damn near amazement, and everything is perfect again.

“Tell me everything.”

She’s got me chuckling again.

"Well...as soon as you told me what he did, I went crazy." I settle my palms on the small of her back. "I may not have showed it to you, but I knew right then and there he was going to hurt for what he did to you."

Emotions flank through her eyes. And I get why. No one has ever defended this girl before.

"Once I left your house, I tried to look for him, going to his usual spots. The basketball court. The park. But he wasn't there. But the following day, after school, there he fucking was," I tell her. "With his two buddies, smoking joints."

She purses her lips. "Figures."

"I scared the other two away, and it was just me and him left," I continue. "He was ready to piss himself when he saw me. Because he knew I must've known what happened. He was all, 'Sorry, I'll never do that again.'" I scoff. "But with a single punch to his nose, he was on the ground and, well...the leg? I stepped on. By accident of course." I smirk.

"Of course," she giggles, and it's fucking adorable. "And here I thought you were sweet."

"Only with you, little one. Anyone touches you, and they die. I'd do anything for you. It's that simple." I press my lips to her forehead once more, closing my eyes and feeling everything for her in this very moment. "The only reason he remained alive was because of his age. But I swear, if he ever tries that on another woman, I will know about it, and this time, nothing will save him."

The kid screamed so damn loud, I wanted to record it and send it to her as a gift. He deserved worse. These assholes think they can do whatever they want to women. Like by having a dick, they own them. He's lucky I didn't kill him.

"Thank you, Raph." Her voice grows tearful, and she presses her cheek into my chest. "No one has ever been there for me the way you always have."

With the back of my hand, I tug up her chin. "Always will be, tesoro mio. You'll never be alone. No matter who you end up with, no matter how much it fucking hurts, I'll always be there. I'll always keep you safe. Because you're mine, even when you're not."

Her glossy stare is full of emotion, and if she cries, I'm going to throw her up against the nearest wall and finally show her what she means to me.

"What the hell did you ever see in that idiot anyway?" I ask.

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “I didn’t even really like him. I...just...”

She tries to glance down to the floor, but I grip her jaw roughly and refuse to let go.

“Look at me.”

She gasps at my harshness, her cheeks turning slight crimson.

Why the hell does she look so fuckable? The things I’m doing to her in my head right now...

“Finish what you were about to say,” I demand in a crude tone.

“You’re not going to want to hear it.”

“I want to hear everything that comes out of that pretty mouth.”

“Pretty ass and pretty mouth?” she teases. “Well, Raph, a girl could get used to all these compliments.”

“I’ve got so many more coming. Now tell me, why him?”

A heavy breath wooshes out of her. “I was sick of seeing you with her, so when he asked me out, I accepted. I hated every time she kissed you. Every time she told you she loved you. Because I wanted to be her.”

She bites into her bottom lip, and my mouth hungers for those lips. I want to be the one to do that over and over for the rest of my days.

“I thought if I had someone, you’d finally see me. That you’d be jealous. But you weren’t.”

“Nicolette...” I breathe, stroking a thumb across her heart-shaped mouth. “I was never in love with her. Not for a moment.”

I pause, not sure how much I should reveal, but in the end, I decide to tell her.

“I tried to end it that day you kissed me.”

“What?” Her eyes expand.

“Yeah.” I nod. “But she told me she was pregnant, so I stayed with her. Once she lost the baby, we were already married, so I couldn’t do—”

“She told you she was pregnant?” Her voice trails almost to a whisper, her features crawling with shock.

A chill crawls down the back of my neck. “What is it, Nicolette?”

“Did you ever go to doctor’s appointments with her?”

“No...” My arms fall to my sides, and I back a step, my head starting to spin. “She said she had one for bloodwork and that was it. She said she was newly pregnant.”

She presses two fingers into her temple, her expression growing distant, like she’s trying to remember everything from that time. Seconds later, and

she's shaking her head.

"She couldn't have been pregnant, Raph. She was always drinking at home, up to the time she moved in with you after the wedding. I'd see her with a glass at dinner almost nightly. Why would she do that if she were pregnant?" she asks. "And knowing her, she'd have told my parents so they could fawn over her even more."

A buzzing noise fills my ears, and I blink rapidly, unable to grasp what she's telling me even as she says more.

"She must've figured this was the best way to trap you. I wouldn't put it past her."

Could she be right? Did Bianca play me for a fool?

"Fuck!" I roar. "Fucking hell!"

I force a fist to the bridge of my nose. I can't believe this. I can't even confirm it.

She stole years from me on a possible lie. Was she that conniving? I mean, she fucked my father behind my back. Why am I even questioning it?

"I need to take a shower."

I reach for Nicolette, grabbing her hips and kissing her on her cheek, not wanting her to think I'm mad at her. She's one of the only people who actually gives a fuck about me. I can't lose her.

"Okay," she sighs. "Do you want me to make dinner?"

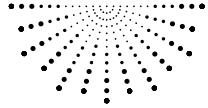
"We'll do it together once I'm done." A smile falls to my mouth easily.

"I love it when you smile at me like that," she breathes.

My heart beats faster the more she stares at me. "With you, all I wanna do is smile."

And when she sucks that damn bottom lip into her mouth again, I quickly turn and rush for the coldest shower of my goddamn life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



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NICOLETTE

THE WATER RUNS LIKE THE RAIN, AND KNOWING HE'S UNDER THE SPRAY OF it has me feeling insanely aware of my own body.

I can't believe he beat Leo up. He cared enough to do that. We have made a bunch of breakthroughs today. Not only did he beat up my jerkoff ex, but—here's the big one—he wasn't in love with my sister! If I could purchase one of those Times Square billboards and announce it to the world, I would.

All this time, I thought he really did love her. Meanwhile, he was with someone he didn't love only because he was just trying to be a good person. He's even more perfect than I've realized.

I busy myself in the kitchen, tidying up, trying to distract myself from the fact that he's naked in there right now. Wet and naked and hard in all the right places.

Yep. Here goes that visual. I force myself to think of anything else but that, yet it's all I'm consumed with.

"Nicolette," he groans.

Real low and sensual. The sound echoing.

Is he...

No. Of course he isn't doing *that* while saying my name.

"Nicolette," he husks out, deeper this time and a shudder scurries up my spine.

I mean maybe I should go and make sure he's okay. It's possible he... uh...hurt himself and is calling me for help. Wouldn't be nice of me to leave the poor guy hurt in the shower. Naked.

My feet are already moving the short distance, and when I find the door ajar, my heart rate kicks up. His gasping breaths burst out while I still, my back pressed against the wall, right beside the door, unable to move, or breathe or do anything but listen.

“Fuck...” His raspy growls have me clenching my thighs.

Okay, so he’s definitely not hurt. He’s... I can’t even finish the thought. Should I look and confirm?

I cover my mouth with a palm. No, I can’t do that. It’s a violation of privacy. It’s wrong. It’s dirty.

You’re better than this, Nicolette Ricci.

Am I, though?

“Fuuuck, Nicolette,” he growls on a whisper.

And before I can stop myself, I’m peeking inside, and...

Oh my God... I was right. He’s huge.

My heart ceases to beat, because he’s got a fist around his thick cock, his back and head pressed against the tiles, his eyes closed as he strokes himself.

Is this actually happening right now? And am I actually watching? My clit instantly throbs as I take in the rippling muscles of his arms, his defined six-pack straining as he hurries his tempo.

Water sluices down from his well-toned chest to the V that sharply runs lower. The need to touch myself has taken over.

He strokes roughly, gritting his teeth, cursing under his breath like he’s real close.

“Sei così fottutamente bella,” he grits.

He just called me fucking beautiful.

Oh, God.

His face strains while his hand jerks up and down real fast. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen. Raph touching himself. To me.

My core pulsates, and I roll my hips instinctively, the swell of my own desire rising until I can’t take the throbbing any longer.

He fists himself harder, and before I know what I’m doing, I slip my hand into the waistband of my leggings, past the edge of my panties and down to where I’m warm and achy for him.

From the crack in the door, my eyes stay glued to his drenched, tanned body. I’m already wet as two fingers work my clit, watching the man I want touch himself to thoughts of me. The faster he moves, the faster I do too.

He hisses my name on a strangled breath, and as I reach the edge, I let out a moan. A quiet one.

“Nicolette? Is that you?”

Or so I thought.

Shit!

I pull my hand out and stay frozen in place. Maybe if I don’t move, he’ll go back to doing...that.

As seconds fly by, I can’t seem to breathe. Or move. Or do much of anything.

“Nicolette. I know you’re there.”

My face heats up.

“Come on out now. Don’t make me ask again.”

Why does that demanding tone make me grow even more aroused.

My heart slams in my throat. What do I tell him? *Sorry I accidentally moaned while watching you jerk off?* Ugh!

“Get your ass in here.” His voice rolls with a deep-chested groan.

The door creaks as I part it the rest of the way.

As soon as I see him, he smirks with satisfaction, rolling his fingers through his hair. My stomach roils with utter humiliation and lust. He’s gloriously naked and not even ashamed that I’m seeing him that way. If it were me, I’d be so embarrassed.

“I’m sorry. I was just—”

He chuckles darkly. “You were just what? Watching me jerk off?”

“Uh,” I whisper, my body slinking with a shiver. Shame fills my entire face.

“Did you like what you saw?” He grabs his cock and languidly strokes it while his gaze zeroes on my lips and roves south.

My nipples strain against my shirt, and I instantly want to take it off. Want him to see me bare. Would he like what he saw? I’ve never been naked in front of a man before. It’s scary and vulnerable, yet I want to give him that. I want him to erase all of my insecurities.

“I shouldn’t have been watching you.” I try not to stare at his cock, but Lord, it’s like asking for the impossible.

I wonder how it’d feel in my hand. In my mouth. Inside me. Would it hurt? I bet it would. I bet I’d love it. I bet I’d beg him for more.

“Come here,” he calls with a crook of his finger.

And I'm moving not of my own volition. It's like he's got a string attached to me he can pull at any moment.

When I'm in front of him, my throat goes dry. My lips quiver. My panting gets louder. I force my eyes up to his. Is he going to touch me? Finally? But instead, he lifts my hand up and runs the tips of my fingers against his nose. His jaw tightens and he growls all deep and masculine.

My chest heaves with anticipation.

"You were touching yourself."

It's a statement, not a question. Heat rushes up to my face again.

"Fuck. You know what that does to me? To know you were touching that sweet pussy while watching me?"

My heart hammers, and I swear it will stop beating if he keeps talking like that. I try to get my hand back, but he cinches his grasp and pops my fingers into his mouth, sucking them, the hollows of his cheeks deepening while his gaze bores into mine, groaning as he tastes me on his tongue.

"So damn delicious. I bet you'd taste even sweeter spread open for me with my tongue in that tight little hole."

"Oh my God," I pant. "Am I dreaming?"

I once fantasized about this, but now he's talking to me like that. It's like he's doused me with gasoline and set me on fire. I ache everywhere for him.

"I think this is my dream, not yours." He brings my hand to his abs, and my body tightens from the mere feel of them against my fingertips.

"You know how beautiful you are, tesoro mio?" His gaze locks with mine. "I can't stop looking at you. I..." he stammers, his voice straining. "I don't have it in me to send you away right now." His teeth scrape along his lower lip. "So either you go or you watch me finish thinking of all the ways I wanna fuck you."

I stay rooted in place, rubbing the insides of my thighs together, wanting to watch him come so badly no one could tear me away from this place.

His mouth twitches. He wanted me to stay.

"Show me," I tell him. "I wanna watch."

He hisses and tightens his grasp on my hand right before he lets go. And the next thing I see is his fingers wrapping around his thickness.

He starts slow at first, his hungered gaze slinking up and down my body, sending me into overdrive. He increases his tempo, his teeth grinding, while glancing down to the apex of my thighs.

“Touch your pussy while I watch.” He growls my name, while jerking himself faster. “Use me the way I’ve been using you all these years. Picture my cock inside you.”

I gasp, my skin alive and prickling with desire. My hurried breaths leave my lungs in gasping aches.

Can I really do this?

He leans back against the wall and rolls his fist up and down.

Maybe I can do this. Maybe I can show him what he’s been missing. And before I lose my nerve, my hands are on the hem of my shirt as I lift it up and over my head.

“Oh fuck,” he strains.

I drop the shirt at my feet, and his eyes greedily take in my bare breasts.

“Take off the rest,” he demands.

I like hearing that power in his voice. I like him in control of me.

I tug down my leggings and panties. No going back now. When I step out of them, his eyes are on the length of me, leisurely sliding his lustful gaze down my curves, not missing a single inch.

There’s barely any space separating us. He can see every flaw, every imperfection.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he whispers, his tone tethered with complete awe.

He looks at me like I’m a sculpture made just for him.

His hand reaches out, and with a feathery touch, his knuckles brush down the side of my torso and down my hip until the span of his palm wraps around my ass.

“I’ve fantasized about this ass so many times. Dreamed about fucking it while I fucked myself to thoughts of it. Thoughts of you.” He squeezes, massaging my flesh, simultaneously working his hard-on.

My fingers slide down in between my breasts, my nipples growing taut from the intense look in his eyes. I want him everywhere. To fill me. To make me his. To make me feel. I never felt this way about anyone.

I drag my fingers lower until they’re between my thighs, dipping them against my achy clit. His hand stays where it is while I touch myself, groaning in sheer ecstasy, and the more I let him hear how good this feels, the more he squeezes my ass, and the harder he works himself.

“Damn, baby, look at you. Getting yourself off while I watch.”

I rub myself faster, our eyes aligned, dripping with passion. With so much want, we could fill pages of history.

“I want you, Raph. So bad...” I suck in a breath when he slides two fingers in between my ass cheeks.

“Tell me, were you saving that pretty tight pussy for me?” His hand slides from my behind to my hip, fingertips brushing down my stomach, almost touching me where I need him.

“Yes,” I gasp.

And with a muttered curse, he jerks my hand away and replaces it with his.

I scream out when two of his fingers roll around my clit, sending shockwaves down my entire body.

He groans. “Fucking hell. You’ve been walking around aching this bad for me?”

“Y-yes,” I stutter, my lips parted, cheeks flushed, knees weak.

I swear I’ll hit the ground, but an arm curls around me, holding me still, while he works me faster.

“Tell me I’m the only man who gets you this wet. Tell me I’m all you’ve ever wanted. Because you are all I’ve ever wanted.”

“You’re everything,” I breathe, trapping air in my lungs. “I’ve never felt anything like this before. You’re the only one. You’ll always be the only one.”

“Good girl,” he growls.

My body shudders with a cry when he replaces his fingers with his palm, forcing it against my clit, making me ride it until I’m near the edge.

“You make my cock rock hard. Make me want nothing else but to bury myself so deep, you’ll be sore for days.”

With all those dirty words, with the way he manipulates my body, I climb higher and higher.

“I’m close. Please...faster.”

But he suddenly stops. My body screams and trembles, wanting him to continue. And just when I think he’s changed his mind, his hands are on my hips and I’m flying in the air on a gasp.

He drops the backs of my thighs on his shoulders and walks me into the shower with him, throwing my body up against the wall, the water running down his back as he stares up at me.

“You’ve never had a man’s tongue inside you?”

I shake my head, unable to grasp the fact that my thighs are spread open for him and he's about to make my pussy his meal.

"Mmm, I love knowing I'm the first man to ever get to taste your pretty pussy."

And when his tongue languidly slides up my clit, I throw my head back with a scream and let him have every inch of me.

Masterfully, he flicks and fucks while I thrash and beg. God, I beg. I never want this to end.

"You taste like the sweetest sin. Like my every desire come to life. And I know this is wrong. Fuck, baby, I'm not strong enough."

He dips his tongue inside me, and I buck against it, grabbing a fistful of his hair, tugging him even closer. The sound of his husky laughter vibrates across my sensitive flesh. My God, can his tongue move. But I want more. I want him to fuck me. To let go completely.

But I know he won't. He's still trapped in his regret, and I'm sure once this is over, he'll regret it too.

The tip of his tongue rolls around my clit, my thighs squeezing his neck, and this time when he does it again, I fly. I soar. I scream out his name over and over, the orgasm a never-ending sensation wafting through me.

His tempo slows when my body jerks before it stills. That mouth of his lands against both of my inner thighs in a soft kiss.

"Thank you," he says with utter emotion.

Gently he lifts me off of him and slides my body down, until I'm pinned against the wall, his heavy cock pushing into me.

"For what?" I heave with every inhale.

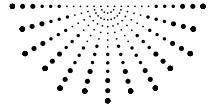
He grips my jaw in his powerful hand, his thumb stroking the corner of my mouth. "For trusting me with your body."

"I'd give you everything, Raph. It's yours." My voice grows pained. "You can take it all."

He holds my face with both hands, his gaze drowning into mine. "But I can't."

I know he means my virginity. And right now, I hate him for it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



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RAPH

MY WILL WASN'T STRONG ENOUGH TO RESIST HER, NOT WHEN I KNEW SHE'D been touching herself behind that door.

I didn't expect for her to strip for me, but fuck, I'll never get that image out of my head for as long as I'm alive. She's even more beautiful than I imagined.

Seeing her like that, all turned on, fingers dipping inside her, I admit I was weak. Weaker than I've ever been around her. I told myself it was okay to get a little taste. No harm. She's still a virgin. She can still give that to someone else.

A sinner like me doesn't deserve an angel like her. I'd swallow her light with my darkness and extinguish it for good.

She's better off without me. It's the way it has to be. Once we're free, I'll set her up with a house of her own, with her personal armed guard. That way I know she's always watched out for. And if her fucking boyfriend or husband doesn't like it, he'll have to deal with me.

I bury a fist into my temple at the very thought of her with someone else.

My chest tightens. I may not like it, but it's the way it has to be. But Nicolette is mine to protect. She'll always be mine. No matter whose ring she wears.

She pulls on the hem of her oversized sweatshirt and flips the comforter over, getting ready for bed. We haven't said much to each other since the shower. It's the unease between us that I hate the most. I hated it then when I kept my distance, and I hate it even more now.

"Are you coming to bed?" she asks, settling on the pillow.

“Yeah...” I stare silently at her while she stares back.

I know I belong right beside her, holding her as she falls asleep. But instead, I shut off the lights and lower to the floor. Just as I’m ready to shut my eyes, a knock pounds on the door. Instantly, I jump to my feet.

“Who is that?” Her sharp intake of breath fills the room.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. “Stay here.”

My pulse knocks inside my ears. No one knows where we are. There’s not a house for miles. Whoever that is can’t be here for a friendly visit. Quietly, I reach for the nightstand drawer and pick up my semi-auto, slipping it into the waistband of my sweats.

“Please be careful,” she breathes.

“I will. Hide if you hear someone coming.”

She nods, her shoulders quivering as she sits up.

I hate leaving her alone, but I have to know who’s here before they try to get inside. I exit the bedroom and head for the main door until I’m beside the window.

When I flip the corner of the curtain, I find a black sedan parked right in front with a man, not much older than me, staring at his cell. He paces back and forth right before the door, muttering something, while a woman is waiting inside the passenger side, giving him an irritated look.

Another knock comes through, and he stares up at the door, turning his head back to the woman, flipping his hands in the air.

“Hey, excuse me,” he says. “But my wife and I are lost. If someone is in there, could you please help us out. We just want to find Acres Lodge. It’s our anniversary...” He chuckles nervously. “And I got us lost. Wife ain’t happy. You’d be doing me a solid.”

How the hell did they end up here?

“I don’t know where that is,” I call out. “Sorry.”

I do in fact know where the place is, and he’s definitely heading in the wrong direction.

“Oh, thank God! Someone is in there. Honey!” he yells over to her. “You were right. There is a man inside and he’s going to get us there. You’ll see.”

She rolls her window down. “Well, hurry! I’m exhausted and I need to pee!”

“Please, man, can you at least look at this damn map on my phone? The GPS keeps taking us in circles. It would mean a great deal. You know how

women are.” He laughs again, and with a shake of my head, I unlock the door and start to open it. “Let me see the—”

The words die in my throat as a gun is pointed to my chest. “Hi, Raph. Sorry to have to do this, but your father sends his regards.”

His thumb rests on the trigger as a menacing grin takes hold of his face.

Fuck. Nicolette! I glance back at the car, but the woman is gone.

No!

In a flash, I duck down, just as one of his bullets rings off. My leg kicks him, throwing him to the ground, the weapon slipping from his hands, the back of his head hitting the ground hard. Not hesitating, I reach for his nine as he struggles. My forearm pushes into his throat as I strain my other hand toward the gun.

Fingertips graze the muzzle, while simultaneously, I throw punch after punch into his jaw with my free hand. My fingers wrap around the weapon, and when he registers it in my grasp, his eyes bulge.

“Should’ve thought better than to come after her,” I say.

“Fuck you,” he spits out, rage filling his blue eyes when I line the barrel in between them.

“Go to hell,” I snap, firing a single bullet.

Blood seeps from the top of his head as I jump to my feet, rushing toward Nicolette. And as soon as I see that woman from the car on the floor, on top of her, hands wrapped around Nicolette’s throat, I don’t even hesitate.

Pop.

Nicolette screams as the bitch falls right over her, practically smothering her. Her muffled cries get louder as I run, throwing the woman off.

“It’s me,” I say as soon as she sees me, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. “Oh, baby, I’m sorry.” My voice breaks.

Gently, I lift her shuddering body into my arms.

“Are you hurt?” My eyes scan the length of her.

But she only cries with a shake of her hand. Rage roils in my gut.

“Sh-she came through the window. I was so scared, Raph.” She burrows her face into my chest, and I kiss the top of her head, shutting my eyes.

This is what life with me will be like. There will always be an enemy we’re fighting, and she’ll always be the one they go after.

“We have to get out of here,” I tell her. “We’re no longer safe.”

“Wh-where are we going to go?” She looks back up, her features tight, eyes glistening.

The cold wind sweeps through the now-broken window, glass shattered on the ground.

Whoever these two were, they were experts. Not good ones, though. I have to get a hold of Michael and let him know what happened. But first, I have to get her to safety.

Hurriedly, I grab a suitcase from the closet and start stuffing our clothes and everything we have inside, while she throws in her shampoo and razors and all the cans of food she can find.

“Come on,” I tell her. “We have to go in case they send more people.”

“O-kay.” She nods while I grab her hand and drag the suitcase out the door, swinging the car door open and securing her inside.

Popping the trunk, I throw in the luggage before getting in.

“What about the bodies?” she asks just as I start the car.

“I’ll call Michael to send people to clean it up.”

Her hands ball and tremble in her lap. “I can’t believe your father found us. It has to be him, right?”

“It was.” I get us on the road, speeding down a deserted stretch of land, surrounded by tall mountains that I manage to see only due to the streetlights.

“Oh, God...” Her words trail.

I grab her hand and thread my fingers through hers, squeezing as I peer over before looking back on the road. “We’ll be okay. I promise you. We’ll make it out of this, and then you can be free from all of this.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to be free if that means being without you.”

“You don’t mean that.” I turn right, whizzing past a single SUV to her right.

“But I do, Raph. I’d rather live a life of fear and be with you than be safe and alone.”

My jaw tenses, and I don’t know what to say because I don’t want that life for her. She deserves so much more than that. But if I tell her that, all

she'll do is fight me.

We drive wordlessly for miles, passing darkened street after darkened street.

I drop her hand, reaching into my pocket, removing my cell.

Pushing a button after I unlock it, I say, "Call Michael."

The cell starts to ring.

"Yeah?" His voice booms through the vehicle.

"He sent two assassins after us. They tried to kill us. Their bodies are still there."

The next thing we hear is a curse. "I'll send the cleaners. Did you get to check the bodies for any marks?"

If they are a part of any crime syndicate, they'd have some kind of tattoo or mark on them.

"No time."

"Okay. I'm on it. You two okay?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Do you know where to go?"

"I know the plan." We discussed this privately already. If we have to run, we go to this small, unassuming motel across state lines. It's better to hide out somewhere with less foot traffic and even less cameras.

"Okay." He pauses, but I can still hear his heavy breathing. "I'll get you home, Raph, where you belong. And when you're back, the seat is yours if you want it. I can step aside."

Me as the head of the family? It's something I've always wanted...once upon a time, when I cared about getting my father's approval. But now I don't.

"I'm happy to support you, Michael."

"Are you sure?" he asks incredulously.

"Yes. The seat is yours."

"If you're sure."

"I am," I tell him.

"I want you as my number two, then," Michael continues. "I want you back where you belong. I won't take no for an answer."

I glance back at Nicolette. Can I still be with her when my position will bring added danger?

Will she even want me now? But it doesn't matter. I won't refuse my brother. He risked everything to help me. I owe him my respect and my

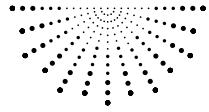
loyalty too.

“Okay,” I tell him, my eyes on the road once more. “I’ll do it.”

And with those three words, I may have cemented my future without her.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



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NICOLETTE

I RUB AT MY EYES, PULLING IN A YAWN JUST AS THE CAR SLOWS TO A STOP in an almost-bare parking lot.

“How was your nap?” He kisses the top of my head, and I feel the warmth spreading across my skin, erasing the horror from before.

“Mmm...good.” I lift up my head, pressing my fingers into my eyes.

“I can see that.” He smirks, glancing down at his shoulder.

“Oh my God. I drooled on you.” I pinch my lips and shut my eyes with complete and utter humiliation.

He chuckles so freely, I want to bathe in the feeling it gives me. Pure happiness. That’s what being with him feels like.

“I’m never taking it off.” He hits me with a showstopping grin, and there goes my pulse. “Come on, let’s go get a room.”

Instantly, my mind goes to why we’re actually here. I can’t help but recall that woman on top of me, choking the life out of me, while her cold eyes seeped into mine. She didn’t even hesitate once she jumped in from the window.

I ran into the closet and held on to that doorknob, but she dragged it open right before I slammed it into her face.

The gun she had on her slipped from her grasp, and instead of going after it, she grabbed a handful of my hair and tossed me onto the floor. Stars exploded before my eyes when my head hit the ground, and she took advantage of that moment.

My fingers slide up to my neck, the burning sensation still present.

With a slow sigh, my eyes take in the two-story motel, green and pink fluorescent lights bathing it. It reminds me of a nightclub, except a lot

seedier.

There are only three cars parked in the lot, and I'm hoping it's the people who work here. Don't want too many eyes on us.

He exits the vehicle, taking out the luggage, and comes to stand on my side.

He swings my door open. "You ready?"

"Yeah, just..." I fidget, and my feet refuse to move.

"It's okay to be afraid, little one." He takes my hand in his and gently pulls me against his chest, tilting my face up to meet his eyes. "I'm so damn sorry...for everything. If I lost you. If I let that happen..."

I extend my hand toward the thick stubbles riding his jaw and hold him in my palm.

"I don't blame you. I never will." My arms circle around his neck.

"You should, Nicolette. My family cost you everything. Your freedom. Your life. If I could do one thing for you, it would be to give you the world and make you realize I don't belong in it."

The sheer, utter devastation of his words breaks my heart.

"If you gave me a world that didn't include you, I'd burn it to the ground and walk through hell to find you. Because whether you realize it or not, Raph Marino, you can't change how I feel about you."

He tilts his head up to the pitch-black sky, not a star within it.

"I don't deserve you," he whispers softly.

"And yet, you have me."

He shakes his head and releases a heavy sigh, and together, we head toward the entrance and walk inside.

The bell rings as a middle-aged woman peers up, popping her chewing gum as she gives us a cold once-over.

"Yeah?" Her black-rimmed glasses sit slanted on her wide nose.

"We need a room," Raph says.

"Mm-hmm." She taps a few keys on the laptop in front of her, a pen sticking out from the top of one of her ears.

"It's eighty. A night." She pitches me with a disapproving look. "We don't do hours here."

"Good thing," he snickers. "'Cause she isn't my whore."

For a moment, her brows shoot up, and then she's back to looking at us with disgust.

“I’m paying for the week. Will extend as needed.” He removes his wallet and hands her a wad of cash. “Keep the change.”

That makes her cold, dead eyes glisten like diamonds, and a smile finally crawls to her thin, chapped lips. She grabs the cash and pops it into the register, handing him a key card.

“Room number twelve. It’s got one bed. Will that be a problem?” She eyes him curiously.

“You don’t have any with two queens?” he asks, and she slowly creeps her gaze toward me.

“No. Bedbugs. It’s what we’ve got. You want it or not?”

“We’ll take it,” he says.

“Mm-hmm.” She returns to chewing her gum and ignoring us.

“Wow,” I mutter under my breath as he takes my hand in his and pulls me back out into the street.

We move from door to door, looking for our room.

“Twelve should be here.” He points up ahead.

Nerves swallow up my gut at the thought of sharing a bed with him. Unless he plans to sleep on the floor again, which by the appearance of this place would be a big mistake...

A few more rooms, and we’re in front of ours, a blue door with a tilted number twelve on it. He scans the room key, and as soon as we walk in, he flips on the light.

Okay, so the inside isn’t as horrifying as I had pictured. Minus the bright red stain on the gray rug that looks as though a murder happened here. The bed is plain brown wood with a floral yellow comforter. I guess that was their attempt at livening up the place. Can’t say it’s working.

“I know this isn’t the Hilton,” he says, “but we have to stay off the grid. And tomorrow I’ll have Michael get one of the guys to drop off a new car for us. We can’t use the one I was driving anymore.”

“Okay.” I plop myself down on the mattress. “You think they’ll find us again?”

His draws closer and lowers himself beside me. “I’ll do everything in my power to prevent that from happening.”

And this time as he gazes into my eyes, he doesn’t attempt to tuck his hand into mine or hold me. I nod, glancing down into my lap. In his arms, I feel safety, and without them, I feel bare and cold. Does he regret what happened in the shower? Is he trying to push me away?

“You should get some rest,” he tells me.

But at the very thought of falling asleep, being vulnerable to our enemies, my body clamps up, and I shiver. Even knowing he’ll be near does nothing to force the dread away.

He starts to remove his sneakers, and I remove mine, neither of us bothering to change our clothes since we had changed right before we started packing. Slowly, I slide into the bed, my cheek hitting the icy pillowcase before it warms against my skin.

And instead of making himself comfortable on the floor, he does something I really didn’t think he would. He lies beside me and gets real close, until the heat from his body warms me from the inside.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Sleeping beside you.” He throws an arm around me.

“Since when?” I breathe, shivers coasting down my arm.

I wait and wait for his response, wondering if he’ll actually utter a word.

His mouth presses to the back of my head. “Since the moment I almost lost you.”

RAPH

Propping my head on my palm, I watch her sleep, tucked against me. She’s on her back, her full lips slightly parted, chest gently rising, the blanket casually draped around her middle.

She drifted off with ease, as though all she needed was me. I’m willing to give her that if it means she gets some rest, even while it’s pure torture for me.

Her nipples poke through her shirt, having me wondering if she likes them sucked on.

Does she even know what she likes? What makes her feel good? Bet I can teach her. Show her what her body can do. Maybe I should be the one to take her virginity. Make it special for her. Make it right. Teach her things for...

For what? For some other asshole to reap the fucking benefits?
I ball my other hand and grind my teeth. She should be mine.

I reach a hand, the featherlike touch of my knuckles slowly rolling down the slope of her high cheekbone.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper.

She stirs and lets out a moan.

I snap my hand away.

“Mmm,” she drawls, the sway of her voice a raspy thing.

Did she know I was touching her? Does she know I’m aching for her? Fuck, I hope I didn’t wake her. That’s the last thing she needs. Her wound is slowly healing, and she is in a lot less pain now.

Her body stretches as she lets out a series of tight moans, her knees shifting under the blanket, her hands gripping the sheets.

“Yes...” she mumbles.

My pulse speeds.

Is she having...?

A sultry sigh leaves her lips, hot breaths escaping between them, the blanket now rolling down to her calves.

God damn it, she’s definitely having one of those dreams. My cock throbs and my heart hammers as I continue to watch her getting turned on.

Who the hell is she thinking about? I want to kill him already.

My ragged breaths consume me as she continues to cry out lowly in her sleep, pushing her knees into one another.

Without a second thought, I brush the pads of my fingers over the tops of her thighs, so close to where I bet she’s warm and wet.

The bulge between my legs grows stiffer every second I watch her, wanting to wake her up and ask who she’s dreaming about, who’s making her feel this good.

Suddenly, her hand reaches to where my fingers still trace her, and she grips my wrist.

“Raph...” she cries.

And before I can process the fact that it was my name she was just gasping, her eyes fly open.

“Hey,” I smirk, keeping my cool even as my heart pounds, wanting to kiss away that puzzled look on her face and replace it with something else.

“Hi...uh...what time is it?” She quickly takes her hand back and drags the blanket back over her breasts, denying me the view.

But the image of her naked in that bathroom is forever seared into my head, and there’s nothing she can do about that.

“It’s late, little one. Go back to bed.”

“Was I...um...” Her throat tremors as she tries to finish that.

But I’m not about to embarrass her.

“Were you having a bad dream?” I bring her hand up to my mouth and kiss the top of it.

Her chest rises with a tremble, and she bites that lower lip while I hold back a groan.

“Yeah...uhh...very bad dream.” She clears her throat. “That’s what it was.”

If the lights were on, I bet she’d be blushing.

“How about I hold you and keep the monsters away?” The words fly out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Damn idiot. She’s going to feel you rock hard.

But my heart doesn’t seem to care right now. All it wants is her.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” she breathes.

I place her palm over my chest. I bet she feels it—the racing of my heart for her. “Never been surer of anything in my life.”

Except that I love you.

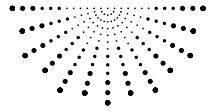
Her loud breaths fill the silence. And even in the dark, I can see her staring right into my eyes, wanting me with just as much force.

“Lascia che ti stringa mentre dormi.” *Let me hold you while you sleep.*

“Okay,” she softly rasps.

And wordlessly, I slide up beside her, my front to her back, and I hold her tight, wondering how I can possibly let her go.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



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NICOLETTE

TWO WEEKS LATER

THE MOTEL HAS CONTINUED TO BE OUR HOME THESE PAST COUPLE OF WEEKS. It's been quiet, and we're both alive, so that's something to be thankful for.

After he held me that very first night, I've been in his arms ever since, sleeping beside him, his powerful body making me feel safe. I've gotten so used to sleeping with him that I don't know what I'll do when we're free of this place.

I keep wondering if we'll be strangers again.

My heart tightens in my chest. The painful truth that he may not want me, even after everything we've shared, hurts me to my core. He hasn't tried to kiss me or do anything, and I've been too afraid of rejection to make the first move.

Sitting on the couch, I wait for him to return. He'd left a little while ago to pick up a second car Michael has left him a few miles away. They thought it better to switch one more time just in case the other one Michael had sent as soon as we got to the motel had been spotted.

I love how close Raph is with his brothers. They've always been that way. I wish I'd had that. A sister I could rely on. But that was never us.

I still remember the day I caught Bianca and Giancarlo making out in his car, well after she was married to Raph.

We were all planning on having dinner at my sister's, and Raph was to do the cooking. I had finished school early and decided to drop by in hopes of catching him alone and maybe offering my help. I thought maybe it'd be a way to get us to how we used to be.

But things didn't go as planned. Instead of finding him there, I found something else entirely.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO

ALMOST 20

I decided to take the train to Raph's today, leaving my car at campus. I attend college not far from home, but dorming allowed me to have some peace away from seeing Raph and my sister together.

When I don't see Raph's SUV, I start for the back of the house to wait for him in the yard when suddenly a car comes rolling down their gated street.

As the black sedan gets closer, I peer around from the side of the back wall, wondering who it can be. But when the sedan stops, I find Giancarlo at the wheel, my sister beside him.

Okay, that's weird. She's supposed to be coming from work. Did he pick her up? I stand there, waiting for her to exit, but instead, she throws her arms around him and...

"Oh my God..." I whisper.

She's kissing him. Not on the cheek, either. His hand finds the back of her head, and he pins her to the headrest and practically eats her alive.

This is disgusting. Nausea swirls in my gut. She can't be doing this to Raph. Oh my God, poor Raph. What if he's heading home right now and finds them? This will kill him. I knew she was a bitch, but to him? Why? Why would she do this?

I instantly hate her even more.

I never liked Giancarlo either. He's one of those sleazy kinds of men and he treats Fernanda, Raph's mom, like shit. Even with all my parents' faults, Dad never treated Mom badly. Not in front of us, anyway. How could he do this to his own son?

Finally, she gets out, swiping her mouth with a grin. I shake my head with vitriol filling my chest.

She winks at him like she's some schoolgirl with a crush.

You're married, you bitch! To his son!

"I'll see you in a bit, you sexy thing," Giancarlo calls before he speeds back out.

And when she turns toward the house, she jumps back with a gasp.

With a hand on my hip, I glower at her. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

She scoffs, heading for the door and taking out her keys. “What’s your problem?”

“Seriously? You want to pretend that I didn’t just see you tongue-fucking your father-in-law?”

She opens the door, heading inside, her heels clacking before she removes them and places them in the foyer closet.

I swear if I could get away with it, I’d take one of those thin heels of hers and stab her in the eye.

“Hello! I’m talking to you!” I follow her into the kitchen, not even taking off my shoes.

“Listen, child,” she snarls. “I’m a grown woman and what I do is not your business.” She takes a single step and glares. “Now shut up and pretend you didn’t see that. Got it?”

“I won’t do that.” I near her, only a few feet between us now. “I won’t lie to him. He deserves better than you. He always has. Now he’ll have a good reason to leave you.”

Her eyes grow wide, and for a split second, I think she’s actually afraid. But she lets out a laugh—a big, mocking laugh—and pretends she needs to catch her breath.

“That’s truly adorable.” Her brows pinch and her lips tighten as she pats my shoulder. “I almost feel bad for you, Nicky. Being obsessed with my husband so much that you’d be willing to ruin your own life by ruining mine.”

“Don’t call me Nicky. That’s not my name.”

She does that on purpose, knowing I hate it. No one calls me that. My God, how can we be related?

“I wouldn’t be ruining my life,” I tell her. “I’d let Raph see exactly who you are.”

She steps into my face, her expression icy, our bodies almost an inch away.

“Really? Is that what you think? Because if you tell him, he won’t believe you.” A single cunning laugh rolls out of her. “I’ll cry. Tell him you’re jealous. That you’re not over him and want to see our marriage fail. I’ll tell him that you still wanting him is stressing me out and you are the cause of why we can’t seem to get pregnant. I’ll tell him that you’re no

longer welcome here in our home and that it's time we cut ties with you for the sake of our marriage. And Mom and Dad? They'll be on board with it, because they never loved you. You know that, right?"

My chin trembles, tears filling the space behind my eyes. Those words may as well have been a knife to tear me apart. Because that's what she just did.

And the sad truth is, she's right about it all. Raph would do anything she wanted, even cast me aside. My parents would do everything to protect her. They'd blame me. Hate me. Tell me how ridiculous I am for thinking she could do such a thing. And Giancarlo, if he were to find out, would probably kill me. I can't say a word.

The front door opens, the sound growing in the distance. Footfalls thud heavily.

"Hello? Bianca, you home?" Raph's voice calls as he treads through the foyer, walking the distance toward us.

"Yes, baby!" she says. "Right here in the kitchen."

Now I see him, both of us staring at one another. His jaw clenches, his gaze searing into mine.

My heart stills and my pulse pounds.

But then he quickly looks at her, clearing his throat.

"What's going on here?" he questions. "You girls okay?"

He slips out of his dove-gray suit jacket, the white dress shirt beneath contouring to his biceps like a second skin.

"Oh, yeah, we're fine." She slides up against him, her manicured fingers trailing down his abs, and I'm filled with heated jealousy.

Watching the man you want with someone who should've never had him to begin with is agony.

She takes her time touching him, glaring at me as she does, a sinister grin on her face that he can't see.

"Nicolette had something to share with us, isn't that right?" She smiles politely, a coat of venom lining her sinister mouth.

My heart races and my head spins. My throat closes as he pins me with a concentrated gaze.

"What is it?" he asks, circling his arm around her, and it's as though he's yanked my heart out of my chest and stomped on it.

I can't say it.

I shake my head. "Nothing. I...uh...I've gotta go."

I practically run out of the kitchen and toward the door. I can hear her laughter, and the back of my eyes burn.

“Nicolette!” he yells out just as I rush onto the street, running for the gate, needing away from this place.

He runs after me.

“Wait, damn it.”

The emotion in his voice, the demand in it... It’s what causes me to stop. To turn. To look at him. And I instantly regret it because I can’t look at him without wanting to die.

His palm lands on my arm, as though a shackle meant to keep me in place. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going back to school.”

“Why?” His chest heaves.

“Because, Raph...just because.”

His breaths roll out of him like a quiet tide, drowning me in goodbye.

“I wish you wouldn’t go,” he says.

I wish I didn’t have to, either. But I can’t be here anymore.

I let out a heavy sigh. “Are you happy, Raph? Like truly happy?”

He pauses, his gaze narrowing, like he’s trying to figure out why I asked. Seconds drift by, and selfishly, I want him to say he isn’t. That she could never make him happy like I can.

But instead, he breaks my heart all over again.

“I am happy.”

I nod with sorrow filling the marrow of my bones.

“Good, then,” I say with a broken kind of smile, and it feels like every piece of me is dying. “Be happy.”

Even if it’s not with me.

I pivot and start for the road, the distance growing between us.

“Come back,” he calls with a tight rasp in his voice.

My heart...it swells with hope, with hate and love and all these emotions I can’t contain. And right here on this street, I stop for the second time, like he holds the key to my every move, every breath, every molecule in my body. It’s his. I’m barely able to hold back the tears as I face him once more.

“Stay.”

He treads a step closer, keeping his eyes on mine, and it’s almost too much to look at him. Too painful. I want to run away while running into his arms at the same time.

“Have dinner with us,” he goes on. “Your parents will be here soon.”

“I don’t belong here. Never did.”

His eyes grow sad, right along with mine.

“Bye, Raph,” I say this final time, meaning it.

As I rush out of there, I could swear I hear him whisper, “You belong with me.”

But when you’re in love with someone who’ll never love you back, you pretend to hear things they’ll never truly say.

That was the most Raph ever said to me since that moment I kissed him. I still don’t know if I really heard him say those words, and I never asked. Because in the end, it didn’t matter. He was hers. He was never mine.

But now I know the truth. He never loved her, and somehow that gives me comfort. I wonder if he’d be mad at me if he were to find out I knew about the affair for all that time and didn’t tell him. It’s my one regret. I let her scare me, but at the time, I was afraid of losing Raph for good. Now, once he finds out I knew, I might lose him anyway.

RAPH

I shut the door of the black sedan Michael had left for me. Reaching for the glove compartment, I find two nine-mils and a bunch of bullets, along with a few more burner phones.

Before I can start the car, one of them rings, and I immediately know it’s him. Pressing a button, I answer it.

“Yeah?”

“Glad you got your gifts.” There’s amusement trickling in his tone.
“There’s more in the trunk.”

“Oh, yeah?” I chuckle. “Must be my birthday.”

“Consider it an early gift.”

“Can’t wait to open it.”

I start the car and put him on speaker.

“I’ve got some news,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll be married in a few days.”

Well, can’t say I expected that so soon.

“Honestly didn’t think you’d go through with it.”

“Let’s just say she just landed at my feet and had no other choice in the matter.”

“Poor girl.”

He laughs. “She’s kinda growing on me.”

“By the sound of it, it seems it’s more than kinda. What is she like?”

“She’s good with Sophia. They get along.”

“How about for you? Does she like you?”

“I’m growing on her too.” He chuckles. “Maybe.”

He sounds happy. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him sound that way.

“You deserve that,” I say.

“She’s not staying.” His voice hardens. “She agreed to a year in exchange for her freedom, and I will give her that.”

“Why not keep her?”

“Wouldn’t be right, even if she wanted to stay. You know the way our life is, it wouldn’t be safe.”

“I get it.”

It’s why I can’t keep Nicolette either. That and about a hundred other reasons.

“Also wanted to tell you, I’m talking to the Irish and I may have a plan soon.”

“Look, Michael...” I let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t want you putting yourself at risk for me. You have a daughter. I can answer for my own mistakes. This is on me.”

“No. This is on *him*. You did what you thought was right, but *he* put it in motion, and for that, he will answer.”

My pulse thrashes. “I want to see him suffer.”

“And he will.” He pauses. “Take care of yourself. I’ll be in touch.”

“Tell your fiancée I can’t wait to meet her.” I let out a small laugh.

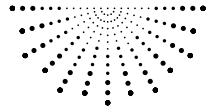
“She thought you were dead.”

“Sometimes it feels that way.”

Except when I’m with her.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



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RAPH

DRIVING BACK TO THE MOTEL, I SEE A MINI MART AND PARK IN THE LOT, knowing we need to restock on some items. All the money Michael left us in the trunk should keep us fed for at least thirty years.

Stepping out of the car, I keep my head down as I enter. Spotting sunglasses in a spinning stand, I grab two and put one on, then pull out a cart, heading for the frozen section. I throw a bunch of boxed pizzas she loves and White Castle cheeseburgers, which have also become her favorite.

Walking toward the register, I spot a camera in the corner.

“Hi there,” an elderly woman, maybe in her seventies, greets me. “Is that all today?”

“Yeah, plus these sunglasses,” I tell her.

“Sure.” She presses a few keys. “That’ll be forty dollars and sixty-two cents.”

She looks to me with kind eyes, wrinkles deepening at the sides of her pale green eyes.

Silently, I hand her the cash, darting my gaze to the right, noticing a small corner with bouquets of flowers.

“Are those fresh?” I gesture toward them with my chin as she looks that way.

“Oh, yeah. I grow them myself.” She stares fondly at them. “My Johnny used to grow them, and every morning, like clockwork, he’d leave a red rose on my pillow before heading to work.” Tears shimmer in her eyes. “Now, every morning for the past two years, I’m at the cemetery, leaving one for him.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, feeling her anguish. “Was he your husband?”

“Of forty years, he sure was.” She grins proudly. “You got a lady?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh on a chuckle, handing her the money. “I’m not sure what she is.”

“By the look on your face, I say you do.” She laughs. “So how about you grab a bouquet, on me, and you tell her how you feel. Might make you feel better.”

I snicker, rubbing a palm down my face. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I think it is.” Her lips thin into a knowing smile. “And being that I’m old, I don’t have many good ideas left, so I say you run with it and see what happens.”

I exhale a short breath of laughter. “All right. Add the bright pink roses to my total. I’ll be paying for them.”

“Sure thing. It’s ten.”

I hand her one hundred. “Thank you. Keep the change.”

“Are you sure?” Wide-eyed, she stares at the bill, then at me. “This is one hundred. Not ten.”

“I’m sure.” My mouth tips up and I head toward the flowers, picking up the roses and inhaling their scent.

They remind me of her shampoo. I wonder if she’ll like them. Then I wonder if she’ll wonder why the hell I’m getting her flowers when half the time I’m pushing her away.

But I want to be like Johnny. I want to wake up beside her and leave a red rose on her pillow. I want her to know she’s loved. And I want to be the one who loves her.

So maybe this woman is right. Maybe I should just tell Nicolette I’m in love with her and that I want us to be together.

Or maybe I’ve lost my mind. But right now, it doesn’t even matter.

“You be sure to tell me if you win her over, you hear?” the woman says when I go back for the rest of my stuff.

“Will do, ma’am. Have a great day.”

The door chimes as I exit, and I start for the car, dropping the bags on the passenger seat before getting back on the road. It’s only a couple of miles to the motel, and I park right in front.

Items in hand, I enter our room, and as soon as she sees me, she sits up on the bed and smiles.

My heart flips in my chest, and the more I stare into her eyes, the more it does.

And I remember the woman's words all over again.

I never once felt this way with Bianca. Not when we met, not after I married her, not even as we tried for a baby after her supposed miscarriage.

I wanted a child more than I wanted her, but we couldn't have any. The doctors didn't understand why. We did all the tests, and we were both fine, but it was like the universe was kicking me in the ass, trying to tell me to leave. And I should've. After I found out she had been lying about being at work, I should've told her I wasn't in love with her, and I should've left.

But my father...he's always had this hold on me, and I couldn't let him shame me. Instead, he was fucking her behind my back.

"What do you have there?" Nicolette rises out of the bed with her long, lean legs, hair gleaming like the goddess she is.

My hand balls around the bag and flowers, because this woman makes me see the impossible—a future I once only imagined. A life full of love and family and all the things I didn't think were attainable for a bastard like me.

But right now, with her pink-stained cheeks and that grin on her face, all I want is to confess all my truths and erase all the lies I've ever told to survive an existence without her.

"What's wrong?" Her brows furrow, her hand clasping my wrist.

"I'm just..." I drag in a breath, my pulse slamming in my ears.

Just say it. Tell her. Show her. Fuck everything else. She makes you happy. That's all you need to know.

"What is it, Raph?" Her other palm falls tenderly to my cheek, and concern weaves and deepens in her gaze.

She glides her fingertips over my stubble, and every part of me catches fire—engulfed, breathing in the smoke. My throat closes and my eyes shut, drifting to a place where she is mine and I am hers.

Tell her how you feel. Might make you feel better.

She was right, that woman at the store. Because right now, all I want is to tell her what she does to me.

What am I truly afraid of? Of losing her? Of becoming my father? I'm nothing like him. I can't be. The way I feel for her...there's no way my father ever felt an ounce of that for any woman, let alone my mother.

In a flash, I drop the bags and roughly grab her face with both of my palms.

Her widened gaze captures mine.

“Raph?” she whispers. “What’s going on?”

And I don’t know. I have no answers to that question except that all I want in this very moment is to kiss her and never let go.

It’s as though I’m moving on autopilot, my heart doing all the talking now. The way it should’ve been from the very beginning. But I was too busy drowning out the words, letting the noise in my head win.

Her chest shudders with her hurried exhales and mine are equally heavy, storming out of me in waves.

I drag my knuckles across her jaw.

“Touching you like this...” I drop my forehead to hers. “You feel mine. Always were,” I breathe.

“Are you feeling okay?” Her whispered voice swims with surprise, and I can’t help but let out a small laugh.

“I’m more than okay, tesoro mio, and that’s because of you.”

Her mouth begins to move, but nothing manages to come out of it.

Raw emotions stitch up my throat as I pitch back while her eyes search mine, filling with questions and unspoken words she’s afraid to say.

I return my other hand to her cheek, cradling her velvety skin, our eyes holding on to one another in a sea of chaos, and I let the truth seep from the depths of my heart.

“You’ve always been the one for me, Nicolette. No matter how many years have passed, no matter the distance between us, you own me. You’ve owned me since the moment you kissed me. Because since that moment all I’ve ever thought about was you. I never quite figured out how to stop.”

Tears gradually fill her gaze.

“And all I could do was suffer in silence wanting you the way I did, knowing I couldn’t have you.”

“You felt something when I kissed you?” Disbelief clouds her features, and my mouth jerks into a smile.

“I felt a lot of things, little one. All of them equally profound and equally dirty.”

She rolls away from me, mouth popped wide. “But you stopped talking to me. You told me you were happy. With her.”

"I lied," I admit, remembering that day well. "I was miserable. I whispered that you belonged to me. I knew you couldn't have heard it, but part of me wanted you to."

"I heard you," she breathes. "I thought I was only hearing what I wanted to."

"No." My mouth tics up. "I meant it then, and I mean it now." My heart tightens in my chest. "I've missed you so damn much. I never felt lonelier than I did without you in these years. I've missed talking to you. Just being around you. It was never like that with her."

My rough hands tighten around her face, my mouth drawing nearer. I slide a single hand to her nape, fingers slicing through her soft strands, and she sighs out a throaty moan. My cock jerks, the sound making me want to show her just how badly I want her.

"Is this real?" she asks in a whisper, her soft fingertips climbing up my back, weaving through my hair.

"We've always been real." I lock her eyes with mine, my gaze deepening with hers.

My thumb traces her heart-shaped lips, and with every pounding beat of my heart, I do something I should've done from the moment she walked back into my life: I kiss her.

Wildly. Roughly.

There's nothing gentle in the way I take her. Taste her. My teeth tugging, passion dripping through my veins. God, I've wanted this for what feels like centuries and lifetimes in between.

I love on her mouth like she's the fire keeping me warm. Like a man lost who's found his compass. Because that's what she is. She's always been pointing me home. But I was too stubborn to believe. Too afraid to live my life for myself.

I've spent my existence looking for my worth in places it would never exit. Searching for my purpose in things that would never truly fulfill me. But her? She gives me all of that. With her, I realize I'm no longer broken. That I'm capable of feeling for a woman the way I feel for her.

She proved to me that it simply takes the right woman to make you feel...everything.

I don't know if I'll ever feel like I can keep her safe, but there's no way she's going to be anyone else's but mine.

I fist her hair hard and slant her head sideways, my tongue tracing the seam of her lips before I slip between them.

Her palms run up and down my back as she hums out a moan, sounding so damn good, just how I imagined she would when I'd picture us this way.

I nip her bottom lip, my mouth coasting down past her jaw, teeth grazing, tongue tracing the contours and the valleys of her throat.

"You're so beautiful," I groan against her soft skin.

My other palm slides down her hip, cupping her ass, massaging her flesh, needing her bare for me.

"Raph...oh, God," she pants. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it." I let out a low chuckle as her head lolls back, exposing her neck even more for my greedy mouth.

I don't know what I'd do if I never got to hear her say my name like that. Probably die. No, definitely die. Slowly and painfully.

"You taste so good," I tell her. "I can't wait to throw you on that bed, spread open those thighs, and taste your pussy again."

"You...you'd want to do that again?" She swallows hard, her fingers dipping into my muscles.

I look up. Her breathless, innocent gasps, those flushed cheeks, have me throbbing.

"That's right." I roll her long hair around my wrist, my lips feathering against hers. "I'm going to taste every inch of you until you're all I know."

I kiss her slow, groaning as she licks inside my mouth.

"Yes..." she whispers on a moan. "I want everything with you."

I yank her head back even harder. "Yeah?" My lips drop to her ear, and I suck her lobe. "You want to watch me stretch that pussy?"

"Oh, God..." Brows drawn, she gazes at me like there's nothing else she wants more in this world. She tugs her bottom lip between those teeth.

And as soon as I see her do that, a growl escapes through my mouth and I'm on her again, kissing her like my life depends on it. Our hands are everywhere all at once, and a growl thunders out of me when she runs her hand across my cock.

Without our mouths separating, I snake my arms under her thighs and lift her up against me, her ankles wrapping around my lower back. And those low throaty sounds she makes as I suck her tongue have me kissing her harder, her sweet minty taste igniting my senses and enflaming my craving for her.

I carry her to the bed and gently drop her on the mattress, fitting my body over her every curve like a puzzle piece that once didn't quite fit. But now it fits too well to ever come undone. I spend seconds just staring and marvelling at her beautiful face, the back of my hand fanning down her cheek.

She grinds her pelvis into my stiff erection. Fuck, I need inside her, but knowing she's a virgin, I have to do things right. I have to take my time and make this experience the best for her.

My mouth trails down her throat, her pulse beating to life beneath me. She lets out a series of erotic noises that does nothing but make me want to bury my cock inside her until it's all she ever knows.

"There'll be no other man for you after this, tesoro mio. You understand that?" I yank the strap of her tank top and nip at her shoulder.

"Yes," she cries, roughing a hand through my hair, pulling hard when my lips slowly slide down to her erect nipple.

I look right up at her as I suck it into my mouth through her shirt. A crease forms between her brows, her lips quivering as I roll my tongue around it.

I pop it out of my mouth. "Tell me you understand that after I'm inside you, no other man will be."

"I do." Her heavy breath fans across my cheek. "I never wanted anyone else. Never will."

With a groan, I yank her top down and expose both her breasts. "Fuck, you're gorgeous." Rising on my elbows, I lower my lips between her breasts. "Do you know how perfect you are, Nicolette? How lucky I am to even be looking at you? Kissing you? Touching you?"

My fingertips circle around each one of her nipples, and she jerks with a gasp.

My lips twitch. She's nervous. I don't blame her.

"I've got you. I'll make it feel good. Unless you've changed your mind."

She shakes her head, her hand clasping the back of my head. "No...I want this. I want you to be my first, Raph."

My heart skips a beat. "And I want you to be my last."

Her eyes glisten as she says, "Then let me be your last."

I swipe a thumb under her eye, erasing a stray tear caught between her lashes. "You're already mine, little one. Making love to you is just a

bonus.”

Rising on my knees, my fingers on the waistband of her leggings, I slowly start to lower them down, a little bit at a time. Her chest quickens.

“You shy for me, baby?”

She nods nervously.

“A little... Okay, a lot,” she confesses. “No one has ever undressed me before.”

My pulse beats in my neck at the thought. “And no one ever will.”

I pull them all the way down until all she has on is black panties. I’m unable to stop staring between her thighs, wanting to make her feel good like I did the last time.

Throwing one of her thighs over my back, I trace my nose up her pussy. “So warm. I can’t wait to taste you. To make you come around my tongue.”

She throws a palm over her mouth to muffle the sounds she makes.

I chuckle, and she jerks as though she felt the vibrations against her clit.

The tip of my tongue flicks over her panties, and her hand instantly clamps around my hair, yanking hard enough to burn.

I hiss, enjoying the pain. “I’m going to take care of you, little one. I promise.”

Without waiting another moment, I flip her panties to the side, exposing her.

“Fuck,” I growl. “Such a pretty pussy. I’ve missed it.”

The tip of my tongue snakes around her clit, and she bucks and cries out, gripping my hair with a vengeance. A gritty laugh rumbles out of me.

“Do you really have to look at it?” Her breaths burst out with the question.

I raise my head and pop a brow at her. “Look at it. Fuck it. Bury my face in it.” A lazy smirk pulls on my lips. “I get to do everything and anything I want to this pussy.” I run my index finger in between her soaked lips. “It’s mine now. Remember?”

I push the pad of my digit against her clit and flick hard.

“Raph!” she moans, her hips flying off the bed, and fuck she’s so wet.

“Look at you, already drenched for me.”

“Please...” she begs with a tremble in her tone as I add more pressure.

“Ask for what you need. I won’t refuse you a damn thing, not even if you asked me to rip my own damn heart out and hand it to you on a silver platter.”

“That sounds painful.” She tries to laugh, but it’s too damn erotic.

I slip my finger over her entrance and enter her right up to the first knuckle.

Her eyes roll back.

“Raph...please...”

My thumb fondles both sides of her clit and she screams out my name, fisting the sheets, her body contorting.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, and I haven’t even fucked her yet.

“I need to come!” she pleads for release, but I’m not ready to give it to her.

“You ever put your fingers inside yourself?” I ask, teasing her there once more, easing just a fraction inside her.

“No...I... I wanted to save that for you. I wanted to save all of it for you, Raph.”

Fuck.

“You don’t know what that does to me. To know you haven’t even fucked your own pussy. I’m going to teach you everything.”

Inch by inch, without taking my eyes off hers, I ease the rest of my finger inside her. She gasps and writhes beneath me.

“Breathe...” I brush her clit with my thumb. “That’s it.” I curl my finger and slide it out, then back in. “That’s my good girl. Taking it so well.”

“It feels so good,” she pants, all heavy-lidded.

I’ve never seen something this breathtaking in my entire life.

“I’m going to add another finger,” I grit, barely holding on to my resolve. “I need to stretch you out before you take my cock.”

She begs for more, a bunch of incoherent pleas slipping from her pretty lips. She grows wetter by the second, and I continue to tease, her walls clutching around me.

“I think it’s time I tasted what belongs to me.”

She groans when I push open her thighs with my palms, my mouth cupping her pussy, licking up from her ass up to her clit.

“Look at me,” I demand, needing to see her eyes, to watch her watching me.

She rises on her elbows and shyly connects her eyes with mine, and that’s when I lower my mouth back on her, my tongue entering her. A tremor rolls through her body, her moans getting louder. Deep noises of satisfaction rumble out of me.

And when her hand lands on the top of my head, fingers spreading through my hair with a tight curl, I suck her clit into my mouth, flicking my tongue over and over, knowing she's close.

She screams my name with gasping breaths, her back arching, while two of my digits slip back inside her. And this time, I'm not gentle about it.

I give it to her hard, my pace increasing, refusing to hold back with every moan she gives me. Her panting grows harsher, like she may be in pain, so I slow down the tempo, kissing her inner thighs, taking my time with her. Once she's closer, once her gasps come in waves, I fuck her harder, my tongue swirling, mouth sucking.

She spasms around my tongue in the throes of her release. "Yes! Oh, God, Raph!"

Her screams and moans permeate the walls around us. Her hips bend higher while I don't slow, taking everything she has to give.

I groan around her slick flesh, licking up every inch of her, tasting the sweetness on my tongue, until her body comes down from the high, stilling even as her breaths fight out of her in a frenzy.

I drop a final kiss on each one of her inner thighs, then my hands are on my own shirt, flinging it off. Her eyes hungrily rake down from my chest to my abs, and the way she looks at my body... My cock strains to be inside her.

She gazes up, her brows knitting.

Is she nervous?

"It'll fit your sweet pussy."

"If you say so." Her face turns crimson, and I hold back a chuckle.

Can't say I've ever wanted to fuck a virgin before, not until her. It never mattered, being someone's first. It held no appeal. But with Nicolette, for some reason, I want that. I want to be the first one to ever make her feel good.

With my fingers on the waistband, I start removing my gray sweats, and as soon as my cock springs out, her eyes expand, and I can't help but chuckle.

Her thighs are still spread open, and my eyes linger there, seeing her wet and glistening where my mouth had just been. I lower myself on top of her and her lips curl up in the sweetest most beautiful smile.

"Hey," I tell her, thumb stroking those goddamn fuckable lips. "I promise, if it doesn't feel good, we can stop."

“Okay.” She says one word that holds so much trust, it nearly shatters me.

“Making you come as much as possible will be my new mission in life.” I kiss her mouth with a slow-growing smile, and she laughs.

“What you just did, that was amazing...” she whispers.

“That was me taking it easy on you, little one.”

I roll my hips against her core, and her mouth parts when my cock slides against her pussy.

She gasps my name, nails raking my back as I stare at the woman who owns me.

“The idea of anyone else touching you drives me insane, tesoro mio.” I palm her forehead, my teeth gritted. “I’d kill him, Nicolette. Whoever he is. I’ll kill him with my bare hands while you watch the life slip out of him.”

She inhales sharply, gaze round.

“This is who I am. Do you understand that?”

“Yes...” She nods. “There’s no one else for me but you.”

I thrust between her thighs with a possessive growl. “Look at you, being a good girl, saving so many lives.”

She fights a smile even as her eyes roll back. “You’re insane.”

“Yes,” I breathe, skimming my lips against hers, her warm breaths wafting across my jaw. “I’m insane for you. Always will be.”

“I don’t mind,” she whispers.

“It’s cute you think you have a choice.” I kiss her hard, groaning as she goes breathless, eyes searching mine. “I don’t have a condom, but I haven’t been with a single soul.”

Not since your sister, I want to say, but I know she understands that.

“I don’t want you to wear a condom. I want to feel you bare, and I want you to feel me too.”

“Fuck... My dirty little virgin...” I nip her jaw. “I’m about to take that from you. Are you ready?”

NICOLETTE

My eyes round and my mouth parts on a choked cry as he slowly eases the crown of his cock inside me.

A fire burns through me, rolling down my spine like a furious blaze of heat. I don't care if it hurts. I want this. I never wanted a single thing more.

"We'll go slow," he reassures me. "Just breathe for me."

Being Raph, I knew he'd be this way. Gentle. Loving.

The pressure within me grows, yet I want to feel all of him. He pushes another inch, and my nails score across his bare back.

"You feel like heaven," he tells me, a low growl sounding from deep in his chest.

I shiver at the raspy tone, the warm sound grating up my skin.

"You're doing well, baby, taking my big cock inside you."

I tighten around him, his dirty praise setting me off further.

"Just do it..." I beg, my exhales outdoing my inhales. "Just fuck me. Please..."

"Jesus," he grits, his expression darkening as he stares down at me, all muscle and man. "It's what I want to do, but I don't want to hurt you."

He cradles the top of my head and holds my stare.

"Don't hold back, Raph. It's what I want."

He moves another inch. His lips drop to mine, and he strokes them softly. "Spread those thighs wider."

His demanding tone has me doing just that. His eyes return to mine, his stare pulling me in deeper, like I'm drunk on the high of Raph Marino.

"Mine." The word comes out hot and rough and wildly primal, and with a single thrust of his hips, he's sheathed all the way inside.

I yelp and gasp at the sudden sting and pressure.

He curses under his breath, his jaw tensing as he drops his head back.

"It's okay." He extends his knuckles toward my face, running them down my cheek. "Take a breath, baby. I won't move until you're ready."

He fits a hand between our bodies, his finger unhurriedly fondling my clit, and that's when my muscles ease around him.

A moan makes it past my lips, and he gazes down at me, something in his eyes growing darker.

A shiver runs down my arms, and with a fistful of my hair in his grip, he lets go and fucks me.

He moves like he's ridding himself of the shame, the guilt. All the reasons he gave himself for not giving in to the intensity between us. It all

vanishes, as though it never existed at all.

He molds himself against me, like he's always belonged. The stretching inside me softens until my body accepts him and craves it even more.

His gravelly baritone fills my ears as he tells me how good I can take him. How much he loves how wet I'm getting for him.

With a quick jerk of his hands, he flips me over and drops his heavy weight on top of me. His palm grips my throat, slanting my head back just as he fits himself back inside me.

"Fuck," he groans. "You were made to take my cock. It fits perfectly, tesoro mio."

I've never felt more like his treasure than I do right now.

"Next time, I'm gonna fuck you with a mirror," he drawls against my ear. "So you can see how beautiful you are when you take my cock in that tight little hole."

"Raph..." I gasp, unable to hold back from the overflow of sensations, clawing the sheets beneath our sweat-ridden bodies.

He grips my hair, dropping the hand away from my throat, and yanks my face to the side so he can see me.

His pounding thrusts, the sound of skin against skin, fills me with warm pleasure, pulsating up my thighs and between them.

"Oh, God, Raph..." A heady moan escapes from my lips as he slams harder and faster. "Don't stop..." I murmur, not breaking our connection.

Something swells in my gut and in my core, like I'm ready to burst, feeling the pressure mounting with every one of his thrusts.

And right before it comes, right before I fall, he captures my mouth with his, swallowing up every sound I make.

I shudder with such vicious intensity, my toes contort and my mind feels like it's floating.

He draws his mouth away only a fraction.

"I want my cum dripping out of you." The words fan over my ear, and I tingle where his breath was.

Before I can say a word, I'm tossed on my back, him still seated inside me, savagely pounding his hips into me, staring at me with intense prowess. It's like he's trying to make love to me and fuck me at the same time. His thrusts go deeper each time, and I feel myself rising again.

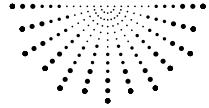
With a satisfied growl set deep in his lungs, he lowers his body onto mine and kisses me like he's getting to know my mouth all over again.

And with every bit of my heart, I find myself unable to escape the magnitude of my affection for him, even if I wanted to.

Because in this moment, I know for certain that no matter where I go, no matter how much distance he puts between us, there's no way I'll ever be able to be rid of him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



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NICOLETTE

TWO WEEKS LATER

I'M IN HIS ARMS AND HE'S IN MINE, SLOW DANCING IN OUR SHITTY MOTEL room, but we're creating memories I once only wished we could make.

I know what waits for us outside of these walls is scary, but right now it feels as though we're a real couple and I hold on to that with all my might.

"You're a good dancer," I say softly, my cheek resting against his powerful chest, his hands clasped around the small of my back as we sway together to a sultry melody.

My eyes closed, I'm consumed with the enormity of my feelings for this man, so much so they pervade my soul.

These past weeks have been the stuff of dreams. We've laughed. We've talked. It's like we're back to how it used to be. Except now we also have a ton of sex, which I'm definitely not complaining about. Sex with him is magnificent. I may not have experience, but I'm pretty sure he's the best there is.

"It's only because I'm dancing with you." He kisses the top of my head.

It's these little things that make my heart come alive. These sentimental touches, his sweet words, those tender kisses that'll never get old.

"I like this dress on you," he tells me, his softened gaze roaming down my curves.

"Thank you." My cheeks warm at the compliment, the red knee-length dress fluttering as he spins me.

He bought it for me when he went shopping one day. Said as soon as he saw it, he knew it'd be perfect on me. He was right.

"You did good picking this one." I tip up a single brow. "I'm kinda running out of room for the list of talents on your résumé."

“Résumé, huh?” He narrows a playful gaze, his palms roughly clasping my hips. “What else is on this résumé you’ve not told me you’re writing?”

I press my lips tightly with a laugh and he grabs my jaw, a darkly domineering gaze within his eyes that sends my gut into a chaotic mess of emotions.

“Well,” I stammer, his unrelenting gaze making me all sorts of nervous. “For starters, you’re very talented in the kitchen.”

“Uh-huh...” His thumb comes up and runs across my chin. “What else?”

“Well...um...” Suddenly, I get insanely shy and my gaze darts to the ground.

The rest of it is pretty dirty, and I’m not used to talking that way.

He chuckles and tugs my face up, forcing me to peek up at him.

“Finish that sentence,” he demands. “I have a feeling I’m going to like where this is going.”

“Can I close my eyes first?” I grimace.

“Nope.” His smirk curves over his mouth, that handsome face so beautiful to look at, I wonder how someone like him could want someone like me. “I need to see your eyes when you say it. Because I swear, whatever comes out of that mouth is guaranteed to make my cock hard.”

“Geez...” My eyes widen. “Want to warn me before we start talking about your...you know...”

“My what?” His lips twitch. “Going to have to say it.”

I narrow my eyes with a shake of my head. “You’re the worst.”

“Insufferable. Just the way you like me.” He drops his mouth to my forehead and inhales deep. “Goddamn, you smell good.”

“Distracting enough that you’ll forget what we’ve been talking about?”

“Not a chance in hell.” He tilts back with a small laugh, waiting for me to answer, and I have a sudden urge to kiss him.

My mouth widens with a grin, and I rise on my tiptoes and press my mouth to his, kissing him slow.

He groans, grabbing a fistful of my ass, and sucks my lower lip into his mouth, teeth grazing as he gradually lets it go.

“I see what you’re trying to do.” His voice is gruff, brushing his mouth with mine. “But you’re not getting away with it that easy.”

He kisses that spot under my earlobe that makes me crazy.

Growing breathless, I lace my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, and he growls against my neck, kissing and sucking me there.

“For starters,” I whisper. “You have a very talented tongue. I think you broke me for all other men.”

He pauses and pushes off, staring at me like molten lava.

“What men?” He grabs my jaw with a possessive hand, searching my eyes. “There will be no other men.”

He says it like it’s a declaration, a law made into fact.

“I’m just saying, just in case.” I tease him with a smile turning up one side of my mouth.

And I swear his pupils dilate, his gaze hot and dangerous.

“You don’t need a just in case,” he grits, his fingers biting deeper into my skin. His chest heaves while his mouth lowers to mine, his hot breaths fanning over my lips. “You’re mine, little one.” He tugs my bottom lips between his teeth, his eyes daring me to prove him wrong. “All mine. And don’t you forget it.”

Then he kisses me. My God, does he ever.

My heart stills.

All the air leaves my lungs, the way it always does when his lips touch mine.

And that term of endearment, the one I used to hate... I don’t hate it anymore. It no longer holds the same meaning as it once did. Now, I look forward to hearing it. I’m his. His little one. And though he may not be perfect, he has the softest heart and the purest soul.

We’re both breathless as he wrenches away, gazing at me with so much emotion I’m afraid to look away.

And right now, in this moment, it feels like nothing can tear us apart.

Yet a little part of me still wonders, would he choose me if he had a choice between my sister and me? I wish she were here so I could know that for myself. It’s like my self-esteem won’t let me be happy. Won’t allow me to believe that for once in my life someone wants *me* over her.

“Can I ask you something?” I breathe, my pulse racing.

“Anything.”

“Promise not to lie?”

“I’d never lie. Least of all to you.”

I nod, and with my gut roiling, I ask him the question I already regret asking. “If she were alive, would you ever try again with her...even after

everything?"

If the answer is yes, please lie to me.

The very thought makes me sick.

Seconds trail by.

And all he does is stare.

"How could you ask me that?" he finally says, appearing offended. "I don't want you to even think about her. She doesn't get to stand between us anymore." He sighs. "She means nothing and she's dead."

He pulls me against him, a palm clasped to the back of my head, holding me against his chest, his heart beating rapidly.

But in all that time, I can't get his answer out of my head. Because he didn't actually say no, now, did he?

While he's in the shower, the water pounding, I force myself to forget the discussion about my sister from earlier. I shouldn't have asked. It doesn't matter. He's right. She's dead. What difference does it make now? But anxiety ripples through me at the thought of not knowing the truth.

No, I have to stop this. Nothing good will come from it.

I smile as I recall that day he took me to my dance. Does he even remember? It was the very first time he danced with me. I can still smell his expensive cologne. The black tux and matching bow tie he wore. I thought I won the lottery when he offered to take me to my homecoming dance.

I think that was the night I truly fell in love with him, except at the time, I didn't realize how deep that love ran.

FIVE YEARS AGO AGE 16

"I'm not going, Brenda," I tell her. "Leo isn't going. You have your date. I don't want to feel like some annoying third wheel."

"Oh, stop, already. You're never a third wheel with us. Keagan adores you, and he said he didn't mind if you joined us."

“Well, I mind. I don’t want to be the only girl going to a dance without a date.”

She sighs, knowing when I make up my mind, not even an avalanche can stop me.

“What if you go with Keagan’s brother? He has the hots for you. He would be ready in ten minutes if we told him you wanted him to go with you.”

“Seriously, Brenda? He’s a freshman, and I’m a junior. Hello, social suicide.”

“Okay. Fine. You’re right. Dumb idea. I just really want you to come,” she practically whines.

And I really did want to go, but it’s not happening now. The dance is in an hour, and I’m in my pajamas, hair in a messy bun, stuffing my face with pretzels.

I pop another into my mouth. “Brenda, I swear I’m fine. I’m just going to stay in my room and watch TV. Go to the dance and have fun. Then tell me all about it.”

She exhales dramatically. I can almost see her scrunching her thick brows, as black as her hair. She’s one of those lucky people. Gorgeous olive skin, silky hair. The guys go crazy for her curves, but she’s only got eyes for Keagan. He’s the only boyfriend she’s ever had. Right out of freshman year. I bet she’s going to marry him one day.

And me? I’ll still be sitting in my PJs stuffing my face with pretzels. I’ll probably be one of those cat ladies.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta go, Brenda.”

“Oh yeah? Where to? Got important things to do in your pink fuzzy pajamas?”

I look around, my heart suddenly racing.

“Are you spying on me or something? Wait, are you in my closet, watching me?” I tease this time.

“Ha-ha.” She definitely just rolled her eyes. A girl knows her bestie. “I know because I know your ass. It’s the only pair you ever wear. Don’t you have like two of them?”

“Five...” I grimace.

I like what I like. Sue me.

She laughs. “Reconsider. It isn’t too late. Please,” she begs.

“Okay, yeah, I will totally think about it.”

“No you won’t.” She snickers.

“Like you said, you know me well.”

“Fine, bitch. Gotta go do my hair. Love you.”

“Love you too.” I end the call, dropping the cell on my bed.

Well, this will be the most boring night ever. My parents are out with friends. Bianca is working or whoring around. Probably whoring around. I saw some dude dropping her home once when she didn’t think I was here. And I’m pretty sure Raph has no idea, and I can’t be the one to tell him.

Fuck my sister. I hope she gets what’s coming to her. Hopefully that comes in a form of itchy crabs. Only a crazy person would cheat on someone like Raph. She’s lucky he even wants her.

Whatever. I climb off my bed, intending to go down and grab some soda from the fridge downstairs, but when I open the door, I’m stunned speechless. Because just as I exit, I find Raph standing there, and I think I’ve officially stopped breathing. And when he smiles, one of his dazzling smiles, wearing a tuxedo like it’s been made for him, I almost pass out.

My pulse thrashes in my ears, and I try my best not to salivate. How can anyone be that good looking? And tall. My God. It’s not fair she has to be the one to be with him, while I can only dream of such things. It’s cruel. I want more than anything to be older, just so he can see me.

I sigh, defeated. Absolutely devastated too. My heart physically hurts. Will I always like him this way? Will I pine after my sister’s boyfriend for the rest of my life? Oh my God. What if he marries her? Then I’ll really be pining after him for the rest of my life.

I guess I could move when I turn eighteen. Live on campus somewhere. Anywhere but here. I’ll take out loans. I know my parents wouldn’t spend a dime on me. It’s fine. I can do things on my own. I’ll figure this out. I just know I can’t live a life wishing I was with someone who’ll never want me back.

“Hey, Nicolette.” He looks me up and down with a squint in his eyes and a slant of his mouth. “I’m pretty sure today is your dance, but for some reason you look like you just woke up from a long slumber.”

“Slumber?” I raise a brow. “Are you suddenly from the 1820s?”

“Okay, Ms. Comedian.” He chuckles. “Go get dressed. You’re going to be late.”

He holds tightly to a large brown paper bag, and I give him a speculative look, wondering why he’s so dressed up. But he’s always

attending some big fancy party for work, so I'm sure that's where he's heading. Not surprised he'd want to check in with me before heading out. He always does that.

My parents gave him a key so he can come and go as he pleases. They're obsessed with him. Must be all that money. They're like my sister that way.

"Haven't you heard the big news?" My lips tighten into a barely there smile. "I'm not going."

"Oh, I heard when you told me yesterday. But just because that asshole boyfriend is too good to be your date doesn't mean you shouldn't go."

"Uh-huh. Right. What do I do, then? Go alone?" I scowl. "I don't want to look like a loser. You wouldn't understand." I throw a hand in the air.

"Maybe not." He takes a step closer. "But I also don't think you should stop yourself from making memories just because of a guy you won't even remember ten years from now."

His voice grows all gritty, and there go those butterflies fluttering in my stomach, the ones I was really doing a good job of hiding. But he has that effect on me, making me feel things I have no business feeling.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Raph." My voice loses that snarkiness. "But I'm okay. I've got my pretzels and TV. Living the dream here. So go and enjoy whatever party you're heading to."

"Well, actually..." He digs into the bag and pulls out a short A-lined emerald dress. "I was kinda hoping you'd join me."

My eyes grow, staring at the dress, then at him. "Join you at...uh...your party?"

Why are my hands all clammy? Oh my God, am I sweating? Discreetly, I pat my forehead, but no sign of it. Thank God for that. That would be humiliating.

"Not my party," he clarifies.

My stomach drops. Of course he wouldn't want some little girl attending one of his parties with him.

"I was hoping..." He removes an ivory corsage. "That you'd let me join yours."

What did he just say?

All air leaves my lungs.

He takes a single step forward, invading all my senses and taking up all my space.

“I want to be your date to the dance,” he goes on, oblivious to the chaos currently erupting in my chest. “If you’ll have me of course. I told your school I’d chaperone.”

He laughs, taking in my dumbfounded expression. I could listen to his deep laughter on a loop and die happy.

“I know I’m basically a dinosaur, but I can dance when you need me, and you can have fun with your friends without feeling like you’re going without a date.”

Another step closer, and my heart practically stops working. His cologne wafts through my nostrils and I want to permanently sew that smell into my skin, if that were at all possible, which obviously it’s not. But I’m a dreamer, and right now, I know I’m going to wake up from this magical dream and laugh. Then laugh some more. Because there’s no way Raph is standing right in front of me, holding on to a gorgeous dress that would fit me perfectly, asking to be MY date.

Brenda is going to flip. She’s the only one who knows about my crush on him.

“Are you sure you’d wanna be around a bunch of annoying teenagers?” I sneer, trying to convince him not to go.

I mean, how can I actually go with him and dance with him and be around him without acting like a giddy fool? And how the hell did Bianca approve of this? She hates me. There’s no way she’d let her boyfriend help me out.

“I can handle teenagers. Don’t worry about me.” He extends the hand with the dress. “Now go change. I’ll wait, and so will the limo outside.”

“You got us a limo?” My mouth falls open.

See? Already making a big fool of myself.

“Of course I did.” He folds his arms over his chest.

I never thought I’d be one of those girls obsessing over a guy’s muscles, but here I am obsessing. His biceps would do well with their own zip code. How often does he work out?

He chuckles. “I like it when you’re happy, Nicolette.”

I’m only happy with you.

I wish I could say those words out loud, but I lock them in my treasure chest where I keep all these little moments with him, ones he has no idea matter the most to me.

Sadness trips up my nerves, and I try my hardest to hide all of my overwhelming emotions. It's what I've been doing for quite a while when it comes to Raph Marino. How come I'm not used to it? How come it gets harder with each passing day?

Don't you dare cry, I scold myself when that prickling sensation hits the back of my eyes.

He got me a dress. He ordered a limo. He dressed up. For me. To make sure I get to go when my own boyfriend couldn't even bother. I was only using him to get over my feelings for Raph, but the only thing dating him did was make me realize how rare guys like Raph are and that I'd never find one like him.

"So, what do you say, little one?" He lights my heart on fire with a glorious smirk. "I put on my best tux." He flips his hands in the air, knowing full well all his tuxes are the best.

Suddenly I'm smiling right back at him.

I grab the dress and grin wider. "Wouldn't want to make you waste a perfectly good tux. Give me twenty!"

My stomach knots up and I'm jittery and walking on make-believe clouds as I rush to my room and lock the door behind me.

"Take your time," he calls out. "We can be fashionably late. I hear that's what the cool kids are doing."

"Wouldn't know," I toss out just as I quickly strip off my clothes and slip into the dress. "I've never been cool."

"Neither have I." He chuckles.

I rush for the full-length mirror and am stunned speechless. I actually look pretty. Running my hands down the thick, yet soft material, I smile at myself. But when I see my hair... Goodbye smile. A quick brush and a flat iron should fix that.

After I'm done, I throw on some mascara, blush, and bright red lipstick Brenda got me for my birthday. I never had any reason to wear it. Until now.

Thirty minutes later, and I'm slipping into a pair of silver heels Raph bought me when I turned sixteen. They cost more than a pair of shoes should cost, but the price never mattered. It's the fact that he got them that does.

My hand on the knob, I'm instantly nervous for him to see me. Will he think I look nice?

I drag in a single long breath, closing my eyes for a beat, gathering the courage, before I'm yanking the door open. I hold my breath, and as soon as he sees me, his eyes widen, and they hold mine for a mere moment in time.

And I feel it, the way he looks at me. But just as soon as it appears, it's gone.

"You look lovely," he says under his breath. "You ready to go?"

"Yes." I clear my throat.

Well, lovely is a lot better than nothing.

He was so adamant about me making memories of that night, but in the end, the only memories I made that mattered were of us.

When we first arrived, all the kids were staring and whispering. I felt awkward and wanted to run right back home. But when he squeezed my hand, I put on my brave face and didn't let them scare me away.

As soon as Brenda saw us, she shrieked and ran over, jumping up and down, thanking Raph for bringing me.

I shared two dances with him, two heart-pounding dances that I also added to my secret collection of all-things Raph. He urged me to go on dancing with my friends, while he watched me the entire time. And every time I caught him, he smiled, and I did what I always do. I smiled right back.

Suddenly, the bathroom door swings open and in he comes, gray towel hung low over his hips while he dries his hair with another, his biceps straining as he eyes me.

I let my gaze run down the length of him, knowing that now I can do it freely.

"I like the way you look at me," he rasps, lips curving into a sinful smirk.

"Good." I sit up straighter. "Because I plan to look at you as much as I want."

"Is that so?" The bed dips as he settles beside me, the towel almost coming undone.

“It is.” My heart races as his knuckles brush down my cheek, his eyes staring with a soul-crushing intensity.

“You’re my favorite person,” he tells me as those eyes continue to captivate and enthrall every beat of my heart that he already owns.

Emotions scrape up the back of my throat.

“You were always my favorite person,” I confess. “I was just remembering that time you took me to the dance. Do you remember?”

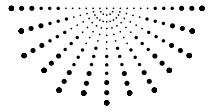
“How could I forget?” He pushes me down onto the bed and settles his weight on top of me. “The look on your face when I showed up...”

His eyes grow heavy-lidded as his stiff length pushes in between my thighs. Awareness pools with warmth, and I ache for him desperately.

“You somehow always show up for me, Raph.” I clasp the back of his head, pulling him down so close that with his next breath, his lips touch mine.

“And I always will, tesoro mio.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



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RAPH

I CAN'T GET HER QUESTION OUT OF MY MIND, THE ONE ABOUT BIANCA. IT'S still in my head the following day while I'm seated beside her on the sofa, watching TV. Or pretending to at least. My arm tightens around her shoulders, and she looks at me and smiles, a big sort of smile that lights my heart like fireworks.

I lower my lips to her temple and keep them there, eyes closed, inhaling her fresh floral scent.

How could she think I'd want Bianca back? I'd want nothing to do with her even if she were the last pussy on this planet. I'd happily fuck my own hand for the rest of my goddamn life.

Nicolette is my future. I know that. And sure, I still have some doubts, I won't pretend otherwise. I worry about whether I can keep her safe, about what others will say of our relationship once they find out. But that's for another time. Right now, there's no one here. Right now, we can simply be Raph and Nicolette. And no one will judge us for it.

My burner phone rings in my pocket, and I quickly dig it out, seeing that it's Michael.

"Hey," I greet him. "What's going on?"

Glass clanks in the distance, and I can just picture him pouring whiskey into it, swirling the honey-colored liquid, staring into it in concentration before he downs it all. It's what he does when he's got something on his mind, and I'm not yet sure if he brings good news or bad.

"What's wrong?" I continue, growing impatient.

If my father has done something else, this is it. I'm coming for him. He needs to be put down.

“Nothing,” he finally says. “Or a lot of things.” His sigh stretches through the line and my pulse kicks up. “I’m married now. I’m the new head of the family.”

Shit. Relief washes over me and I sit up straighter. Nicolette registers my intensity and stares curiously.

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you. Truly, brother.”

I hope Michael finally found someone who can make him happy, because it’s what he deserves. Though he’s never allowed himself to believe that he does. He was so concentrated on finding the right mother for his little girl that he failed to see the importance of finding the right wife for himself. I hope this woman is what he needs.

I glance over at Nicolette, *my woman*, and my heart strains in my chest. I want that for him too. I want him to feel what love can do to a man. And I start to wonder if she and I will ever have that. Marriage, a bunch of kids running around. I want that, I realize. With her.

I give her a smirk, tethering my gaze into her soulful one, and she returns it—a grin so wide it makes me want to forget all of our problems and sink into the love we share in silence.

I haven’t told her I love her. I want to. But it’s not the right time. Nor the right place. I want the first time I tell her to mean something. I want her to believe it. I want her not to doubt it for a second. I want the whole damn world to know. So I won’t do it when we’re both hiding out.

“I have more news,” Michael cuts through my thoughts. “I’ve ironed out a plan with the Irish.”

He pauses, and anticipation crawls up my back with a deadly hand.

“You will be spared,” he says, and for the second time, relief hits me hard.

“How?” I wonder.

Patrick isn’t an easy man to please. He must’ve offered him something the Quinns really wanted.

“I told him he can have our father’s head instead. That it was his fault you went to that extreme. You know how Patrick lost his wife in war. He has a soft spot for that, so I used it to my advantage.”

“That’s all he wanted?”

Thick silence greets us.

“No.” He finally confirms my suspicion.

“What else does he want?”

“He wants a marriage between our families. To secure our alliance.”

“Absolutely not.” I clench my jaw. “I’m not marrying anyone.”

“Not you,” Michael explains. “Gio. He will marry Patrick’s youngest daughter, Eriu.”

“How many does he have again?”

I turn to Nicolette, finding her face practically ashen. I get how worried she is about everything. I don’t fault her for it.

“Two. Iseult is the other.”

“Right. I remember now. Have you ever seen either one of them? I swear, I don’t know anyone who’s actually met his daughters.”

“Everything’s on a need-to-know basis with him.”

“Yeah.” I nod with a sigh. “So, does Gio know about this? He won’t like it.”

“Not yet. He will soon.”

I inhale a steady breath. “He will hate you.”

“He will. But he also loves you. He’ll come around. Eventually.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Gio has never had plans to settle down with anyone. He prefers to play the field, to pretend he doesn’t need anyone. That he’s better on his own. But with our parents being the example of what marriage is, I understand him. It’s easier to drown in women he’ll forget about the next day. Easier to keep one’s heart caged, free from the hurt a woman can cause it. Relationships are tough. Marriages are even tougher. But maybe he’ll figure it out one day.

I’d like to believe that marriage with the right person is better than a life lived in solitude.

“We’re running out of time.” Michael blows a breath. “Our father is pushing for your death, and I worry that soon he’ll send more people after you, and that this time, you two may not get that lucky.”

He’s right. We have to end this, for Nicolette’s sake.

“We’re going to take him out soon. Be ready,” he stresses.

My heart pounds. “I am.”

“I’ll be in touch. Take care of yourselves.”

“Will do.” The call ends and I stick the phone back in my pocket.

When I glance back at Nicolette, she’s fidgeting nervously, playing with the fingers tucked on her lap.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing.” She forces a smile, but I can tell it’s in fact something, something she won’t say.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She nods a little too enthusiastically. “So, did Michael have good news?”

I let her keep her secret, refusing to push when I know it’s not what she needs.

“I think so.” I grab her hand and hold it tight, stroking my thumb over the top of it, loving the feel of her soft skin beneath mine. “We’re going to be okay. I don’t want you to worry.”

She lets out a tense laugh. “I don’t know how not to worry, Raph. It’s all I’ve been doing for the past year.”

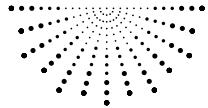
My jaw tics, venom crawling through every sinew of my muscles. Contempt and rage meet inside my chest, vowing to avenge every hurt she’s been made to endure.

“That’ll all be over soon. I swear it.” I bring her palm to my lips, holding her gaze for long, breathless seconds, wishing to undo everything she’s gone through.

But I know I can’t. All I can do is promise to give her a fresh start. A new beginning. And for that to happen, my father has to die.

And I’ll be the one to kill him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



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NICOLETTE

I'M NOT MARRYING ANYONE.

That's exactly what he said to Michael yesterday and all I do is replay those words over and over. Does that include me?

I shake my head at my own stupidity. Of course he'd never want to get married. My sister messed him up so badly, he must not trust anyone. I was foolish to think there was a future waiting for us out there.

"Is something wrong with breakfast?" he asks, sipping his black coffee, watching me intently from across the table.

I wrench my gaze away from his, staring down at the bacon and eggs he picked up from a diner nearby.

"No." I force a smile, throwing a piece of the bacon into my mouth. "Just got stuff on my mind."

Picking up my own coffee, I drag in a few long pulls, while his eyes still tether to mine.

"Are we finally going to talk about what's been bothering you? You've barely said a word to me since I spoke to Michael yesterday. I know you must be scared, but I'm here. I'm gonna protect you."

"I know." I glance up, playing with the food.

I can't tell him what's truly on my mind. And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm terrified too. I won't feel safe until his father is dead.

Seconds trickle by, and all I hear is his rough breaths colliding with my quiet ones.

He mutters a curse, and suddenly, he rises and comes to stand before me. I register his towering frame, managing not to look at him.

The back of his hand slinks out and brushes sensually down the side of my face, and with a tilt of a finger, he nudges my face up to his. I choke on my own heartbeats from the magnitude of the affection I find gathered within those eyes.

“I need you to believe that I can keep you safe,” he says. “I’d scorch a thousand armies and scatter their ashes at your feet.” His thumb strokes my lips with a rough yet feathery touch, igniting a burst of warmth, spreading deep and wide like wildfire. “I want you to be able to talk to me, about anything. Understand?”

I nod even as indecision battles within my heart. He holds my stare, waiting for me to tell him something. And I want to. I want to ask him if he truly doesn’t ever want to get married, but I refuse to appear desperate and insecure.

I don’t want to say the wrong thing and have him stop talking to me, touching me the way he has been. But what if he does anyway, years from now when we’re together? What if he finds out that I kept the affair from him all this time? He’d never trust me. I have to tell him. There’s no other option. At least if he stops speaking to me now, it’ll hurt a lot less than when I’m really in love with him.

Except you’re already in love with him.

Knots tighten in my gut.

Before I can convince myself otherwise, I start to tell him everything and pray like hell he forgives me.

“I knew,” I whisper, peering down at my lap.

I can’t look at him right now. Can’t see his eyes staring back at me with disappointment.

“Knew what?” His hand clasps my jaw. “Look at me.”

There’s demand coursing through his voice, something lethal and dark and all-consuming. And I do it. I look at him, and I almost want to die.

He tucks my chin in his palm. “What is it, little one?” His brows crease. “What do you have to tell me?”

I take a deep breath, preparing for the moment he’ll hate me, but how do I prepare for that?

“I’m not a good person, Raph. And after you hear what I’m about to tell you, you won’t want me anymore.”

His chest widens with a rough inhale, and before I know what’s happening, he slips his arms under my thighs and lifts me up against him,

cradling me while my arms and legs fasten around him.

My inhale stills in my lungs as he clutches my nape and forces me to look at him.

“What are you doing?” His gaze delves into mine. “Are you trying to push me away?”

He grabs a fistful of my hair and nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck.

“Because no matter what you tell me...” he whispers. “I’ll always want you.”

“Raph...” I swallow the lump in my throat, groaning when his lips mark my skin, teeth grazing softly. “Please just let me say this. Let me get this off my conscience.”

That has him rearing back and pinning me with a hardened look. He walks us to the bed and settles on the edge of it, me straddling his lap. When I try to get off, he clasps his arms tighter around my hips.

“No,” he says sternly. “You stay right here, and you tell me whatever you need to say. There’s no hiding. Not from me.”

I nod, biting into my inner cheek. Here it comes. Here’s the moment that either breaks us or keeps us from breaking together.

“I...”

My eyelids flutter closed to gather some courage, and when I open them, I find his gaze has hardened. My heart swells with nerves flitting within it, pounding at an abnormal pace, the sound filling my ears.

“I’m sorry, Raph...but I knew.”

He grinds his teeth.

“I—I...” I swallow down the lump jammed in my throat. “I knew about your father and my sister for a while.”

“You what?” His voice grows ice cold.

I nod, tears trapped behind my eyes once I see the hurt in his. His hands ball into fists around my hips.

I knew it. I knew he’d hate me. I deserve it too.

“I saw them kissing in the car that day you chased me down the street and asked me to come back. I confronted her about it, and she threatened to ruin me if I told you and...”

His nostrils flare. “And what?”

“And...and I was afraid you wouldn’t believe me.” The words tremble from my lips. “I was afraid my parents wouldn’t either. That everyone

would hate me more than they already did.”

I clasp a hand around his cheek, and he doesn’t push it away. Instead, emotions pull at his face. Tender emotions.

His eyes soften. “I never hated you, Nicolette. Not ever... Fuck...” He forces his head back and shuts his eyes.

It breaks my heart to see him hurting, and it’s all my fault.

His attention returns to me, and he sighs deflatedly. “If I had known, I would’ve left her, Nicolette.”

“I’m sorry. *Please forgive me.*” My brows furrow, my heart slicing in my chest. “I’d never do anything to hurt you. Not intentionally.”

“I know,” he says softly.

I should tell him about Bianca’s baby too. I should get it all out in the open. But I told Michael I wouldn’t. Yet how can I continue to carry another secret? How fair is that to him?

But at the same time, does it matter anymore? She’s dead. His father will be soon. All it will do is cause him unnecessary pain. Michael was right about that. I pray like hell Raph never finds out.

He sighs and looks back at me. “I’m not mad at you. I’m more mad at myself for being blind.”

A hand slides up my back, fingers cutting through my hair, and he pulls me toward him, his lips landing on my forehead.

“Is that all you needed to tell me?”

“Yes.”

The lie slips easily from my lips. Yet it weighs heavy, causing my body to drown.

“Are you still sore?” His guttural tone has my toes curling and my breaths coming in gasps.

The water cascades down in between my breasts, the weight of his body pressed up against my back, his voice rough and warm, fanning against my neck.

“A little.” A lot.

But I can’t tell him that. I don’t want him to stop what we’ve been doing.

“Well, I’m about to change all that,” he rasps, sliding a hand down my stomach, two fingers brushing over my slit.

I groan at the anticipation of him fucking me again. My head falls against his chest and I find the hungered depravation snaking in his gaze.

He works me faster, curling his fingers inside me, while his other hand wraps around my throat. His large grip imprisons me with ease.

The more he stares at me while touching me, the more I need to fall, again and again, until I can’t anymore.

“You feel so good,” he growls in pleasure, thrusting so roughly that I beg for things I once only begged in the privacy of my room, when I was alone, fantasizing about him.

His growing erection pushes into my back just as he flips my body until I’m flush against him. His hand grabs my jaw, fingers tightening, eyes searching my heavy-lidded gaze before he slams his lips to mine.

I let him kiss me. Slowly. Madly. I let him throw me up against the wall and bite and suck down my neck, in between my breasts.

He drops to the floor, kneeling before me, throwing my leg over his shoulder as he gazes up with wonder. And I let his mouth make me feel things I once only thought would remain in my dreams.

I clutch on to his hair, pulling harder as the tantalizing sounds he makes shoot through my core and down my legs.

This is where I belong. With Raph. I don’t want to think of anything else but his mouth on me, his fingers playing with my pussy as he slides one inside me. Then another.

I whisper his name, my body shuddering, and when my legs start to close around him, he parts them roughly and sucks my clit into his mouth, grazing his teeth around it.

“Yes!” I shout without a hint of shame, causing him to look up and drag his lips into a seductive smirk.

“You keep that pretty pussy open for me. I like looking at it.” The bossy, demanding tone from each one of those words triggers the pulsing tempo between my thighs to hasten.

His steely gaze remains on me while the tip of his tongue snakes out and licks me from entrance to clit. I don’t even hear the sounds coming out of me, it’s like they’re set in the distance, belonging to another. All I can feel is him and what he’s doing to me.

I slip toward the edge, close to falling, close to feeling the power he wields over my body. But just as soon as it comes, he stops. I jerk in protest, fists roughing his hair.

He chuckles, peering up, his lips wet, coated with my arousal. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"You're fucking beautiful. You know that, tesoro mio?" Leisurely, he fondles me with a finger, teasing the orgasm once more.

My heart races and breaths shoot out in gasps.

"I should probably tell you how many times I've fucked you in my head back then." He pushes two fingers deeper, curling them, and my head slams against the wall with a heady moan.

"Tell me," I beg. "Tell me what you did to me."

My attention finds him once more.

"I want to know," I pant. "I want to hear you say it."

"Oh..." He kisses my inner thigh, his other hand curving under my legs, grasping a handful of my ass. "If I'm being honest with myself, the first time I realized how beautiful you were, was when I took you to that dance."

I gasp from the confession, from his expert fingers making me climb higher. "Oh, God."

His thumb rolls lazily around my clit. "That's right. I'm a sinner, a goddamn animal because that was the first time I fucked you in my head. First time I wondered why it wasn't you I was with, and I hated myself for even thinking about you that way."

He grunts when I yank his hair.

"Do you still want me knowing that? Knowing the depth of my depravity for you?"

"Yes..." The word drowns out with a strangled sigh. "I want you even more."

He groans. "That's a good thing." His mouth returns to my pussy, pressing a kiss to my most sensitive place. "Because I'm never letting you go."

And that's the last thing he says before he finally gives it to me, sucking and flicking until I'm lost to the flaming desire, to the fire that burns through me with ferocious intensity. I ebb and flow through the countless ripples of pleasure he gives me, while he takes and he takes everything my body gives, until there's nothing left but my beating heart.

He climbs back up, two palms cradling my face as he stares into me like he sees inside my very soul, like he's the one who put it there.

"Fuck, I've never wanted a single person the way I want you." His hot breath coasts against my lips while I slowly climb down from the high.

The pads of his fingers return to my center, and he makes my body soar all over again. I thrash and protest, but he pins me to the wall by my throat and doesn't stop. His eyes are searing, monstrous, as he uses his palm and forces me to ride it.

"I can't..." I groan even as my body betrays me, like he's the drug that feeds my own depravity.

"You can." His lips slide down my neck, teeth scoring down my shoulder. "Give me one more before you come around my cock."

And those words are all it takes. I'm rising again, and this time, the need is stronger, more intense.

"Oh, God, this is so good." The gasping thunders from my chest, my nails clawing up and down his back.

His growl is guttural, the vibrations from his chest only pushing me further to the edge.

"The things I want to do to you. Things we haven't done yet," he promises. "There's so much I'm going to teach you."

"Like what?" I breathe.

"Like how good it'll feel when I take your ass too." His touch drops from my throat, and he grabs a fistful of my behind right before he strikes a heavy palm across my flesh.

I yelp...or moan. God, I'm not even sure. Pain morphs with pleasure while a finger eases into my puckered hole.

I instantly tense when one finger plays with me there.

"It's okay," he reassures with a tense sway of his tone. "Relax that tight hole and let me finger-fuck it while I thrust inside that sweet pussy."

And that does it. I instantly obey, my body opening up for him.

"That's my good girl." He slides his forefinger inside with ease while his palm continues to ride my core, sending a jolt shooting down the length of me.

I let out a scream of pure undulated pleasure while he takes me from both ends. I've never felt more full, more alive in my entire life.

"Oh, baby," he hisses on a groan. "If you could see yourself right now..."

He goes faster, his tempo beastly, the noises escaping through his lungs animalistic and untamable. I never thought I'd like something like this. Never even imagined it. And now, all I want is to find out how it'd feel if he were fucking my ass.

I pop my behind, pushing it into him while he swallows me up into his hungered gaze.

“Greedy thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes... Harder...” I can’t even recognize the woman talking. She’s someone I once wished I could be.

“You never have to beg me for that, tesoro mio.”

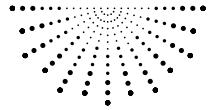
With those words, his thrusts turn rough, and I shatter, screaming out his name, wanting this feeling to never end.

And while my body still revels in pleasure, he lifts me up against the wall, positions his cock at my center, and slams home.

By the end of it, I can’t quite count how many times I’ve actually come.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



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RAPH

A FEW DAYS LATER, WE'RE AT A SECLUDED PARK, NO ONE HERE BUT US. I found it by chance, driving by it when I was getting us some food at a hole-in-the-wall gas station. I try not to go to the same place more than a few times. I don't want anyone asking questions.

I hate that I have to feed her garbage. I miss cooking for her. I know how much she enjoys it. Can't wait to get back to our damn life. It's been so long, I don't even know what normal is for me anymore. I don't know what normal with Nicolette is either.

My arms grasp her tighter, her back to my front, sitting on the towel we stole from our motel room. We may be running, but if I'm honest, being together like this feels a lot like being home.

Maybe it's her.

Maybe it doesn't matter where you are when you have the right person beside you.

Or maybe I like it here because I don't have to face all the reasons we shouldn't be together. Because they're still here, invading our space.

And maybe in the end, she'll be the one to leave me, realizing that the kind of life I live is too much to bear.

I pinch my eyes shut and take a deep breath. I'm with her now. That's where my focus should be.

Picking up a strawberry from the paper bowl to my left, I place it against her lips.

"Open your mouth," I softly say, bringing it closer to her.

"I'm really not that hungry." She sighs, like there's a cloud looming above her.

She's barely been eating these last few days. It's why I decided to get her out of the motel. Risk be damned. She's silently hurting, and I need to lift up her mood somehow.

"Come on. Just one."

Strawberries were once her favorite fruit, yet right now, she doesn't even look at it. I drop it back into the bowl, grabbing her hips, and with a yelp, she comes to straddle me, wrapping those thighs like a vise.

A flicker of a smile pulls at the corner of her lips. My heart quickens like it does whenever I get the chance to look at her, really look.

It's kind of crazy what a smile from the right person can do to someone, and hers? It makes the impossible seem possible.

"Hey, baby..." The back of my hand strokes down her cheek.

"Hi," she breathes, her lashes fluttering, her chest rising higher.

"There she is," I whisper, knuckles tracing the underside of her jaw. "You haven't been yourself in the last couple of days. I want you to talk to me. If you're hurting, I am too."

"It's nothing." She shakes her head, but it's bullshit. I can read her just as well as she can read me.

"Don't lie to me, Nicolette. I know you better than that."

She drops her forehead against mine and sighs.

"I'm just tired," she admits quietly. "Tired of everything." She finally looks back at me. "Tired of running. Tired of being the one who has to look over my shoulder when I did nothing to cause this. It's all her. It's always been her. I'm just sick of it. And I swear..." She snickers. "If my parents find out about everything Bianca did, they'll make up some excuse for it while I'll be shunned for not telling the police that your father killed her. They'll blame me."

Painful emotions swallow the light in her eyes.

"They'll disown me for it." Her chin trembles. "And why do I still care?"

She laughs tearfully, melancholy wrapping around each word.

"Not like they ever cared. But at least I had a home, you know? What will I have when they abandon me? I have no place to live. I didn't even finish college. I literally have nothing, Raph, and it's all her fucking fault. I hate her," she cries. "I hate a dead person. What does that make me?"

She narrows a gaze, and I listen, letting her get it all out.

“A bad person. That’s who,” she answers her own question. “I’m a terrible person, aren’t I? Worried about stuff like this when she’s dead. She’s never going to get older. She’ll never have anything. And I’m here complaining.”

She openly sobs now, and my arms circle around her, bringing her to my chest. Those tears pound through me like the pain is mine as much as it is hers.

I had no idea that was what she’d been thinking about all this time. I just assumed she’d be with me.

“You’re a good person,” I remind her. “Who else would think about their sister when all she did was hurt you? I can tell you Bianca would never do that. And as far as school and a place to live, I’ll make sure you get everything you need.” My palm rides up and down her back reassuringly while she continues to cry. “You’ll never be alone. I’ll always be here for you. I told you that.”

“How do you know?” She sniffls and wrenches herself away. “How can you promise me that? How do I know you’ll be alive long enough to promise me anything?”

“I’m dying now?” I chuckle tensely, but it does nothing to change the sorrow appearing like a cloud before her eyes.

She’s right about it all. I could die and leave her alone to fend for herself. The thought nearly kills me.

“You know what I mean. Between all the danger and you being who you are, how do I even know that this could work between us?”

I release an unsteady exhale. “What are you saying? You don’t want this anymore?”

My pulse fills my ears. There’s no way I’d ever let her go willingly. I’m not capable of it.

“I’m not saying that.” Her chin quivers. “I’m just scared, okay?”

“I know you are.” I tuck her jaw in my palm, my chest expanding with a harsh breath. “It’s going to be over soon, and then we’ll figure this thing out between us. But I can tell you one thing: you’re never getting rid of me.”

She laughs, tears leading a shaky path down her cheeks.

“I don’t ever want you to let me go, Raph,” she professes, staring into my eyes, like she’s searching into my heart and finding that it only beats for her.

Small hands come around to hold my face within them.

“Back then, you gave me so much. Your time. Your attention. You cared, Raph. No one ever did.” She smiles softly. “And slowly, that young girl I was became infatuated with you.”

My mouth pulls up. “Are you still infatuated?”

She shrugs. “Maybe...” She bites her bottom lip.

“Fuck, baby. That lip bite is going to send me straight to hell.”

“I hear it’s fun down there.” Her carefree nature returns, and she throws her arms over my shoulders. “How about a one-way ticket for the both of us?”

Her voice turns sultry, and my cock likes the sound, growing harder with every second that passes.

“And how do we get there?”

“Like this.” She circles her hips on my lap, her breaths growing raspier.

I lean into her, my nose tracing down the side of her throat, fingers slipping into her hair, pinning her mouth to mine.

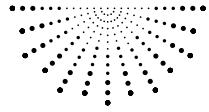
“I want you to fuck me right here,” she breathes. “Out in the open.”

“My dirty girl.” My teeth grate right behind her lobe, and she moans, driving her fingers into my back.

A hand lowers, and she reaches down and grabs the head of my cock through my sweats. And before she can slip inside, I hold her to me and flip her down beneath me. When she gazes up, stealing every single one of my breaths, the urge to tell her I love her grows until it’s insurmountable.

But instead, I toss her onto her stomach and fuck her on all fours with everything I have.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



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RAPH

“SO YOU’RE OKAY WITH ME WEARING SHORTS TO BED NOW, HUH?” SHE giggles as I flip her over my shoulder.

“Of course I am.” A smirk touches my mouth as I slide my hand underneath the tiny scrap of material covering that glorious ass of hers. “Now that I get to do this...” My palm slaps across her behind. “You can wear whatever the hell you want.”

I drop her onto the bed and press my body into her, my cock pulsing between her legs.

“But I much prefer when you wear nothing at all.”

I run a hand up the inside of her thigh, my fingers in the waistband of those shorts I’m dragging down until she’s in a pair of black panties. My mouth lowers to her abdomen, kissing her right above her mound while she moans, grabbing my hair in her fist before I kiss right back up.

The desire to sink inside her and forget the rest of the world overwhelms me until it’s all I know.

With a single swipe, I push a strand of hair away from her face and stare down into those eyes, never wanting to leave them.

“How can someone be this beautiful?” I whisper, almost to myself.

And when her lips flutter in response, all I want to do is kiss them, so I do just that. I kiss her gently at first, my tongue swiping inside her warm mouth, but then it overtakes me—that hunger, that desire to make her feel everything we are together.

I flip her on top of me as my teeth graze her jaw, hand fisting her hair as she grinds herself, rolling her perfect pussy over my hard-on.

Breathlessly, she drags herself away, pulling up her shirt until she's tossing it on the floor.

"Fuck," I grit, my eyes greedily taking in every one of her curves. I reach my hand for her chest, and slowly, I let my fingertips trace in between her breasts, watching her skin prickle in response.

She rocks her hips, eyes pinning me with intense desire boring through them as her hand lowers to my erection and she grips it tight.

"Shit." I shut my eyes as she strokes me through my pants.

When I feel her slide off of me, I look back at her, finding her kneeling between my thighs. Her eyes dart between me and my hard-on, and she gives me a confident grin before grabbing my pants and pulling them down. I like seeing her this way, like she's comfortable with me in every way.

My cock stands at attention, hard and ready for her. What else is new? When the hell was I ever this hard? Don't think I ever was.

"You're a damn dream. I'm not worthy of you," I say as her soft hand wraps around me.

She runs her thumb over the crown, and I buck, groaning out her name, but when her soft mouth lands there, I almost explode.

"Shit, what are you doing?" My palm instinctively locks onto the back of her head as she kisses my cock.

Fucking hell, this woman...

"I want to try to...you know?" Her cheeks stain with a deep shade of pink.

"You really want to suck my dick?"

She nods.

My chest expands at the thought of it. I'd be lying if I said I haven't had the image in my head more than once, but she's new to this and I didn't want to push her. But if she really wants this, who the hell am I to refuse.

"Are you sure?" My voice is heavy with yearning. I'm barely keeping it together.

She nods again.

I curl my arms under the back of my head. "You ever done this before?"

It wouldn't matter either way, but I want to be the first man she's tasted. The mere thought of her sucking some other guy's dick fills me with unexplainable jealousy.

"No." Her brows slant. "So I may not know how to."

She's nervous and it's hot as hell. "Don't worry, tesoro mio. You'll be perfect. You always are. You could touch my cock and I'd be fucking happy."

Her cheeks flush, and she bites her damn lip.

"Fuck, I'm gonna have you choking on my cock if you keep looking at me like that, biting your lip."

Her chest rises heavily and her mouth trembles.

"Will you show me what you like?" she asks in the sweetest tone that makes me want to throw her back down on the bed, spread her thighs, and make love to her real slow.

"I'll show you whatever you want. I'll teach you everything. But you need to understand..." I lift up and grasp her jaw in my possessive hand. "That this thing between us, it goes beyond sex. Beyond all of this."

Her eyes grow softer. "I know it does, but I want to make you feel good. I want to learn what your body likes. I want to be as good as the other women you've been with."

She stares down like she hates the thought of me with anyone else as much as I do.

I tilt up her chin between two fingers. "You'll never be like the other women I've been with."

And for a moment, sadness crosses her gaze.

"Because they'll never compare to you, Nicolette." I drag my eyes over every inch of her face. "You're my destiny. They were the forgotten path that brought me right to where I've always belonged: with you."

"Raph..." she breathes, chest rising and falling steadily before she lowers her mouth, soft lips landing on my cock.

I groan, throwing my head back, clasping a fist around her luscious hair.

"W-was that okay?" she whispers, glancing up at me.

"It's more than okay. No one has ever kissed my cock before and it's now my favorite thing."

"Really?" Her eyes gleam.

"Really."

"I want to give you all your favorite things," she murmurs, taking my length in her grasp, stroking me from root to tip.

"That's easy, baby. You're my favorite thing, and you've already given me that."

A coy little smile curls over her mouth. "What else can I give you?"

“Kiss it again,” I tell her.

And she does, right before the tip of her tongue strokes up my length.

I let out a beastly grunt, clasping my palm behind her head. And when she moans, my control snaps.

“You really want to suck my cock? Because this is your final chance to refuse.”

“Yes,” she says, and I clench her hair, staring into her eyes.

“Come on, then. Wrap that pretty mouth around it and suck.”

Her eyes grow, and gradually, she obeys and sends me straight to heaven.

She swallows the head, and when she glances up at me, all doe-eyed, my cock jerks against her tongue.

“Grab it as you suck and tighten your fist at the base.”

But her fingers can only wrap around about half of it.

“Stroke me up and down.”

She does, loosening her grip.

“Tighter.”

She cinches her grasp and glides it up and down real slow. “Fuck. That’s it. You’re doing good.”

My balls are practically burning for release. I stare at her, naked for me, aching to fuck her, to stare into those eyes that own me. There’s no feeling like it in the world. Never will be.

She takes more of me into her mouth, her moans vibrating over me.

“Yeah, just like that,” I hiss, throwing my head back, my palm pushing her down roughly until she’s swallowing the rest of me. “Tighten your lips around it even more. Good girl,” I groan when she does.

She gags and pulls back a little, her eyes tearing as she looks up at me.

“I’m sorry, tesoro mio. I was just...”

Completely obsessed with you.

“Do that again,” she tells me, excitement taking over her eyes.

“You liked that?”

What the hell am I going to do with this woman? By the time I’m through with her, she’s going to be trouble.

“You want me to force my cock down your pretty throat?”

“Yes...please.”

“Want me to make you gag on it again?”

Another nod.

“Good girl.”

A blush creeps up her cheeks.

“Where should I come?”

“In my mouth,” she confidently says. “I want to taste you.”

“Fucking hell.” I grind my teeth, my hips arching, begging for that mouth again.

“Better brace yourself, little one. I’m not going to be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle.” Her gaze turns heady. “I want you.”

Instantly, her hair’s wrapped tightly around my wrist, and I drive her mouth right back onto my cock, forcing her to take it down deeper and deeper.

“That’s it. Now, you’re going to suck until you swallow every drop of my cum. You understand?”

When she doesn’t nod—when she gags and chokes—I say, “Nod if you understand.”

And when she does, I tell her, “What a good listener.”

I yank her head back with a pull of my wrist and force her down onto me over and over, her hand jerking me as I make her take every raw inch.

“Just like that—fuck!” I groan. “Gonna make me come so hard.”

She moans and the sound vibrates around me, shooting down my spine. She takes over, sucking me hard and fast, gazing at me as she does.

“Oh, shit...” My voice trails, my fist tightening around her hair and the release hits me so damn hard, I grow lightheaded.

It shoots out of me in waves, hot spurts coating the back of her throat as I hold her head hostage, not letting even a drop slip.

When I’m through, my hand eases and she gradually pulls back. Her wild stare and watery eyes take me in, but I can’t tell if I did something she may have not enjoyed.

“You okay, baby? I’m sorry if—”

“That was amazing...” Suddenly she’s grinning, lowering her body back over mine, her lips kissing my jaw, my throat.

I chuckle. “Who are you and what have you done with my sweet Nicolette?”

She shrugs a single shoulder. “She’s still in there. She’s just a little more of a freak now.”

“Oh, is that right?” I flip her under me, settling my body over hers, my lips slanting down to the curve of her neck.

Her hands snap to my shoulder blades, sinking her nails into my flesh as I kiss up her throat, stroking my semi-hard cock against her pussy. Blood rushes into it again, and the need to fill her, to worship her, to own her is all I know.

“Fuck me, Raph,” she gasps.

I’m close to getting fully hard when my damn burner rings. I ignore it, my mouth dropping to her chest, lips latching on to a stiff nipple, teeth nipping it before I move on to the next.

It rings again.

“Fucking hell...” I mutter, throwing my forehead against her chest.

“Just get it...” She goes breathless.

I know I should. It could be Michael or one of my men.

“Two minutes.” I trail kisses between her breasts. “I promise.”

Then I’m jumping off the bed and hurrying to the table, grabbing the cell.

I see Michael’s number and immediately answer. “Yeah?”

There’s a long, ominous pause before I hear him. And in an instant, everything changes.

“It’s happening,” he says, those words laced with a tense undercurrent.

Something is terribly wrong.

“In three hours from now, we’re taking him out.” He sounds like he’s going to burn the whole city to the ground. “Get back to the house and get everyone ready.”

I turn to look at her as she props herself on her elbows, her eyes full of questions. And my heart lurches.

All I can think about is what the hell I’m going to do with her when I’m gone.

I have to bring her to the house where my men can protect her. It’s the only way. She’s too vulnerable here alone.

“We’ve been ready,” I tell Michael. “See you soon.”

I don’t bother him for details. I can call him back on the drive.

The call ends, and I grasp the cell tighter.

“Baby...” I despise separating from her, even knowing it’s the only way to finally end all of this.

She sits up straighter, grabbing the blanket to cover herself. “Is everything okay?”

A panicked expression flitters across her gorgeous features. I hate seeing her in fear. It's why this has to end.

Then it hits me. This could be the last time I see her. Something inside my chest snaps, like my heart has broken free from my rib cage.

What if I never get to tell her I love her? And how fair would it be to tell her now only to leave her and never return?

No. I'll tell her when I come back to her. When I can tell her over and over again.

"Was that Michael?" she asks.

I retrieve my sweats from the bed and slip into them. "Yeah. We have to go now." Her brows pinch in confusion. "We're taking care of my father today."

"Oh." Goose bumps skate down her arms.

"Everything will be okay." I lower on the bed beside her and take her hand in mine. "But I have to bring you to my house where my men can watch over you."

She drags her hand away and shakes her head. "No. What if your father's people find me there?" Dread skitters in her gaze. "No one knows I'm here. Wouldn't it be safer to stay?"

"I can't leave you here alone."

"Think about it." She slides closer and places a palm on the top of my knee. "They won't know where to find me. I'll stay here the whole time you're gone. It shouldn't take long, right?"

Fuck. Why am I even considering this? But what if she's right? What if this is the safest option?

"I hate the thought of leaving you, tesoro mio. If something happens to you..." I trail, grasping her nape and pinning her forehead to mine. A thick slam of emotions hits the back of my throat.

This may be the very last time I get to hold her. So I hold her tighter, my arms wrapping her so close, I wonder if I'll break her.

And instead of pulling away, she holds me too. Just as tightly.

"I'll call you as soon as I can," I say.

"Promise me you'll come back," her whispered voice drops with tears filling it.

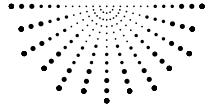
She feels this too. This slice of pain in the air, the goodbye, not knowing if it's forever.

"I promise," I lie.

Because sometimes lies are all we have to hold on to.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



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NICOLETTE

I'VE BEEN PACING FOR HOURS, STARING AT THE PHONE HE GAVE ME, FIRMLY clutched in my palm. He promised he'd call as soon as he could. Why hasn't he?

I tried calling, but it went to voicemail.

What if something happened? What if he got into an accident and is bleeding somewhere? What if he's...

No. Don't do it. He's fine. Probably has poor reception. That has to be it.

I stare at the gun he left me, and the briefcase of more cash than I've seen propped against the nightstand. He told me if he doesn't reach out to me in twenty-four hours, to take the cash and travel to Hawaii. He's got a place there no one knows about, and if he doesn't show up, it means he didn't make it. I was sick at the thought, not wanting to hear a word of it, but he told me it was important. That we needed a plan.

If he doesn't come back tonight, I won't sleep at all. There's no way I can. Not when he's out there facing who knows what. A shiver crawls up my spine.

Parting the curtains, I sneak a peek into the parking lot, seeing two other cars. One is new. No idea which room is occupied, and the other belongs to the woman who checked us in.

I plop down on the bed, not knowing what else to do. An hour later, and I'm pretending to be watching a movie, but my mind is still on Raph.

Is he there already? I should've asked what the plan was. I don't even know any details about what's transpiring.

The credits on the TV roll, and I'm about to switch to something else when I hear a woman's scream. My pulse jumps in my throat and I'm instantly on my feet, the remote falling on the floor with a loud thud.

"Shit," I mutter, fear taking over.

My heart beats in an unnatural pace.

Who the hell was that?

"Help!" the scream returns. "Someone please help me! My baby! Oh, God, my baby!"

"What the hell?" I whisper, rushing toward the window and seeing a blonde middle-aged woman with tears streaking down her cheeks, her tanned sweater marred with stains.

Frantically, she runs toward the room beside ours and pounds heavily with her fists. "Please? Anyone? He's not breathing. My baby's not breathing!"

"Oh my God," I gasp, quickly dashing toward my phone, intending to call an ambulance, unsure if she's done it.

By the looks of her, she may not even own a phone. And the one in the motel doesn't even work. At least the one in our room doesn't. As I'm about to dial, she bangs on my door.

"Please! Anyone inside? He needs help. He's dying!" She hits my door over and over and looks through my window.

When our eyes connect, my heart jumps to my throat. I back away, right into the corner of the wall. Fear slams into my body from all over.

"Miss? Please!" She smashes a fist against the window.

Where the hell is the woman at reception? Why hasn't she helped?

"He's only three, and I don't know CPR!" she pleads. "If you do, please help us."

After everything I've endured, I fear everyone. But, at the same time, if a child dies and I could've done something to stop it, I won't forgive myself.

I suck in a long, shallow breath, slowly exhaling.

I have to help. It's the right thing to do.

"I—I know CPR," I tell her loudly enough.

By the time the ambulance gets here, he may die. And what if the police show up too? Knowing that the cops are connected to Raph's family, I don't know which ones I can trust. One of them could take me back to Giancarlo or kill me.

I back off the wall and move toward the entrance, my legs as heavy as lead. I start to unlock the door.

“Oh, thank God.” She slaps her palms over her knees and a breath of relief wooshes out of her. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” she feverishly says while I attempt to get my pulse to slow. “This way.”

With a tremble, she points a finger to her left, and we run toward her son.

“I’m only a few doors down. I don’t know what happened.” She sniffles. “One second, he was fine, and the next, he was having a seizure and hit his head when he fell. I called an ambulance, but I know how it is in this part of town. They don’t care, so I was hopin’ someone helps before they show up.”

As soon as we make it to her door, she scans her card and opens it.

“You’re an angel,” she pants. “He’s in the restroom. I left him on the floor and ran for help.”

I rush toward the child, with her close at my heels, and when I enter the bathroom...

It’s empty.

“What the...?” Fear grips my throat and my lungs grow heavy.

And all of a sudden, she’s not crying anymore.

I whip around just as something pricks the back of my neck.

My eyes widen. Her gaze flashes with malicious intent, and before I can fight her and run, my head spins.

Round and round.

The room blurs.

The light flickers in and out.

My body grows weightless.

“Night-night.” Her voice seeps through the chaos, and darkness falls all around me, trapping me with it.

RAPH

I stare out the only window with the light shining bright within it. The rest of the house is pitch black while I wait for Michael and the rest of them.

Dragging out my cell from my pocket, I attempt calling Nicolette again, but there's no answer.

I got her worried text hours later, when I had a better connection. I called and texted her back immediately, but she never answered. I'm hoping it's because she's asleep by now. It's late, but knowing her, I expected she'd be up.

All I wanted to do was turn back around and check on her. But the faster this is over, the faster I can leave.

Michael's plan is simple. Pretend I'm alone. They take me, tie me up, except I'm not going to be tied up too hard. Just enough for my father to believe that Michael wants me dead. Then we give him one hell of a surprise.

"They're coming, boss," Julian, one of my guys, alerts me.

He leads my men. Ex-sniper for the Israeli army. Tough as they come. More loyal than anyone who's worked for me.

"Have everyone on the ready."

He nods and returns to his position downstairs. All the men have been instructed to hide. My father has to think he has a shot at getting what he wants.

Minutes later, I hear my front door creak open, and the thud of footfalls comes next.

"It's time to end this. We have you surrounded," Michael calls from down below, his voice traveling.

A grin crawls to my face. He's damn near convincing *me*. My father won't suspect a thing.

"Show yourself. Don't be a coward," he continues.

My laughter echoes through the hallway as I start for the stairs.

"Never been a coward, Michael," I say, itching to get my hands on the bastard who's ruined my entire life. "I'm glad you all finally decided to come." I round the corner, almost at the top of the staircase. "I've been waiting for you for far too long."

Adrenaline and rage hit me all at once.

"Seems like I'm not the coward after all."

I greet them with another chuckle, and finally, I start down the stairs. Michael's men point their weapons at me as soon as they see me.

Well played, brother.

And when I see them all—my two brothers, my father—the blood in my veins pumps louder. This is almost over.

“Where are your men? Your weapons?” Michael asks, already knowing the answer.

We spoke briefly after I left the motel and we discussed how everything will go today.

“They’re gone.” I raise my arms in surrender as I move down the stairs. “And as you see, I don’t have any weapons.” I continue toward them. “You came here for one purpose, so let’s get it over with.”

Let’s kill our damn father.

At that, my hardened gaze zeroes in on the bastard, and his eyes glare right back.

“Kill him, Michael,” he fires out, his body zapping with maddening fury.

He wants me gone just as badly. It shouldn’t come as a surprise. But somewhere inside, it hurts to know my own father wants me dead.

“Nice to see you too, Pop.” The words may as well be filled with poison.

Michael gestures toward one of Patrick’s sons, who grabs me while I play the part, keeping my hands up.

“Tie him up on the chair,” Michael instructs him. “Do to him what he did to Sophia and Elsie.”

The instant he says that, my pulse quickens. Michael told me what happened to his wife, Elsie, and his daughter. That my father sent people after them, organized the entire thing, and put the blame on me.

Apparently, I also set a fire to one of our restaurants and left a note behind.

My father is trying hard to make me look like the villain. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when the truth is finally revealed.

“How is my favorite niece doing?” I ask, grinning whenever I think about that kid.

God, I love her so much. I can’t wait to hug her.

I’m being dragged toward a chair while I keep my eyes on Michael.

“Misses you,” he admits.

Wish I could have told her the truth. That I didn’t abandon her. That I had no choice.

I close my eyes. “I miss her every day.”

“You fucking liar.” My father’s harsh tone seeps through my thoughts.

And when I open my eyes, he’s sprinting toward me while the men loosely tie my arms behind me.

“After what you did...” He punches me right in the middle of my jaw.
“You don’t deserve to even utter her name.”

Fuck, I’m this close to emptying a gun into his chest.

“Stay back,” Michael warns him.

I don’t so much as flinch, staring with rage lighting my gaze on fire.

“This is my kill,” Michael goes on. “My daughter.”

“And she’s *my* granddaughter!” Our treacherous father bangs a fist to his chest.

“Yeah.” Michael slowly nods. “She is.”

I know he’s thinking what I am. How could he do that to Sophia? She’s a child. But he never cared about that. He only cares about himself.

“No mercy for the enemy.” My chuckle is deadpan. “Isn’t that what you taught us?”

“That’s right.” My father hits me with a narrowed stare. “And today, you’ll learn what that statement truly means.”

This is it. It’s time.

I grin.

“I think the only person who’ll be learning that lesson...” I slowly slip out of the ties and bring my arms forward. “...is you.”

My father’s eyes grow large.

My laughter is cold and menacing, and I revel in the shock etched to his face when I jump to my feet and prowl closer to the bastard.

“W-w-what is this, Michael?” He falls back a few steps, his horrified expression darting toward all the men around us. “Shoot this traitor! He—he came after your daughter!”

But no one listens to a word he says. He’s not the boss anymore, and though he may have some still loyal to him, none of those men are here. I stretch out a palm toward another man, who hands me a gun.

And just on time, my guys come out of hiding and join in the fight. If you can call it that.

“What the fuck is happening?” Gio parts through the crowd and walks over to where Michael and I stand.

“I’ll explain everything in a moment,” Michael says, staring just as viciously at our father as I am.

“The only traitor I see, Father...” I lift the pistol and aim it straight at his chest. “...is you.”

He backs away, his inhales quick and shallow, and in a single move, all the weapons are now pointed at him. Any one of them would be willing to kill him if Michael asked.

I keep staring at the man who gave me life. At a man who, from the time I was little, hated me so much, he’d beat me for fun. He’d find any reason to hurt me. Then he found more ways to hurt me by fucking my wife. He needs to die. Right the hell now.

I rush forward, the muzzle of my nine pressing into my father’s forehead. “Are you ready to admit what you’ve done? How you tried to blame me for everything you’ve been doing?”

There’s an instant when fear skates past his gaze, taking hold of his features, and to know I’m the one who did that...it feels damn good. But just as quickly, it disappears, and out comes the monster. He laughs, really laughs, and the urge to torture him before he dies comes on strong.

“Is this a joke?” He pivots toward Michael, who aims his weapon at him too. “What the hell are you doing, son? After everything I’ve done for you?” His voice grows shrill. “After I gave you *my* rightful place? You turn on me?”

“You turned on this family,” Michael tells him. “You know what you’ve done. You know why you’ve been blaming Raph for everything you yourself have orchestrated.”

“Michael?” Gio’s face tightens, fitted with rage. “You’d better fucking tell me what the hell is going on before I lose it.”

Michael clasps him on the shoulder and tells him how sorry we’ve been for keeping this from him, but that we were afraid he’d fuck up the plan. He’s angry for a moment, but his anger is directed at my father, and it takes both me and Michael to keep him from murdering that son of a bitch.

Once he relaxes, once he’s calm enough to hear what our father has truly done, I tell him everything: the affair, what Nicolette overheard, what she saw, and how she went on the run to hide from our father.

Gio’s face goes ashen. Disbelief clouds his face, and my father tries hard to convince him we’re the liars, but Gio’s on our side.

Michael tells him that our father had even planned the hit on him just to blame me for it. Just to get Michael to come after me. My father knew if Michael killed me himself, his problem would be solved. And if Michael

died first, he'd have all the reason to kill me without revealing his true motivation.

"Let's get this over with," I say, pressing the gun into my father's chest.

His upper lip curls. "You may want to hold off on that, son. I'm not done telling you the best part yet."

There's nothing he can do or say to save his life.

"Oh yeah?" I force a dry snicker. "What's that?"

"Well..." He drags in a slow breath, his eyes connecting with mine in a vile kind of way, like he's got something under his sleeve. "If you kill me, you'll never get her back."

A feverish chill creeps up the back of my neck.

"Get who back?"

My drumming pulse drowns out the whispers in the room. I force down the nerves clawing inside my stomach. He can't be talking about her.

"That pretty little Nicolette. You've been shacking up with her, haven't you?" He groans. "Who could blame you. The set of tits on that girl."

There's no way. He's just trying to mess with me.

It's fucking working.

In a quick move, I'm on him, clutching his throat and squeezing hard. "You say one more thing about her and I'll kill you. Slow. So fucking slow, you'll wish for death."

"She'll...d-d-die t...too." He strangles out the words.

"Nicolette is safe. You can't touch her." I drop my hand.

I won't let him make me think he's got her. She's safe. She's okay. I force some deep breaths into my lungs. I have to get back to her. I have to kill him and bring her home.

My father tries to say something, but coughs up blood instead.

"You...sure about that, son?" He looks smugly, attempting to steady his breathing.

The way he's staring at me. The way his mouth twists...

Fuck.

I stumble backward, my gun hitting the floor.

"You're fucking lying," I tell him, but I can't even convince myself that he is.

"Am I? Why don't you call her and see if she answers?"

My heart pounds, my eyes filled with disdain as I level him with a stare and reach into my pocket for my burner.

Even before I start to dial, I know in my heart that she's gone. That he took her. That no matter how hard I tried to protect her, I failed. How the hell could I have thought she could be safe with me? That we could be right for each other?

The phone rings.

And rings.

And rings.

"Fuuuuck!" I toss the cell and hear it crack. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

My fist lands on the mirror, blood seeping from my knuckles. But I don't even feel any pain. My chest, it's the only damn thing that hurts.

I have to find her. I rush toward him and grab his shirt.

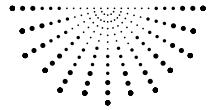
"Tell me where she is. Now!"

"Gotta let me go first." Ridicule flanks his features.

And when he laughs this time, I don't quite hear it, other than his screams as I release every pent-up shred of rage he put inside me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



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NICOLETTE

MY TEMPLES THROB, LIKE SOMEONE SLAMMED A HAMMER INTO MY HEAD. I groan.

Or I think I do. It doesn't even sound like it's me.

I force my eyes open, but there's mostly darkness, and it takes me a few minutes to adjust to my surroundings.

I'm sitting on the floor. It's cold. Wet. Is that water? Blood?

A shiver spirals down both arms.

Grumbling, I try to get to my feet, pulling at my hands.

I gasp, turning to find my right arm restrained at my wrist. All the little hairs on my body stand up.

Where am I?

I remember her. That woman. The liar. Does she work for Giancarlo? Is that who kidnapped me?

It has to be him. Who else would it be?

Raph has no idea I've been taken. I'm on my own.

Fear has completely snapped me out of the fog and the adrenaline pumps through my blood. I have to find a way out.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" My heartbeats drum faster, almost to the point I grow dizzy.

What will these people do to me?

Panic sets in full force, and my panting intensifies, echoing through the cold room. The moon shines through the window behind me, providing enough light to see around me, but not enough to make out the rest of what looks to be a sizeable room.

"Nice to see you again," a woman says from across my left.

“Who said that?” My harsh inhales and exhales permeate the room.

It can’t be.

Fear coils in my gut.

Because for a second, that voice sounded like...

No. It’s not possible. I must be having a nightmare. There’s no way I heard right.

“Hello?” she calls again. “Do you hear me?”

That was definitely her.

Oh my God.

“Bianca?”

My pulse thrashes and fills my ears.

“Hey, sis.”

And all of a sudden, the room is bathed in a soft light. She grins as I finally take her in, chained up like me on the opposite side.

“H-how? How are you here?” My voice trails.

My mouth falls open. How can she not be dead? I saw her. She was motionless and bleeding. She was gone.

“It’s a long story, but my God, Nicolette, I’m so happy to see you!”

She is?

My mind and my body haven’t caught up yet. I stare at her in disbelief. It’s definitely her. I’m not imagining it. She’s still pretty. Still looks the same. Like nothing has changed. While for me, everything has, and it’s all her fault.

“How are you here, Bianca? I don’t understand.” I try to climb to my feet, but stumble back down, my head spinning.

“Well...” She easily stands, walking over to where I am and stares right down at me.

The chain around her wrist is long enough for her to move around with ease. Of course the bitch gets the bigger chain.

“When they brought me to the hospital, I actually made it through surgery, and when I woke up, I begged my doctor friend to tell everyone I was dead. You know I knew everyone at that hospital.” She laughs coldly. “I knew lying to you all was my only chance of getting away from Giancarlo.” She runs a finger through her jet-black hair and bats her lashes. “I didn’t want to. Obviously. I had a good life with Raph and all of that, you know? But I had no choice.”

“And...and the baby?” I whisper. “You were pregnant with his damn baby!” I shout, anger seeping into my pores.

“I lost it when I got shot. Whatever.” She shrugs.

“How could you do that to Raph?”

“Listen,” she sneers. “My marriage has never been your business, though you always made it yours.” She yawns like she’s bored. “May I finish my story now?”

I grit as she goes on, already hating her all over again. I’m not even happy to see her alive, and I’m not sorry about it.

“The doctor was a good friend of mine. He was a little more than a friend, if I’m being honest...” She grins, looking past me as though she’s imagining him right now.

My God, she slept with him too. I shake my head, unable to comprehend how horrible she truly is.

“The doc offered his help after I told him the amount of danger I was in. He arranged for his rich uncle to get me out of the country. I was living a good life on a remote island near France. That is, until one of Giancarlo’s bastards recognized me.”

Her face turns with revulsion. “The asshole followed me home and tied me up. Told me his boss would be happy to know I was doing well. He was gloating.” Her eyes narrow. “He drugged me and brought me here.”

“Did you see Giancarlo?”

She nods. “He came here the next day and told me how happy he was that I’d returned from the dead, and that Raph would be thrilled to see me.”

“Has Raph come?” I know he hasn’t, but I want to know what she says.

“Not yet.” She arches a brow. “He will soon. Gian promised I could have my life back. It will just take a little time.”

“Time for what?”

My stomach flips. I don’t like this at all. There’s no way he’ll let her go just like that. Is he waiting for Raph to die to release her? And he’s definitely not letting me go. I’m as good as dead.

“It’s Giancarlo, Nicolette.” Her face pitches with annoyance. “He didn’t give me a play-by-play. I’m just glad he didn’t put a bullet in me again.”

“How long have you been here, exactly?”

“A few weeks. I think. Not like there’s a calendar here I can tick off.”

Her lips press into a thin line of irritation. “You should be happy to see me instead of asking me all these questions. I mean, my God...” She walks

back to her original spot and lowers into it. “I’m alive. You have your sister back.”

“Um, I don’t know what fantasy land you’re from, but you and I were never close, *sister*.”

Her face tightens, and then she’s smiling. One of those fake smiles she’s perfected over the years.

“You’re right.” She clears her throat.

Wait, did she just admit I was right? Is this an alternate universe?

Her fingers flutter across the side of her throat. “I do take the fault in that. Most of it anyway.”

She looks like she’s about to say something. A few seconds pass before she actually does.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch to you.”

Her voice softens, and I find it hard to believe. She’s never in her life been nice to me. Maybe whatever happened to her has changed her.

“I know it may mean nothing now, but...” After the longest pause known to man, she says, “If we get out of this, I hope we can be a family. That we can have a fresh start. Be sisters. Wouldn’t you want that?”

No. She’s lying. There’s no way in hell this is the real Bianca.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” I ask, hating to admit that in the pit of my stomach, I’m wishing she’s earnest.

I’d do anything to have a sister. But is she really capable of that? And what about when she learns what’s been going on with Raph and me?

Oh, God. Raph. I can’t give him up. Not after he’s finally admitted to wanting me. Not after we’ve been together.

What will he do once he learns she’s still alive? Will he want her back? Will he want to make his marriage work? I know how seriously he takes his vows. Shit, he may actually forgive her. Or pretend to. He always said he’d never divorce. His family is against it.

An ache pulses in my chest, and I rub at it, feeling the pain settle comfortably. I fight not to cry from the loss that’s inevitable. Once he finds out, he’s going to choose her. I just know it. Because no one ever chooses me.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” The shrillness in her tone grates up my insides.

“I don’t know what I want, Bianca. There’s a lot to think about. A lot you’ve done to me over the years.”

“Typical.” She snorts. “I’m extending you an olive branch and you won’t accept it.”

Is she doing it for Mom and Dad? Why would they care? They never have before. Maybe she thinks Raph would forgive her for fucking his father if she were nicer to me. He’d be an idiot, an absolute moron, if he didn’t divorce her after everything she’s done.

Wait, does she even know that he knows about the affair? Time to burst her little bubble.

“I appreciate you wanting us to be sisters and all of that, but why now? Is it because of Raph?” I straighten my shoulders, the throbbing in my head dissipating. “Because you should know, he knows everything.”

I don’t tell her he doesn’t know about the baby. Let her think he does. Let her suffer.

Her eyes expand. “He knows about Gian and me?” A hand curls into a fist by her thigh. “You told him, didn’t you?” Rage laces through the narrow slits of her snake eyes. “You bitch!” She jumps to her feet. “You always wanted him.” Her nostrils widen with every raging breath. “Always tried to ruin us!”

I climb to my feet as she comes closer.

“Are you happy now?” She grabs the front of my shirt and pulls her face up to mine, nose to nose. “He’ll still want me back. He’ll forgive me.”

I laugh, shoving her hand off me with ease. “Or he won’t. Or he’ll think you’re a cunt for fucking his father and getting knocked up by him. He’ll divorce you, and you’ll crawl back into your hellhole where you belong.”

My words spray vitriol on her face. She’s ready to claw my eyes out.

“I hate you!” she shouts, throwing her other palm across my cheek.

I rub my burning skin, laughing fiendishly, enjoying the look of despair and anger twined on her features. I don’t buy her innocent act. She doesn’t care about me. Never has. Never will.

“I know you hate me, and I no longer care, Bianca. You are not better than me.” I poke my index finger into her chest. “Never were. Never will be.”

She hisses as I back away.

“He’s going to come for me. He’s going to save me,” I tell her and she’s the one laughing now.

“You’re so naïve. You think he loves you, don’t you?” She slants her head to the side. “Aww. You’re still so pathetic, it’s almost cute.”

I've heard her call me things like that for too long, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me.

Her body rocks with more laughter, but I can tell she's nervous.

"The only person my husband will be saving is me." She curves a single brow. "You never meant a thing to him. Stop fooling yourself with your childhood crush. He only ever saw a little girl who was desperate for his attention."

"Is that what you think?" Fury churns in my chest, and with a hard shove, I push her back and fold my arms over my chest, thankful that my bullet wound has mostly healed. I grin when she stumbles.

Her eyes widen as she takes in the gloating riddled on my face.

"What did you do?" The words fall on a whisper, shock threaded through them.

A slow-growing smile ticks up my mouth. "I think you may have finally started to put the puzzle together."

I let her stew, my lips thinning.

"You slut! Did you fuck my husband?"

"I guess I wasn't that pathetic when he was fucking me in every position, telling me how he never loved you at all."

The next thing I know, she's rushing toward me, roaring like a damn animal. Her fist lands across my jaw and I give it to her just as good, unleashing all the years of pent-up resentment.

I throw her on her back and sit on top of her, slamming a punch into her cheek. "I'm not afraid of you, Bianca."

I hit her again when she tries to claw my arms.

"You never loved him. He didn't mean a thing to you! You just didn't want me to have him."

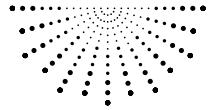
"That's right!" She spits up blood. "He's mine! I'll kill you before I let you have him."

"You can try." I hop off and tower over her. "But you won't succeed. People like you rarely do."

"And what kind of people are those?"

"The sick, piece-of-shit kind."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



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RAPH

IT'S ONLY BEEN A FEW HOURS SINCE I FOUND OUT HE'S GOT HER. I'VE LOST count of how many walls I've made holes in, and it's not even my house. Michael has been gracious enough to not kick my ass for busting up his place, but he must understand what I'm going through.

Elsie isn't here with him, either. But he sent her away for her own safety. Again, my father was the reason. However, at least he knows where she is.

I don't.

Nicolette could be fucking dead by now. My heart feels like it's being shredded right in my goddamn chest. If a piece of her is harmed, I'll make my father suffer for years before he dies. I will make his world a nightmare.

Where could he be hiding her? Everyone on our team is looking, trying to find her, but coming up empty.

"They're almost here," Michael informs me. "Mom just called."

My stomach dips. I haven't seen my mother for about a year, not since I started the war with the Irish. Same goes for Sophia. I don't even know how to look my mother in the face, knowing he was doing that with Bianca under both our noses.

The door swings, and I instantly hear the pounding of footsteps and a little girl's voice.

"Where is he? Where is he?" she calls excitedly, and a smile grows on my face.

I rise to my feet, emotions swelling in my chest. And when she appears in the doorway, her eyes as wide as her mouth, she rushes for me, and my arms open for her.

“Uncle Raph!”

I tuck a palm around the back of her head as soon as she’s against me.

“I missed you so much,” she says with a whisper.

I hold her tighter. “Not as much as I missed you, my favorite girl.”

She peers up. “Promise you’ll never leave again.”

“I promise.” Affection tethers to every beat of my heart, and I kiss her gently on the forehead, hoping that one day, I can be a father too.

Mom wipes tears from under her eyes as she approaches, and with a cry, she throws her arms around me and holds on.

“I’m sorry,” she breathes.

“Me too, Ma. Me too.”

While Michael helps Sophia get ready for bed, Mom and I sit on the sofa beside each other, draped in silence, unable to say a thing to one another.

I’m riddled with humiliation. What can I really say?

“I owe you a huge apology, Raph.” She sighs, and it gets me to look at her.

“You don’t.”

“I do.” She moves closer on my left and places a hand on my shoulder. “For years, that bastard tortured you. Beat you, and as your mother...” She chokes up. “As your mother, it was my job to protect you, and I failed. I failed my own son.”

“I don’t blame you, Ma.” My palm lands on the top of her hand, still settled on my shoulder. “You couldn’t do anything against him.”

“That’s not true.” She shakes her head, a finger swiping under her lashes. “I could’ve tried to kill him.”

I snicker, a smile fighting my mouth. “We both know that probably wouldn’t have worked and I’d have lost the only parent I ever had.”

Her brows furrow and tears leak past her cheeks. “I love you, Raph. You know that, right?”

“Love you too, Ma.”

She nods thoughtfully. “I want him dead.”

“We all do. But I need to find Nicolette first.”

“I can’t believe what he was doing.” She inhales deeply and grimaces. “And Bianca? That hussy. I don’t like speaking ill of the dead, but I hated her.”

I pinch my brow with two fingers, feeling a damn migraine coming on.

“I never liked her, you know,” Mom continues. “Am I allowed to say that now?”

“Sure.” I chuckle dryly.

“Nicolette is a good one. I approve.” Mom gives me a small grin.

A heavy sigh leaves my lungs.

“What’s wrong, honey?”

“I don’t know, Ma. Everything?” Elbows propped on my knees, I glance over at her. “I thought I could be with her. Now...I don’t know.” I pause, choosing the right words. “I can’t even keep her safe. What will our life be like?” I drag in a long breath. “This world isn’t meant for women like her. And then there’s the age difference, or that I was married to her damn sister.”

“Cut yourself some slack.” Mom draws closer. “Bianca was sleeping with your father. I say at this point, you do whatever the hell you want.”

I chuckle.

“I’m serious, Raph. If she makes you happy, then you should follow your heart, because years from now, you will regret it. Take it from me.” Her features grow tense.

I straighten my back, sensing her change in mood. “What does that mean?”

She gives me a faraway look and shrugs. “It means, I was you once. In love with someone who wasn’t your father. But unlike you, I didn’t have a choice. I was forced to marry him, and to this day, I haven’t forgotten the man who stole my heart.” Her eyes glisten as she smiles sadly.

“Ma...I had no idea.”

“No one does,” she says tearfully. “No one but my mother.”

“And she didn’t let you marry whoever this guy was?”

“No.” She scoffs bitterly. “I was arranged to marry your father when I was eighteen. I didn’t have a say. I had to leave this guy behind.”

“I’m sorry.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “Hey, I have you boys, and I will never ever regret anything. I just don’t want you to be me, looking back on your life and wondering what if. You have something I didn’t: a choice. Grab it and

don't let it go." She clasps my face with a palm and kisses my cheek. "When you find that girl, marry her. Trust me." She winks. "She's one of the good ones."

"How come you never liked Bianca?" I ask, just as she starts to rise.

She sneers. "Because the first time I met her, she was spitting out my chicken parm into a napkin."

I burst with a laugh. Yeah, that would do it.

Once Ma's out the door, I consider what she said, wondering if being with Nicolette is something that's right or if I'm being selfish.

Michael's footsteps come marching down the stairs, and he looks ashen once he's standing before me.

"She's waiting for you," he informs me.

Sophia insisted I read to her tonight. She wants nothing to do with her father, and it's slowly killing him. She's angry at Michael for Elsie not being here, and she's not letting him forget it.

"She hates me."

I rarely ever see Michael like this. He's really broken up about letting Elsie go.

I slap him on the shoulder as I get to my feet. "She doesn't hate you. She loves you. She's just upset. She'll get over it."

He gives me a look that says there's no way in hell that kid will let him out of the doghouse. My niece takes her stubbornness from her father.

"You can always get Elsie to come back," I tell him, chuckling.

"Shut up."

I'm still laughing as I start for the stairs, hoping I can talk some sense into my little niece. My brother is in pain. Losing the woman he cares about is slowly destroying him and having his daughter's wrath on top of it is not helping.

Approaching, I knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she asks, her voice tight, like she's afraid it's Michael.

"Uncle Raph."

"You may enter."

I stifle my laughter and push the door open.

She's sitting up in a light pink sleeping gown, a book already in hand.

"Can you read to me every night?" she asks once I approach.

"I can try." I settle on her side of the bed. "But I think your daddy enjoys it just as much."

She rolls her eyes. "Well, I don't want him to anymore."

"And why is that?" I take the book and scoop an arm under her, tugging her close.

"Because..." Her tone loses that stiffness, and in its place is a broken little girl.

"Because why?" I tilt up her chin, and her eyes water over.

"He sent her away!" she cries. "He sent Elsie away!"

Her sobs grow and I leave the book behind and bring her onto my lap, where she cries long and hard.

"I miss her so much." She sniffles. "She was supposed to be my mommy. She loved me."

"She still loves you. It's just..." I battle with what to say to make her feel a little better. "She had to go for a little bit, but she may be back."

Knowing my brother, he won't put her in danger. He'll suffer just to protect her.

"Maybe you can talk to Elsie and make her come back?" She stares into me, hope bathing the brown hues of her gaze, her long lashes fluttering, tears caught within them.

"I'll see what I can do, sweetheart."

I can't tell her no. I won't break her heart more than it's already broken.

"Thanks, Uncle Raph. Can't wait for you to meet her." She swipes under her eyes. "She's so nice and pretty."

"I bet she is." I kiss her tenderly on her forehead. "Now..." I lower her beside me. "How about that story?"

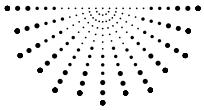
"Okay." She perks up a twinge.

"What's this one about?" I examine the book, a giant green dragon on the cover.

"It's the one with the dragon who burns the whole place down just to save the princess."

Sounds about right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



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RAPH

“YOU TELL ME WHERE THE FUCK SHE IS, OR I KILL YOU SLOW.”

The blade edges the man’s throat, drops of crimson spilling onto his knees. Desperation clings to every fiber of my being.

Another day passed without her.

I’m running out of leads. I can’t lose her. I can’t live in a world where she no longer exists. I have so much to say to her. So much I didn’t get to say, thinking we had time. But now...

The tip of the knife nicks his throat, close to his artery.

“I...d-don’t know a thing,” he fights to speak, stammering with every word.

Patrick’s sons, Tynan, Fionn, and Cillian, watch from behind me, my brothers there too. But this asshole is mine.

We took care of the three others. Neither one had a helpful word to save them. Not that it would. They were dead as soon as they decided to stay loyal to my father over Michael. These four foot soldiers were discovered to be on my father’s payroll, and they were dead the moment that happened.

Not many wanted to work for our father, knowing that Michael is now in charge. But there’s always a poor sucker to reel in with enough cash that he does something stupid.

“Your father didn’t tell us where the girl is,” he mutters. “He was...”

He chokes up more blood.

“Talk!” I snap, punching him in the jaw.

He groans, both of his eyes sealed shut from the assault he endured at my hand.

"He was...secretive of the girl. He hired someone else. A contractor. Don't h-have a name..."

With a flip of the handle, I pierce the knife into his throat, and with bulging eyes he stares at me, gurgling up blood, the life quickly leaving his body.

"You have any other leads?" Tynan asks.

He's the oldest of the three brothers. And when he looks at me, it's like he's imagining how he's going to kill me. Can't say I blame him. I did kill his cousin.

"Not a damn one."

"My father called," he goes on. "He'll be arriving with Iseult by tomorrow."

"Iseult is coming?" That gets Gio's attention real fast.

"Yeah, my sister is quite good with the interrogations," Cillian chuckles.

"Our sister has got herself a bit of a mean streak." A sly grin crosses Fionn's face.

"Leave her be," Cillian adds. "She hasn't had it easy."

Something heavy passes between them.

"What does that mean?" Gio narrows a stare, taking a step forward, his jaw twitching. "Did something happen to her?"

"Why are you interested in her?" Tynan asks, a wrinkle deepening between his brow.

"I was just curious." Gio scratches his nose.

"My brothers talk too much. Pay 'em no mind." Tynan glares at them through icy green eyes.

Gio balls a fist at his side before he paces back a few steps, rolling a hand through his hair.

"Why's Patrick coming down?" Michael interrupts. "He doesn't need to be inconvenienced. And with all due respect, we've got this handled."

"And with all due respect..." Tynan seethes. "My father insists. We're family now, Michael, aren't we?" He throws a hand in the air. "Family helps one another. So let us do that."

By his tone, it doesn't seem like he thinks we're family at all.

Michael nods. But one can tell he's not quite happy with that.

"Let's get cleaned up at my place," Gio offers. "Then we've got dinner at Michael's. Mom insisted you three join us."

“Wouldn’t be anywhere else.” Fionn swipes his palms together. “Your mother is one fine cook.”

“When will your father arrive?” Mom asks, passing the Caesar salad to Cillian.

“Tomorrow, ma’am.”

Her lips tighten, and she fidgets with her fork. “I don’t know what purpose that would serve. I don’t think my husband will talk just to make him happy.”

“My sister can be quite convincing, and my father wanted to lend a hand as well. He’s not good with sitting around.” He picks up a tray of biscuits and places one on his heaping plate.

She lifts her glass of red wine and takes a big sip.

Sophia’s having the time of her life babbling with Fionn, who chuckles, completely entranced.

“Do you live in Ireland?” she asks him. “I learned about it in school. It’s very green.”

“Ahh, yeah.” He laughs amusingly. “It can be very green. But no, I was born in Boston. My grandparents live there though and my dad was born there. Maybe we can take you for a visit one day.”

“Can we, Daddy?” She pivots excitedly toward Michael on her right, and it’s the first time she’s looked at him with what could pass as a smile.

“Maybe. We can see when the time comes.”

“Yay!” She grins, turning all her attention back to Fionn. “Can you come to my school play in April? I’m going to be a princess.”

“Well, sure, I’d love to.” His shoulders bounce with more laughter. “If it’s okay with your father.”

Michael sighs, shaking his head, but his lips twitch. “Don’t feel obligated.”

“I don’t. She’s a good kid. And it’s been a while since I sat through a play.”

“When the hell you ever sit through one to begin with?” Cillian mocks.

“You’re right. But gotta start somewhere. And I’m sure Sophia is one hell of an actress.”

“I am.” A smile stretches on her face, and she drops her cheek into her shoulder in the most precious way.

“Seems like you’ve got yourself a fan club there, Finny,” Cillian continues to tease him, cutting into his steak.

“You call me Finny again, and I’m gonna drop you on the ground, brother, and embarrass you around the wee one.”

Cillian raises his hands in the air, amusement flanking his features.

“You boys seem close. That’s nice,” Mom says. “Just like my boys.”

She smiles fondly at each of us. With a pause, she places a hand on her chest.

“It’s good to have my family altogether.” Tears shimmer within her gaze.

“Family is everything,” Tynan adds, and with that he glares at me.

Here we go.

“You boys have kids?” Mom throws out.

“No, ma’am.” Tynan chews on the bread he’s stuffed into his mouth. “But I’ve got my cousin’s son I’m taking care of because his father is dead, thanks to your son.”

His eyes narrow at me.

Mom’s audible gasp trickles through the room.

“This is not the time for that.” Michael leans forward, his tone deadly, glancing at his daughter, whose bewildered gaze takes everything in.

“Yeah, brother.” Cillian clamps his shoulder. “Let’s talk about some happier things, like how our baby sister is going to marry Gio here.”

“You hurt her, and I’ll kill you.” Tynan glares at Gio.

“Have no plans to hurt either one of your sisters.”

I have to bite on my damn tongue to stop from chuckling at the innuendo.

“Good, then,” Fionn says. “We can put this behind us and finally end this rivalry.”

“Yeah, let’s hope so.” Michael throws back his glass of whiskey and gives me a look that says the war may not be over quite yet.

NICOLETTE

I wish they could take me to another room. Anywhere else but here. I can't spend another moment with my sister. The cement floor is cold, and so is the temperature. I shiver as I huddle on the ground, tightening my hoodie around myself, my arms curled around my middle.

I barely slept. The night came and went while I remained here, shackled in the same space as the woman who hates me. It feels like I've been here forever, yet it's only been a day.

Will I die here?

Oh, God, I'm going to die, aren't I? Running for so long, I finally thought I'd found peace in the arms of the one man I have yearned for all my life. Yet here I am, stuck in the same place as his wife.

Of course she faked her death. What else would one expect from someone so vile? Why would she care how our parents cried missing her? Why would it matter if Raph went to war to avenge her death? She's always been selfish. Not much has changed.

"What are you going to tell everyone about your sudden rebirth?" I break through the thick silence, really curious what she has to say.

She's all nonchalant, locking eyes with me. "That I was a star witness in a criminal case against some really bad people and the government faked my death until it was safe to let me return."

"Wow. You really thought this through."

Why does nothing that comes out of her surprise me anymore?

"Yes, well, I *was* always the brains of the family, while you..." She waves off. "Well, you know...you were you." She scoffs, giving me a concentrated look. "I'll do what I have to do to survive."

My pulse quickens. "What the hell does that mean?"

Her dry laugh never reaches her eyes. "It means doing what Gian wants. It's what you should do too, little sister. It's the only way we'll make it out of here."

"And what does he want from me?"

Her expression grows tight. "For you to keep your mouth shut about what you heard."

"Heard?" I snicker. "I recorded the whole thing, thinking I could...I don't know...be a witness or something."

"You have it on tape?" Her breath hitches.

"On video."

"It's no wonder he wants you dead." She palms her mouth for a moment. "Where's the recording now?"

"Michael has it."

"What?" All the muscles and veins strain in her face and her cheeks turn beet red. "You really are an idiot! How the hell do you give your only leverage to a Marino?"

"Michael is not like his father," I say. "And I'm no longer scared of Giancarlo. Raph will protect me."

Rage surfaces and simmers on her features, like it's alive. "My husband will not do a thing for you. Stop being such a stupid, naïve little puppy."

"Shut up, Bianca," I fire back, wanting to throttle her. "You're the one who couldn't even fake her own death the right way. Look where you ended up."

"I hate you," she hisses. "I've always hated you. I wish Mom miscarried you."

The words...they may as well have been knives to bleed me dry. I try to force the tears back, I really do, but they don't stay away.

"You know you were a mistake, right?" she goes on, not caring how much grief she's causing. "Did you know the condom broke?"

The words pour gasoline into my already flaming heart.

"Aww. You didn't know, did you?" She pouts in a mock. "Yeah, they didn't want you. Sorry to be the one to tell you. I was the one they wanted. But they didn't believe in abortions, so they were forced to have you."

My chest tightens. And every breath stings as it leaves my aching lungs.

"Bet they didn't even care you left, right?" she continues to hurt me.

A sob escapes my lips.

"I figured," Bianca adds. "When they find out you slept with my husband, they'll disown you. You realize that, right?"

Oh, God. Please make her stop. Please! I cry silently.

My heart hurts. It hurts so badly.

"You'll have no one," she digs and digs. "Raph will not want to divorce me. He's very much anti-divorce. So all that BS he was feeding you about not loving me, if you're even telling the truth, will be irrelevant. Because I'm alive and I'm his wife and he'll always be mine."

My mouth shudders, and I swear I try to say something, anything. But no words come out. Because she's right. She's going to have him back while I'm left with nothing.

“Thanks for keeping my side of the bed warm for me, but now it’s time for a real woman to make him happy. Not a cheap knockoff.”

“Shut up!” Resentment swirls in the empty cavity of my chest. “It’s not true.” My body heaves. “He’s going to hate you. He’ll never want someone who did what you did with his father.”

“Please...” She waves off a hand. “All I have to do is cry and tell him how his evil father took advantage of me when I was drunk and threatened to tell him about it if I didn’t continue fucking him.”

“Is that even true?”

“Of course not.” Her thick laughter grates up my insides. “But Raph doesn’t have to know that.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with you,” I whisper credulously.

She looks manic, like she’s a crazy scientist readying the biggest experiment of her life.

“I’ll beg for his forgiveness.” She paces. “He’s bound to believe me. I mean, you heard me tell Giancarlo I wanted to be honest with Raph. I was trying to do the right thing. The recording will actually help me.” She grins facetiously. “Thanks for that. I can always count on you to be stupid.”

Her voice becomes an irritating sound, like static on the radio.

Adrenaline rushes through my body. All I picture when I stare at her is me wrapping my hands around her throat and killing her until she can’t speak anymore.

“He doesn’t love you.” I drill her with a sharp look, but she merely continues to ridicule me with her dark laughter.

“Aww, my poor, gullible sister. That’s what men tell whores when they wanna bone them. And being the slut that you are, you were more than willing to spread your legs.” She gives me a sinister stare. “You proud of yourself, sleeping with my husband?”

I yank at the chain biting into my wrist, getting to my feet, no longer caring if those men watching rush into the room and beat me for ending her miserable life. It’ll be well worth it. All they do is give us food and water, never saying a word. But I bet they’d have plenty to say if I started a fight.

She crosses her arms. “What are you going to do? Fight me? Go ahead?” She shrugs. “I’d pay to see you try.”

I march a few steps forward, my heartbeats drumming in my ears.

“If you do anything to me, the men will kill you. They were instructed to keep us both alive. For the time being.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because they told me when they left you unconscious in here. Told me not to mess with you.”

My hands squeeze. She’s not worth it. Once Raph finds me, and I have to believe that he will, he’ll choose me. I have to have faith that what we shared together meant something.

“When Raph rescues me...” she calmly throws out. “He’ll kill his father for what he did to me, then he and I will be together.” She narrows a wicked gaze. “Without any other distractions.”

“You don’t even love him!” I boil.

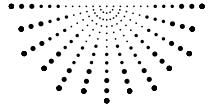
“I like him enough. He’s rich and handsome. And he’s always been good to me, even with you trying to claw your way in every chance you got.”

I can’t let her get to me. I can’t believe anything coming out of her mouth.

But what if she’s right? What if Raph believes every one of her lies?

Where will that leave me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



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RAPH

“I HAVE TO FIND HER, GIO,” I WHISPER AS WE SIT IN A SMALL ICE CREAM shop on the Upper East Side.

Sophia is across from us, humming to a song she’s listening to on my cell. Her pigtails bounce and she bobs her head, digging her spoon into her funfetti gelato.

“I’ve got a guy on it,” he whispers, glancing at her as she peeks up curiously.

I swear that kid should be a detective.

“Who?”

“Grant.”

“Westfield?” I ask.

“Yep. I told him to keep it discreet, and he’s on it personally.”

Grant is Gio’s friend from business school. He runs Westfield Enterprises, a tech company producing a popular brand of cell phones and memory chips. They even have their hands in artificial intelligence. Rumor is, he once hacked the CIA when he was in high school. His dad is a senator and paid to cover it up.

“If anyone can find her, it’s Grant,” he assures me.

I rub a hand down my face. “If he needs anything in return, tell him to come to me. I’ll do anything to find her.”

“Appears so.” He tilts up his mouth. “In love with her already?”

“If I’m being honest with myself, I’ve been in love with her for longer than I should’ve been.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“She’s young.”

“So? And you’re old.” He grins at me, and I scowl. “Look, man, you only live once. And if she makes you happy, then that’s all you need to concentrate on.”

Distantly, I stare straight into absolutely nothing, my mind already giving me twenty reasons why she and I can’t be together. But none of them seem good enough anymore. Not compared to a lifetime with her.

Gio continues. “There are people right now who are stuck with someone their own age while wishing that person got hit by a truck. So consider yourself lucky.”

“You’re very insightful.”

He flips a hand. “I get it from Ma.”

His cell rings, and when he reaches into his pocket and sees the name, he stares hard at it for a few seconds then smiles real big.

“Hey, Red. Miss me already?”

“Not even if you were the last man on earth,” a woman’s irritated voice booms from the line.

I stifle a laugh. Ah, Iseult. This won’t end well.

“Didn’t seem that way when you were begging me for—”

“If you finish that sentence, I’m bound to take your head off, and it won’t be painless.”

“Promise?” He smirks.

“Where are you?” she shoots off.

“Why? You jealous?”

“No...” She pauses. “You’re marrying my sister. I’m making sure you’re being faithful. To her.”

“Faithful, huh? I guess that doesn’t include her own sister?”

“I’m not doing this.” Her voice tightens. “My father and I are going to be at Michael’s shortly. I expect you *not* to be there.”

Humor meets his eyes. “Is that so? Well, now I’m definitely coming, and so will you when I get there.”

“Gio!” she scolds.

“Don’t pretend it won’t happen. I’m going to keep my lap warm for you.”

“I’m sure my father would have a lot to say about that.”

“You’re right. But lucky for us, there are lots of empty rooms at Michael’s, and some are even soundproof.”

“I’m going now.”

“I’ll see you later, baby.” He glances over at me with a laugh. “Hello?” He removes the phone from his ear and stares down at it. “Well, seems like my future wife has hung up on me.”

“You mean your future sister-in-law?” I slap him on the shoulder. “Seems to me you and I have had the same luck, stuck with one sister when you want the other.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not marrying Eriu. She’s a nice girl, don’t get me wrong, but I have no interest in her.” He hits me with a hard stare. “I won’t go through with it.”

“How will you manage to get out of it?”

“I’m going to have to figure out a way to convince their father that an alliance can be made if I married Iseult. Though convincing *her* of that may be an even harder task.”

“Stubborn?”

“Like you wouldn’t fucking believe.”

As soon as we step foot into Michael’s, about forty-five minutes from the city, Patrick and Iseult are already there. She runs a finger through her bright red waves, and now I see where Gio’s nickname for her came from.

“Boys, it’s nice to see you.” Patrick greets us with a shake of a hand, his black blazer tugging around his arms. “We just walked in.”

“Thank you for coming,” Michael adds, standing beside Ma, who’s looking anywhere but at Patrick.

“And who might you be, little miss?” Patrick kneels down to Sophia’s height.

“My name is Sophia, and who are you?” She angles a curious gaze, propping a hand on her hip.

“I’m Patrick, and those three knuckleheads standing over there...” He tilts his head toward his sons at the far end of the room. “They’re my sons, and this is my daughter, Iseult.”

“Oh! So you’re from Ireland? Fionn said he’d take me for a visit.”

Patrick chuckles, righting himself. “Did he now? Well, we’d love to have you all the next time we go for a visit. My mom would cook you up a

feast.” He gazes at my mother then. “I bet she’d love to see you again, Fernanda.”

My mother’s cheeks turn bright red.

“You two know each other?” My curious gaze snaps between them.

Mom does a fine job of avoiding me.

“We did,” Patrick explains. “A long time ago.” He smiles fondly. “We were just kids back then, weren’t we?” His gaze softens as he looks at Mom.

“Yeah,” she replies nervously, pulling on her purple blouse. “Why are we all...uh...still standing here? Come on, let’s eat.”

She waves everyone over and starts toward the dining room.

“Very gracious of you,” Patrick adds, pacing over to her and whispering something.

“What the hell is that about?” Gio asks quietly as we watch them.

“No clue.”

“Looks like Patrick is looking for another kind of marriage alliance.”

Gio finds it amusing, but I don’t. Mom doesn’t need another man like that in her life. Though I never heard about Patrick having affairs on his late wife.

We step into the dining room, and when Iseult grabs a chair and Gio attempts to sit beside her, she nonchalantly moves to settle next to her brothers.

He chuckles under his breath, but doesn’t say a word, taking an empty one next to Mom.

Once everyone settles and begins to eat, Patrick breaks the ice. “Your father, he’s still not talking?”

“No,” I tell him, picking up my glass of whiskey and basking in the burn scorching down my throat as I take a gulp. “And he won’t. He won’t do a thing to help me. He’d much rather see me suffer.”

“He never was a good man. I only tolerated him for the sake of peace.” Patrick picks up the amber-filled decanter, pouring whiskey into his own glass. “But this ends now. What he’s done is a sin. You and I, we may have our differences, but your father, he’s the true cancer in your family, and I’ll gladly end his life like I should’ve years ago.” His eyes go to my mother again, and they settle there as his nostrils flare, his exhale rough, before his eyes snap back to me. “I want a visit with him today.”

“Patrick,” Mom says this time. “He won’t talk to you.” Her brows snap. “If anything, he will get angrier that you’re here, and he definitely won’t talk.”

“Let him get angry,” he grits. “But I’ll have a word with him, and you’ll have to accept that.”

“Fine.” That one word is a sharp bite, and they stare at one another for long seconds before he wrenches his gaze away.

“After we eat, then?” he asks Michael.

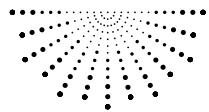
“I have plans today, and they’re important,” Michael adds. “Tomorrow?”

“We can do that.” Patrick nods. “Been a while since I’ve been to the city. I’m looking forward to the view.”

And at that, his gaze takes in my mother, and there’s a glint in his eyes that wasn’t quite there before.

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CHAPTER THIRTY



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RAPH

THE BUSINESS MICHAEL HAD TO TAKE CARE OF YESTERDAY HAD EVERYTHING to do with getting Elsie back. No one is happier than he succeeded than Sophia. That girl has barely left Elsie's side. And she's completely forgiven Michael. Thank God for that.

She's every bit as nice as my niece had said. I can see why my brother is fond of her.

Now if my fucking father would tell us something useful, we could toss him in the river and all move on with our lives.

The Quinns wait upstairs while my brothers and I take turns on my father. Michael asked them to give us one more shot alone with him, and Patrick obliged.

Rushing past Gio, I snatch up the collar of his shirt. "I'm done playing games. Talk, or I kill you!"

"I can talk all day, son." He grins cruelly, and it takes everything in me not to snap him in half.

I've done everything I can to find Nicolette. I've tapped into every resource, but it's like she's fucking vanished. Where the hell could he be hiding her? I clench my teeth and tighten my fist around his shirt.

He's able to look at me through his one good eye, the other one swollen. "Your wife was some piece of ass." He makes a groaning noise under his breath. "And all this time, you couldn't put a baby in her...so I did the job for you."

What did he just say?

My heart pounds.

She...she was pregnant? With his... With my...

My chest heaves, and nausea swirls in my gut.

“What baby?” I manage to choke out, hoping I imagined it.

“Don’t,” Michael threatens him, and I instantly snap my eyes to his.

He knew? He knew my wife was pregnant and didn’t tell me?

My head spins, and I drop my hand off my father and try to keep my legs from collapsing beneath me.

“I’m sorry,” he says coolly. “I must’ve forgotten to tell you the best part.”

“What is he talking about, Michael?” My pulse fills my ears with a deafening sound, and I palm my hand on the wall to keep from falling.

“Just tell him, Michael. Take him out of his misery.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Michael slams a fist into his mouth, but I’m barely able to focus.

How can this be happening?

It was bad enough to know he slept with her, but worse now when I know he got her pregnant. The realization that the lack of a child had been my fault hurts the most.

Fuck.

I fist my mouth to keep from heaving.

“Why should I? I met her first,” that asshole says.

I can’t even call him a father any longer. Not after this.

“She was more mine than she was his.” He glares angrily at me while confusion settles in my chest.

What does he mean by that?

“And that was my baby she was carrying. Your baby brother.” His upper lip curls. “Or sister.”

Discomfort pulls at Michael’s face.

“I didn’t want this to hurt you,” he explains.

But all I feel in this moment is tired. I just need my Nicolette back and in my arms.

With a quick breath, I tell Michael, “Fuck Bianca. I just need to find her.”

That gets my father amused, and I swear I’m about to slice his arteries.

“Her?” he asks. “Which one, exactly?”

My icy glare zeroes in on him once more.

What did he just say?

The air in the room grows thin, my lungs heavy and burning. I take a step forward.

“What the hell do you mean, which one?” I lower my face right up against his, my breathing churning in my lungs. “Nicolette! Where is she?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, son.” His mouth thins. “I thought you meant Bianca.”

My breaths lock in my throat.

What?

The entire room grows silent, other than my father’s cruel laughter as he registers the shock on my face.

“I know,” he says. “Can you believe that little bitch?”

Every single inch of me grows ice cold. I heard wrong. That has to be it. He’s playing mind games. It would be like him to fuck with me.

It wouldn’t be possible. They brought her to the hospital. We saw her there. She was dead.

I force a fist into his jaw. “Bianca is gone, you son of a bitch!”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong, son.”

On instinct, I land another hit into his nose this time. “I’m not your goddamn son.”

“You’re right. You’re not.” He continues to laugh. To bait me. “There’s so much about your wife you didn’t know. Not like I did.”

I force myself back as far away from him as I can. I need out of this fucking room before I burn this house and all the lies it carries. Did she fuck him here in our home? If she’s still alive, she’s going to wish she wasn’t.

“Tell me where the hell she is, then.”

“She’s with Nicolette right now. Some sisterly bonding to help the girls get over their differences.” His mouth thins in a serpent-like grin.

“I’m gonna kill you!” I roar, my knuckles pounding into his face, unable to contain it all, unable to hold back. Everything he’s done to me since I was a child, explodes onto the surface.

Arms grip me, holding me back. I feel them tighten around me. Multiple voices reverberate through my ears, but I can’t make out who it is anymore. It’s all white noise. My chest lurches, throbbing, as I’m forced back until I’m too far to hurt him.

“You’re all right,” Michael says, but I barely hear him through the buzzing in my ears. “Relax. Don’t let him get to you.”

But as I stare at the man who was supposed to protect me, I wonder how someone can be this cruel to their own child?

“Aren’t you ashamed?”

I realize it’s Patrick who just said that. I turn my head back to find him there with the rest of the Quinns.

“Oh, Patrick, old friend.” My father yanks at his arms, forgetting they’re bound behind him. “How nice of you to come. I’m sorry I’m indisposed right now. Hope you’re getting a proper welcome.”

“Yer face looks a wee bit battered there, *friend*.” The vein at his neck pops. “Could maybe use some ice.”

Suddenly, Iseult’s walking up to him, her high-heeled boots clacking as she approaches our father. There’s a steel bucket in her hands, and when she’s near, she forces his head back, planting a palm on his forehead.

“Got ladies doing the work for you now?” Our father chuckles, even as fear clouds his voice.

“I wouldn’t go around insulting my daughter if I were you.” Patrick folds his arms over his chest and leans against the wall.

Iseult stares down at him with icy restraint. Our father tries to fight her, but she only scoffs.

“Pathetic,” she mutters, right before she flips her other hand and pours what appears to be iced water right over his face.

He grunts, the liquid gushing down into his nose, his throat. Fucking hope he suffocates.

“I gather that was refreshing,” Patrick taunts.

When she’s done, she drops the bucket on the floor, wipes her palms on her jean-clad thighs, and removes a flip knife from her pocket. She edges it against his throat, a menacing tilt of her mouth made to provoke him.

My father pants, his head lolling, water dripping down from his entire body.

“You rat bastard,” he groans at Patrick. “Why’d you come? Huh? To gloat?”

“No.” Patrick marches up to him until he’s inches away. “I wanted to see this for myself. To know how you can do what you did to your own bloody son.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” A clear challenge paints over his words.

“How’s that?” Patrick stares him down. “Facts are facts, Gian.”

Iseult remains where she is, and I can see from her face she really wants to end him.

“How about the fact that now you’re free to fuck my wife whenever you want,” my father goes on.

Patrick shakes his head with contempt spilling through his glare. “We both know Fernanda was always too good for you. But circumstances and bloodlines prevented me from being her husband the way I was always meant to be.”

Iseult’s face goes white, the knife slipping from her grasp. She backs away until I no longer see her.

“What?” Michael’s incredulous baritone slips out while my own eyes widen.

What the hell is going on? Mom and Patrick?

Ignoring Michael, Patrick continues. “I loved her the way you never did, you feckin’ bastard.”

There’s a slice of longing and aching there. I can’t see his face, but I can register his body going rigid.

“And unlike you, I’d never disrespect your marriage like you disrespected her over and over. You don’t know how many times I wanted to cut your damn dick off for what you were doing to her.”

“If it makes you feel any better, friend, I’m sure it was you she was thinking about each time I was fucking her.”

Patrick growls, grabbing his shirt with both hands and slamming his forehead against our father’s. Patrick’s body shudders, raging like an animal ready to taste the blood of its enemy.

We knew they never genuinely liked each other, but I never thought it had anything to do with my mother.

And in that moment, I remember what she told me. The man she was in love with, but couldn’t marry...

Was it him? Was it Patrick?

My grandparents were old-fashioned. They’d never have allowed her to marry someone who wasn’t Italian.

“You still fucking love that whore, don’t you?” My father asks with disbelief.

The punch to his face comes so fast, I don’t think he even realizes what Patrick did.

“You call that woman a whore again, and I will kill you with my bare hands. You got it?”

My father chuckles. “I bet you wouldn’t be defending her if you knew what she did to you. To the both of us.”

My pulse drums faster.

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?” Patrick implores. “You better have somethin’ good to tell me, or else I’m gonna kill you right now.”

From the corner of his one eye, the man who spent his life tormenting me stares in my direction.

“You ever wondered why the fuck I hated you so much?” he asks me. “Why I couldn’t stand the sight of you? Why I would never allow you to take my seat in the famiglia?”

The air completely evaporates from my lungs.

Patrick grabs a fistful of his shirt. “You’d better talk, Gian, or I will do far worse than what your sons have.”

“Sons? Well, my old friend, I only ever had two.”

A shiver drowns my body, so cold I feel it in the marrow of my bones. I hear the rough exhales coming out of me, and I can’t seem to utter a single word because nothing makes sense right now.

Patrick backs away, his green gaze landing on me, then my father. Shock treads over his features as he inquisitively looks at me again, as though picking me apart at the root.

“I can’t blame you, Pat,” my father continues. “He never looked like you. He took after her. All the boys did.”

“What?” Patrick’s voice drops. “Are you saying...” He searches my face, taking a step forward. “No...” He quickly glances at my father.

“That he’s yours? Yeah, Pat, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Fuck...” Gio mutters, and I hear Michael choke out a curse.

I don’t understand. Patrick is my father? Mom lied?

My head spins, panic enveloping me.

“You knocked her up right before she married me, and the bitch passed him off as mine after we were married. Can you believe it? But I had a DNA test done. Then she admitted it.”

I grow lightheaded. But Michael and Gio are suddenly there, palms on my shoulder.

“If this is true...” Michael whispers. “It doesn’t change a fucking thing, you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Gio adds. “If anything, you’re lucky. You’re not related to that fucking animal.”

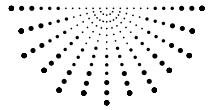
But this doesn’t feel like luck. My whole life, I’ve been lied to. I could’ve had a real father. Someone who gave a shit about me.

She could’ve told me.

“Come on,” Patrick calls to his kids, anger lacing through his tone. “We’re leaving. I need to talk to Fernanda. Now.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



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RAPH

“FERNANDA, WHERE ARE YOU?” PATRICK STORMS IN THROUGH THE DOORS breathlessly, his eyes wandering around Michael’s sprawling foyer as he rushes past the spiral staircase. “Fernanda? We gotta talk.”

Moments later, my mother’s soft footfalls trudge closer.

“I was in the ladies’ room.” She appears. “What’s the big emergency?”

She walks over to where we stand, and as soon as she sees Patrick’s facial expression, her brows shoot up, then her eyes jump to each one of us.

“Come on,” Iseult tells her brothers, her voice laced with her own brand of rage. “Let’s give them some privacy.”

Wordlessly, they follow her into the den while I remain with my eyes zeroed in on my mother. Her gaze fills with alarm.

“What’s going on here?” she whispers. “What happened with your father?”

“How?” Patrick’s voice breaks as he advances a single step.

She backs away, her chest rattling with labored breaths.

“How could you not tell me, Fernanda? All this time, he was mine, and you kept him from me?” He turns to glance at me over his shoulder, and I grow rigid.

Is he really my father?

“What are you talking about, Pat?”

“Cut the bullshit, Fernanda,” he snaps. “He told us. He told us Raph was mine.”

She sucks in a tense inhale, tears pooling in her eyes.

Shit. It’s true.

He grabs her jaw and tilts up her face to his, and it's not aggressive or I'd kill him right where he stands. "Deny it...please."

He sounds like he's on the cusp of breaking. Like this hurts him worse than it does me.

Would he have wanted me? Would he have been a better father than the one I had?

She pants. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Damn it!" He spins off of her, gripping his head, but suddenly, he pivots toward her once more and clasps her cheek tenderly. "Why? Why would you not tell me. I loved you with my whole heart, Fernanda. I would've fought for us. If I knew..."

He shatters quietly. I'm not used to seeing him that way.

"I couldn't," she gasps. "I couldn't tell you. My mom, she found out I was pregnant, and she told me if people found out I cheated on Gian and got pregnant, everyone would know I was a slut. I'd be ruined for life. She told me if I didn't pretend that the baby was Gian's, she'd send me to a nunnery in Italy and I'd be forced to give up the baby. I couldn't do it. I couldn't give him up." Tears flood down her cheeks. "Please understand." She clutches his forearm. "I loved you too. I always did."

Her weeping makes me want to console her. I hate seeing her upset. I know she didn't have it easy with my father either.

"Raph," she says my name with a strangle.

"I don't know what to say to you right now, Ma."

Anger stirs in my chest, but if I'm being honest, there's relief there too. It all makes sense now. My father took out her infidelity on me.

"You could've told me once I was older. I could've left. I could've..." My attention bounces to Patrick, who stares at me with his jaw set tight.

"He could've come to stay with me," he finishes with the words I couldn't, his eyes remaining locked with mine.

"You don't understand," she chokes out, gazing intently at me. "Your father told me if I told you or Patrick, he'd kill us both. And I couldn't lose you, Raph. Not then, and not now." She trudges toward me, but keeps a fair distance. "You're my son, and I love you. Please forgive me."

"Don't cry, Ma."

"I would've run away with you. I would've protected you," Patrick interrupts, cupping his palm around her cheek, leaning into her. "I would've burned the earth for you, Fernanda. You had to know that."

"You were married. You were happy. I couldn't come to you." She smiles mournfully at him, her head tilting to the side. "Who was I to ruin your life that way?"

"Who were you?" He laughs bitterly. "You were the love of my life. That's who you were. Who you are..."

I instantly feel like we're intruding.

"Pat, don't say that," she cries heavily, and he lowers his mouth to her forehead.

"I'm sorry." His gaze returns to her. "But I won't lie to you. I love you, and I'll die loving you. It's just the way it is."

He says something in Gaelic I don't understand, but she seems to, because it only makes her shatter even more.

Gio appears beside me. "You okay?"

"I don't know what I am anymore. I have no time to think about this. My mind has to remain on Nicolette. She's what I need to concentrate on."

Unable to listen to any more, I march out into the garage, and Michael and Gio follow me. Michael opens a door that leads into the bar room and locks it behind us.

The stench of ammonia and bleach hits me hard. Someone must've died in here recently. It's what happens in this room most of the time.

Gripping my hair, I pace back and forth, trying to process everything I've learned. Michael marches to grab some crystal-cut glasses and pours us a drink.

Patrick is my father. My brother is supposed to marry my damn half sister. Fucking hell. I shake my head. This is too much.

"Drink." Michael shoves the amber liquid toward my chest.

I focus on him for a moment before muttering a curse and take the whiskey he's offering. I drain it in one shot, and it scorches going down, settling warmly in my gut, but does nothing to alleviate the stress.

Squeezing the glass in my palm, I look at Michael. "I swear to God, if there's anything else either one of you is not telling me..." I glance at Gio too. "Now is your time to tell me."

Gio shrugs. "I've got nothin'."

But Michael? He goes silent.

Anticipation scratches up the back of my neck. "Tell me. What is it?"

Indecision battles in his eyes.

He knows something.

Momentarily, he tilts up his face to the ceiling.

"I want to know everything, Michael. Do you hear me?" I grab his shoulder. "I'm done with these fucking secrets."

He stares intensely at me. And with a heavy rush of his breath, he slips a hand into his pocket and removes his cell.

"I'm sorry I kept this from you. But I think it's time you hear this for yourself."

When I stare questioningly at the phone, he continues.

"When Nicolette was brought to me, she had a video. She didn't know what to do with it. She didn't want to hurt you either, so I took it. I told her not to say anything, so don't go blaming her for this," he adds when he sees my mouth start to move.

My heart races. Of course I wouldn't blame her. I blame *him* right now. What the hell could be on that thing?

"I downloaded the recording to my phone and erased it from hers. I'm sorry, Raph. Forgive me."

"I'm fucking done with everyone's apologies." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Just play the damn thing."

When I immediately register her voice...my fucking whore of a wife, I want to make him stop it, but I grab the phone and watch it anyway.

"What are you doing here, Gian?" Bianca trails from somewhere distant in that sweet tone she likes to put on. "Raph could come home at any moment."

There's no one on the camera yet, but I can hear *her* breathing.

Nicolette.

My heart squeezes at the mere thought of her and what she's enduring in this exact moment.

I need you back, baby. I need you back so bad. I don't know what I'm going to do without you.

"I came to see my favorite girl," my father replies, flirting with her the way he'd flirt with all the women he's messed around with.

She giggles. "Stop. Not here. Let's go into the bedroom."

Footsteps beat closer until they're both visible through the crack in the closet. It's as though Bianca knew just where to stand, like she wanted to be seen, and she probably did.

"What happened?" My father chuckles. "You can't have an orgasm unless it's in expensive hotel rooms?"

The vein in my neck throbs, and I squeeze the phone in my hand.

When she doesn't say anything, he continues.

"My son doesn't fuck you as good, does he?" He grabs her ass and pushes her body into him.

Disgust gnaws at me. And every slew of muscle inside is ready to snap, to kill him for this.

"Gian," Bianca continues. "I'm actually glad you came. Because I have some news that I don't know what to do with."

"Oh, yeah?" he groans, gripping her tighter. "What news is that?"

"Just stop for a second." She pushes him off with a palm to his chest.

"Why we gotta stop, baby? We're both having a good time, aren't we?" He doesn't let go. His hand holds her ass, and I want to kill them both.

She pauses, the room growing silent.

"Because... Oh, God," she exhales. "I didn't want to tell you like this. I thought I'd have more time to figure out what to do."

"What the fuck are you going on about?" He pulls off her. "Spit it out."

For a mere second, she looks toward the closet, maybe because she's embarrassed that Nicolette had found out, or maybe it's because she knew I would.

"I'm pregnant, Gian, and it's yours."

"Merda!" my father hollers, cursing her out in Italian. "You told me you're on the fucking pill."

"Sometimes it doesn't work."

"You fucking sure it's mine and not his?" He stalks off the camera's view, muttering until he's back.

"Yes, I'm sure. We tried having kids...we couldn't."

My heart bangs in my chest.

"Figured he'd be a pussy." He snickers. "Just say it's his, and that'll be the end of it."

"What?" Her head jerks. "I—I can't do that. What if he finds out and throws me out? I'll have nothing!" she shrieks. "What will me and my baby do?"

He plants a palm on her shoulder and she makes sure to move closer to the closet. "You're gonna do what I fucking said, you hear?" He drops his face even nearer to hers. "You tell that bastard it's his. He's an idiot. He'll believe it. We'll call it a fucking miracle."

"Gian...it won't work."

“So what do you think he’s gonna do to you once he finds out? Huh?” His temper rises. “You fucking tell him it’s his kid, or he’ll kill you.”

“I...okay, fine! But please promise me something.” She cradles his neck in her palm.

“Yeah, uh-huh, what?” He seems completely uninterested.

She doesn’t understand that she’s just one of his many whores. She means nothing.

“Promise to help us if he ever finds out.”

He goes silent, slowly pushing off her.

“Money?” He pauses. “Is that what this was always about?”

“W-what? No!” Her words fly out in a rush. “Of course not.”

“You lying whore!” he bellows. “You were one when I met you and you’re still one now.”

He strikes her across the cheek.

What the hell does he mean? When did they meet? That bastard will tell me everything before I kill him.

Though I can’t see her tears, you can’t miss her heavy sobbing.

“I—I’ll do whatever you want,” she stammers. “I’ll make him believe it’s his. I swear.”

“Do you know what this will do to me if it gets out?” He grabs her by the arm and yanks her flush against him. “Do you think I got where I am to have some whore take that away?”

He clutches her jaw with his free hand, and Nicolette gasps.

I can just imagine how damn scared she was. Fuck. I just want to wrap her in my arms and never let go.

“Don’t touch me!” Bianca hollers, pushing at his arms, his chest, but he doesn’t budge. “Get off! You’re hurting me.”

“I don’t trust you, Bianca, and that’s not good.”

A few seconds later, there’s a heavy thump and she’s out of view. Sounded like he just threw her on the floor.

“Gian,” she gasps. “W-w-what are you doing? Oh my God... No!”

Pop.

Her scream dies in her throat until there’s only silence.

And there’s the proof. He killed her. Shot her. Fuck if I know anymore. But he did it.

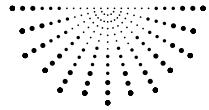
Once the video stops, I hand the phone back to Michael. “Is that all?”

“That’s all I know.”

“Fuck them both.” I grit my teeth. “I’m done. They deserve each other.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



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NICOLETTE

I CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHERE THE HELL WE ARE. IT'S LIKE A BUILDING OF some sort, I think. The air only gets colder, and I tremble in my corner.

Two more days have passed. I think. If the sun coming and going is any indication of the passage of time. I don't know how long I can take this, tied to the ground, pissing in a bucket.

My sister, on the other hand, seems to be enjoying herself, eating one of the cheese sandwiches the men brought and drinking the bottled water. I haven't eaten a damn thing. What if they poisoned mine? What if there are drugs in it?

But my sister has had no issues eating. Hunger digs into my stomach, and I almost cave, fingers nearing the plate.

No. Can't take the chance. Raph will come for me. I have to have faith. He'll find a way.

"How can you eat right now?" I ask her.

Disgust slams into me as she licks her fingers.

"Like this." She takes another huge bite.

"I thought you don't eat bread." I snicker.

"Can't be picky right now." Her mouth slants up on one side. "Once I'm out of here, I'll be truly free. From everything." Her eyes narrow.

My stomach dips.

"Are you even sorry for what you did to Raph? How can you live with yourself?"

She swipes her mouth with her index finger and gently places her plate down.

“Sorry for what? For doing what makes me happy?” She narrows her eyes and gives me a hard smile. “No. I’m not sorry. There’s so much you don’t know, little sis. Things I couldn’t tell anyone. But now?” She shrugs her shoulder with a callous glint in her gaze. “There’s nothing holding me back anymore.”

“Like what?” A shiver races down my legs, and it’s not from the weather.

“I met Gian way before I met Raph. I was seventeen and working as a high-paying escort.”

“What!” My mouth pops open.

“I know.” She flings her hair back with a flip of her fingers and arches a brow. “Me, an escort... Way too good for that.”

Pretty sure that wasn’t what I was thinking. I hold back an internal roll of my eyes.

“But I needed money for nursing school,” she explains. “So when a friend told me about this amazing opportunity, I tried it out.”

“Did Raph know?” I whisper, disbelief blurring my vision.

“Um, no. Obviously not.” She looks at me like I’m an idiot. “Anyway... as I was saying before you rudely interrupted, I started working when I could, while finishing high school. Then when I turned eighteen, I met Gian and told him why I was doing this and how badly I needed money. He was more than happy to help. He gave me cash, lots of it, and kept giving it to me on the side. It was all mine. One day, he told me to quit and all I had to do to get the money was sleep with him exclusively.”

When my face upturns in abhorrence, she flips me off.

“Stop judging.”

“Hard not to.”

“Whatever.” An ugly sneer dances across her face. “One day, he invited me to a restaurant he owned, and that’s where I saw Raph. And, well, you’ve seen the man. Hot. And I figured, why would I continue sleeping with an old dude when I could have his much younger, much hotter, son and have *him* pay for my schooling.”

“Wow... You’re pure evil.”

“Shut up.” She grinds her teeth. “I do what I have to do, and I’d do it all over again.”

“I’m sure Gian was angry when you decided to sneak your way into Raph’s bed.”

“Oh, like you wouldn’t believe.” She looks proud of herself. “But I assured him that for me, this made sense. I’d marry his son and still be close enough to him to keep our arrangement going. He still paid me for sleeping with him while Raph paid for school, as I predicted.”

I blink rapidly, staring wide-eyed. I can’t believe her. I wonder what Mom and Dad would think of their precious daughter being such a horrific person. They’d probably blame everyone else but her.

“I finally had more money than I knew what to do with,” she continues. “The only thing I needed to cement my marriage to Raph was a baby. I didn’t want the damn stretch marks. Gross.” She grimaces. “But it was how I’d stay connected to him forever. And he wanted a child badly. Constantly talked about it.” She rolls those eyes. “But we couldn’t have any. It was his fucking fault. Clearly, I had no issues getting knocked up. But the doctors couldn’t figure out what it was.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” I seethe. I won’t let her talk badly about him.

“Aww,” she mocks. “That’s so cute. The sad little puppy found her favorite toy.”

“Fuck you, Bianca. You are the definition of evil.”

“If anyone is evil...” She grinds her jaw. “It’s you! You were always after him. And didn’t waste any time fucking *my* husband after my death.”

“Some death it was.” I snorted a laugh. “Why did you tell Gian you were on the pill?” I remember that distinctly from the video recording. “Why would you be on the pill if you wanted a baby?”

“Because I lied to him.” She snaps her brows. “You think I wanted to tell him the truth? That I wanted to get pregnant by him so that maybe he’d divorce that frigid Fernanda and marry me? I wasn’t sure if he’d want that. When I got pregnant, I wanted to see what he’d say and, well...you know how that went.”

“Oh my God...” I whisper, my skin crawling with revulsion.

How could she do that?

“I mean, not like Raph was capable of giving me a child. So I wanted the next best thing. If I had Gian’s kid, he’d be stuck paying child support and alimony for the rest of his life. It was a win-win for me.” Her lips wind up.

“There’s something fucking wrong with you.” I blink rapidly, unable to believe she would go so low.

"I'm sorry you feel that way." Her smile grows in a menacing kind of way, and my stomach drops.

There's something else I have to ask, and it's been killing me not to know. "Were you ever pregnant before the wedding like you told Raph?"

Her uncontrite laughter swells through the room. "Oh, you know, I almost forgot about that." It takes her a few seconds to speak again. "No, I wasn't pregnant at all."

I knew it!

"He was breaking up with me all because of you," she practically growls. "So I decided to think on my feet, and he married me, didn't he?"

"This is sickening." I look at her intensely and she stares just the same way at me. "How come you're telling me all of this? Aren't you afraid I'd tell Raph?"

"No..."

My heart drums.

Dread fills my gut.

"Because you see, little sis..." She fidgets with the chain around her wrist, and suddenly...she's free.

"What the..." I gasp for air as the chain clanks against the floor.

I jump to my feet and back away while she reaches into her ankle, and when she faces me again, I realize she has a knife. Gradually, she starts to rise, stalking toward me with a vile grin. The blade glistens as she moves on me.

"Gian promised me he'd let me go and allow me to return to my old life if I did one eensy-weensy thing. One final *fuck you* to Raph."

"A-and what's that?" I back up into the wall, fear clogging my throat.

"All I have to do...is kill you." She points the edge of the knife to my chest, her laughter springing to life, taking a form of its own.

She really hates me. She'd do anything for herself. It's no wonder she and Gian were great together. They're both selfish, egotistical psychopaths.

"Please don't do this." I shudder as she creeps closer, my body breaking into hives. "If Raph finds out you killed me, he'll never take you back."

I attempt to bring some sanity into her head, but it doesn't seem to be working. She doesn't even stop moving.

"But he won't find out." She waves the knife in the air. "The two men here have been instructed by Gian to take the fall. It's all been arranged. Gian gets what he wants, and I get what I want."

“You can’t do this!” I shout, my heart racing out of my throat.

I can’t die. Not after everything I’ve been through. Not after finally having Raph in my life. Now, we’ll have nothing.

“Any last words?” she taunts, only inches between us.

“Fuck you!”

“Suit yourself.”

She lunges at me, and the knife pierces my flesh.

RAPH

“I had no idea he was using this place,” Michael whispers from beside me as one of his men burns the metal lock keeping us away from where Nicolette may be.

An hour ago, we heard from Gio’s friend Grant, confirming the location of where Nicolette had last been seen. He had suspected yesterday, but after further surveillance he sent us from the day she was taken, there is little doubt she is still in there. I saw two men dragging a woman who was wearing her clothing inside, a black woven bag over her head.

I only hope she’s alive. No one will want to be around me if she isn’t. My fist curls at my side at the mere thought.

If she’s here, I’m going to find her and I’m going to bring her home to me. Where she belongs. Spending all this time apart made me realize I’d rather die than be without her. After I get her back, I’m going to marry her, and I hope like hell she says yes.

Focusing on the present, I take in the white van parked across from us while a single streetlight provides the sole illumination in the dead of night.

“It’s just like him to keep a place all to himself,” I tell my brother.

The building was one that Michael had intended on purchasing for the family business when he wanted to open one of our gambling clubs. But he passed on the opportunity for a better one. I guess my father decided to buy it for his own activities.

“Ready?” Michael asks us as the door opens with a squeak.

I clamp his shoulder. “She’s mine. I go in first.”

“Alright.” His mouth twitches, and he moves aside to let me pass.

With a nine in hand, and another at my waistband, I lead the way. As soon as I enter, I'm enclosed in darkness.

"Can't see a fucking thing in here," I mutter, and someone behind me puts on a flashlight.

It's low enough for my eyes to adjust to the puddled concrete floors and steel poles accenting the large empty room.

Footsteps.

I still, pointing upstairs.

They follow as I climb the metal steps; we're almost halfway there when a shout rings out. A man in a black ski mask greets us from the top with a curse, and before I can shoot him, he runs off.

"We've got company!" he yells to someone. "Call for reinforcements."

"Fuck that." I jump the rest of the way up, my weapon at the ready.

I don't know how many of them are up there, but it doesn't sound like a lot. If we can take them out first before they call for help, I can get Nicolette out of here safely.

When I round the corner, he's there pointing his Glock at me. He fires off a bullet I easily dodge. Flickering lights hang from the ceiling, making it easier to see my surroundings.

"Where's the girl?" I ask, shooting him in the upper thigh.

His screams erupt just as my brothers and the others join the fight, going after whoever else is helping him.

"Don't kill me, man!" He raises both hands in the air. "The girls are right in there." His arm jitters as he points to a door behind him.

Pressing my thumb on the trigger, I fire a quick bullet right into his forehead, killing him instantly.

Then I'm running, my legs moving so fast I make it to the door in what feels like seconds.

"Get off of me!" Nicolette shouts at someone, and all I register is laughter.

A woman's laugh. *Her* fucking laugh.

My breath catches. Bianca's going to die if she did something to Nicolette.

There's a padlock on the door, and before I can hurry off and get the blowtorch, my brothers are already there, Michael handing it to me.

The metal dissolves within seconds, and I'm tearing the door open.

And that's when I see Nicolette on the ground with Bianca pointing a knife right into her throat.

Both their eyes lock to mine.

"Drop the fucking knife, Bianca." I aim the gun right at her.

"Raph," she cries, instantly jumping to her feet. "Oh my God, baby, I'm so glad you're here. This bitch was trying to kill me."

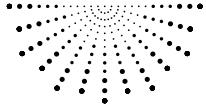
Suddenly, tears appear in her eyes. She would've been some actress.

"I missed you so much," she snivels and runs right into me, throwing her arms around my shoulders.

But I don't return them.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



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NICOLETTE

HE HOLDS MY GAZE WITH SUCH INTENSITY, I SHUDDER. BUT I DON'T MAKE a move to go to him, sitting there, rooted in place.

Because I don't know. I don't know if he still wants me. If he'll choose me after everything.

She's alive. His wife. And that has always meant something to him. An unbreakable bond.

She clings to him, telling him how sorry she is. How badly she wanted to be with him, but his father wanted her dead.

"I'm so glad you found me," she weeps. "I thought I'd die here. I thought she'd kill me." Her hands tighten around his shoulders. "Your father ruined my entire life. He made me sleep with him. I swear I didn't want to, Raph."

She gazes up at him, but he looks past her, his posture tense. Stiff. His eyes haven't left mine. He traps me in his striking gaze. His shoulders rising with shallow breaths.

My heartbeats quicken.

A chill rushes up the back of my neck.

"Are you listening, Raph?" She places a hand against his cheek. "Your father was blackmailing me."

But I don't think he's even listening.

He pushes her off, gradually treading closer. Then he's rushing to me while my pulse quickens and my heart expands.

Slowly, he reaches a hand for mine.

"Come here," he says in his cool, commanding tone as he hoists me up, looking me up and down like he's checking me for wounds.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bianca shrieks, appearing beside him and gripping an arm around his bicep.

“Shut up,” he tells her, the words whipping out harshly.

He looks so broken, utterly broken, as those eyes search mine.

“Tesoro mio...never leave me again,” he whispers with untamable emotions.

The back of his hand brushes down my cheek and my heart skips a beat. He grips my jaw with a possessive hold, and a small cry escapes from my lips. He’s here. He saved me just like I wished he would.

“God, I missed you so much,” he says with such fervor, hope blooms within me. It’s vibrant and optimistic.

But will he finally choose me?

“You missed me?” My question comes out almost silently, and his mouth immediately pulls up.

“Of course, I did.” His thumb strokes my chin. “What did you think? That her being alive would change something?”

“I thought you’d believe her,” I breathe, tears filling the rims of my eyes. “I thought you’d want her back.”

“I’d never want her. Nor would I ever choose her over you, Nicolette. Don’t you realize it by now?” He cups my face between his hands.

“Realize what?” The words fall out so quietly, like I’m afraid to dream that this could finally be happening.

“That I’m in love with you.”

He loves me? My heartbeats quicken to an unruly pace. I can’t seem to say a word, unsure if this is real or if I’m somehow dead and dreaming.

“You’re the only one for me. You always were.”

Thud.

Thud.

“No! You don’t mean that!” Bianca screams.

But Raph only continues. “I’m done living in fear. I refuse to run from the only truth I’ve ever known.”

“What truth is that?” My breath stills in my lungs.

“That you’ve always been the one.” His lips press to the corner of my mouth so tenderly, I feel it in all parts of me. “That I love you with my whole heart. I always have.”

He says the words I’ve been dying to hear for so long. A raw ache pounds at my chest. But no longer from pain or sorrow. From utter and

complete joy. Because for the very first time, someone truly loves me, and I've never felt anything more incredible.

"I know I can't change the past," he goes on. "But I can change the future. And there's no future without you in it. Not for me."

"What are you saying?" I ask with a tear-stricken voice, needing to hear it again. And again.

"I'm saying I'm yours, just as much as you're mine." He brushes his lips against my own. "I'm saying that you're my home, and I never truly had one until you."

"I never had one either." Fresh tears well in my eyes and drip down my face.

"Then we make one in each other," he breathes. "The way it was supposed to be."

"Do you really mean that?"

"With everything I have."

Then he kisses me, like there's no one here but the both of us, like he needs me just as much as I need him. His hands glide up my back, twining in my hair, and he groans when my tongue meets his.

"No!" Bianca screams. "Get the hell off her, you asshole! *I'm* your wife! *Me!*"

But we continue to ignore her, and he only kisses me harder.

"You slut!" she shouts. "Don't you touch him!"

With a low growl, he separates from me and pivots toward her. "If you call her a name again, I'll cut out your tongue."

Her eyes widen in sheer terror.

With a satisfied grin, he curls an arm around my hips. I wince from the cut to my left forearm she gave me. I don't even know how bad it is with the hoodie still on me.

He shifts to examine me from top to bottom. "Are you hurt?"

Quiet, simmering rage etches deep in his gaze, like the very thought of my pain, pains him even more.

I shrug. "A cut on the arm. I'll be okay." I force a smile.

He grinds his jaw, eyes turning into golden flames. "She hurt you?"

I nod, and he faces her once more.

"I'm gonna kill you slowly, Bianca, just for hurting what's mine. You'll never hurt her again."

Every word is laced with a meaningful threat. I'd be terrified if I were her. And by the look on her face—eyes practically falling out—she is.

"Take her," he instructs the men with a tilt of his chin.

I hadn't even realized Gio and Michael were here too, standing beside the men, guns at their waistbands.

"What?" Bianca pants. "No." She shakes her head. "You can't do this, Raph. I'm your wife!"

Two men grab her arms as he chuckles coldly.

"You're no wife of mine. Our marriage was over way before you decided to spread your legs for my father."

The men drag her out of the room, kicking and screaming. And the sounds of her shouting fall into the distance until they disappear for good.

But we stopped listening as soon as she left the room, our eyes only knowing each other. Everyone else steps out and leaves us.

His hands come to rest around my face once more, and his smile is painted with sorrow. "I'm sorry she hurt you. I'm sorry for all of this. It's all my damn fault."

"It's not, Raph." I clasp the side of his neck, his pulse ravaging beneath my fingertips. "You did nothing but come and save me. No one ever saved me. Not until you came along."

"You'll never be alone again, little one." His eyes grow tender. "I'll always be here, whether you need me or not. No one will come between us anymore, and I'll prove that to you every single moment we spend together."

A smile touches my lips, and I say what I have wanted to say for years now. I say the three words that have lived in my heart in silence. But now, I no longer have to keep them to myself.

"I love you too, Raph Marino. I always have and I always will."

And with a satisfied groan rumbling deep in his chest, he smashes his lips to mine, and it's as though the universe has shifted into place. The colors are brighter. The world more beautiful.

He growls as he sucks my tongue into his mouth, his hands traveling up and down my back, gripping my ass, the fingers of his free hand lacing through my hair, fisting it in his palm. My Lord, can this man kiss. But it's more like a possession. A claim to my body and soul. Marking me for the rest of eternity.

Breathlessly, we both separate, staring at one another with hunger and lust and unspeakable devotion. I feel it and see it there in his eyes.

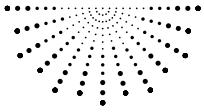
“My God, Nicolette. I thought I lost you for good...” Emotions clog his throat. “And the mere thought of never seeing you, never holding you, never being able to tell you I love you, it almost destroyed me.” He pauses and brushes his lips with mine. “I’ve loved you for years, and I want to love you for the rest of my life,” he swears. “If you’ll have me.”

“I’ll always have you, Raph Marino. I don’t quite know how not to.”

Then he kisses me again, and I don’t really know how long this one lasts.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



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RAPH

I STARE AT THE TWO PEOPLE WHO BETRAYED ME, KNOWING THIS WILL BE THE last time I see either one of them.

My father stares at me through that one good eye, his lips jerking like he's taunting me. I bet he's afraid. I bet he knows this is it.

"Please, Raph," Bianca begs from beside him, her arms tied to the back of the chair. "I'm so sorry for hurting you. I'm awful, okay?" She sniffles. "I will do better. I'll be better. I'll...uh...disappear for good. I'll go back to where I was, and you'll never see me again."

I bend until my face is inches from hers. "That's not good enough. She won't feel safe until you're dead." I straighten. "Until both of you are dead." My gaze jumps to my father. "You wanted to be together. Now, you can die together."

"Please," she pants. "I don't want to die."

I should feel something. I should feel some kind of regret at what I'm about to do, but I don't feel a thing.

Patrick hands me a blade. "Take this, son."

My heart raps against my ribs, ringing in my ears.

This is the first time he's called me that.

I take the knife he offers, holding his stare.

"End this," he says. "Take him out."

And as I look into the eyes of the man who I thought was my father, I lift the blade in the air and slice straight across his artery.

Shock buries deep in his eyes while Bianca shrieks. And he starts to gurgle up blood.

I level a stare at my soon-to-be-dead wife.

“Please! Please just let me go! I beg you! I’ll never bother her again. I promise.” Her voice only irritates me.

“I can’t do that.” I shrug. “Everyone already thinks you’re dead. Now you will be.”

She whimpers, begging me for another chance. But that’s over now. This is the end. As I grab her hair in my fist, our eyes connect, and I bury the knife deep in her throat. She doesn’t stop looking at me as life slips out of her, until she’s finally gone.

Until they both are.

I’m free.

It’s like a weight has dropped from my shoulders.

Nothing is holding me back anymore.

“Are you alright?” Patrick takes the knife from me and places it on the plastic beneath our feet.

“I will be.” I nod once, needing to get out of here. “I have to get back to her now.”

I start for the door, wanting to touch her. To feel her in my arms and wake up beside her.

“I know you do, son,” he says.

I stop, looking over at him.

“But you and I...we should talk. There’s a lot I need to say.”

Me too.

ONE WEEK LATER

With family around me and the woman I love seated on my lap, I’m the happiest man that has ever walked this earth.

Patrick holds Mom’s hand in his lap, kissing her knuckles as he laughs with Michael, Elsie right beside him. Her head falls on his shoulder while she grins at Sophia, who twirls to a song Michael put on.

After Bianca’s death, I closed that chapter of my life, and so did Nicolette. We still haven’t gone to see her parents. She’s been afraid to see them again, especially now that we’re together, but I want her to have closure. I want her to tell them how they’ve made her feel. And mostly, I

want them to apologize. Because no matter what she says to me, I know she's carrying a lot of hurt that they put there.

Sophia hops over to me and plops down beside me.

"Hey, pretty girl," I tell her, kissing her on the forehead. "Tired from all that dancing?"

"No way. I'm having the best time. Do you want to dance with me, Uncle Raph?" She flutters her lashes, her poofy pale pink dress hitting my knee.

"Sure." I grin.

And that feeling of wanting my own child... It hits me whenever I'm around her. I drag in a quiet breath, glad that the music masks my inner turmoil.

"Thank goodness. You're a better dancer than Daddy, but just don't tell him that," she whispers as she side-eyes him.

"I heard that," Michael teases sternly and he winks at her.

He's a great father. If he can be, maybe there's hope for me too. Maybe Nicolette and I can adopt a child of our own one day. It's something we can discuss when she's ready.

"Sorry, Daddy." Sophia shrugs all innocently, then glances back at me. "So will you dance with me?"

"You can't keep a girl waiting." Nicolette lovingly shoves me with an elbow.

I gaze at her, overwhelmed with the amount of affection I hold in my heart for this woman.

"Don't go anywhere." I drop my lips to hers and kiss her slowly. This feeling inside me each time I do never seems to get old. I hope it never does.

"Wouldn't dream of it." She sighs.

"Uncle Raph?" Sophia jumps to her feet, propping a hand on her hip as her inquisitive stare bounces between Nicolette and me. "If you get married, can I be the flower girl?"

"Uh, I think if we get married, Uncle Gio wants to be the flower girl."

"What!" She sharply pivots toward him. "You can't be a flower girl."

"And why not?" His brows gather and he raises his chin.

"Cause you're not even a girl. Duh!"

"Fine, you got me there, kid."

Iseult covers up a smile with her fingers, and when she realizes I caught it, her face instantly hardens.

Gio looks up at her from the corner of his eyes, his jaw pulsing. I haven't seen those two say one word to each other. She's avoided him as though he's the bubonic plague. She tried to skip out early after the family dinner Mom arranged, saying she was tired and wanted to return back to the apartment she apparently owns in the city, but her father wouldn't allow it.

"Speaking of weddings..." Patrick throws in.

"What is it, Dad?" Fionn chugs the rest of his bourbon.

"Well, boys, Fernanda and I are getting married next week."

"What?" Michael pivots abruptly. "Are you serious?"

Iseult mutters a curse and looks anything but pleased.

"Aye, dead serious," he tells Michael. "I love your mother. Always will."

His eyes jump back to her affectionately, and she returns a smile I've never seen her wear for our father. Or my brothers' father. Fuck. This will take some getting used to.

"I lost her once," he tells the room. "And I'll never do that again. So if you have a problem with that, Michael, then we will have another reason for war."

"I don't—" Michael attempts.

"Pat, no." Mom shakes her head disapprovingly. "No one will be fighting. You got it, boys?" She pitches both Patrick and Michael a look. "I'm a grown woman, and this is my choice."

"Can you two let me finish?" Michael shakes his head. "I have no problems with you two getting married. In fact, if you two do get married, then would it be necessary for Gio and Eriu to do the same?"

He gives my brother a knowing glance, and for once, Gio's face fills with hope.

Patrick laughs. "Clever. But...our deal stands, Michael." All humor disappears from his face as he continues. "I don't want to speak of such topics when I have just announced my upcoming nuptials. But..." He drags in a sharp breath. "My nephew is still dead. And this is part of the price your family must pay to secure our future bloodline. It's not negotiable."

The way Gio grits his jaw, I'm surprised he hasn't broken some teeth.

"Excuse me," Iseult whispers. "Ladies' room."

She hurries off, and Gio balls and unballs a fist.

“We will have to choose a date soon,” Patrick says, but Gio’s already marching out of the room.

Sophia watches everyone inquisitively, completely forgetting about the dance I promised her.

“Well, Grandma.” She comes to sit on her lap. “I guess I’m gonna be your flower girl instead.”

“Seems that way.” Mom taps her on the nose with a finger.

While Patrick continues to talk wedding and Mom is preoccupied with Sophia, I tell Nicolette I want to check on Gio. Quietly, I leave the room, walking out into the foyer where I hear his distinct voice, then Iseult’s.

Ah, fuck. What the hell are they doing where anyone can hear them? Marching closer, I make it around the corner, their tense conversation growing nearer.

“We can tell him tonight,” Gio urges. “We can tell your father we want to be together.”

“Are you insane?” She laughs bitterly. “First of all, I never said I wanted to be with you. This is just sex!”

He groans, and his voice deepens an octave. “You fucking liar. I don’t know why you’re denying this, but I won’t let you.”

“Oh, yeah? And what are you going to do about it?”

There’s a sudden thud, and I peek around the corner, finding him with a palm around her throat, his body slanted over hers, pinning her to the pool table.

They don’t see me. Both of them are focused on each other, wordlessly staring at one another with obvious lust. If anyone else had caught them right now, fuck knows what would happen.

“He will disown me.” Her voice breaks. “I can’t tell him.”

“We can try.” He pins his forehead to hers. “I want you. I’m not willing to let you go.”

In all my life, I’ve never seen Gio this crazy about a woman before.

“You don’t understand. My father doesn’t tolerate disrespect, and doing what we’ve been doing, it’s disrespect to the family.” She keeps her emotions in check, but with every few words, that vulnerability seeps out whether she wants it to or not. “He’ll throw me out of the academy and out of this family. I’ll have nothing, Gio.”

When he draws back a beat, she squeezes her eyes shut for a moment before she pushes at his chest hard.

“Go!” she whisper-shouts, but he won’t move. “Leave me alone. You don’t mean a goddamn thing to me, do you understand?”

He shakes his head.

“Be with her!” She tries to shove him again. “Be with my sister. It’s what you have to do.”

“I’d rather die.” His fingers cinch her throat tighter.

“Now you’re being dramatic,” she scoffs tearfully.

“Wanna see dramatic?” He slants himself further into her and brushes his lips with hers, then kisses her. Hard. Hands in her hair, hers all over his back.

Yeah...time to stop watching, but I also can’t get my brother killed. Patrick may now be family with me being his blood, but he wouldn’t hesitate to kill Gio for cheating on his daughter.

Before I go, I discreetly knock once on the wall, and Iseult gasps.

Good. Hopefully this gets them to stop. I round the corner and hide when I hear the door open and her high heels snapping against the bare marble floor.

When she’s far out of reach, I march back into the game room, finding my brother in an armchair, face in his palms.

When he hears me walk in, his eyes jump up, but sudden disappointment floods them.

“Not who you were expecting?” I ask as he conceals his face again.

“Not even close,” he mutters. “You’re a lot uglier.”

I chuckle. “Next time you’re practically humping your soon-to-be sister-in-law, make sure there are no witnesses.”

He huffs and lowers his hands. “Fuck, you saw?”

“Mm-hmm. Lucky one of the Quinns didn’t. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t.” He sighs. “I never do when it comes to her.”

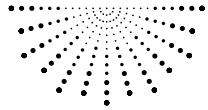
“You’re really fucked, aren’t you?” I take a seat opposite him as he gapes straight at me.

“What the hell do I do?”

“You fight. If she means that much, then you fight like hell until you get her, because there’s no other way.”

He nods with an exhausted sigh. “Then that’s what I’ll do.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



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NICOLETTE

I GROAN AS HE SLIDES IN AND OUT OF ME, PEERING DOWN INTO MY EYES AS he takes his time loving every inch of me.

I never knew sex with another person could feel so earth-shattering, like I'm floating out of my body. Like it's more than just the act. Like our souls are connecting. Maybe that's why they call it making love. You're creating something that's tangible. Something you can feel and taste and see.

"God, I love you," he groans deep in his chest, slipping his lips down my nape, tugging my earlobe between his teeth.

"I love you, too, Raph." I gasp as he hits that spot inside me that has me close.

My fingers sink further into his muscular behind, loving the feel of his body moving above mine. I'll die happy knowing he's the only man I've been with. With him, I have everything I need.

"Spread your legs wider," he husks out as he draws back to stare at me. "I wanna watch my cock sink inside you."

"Oh, God," I cry out, gripping the sheets, shutting my eyes as he rises to his knees, clasping his palms around my calves.

"Look at me. Don't you dare deny me those eyes." His voice turns huskier as he places the backs of my legs over his shoulders, increasing his tempo, thrusting deeper.

We lock eyes as he impales me over and over while the shuddering sensations grow, shooting down my legs like a blaze he set fire to.

"Fuck, you're soaking my cock."

My cheek flush, and he smirks.

“That’s a good thing, little one.” His thumb reaches for my clit, and he strokes it over and over until I feel it: that climb, the warmth spreading through me, making me feel alive and full.

“Yes...faster,” I gasp, and his growl only makes me slicker, chasing that release.

“Come now. Come for me, so I can make you do it all over again.”

He pulls my body higher, my ass in the air as he rams deeper inside me, sending me over the edge with his name across my lips. My body shudders while he groans, not releasing me from his relentless thrusts. In one swift move, he flips me over and forces my ass out and my body on all fours.

“Oh, fuck, look at you. Damn perfect.” He sinks roughly back inside me.

One hand wraps around my throat; the other fists my hair as he fucks me like I’ve unleashed the very animal I once craved.

“You’re gonna come one more time, understand?” he drawls, his teeth grazing my shoulder, sinking into it until it hurts, until it feels good.

I can’t manage to speak. No actual words come out, just sounds of pleasure slipping across the room.

My release climbs once more, stronger now. And when he fondles my clit, my knees tremble and my eyes roll back. His thrusts grow more urgent, and I feel him swell inside me. And together, drenched in fury and passion and deep-seated love, we drown in each other’s inescapable bliss.

Breathless, he flips back on top of me.

“You’re amazing,” he whispers, his mouth marking my throat, cruising up to my lips as he kisses me tenderly, as though wanting to remember everything about this moment.

His mouth begins to slow, and he falls to my side, molding me to him, his palm resting across my stomach. He remains quiet, his fingers lazily drawing circles around my bare abdomen. A heaviness settles in the air, and I can tell he has something on his mind.

Clutching his hand, I raise it up and kiss across his knuckles. “What’s wrong?”

“How do you know something’s wrong?”

I swivel to look at him from behind my shoulder. “Uh, because I know you like the back of my hand.”

He tightens his palm around me and pins me closer to his body, his laughter rumbling in his chest. “You do know me. You always have, and I

love that.”

I turn all the way so I can look at him, so he doesn’t dare lie. Because I will know. “I love you.” I rub his nose against mine, lips hovering over his. “So what’s wrong, Raph?”

He sighs, heavy and defeated.

“Have you ever thought about having kids sometime in the future? With me?” Vulnerability tramples through his words like he fears the answer.

“I’ll have you know...” I throw my arm over his shoulder. “I’ve planned our wedding and our entire life years ago.”

He chuckles. “And what happens in this life of ours?”

“Well, for starters...” I smile real big. “We elope, piss off your family, then have four amazing kids who drive us insane. Their names are Stella, Savannah, Nathaniel, and Gabriel.”

“Holy shit.” He chuckles. “They have names already?”

“Yep.” I lift a brow. “But you do have veto power.”

A lazy smirk slants over his lips, and tenderly, he lets them fall against my forehead. My body warms whenever he does that, kisses me that way.

“You can name our children whatever you damn well please.”

But then, his expression turns anguished. A tense pause settles between us, and he continues to stare like the world is shattering beneath him.

“Raph...” I clasp his cheek. “I’ll love you no matter what. You know that, right?”

He throws his head back against the pillow and stares at the ceiling. “I need you to know...” His throat bobs. “I may not be able to have kids, Nicolette. Ever.”

And when he stares back at me, I find a man who’s hurting. Who thinks that somehow I’d want him less because of that.

“Then we don’t have kids.” I prop my arm up and settle my face in my hand. “All I want is you. The rest doesn’t matter.”

If being with him means we never have a baby, then I’ll be fine.

“You say that now, but what happens twenty years from now when you’re sick of me, wishing you could have kids of your own?”

My mouth drops against the corner of his.

“In twenty years...” I whisper, kissing him once more. “I’ll be saying the very same thing, Raph Marino, because a life with you is what I want. No matter what that life looks like.”

“How do you know that?” He pins his forehead to mine. “How can you be sure?”

“Because I love you.” I kiss him slowly, brushing my lips with his. “It’s that simple.”

With a groan, he slices his fingers through my hair and deepens our kiss until I have no doubt in my mind he believes me.

RAPH ONE WEEK LATER

Michael’s estate has turned into a high-priced event. A large tent, seating two hundred, is set up, along with dimly lit fluorescent lighting. A violinist plays a soft melody while everyone waits for my mother.

She hooks her arm with mine as I ready to walk her down the aisle. “Are you happy, Ma?”

She sighs. “So happy, Raph. I never thought I’d ever get to be with him.” She gazes distantly. “Life surprises us that way.” She focuses on me now.

I’ve come to accept my mother’s apology for not telling me who my real father was. She was in a scary situation, and I understand she wanted to protect me. I have no doubt Giancarlo would’ve killed her. If anyone ever found out his wife had a child by another man, he’d be ruined. The men would never have taken him seriously, and he knew that. So protecting her secret was to his own benefit, and he’d stop at nothing to keep her quiet.

“I can’t believe he’s the one you told me about.” I grin at her, and she shrugs.

“It’s not like I could’ve blurted out his real identity.”

“As long as he makes you happy, or I’ll kill him.”

“No one’s killing anyone.” She pushes me toward the aisle.

“No promises, Ma.”

She mutters something in Italian as the music changes, and that’s our cue to go. Together, we march down, tall white columns with blue flowers and hanging candles on them pass us on both sides.

She smiles at all the guests until we're standing right before Patrick, who appears just as eager to marry my mother as she is to marry him.

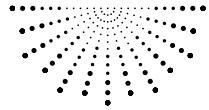
Shaking his hand, I slant into his ear. "You hurt her, and I'll kill you."

He clasps me on the shoulder. "If I hurt her, I'll finish the job myself."

And that says it all right there, doesn't it? Because I'd do the same for Nicolette.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



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NICOLETTE

NERVOUSLY, THE FOLLOWING DAY, I WAIT FOR HER TO OPEN THE DOOR. IT'S been over a year since we saw each other and I'm sure she's been worried. She's one of the only people who would be.

When the door swings open, Brenda shrieks, a baby girl with black curls on her hip. The last time I saw her, she was pregnant, and we had picked the baby name together.

"You're alive!" she shrieks, grabbing me with one arm and hugging me so tight, I can't breathe. "I swear, I was going crazy." She draws back. "Thinking the worst."

Her tearful voice has my own emotions surfacing. Her deep brown eyes glisten, her black hair rolled up in a messy bun.

"I'm sorry I look like shit and the house is even worse." She laughs. "But, biatch, you're alive, and..."

She gapes behind me, finding Raph standing there, a few feet away.

"Damn. I didn't see you there, Raph. How are you?"

"Brenda." He nods with a tight smile. "I see you're doing well." His eyes go to the baby, and his smile instantly grows.

"You wanna hold her?" she asks him.

He's moving closer until he's right beside me. "I would love to."

My heart instantly aches. He really wants a child, and I don't know if we'll ever be able to have any.

"Good. Because I need a break. She's heavy!"

He takes her into his arms and holds her against his black wool coat.

"Hi there," he says, and the little girl gives him a toothy grin.

"Oh, she likes you," Brenda says, walking into the house with us close behind. "You're in trouble now, Raph."

"I can manage," he replies, his tone as soft as silk. "I like kids."

"Mmm-hmm." Brenda gives me one of her knowing looks over her shoulder. "I can see that, all right."

"How old is Mila now?" I quickly change the subject before she gets nosy.

We settle on the red, velvet sofa, me sandwiched between them. Her place is small, yet cozy, pictures of her with Mila and her husband, Keagan, donning the walls of the den. She ended up marrying her high school boyfriend. She calls herself a walking cliché. But I think it's sweet. How many people can truly say that?

"She's nine months now. Can you believe it?" She's glancing fondly at her daughter, who's playing with Raph's nose.

But he looks like he's in heaven.

Knots form in my stomach. Will we ever have that?

"So, uh, you gonna tell me what happened to you after you got to my grandparents' house?" She tucks her feet under her. "And why you're in my living room with Mr. Hunk over there?" She pops a thick brow.

I stifle a laugh when Raph stares at her with amusement.

"What?" She throws a hand in the air. "I'm married. I'm not dead. And homegirl over here, has called you a lot worse."

That gets his attention. He places Mila on his knee and bounces her while she squeals. "Did she now? And what did she say about me?"

He gives me a devilish smirk that has my insides flipping.

"Girl code. Can't tell ya." Brenda raises her chin and gives me a wink.

"How about I pay for a sitter so you and your husband can have a night out?"

She draws her lips back and grits her teeth. "Tempting, but I have a sitter, and she's free."

"You draw a hard bargain, Brenda." He considers his options thoughtfully. "What about all expenses paid to any restaurant you want for three nights? I'll even get you reservations to any overnight hotel if you want it."

Her eyes widen.

"Don't you dare, Brenda," I gasp, elbowing her. "We're friends. You don't sell out your friends for food."

“Yeah...but there’s that rooftop restaurant that we’ve been dying to go to for months now, and they’re always booked.”

“The Ribbon Room?” A tight, knowing grin lines those sinful lips.

“That’s the one!”

He takes out his cell and starts pressing buttons.

“What are you doing?” I hurriedly ask, palming his thigh, and his muscles jerk beneath my touch.

He looks straight at me as someone answers. “Hello? Antonio?”

I register a male voice coming through. “Hey. Yeah, how you doin’, Raph?”

The whole time, he eyes me with a satisfied look on his face, and Brenda’s laughing her ass off.

“I need a favor,” he continues. “I have some friends who want to come by your restaurant tomorrow night.”

Brenda is practically bouncing in her seat, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Of course!” the man replies. “We’d love to have them. How’s tomorrow at eight?”

With a narrowed stare, I shake my head at her.

“Sell-out,” I whisper.

She shrugs and her face lights up.

“Great, tomorrow at eight will work. They’ll have my private table with all the works.”

He pauses while the man says, “Absolutely, sir. We will make it extra special for them.”

“I appreciate it, Antonio. I will be sure to stop by very soon with my girlfriend, Nicolette.”

I gasp. He made us public.

Brenda squeezes my arm.

“Can’t wait to meet her,” the man tells him.

“Thank you,” he says, eyes warm like the sun as they search mine. “She’s special.”

“I bet.”

“Say hello to your beautiful wife and those kids.”

“Thank you, sir,” Antonio says before Raph ends the call.

“So, Brenda...” Raph hits her with a satisfied expression. “Are you going to tell me what my girl has been saying about me?”

“Your girl, huh?” Her gaze bounces between us.

“That’s right.” He slips the phone back in his pocket.

She jerks back as she stares at me. “Bitch, you been holding out on me?”

“It’s new.” My face flushes.

“Okay...” She backs up into the sofa. “We need to properly catch up after I fill him in on all the dirty things you’ve said about him.”

“I hate you.” I shake my head.

“I know.” She hooks her arm through mine and smiles. “But you also love me.”

“Unfortunately.” I roll my eyes.

She glances past me at Raph. “So, the first time she told me she had a crush on you, she also called you a god.”

“Is that so...” Heavy-lidded eyes meet mine, and my body comes alive with tingles spreading down the length of me.

Then she’s filling him in on all the other things I’ve said, while I’m sitting there watching the man I love and my best friend talk like they’re already good friends.

And I’m happy. Truly happy. This is family, and it’s all I need.

Hours later, and we’re driving away from Brenda’s and going somewhere I had no plans to go. But Raph convinced me I needed closure. That I would be happy to get it over with.

My foot bounces while his hand squeezes mine, his other managing the wheel.

“It’ll be okay, tesoro mio. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” He gives me a quick glance, conviction and devotion imprinted in his gaze.

I know he won’t. He’s always been there for me, and he won’t fail me now. But this is still hard.

Facing my parents after feeling completely unloved and emotionally abandoned by them is scary. Then throw in actually confronting them about it and telling them I’m in love with their favorite daughter’s husband... I can just imagine how well that’s going to go.

“We’re here,” he tells me, slowing to a stop in front of their driveway.

The two-story ivory house with blue shutters stares right at me, and nostalgia hits all at once.

It's funny how even through the bad, our mind grasps on to the good memories. Like when Dad brought lobsters home one Christmas, even though it was a huge expense, and one of them jumped out of the bag. Or the time Raph and I made tiramisu together in our small kitchen and I actually mastered it. Things weren't all bad in this house. I held on to that for as long as I could.

"Are you ready?" He brings my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles, his eyes concentrating on mine.

"I don't think I'll ever be ready." I drag in a shaky inhale. "What if they don't want to see me?"

"Then we'll never come back here again." He cups my cheek. "You're an amazing person, Nicolette. If they don't see that, then they're not worth your time. Family isn't always blood. I'm your family now, and you can always depend on me."

My heart lurches and emotions grip me in the wake of his words. "I know you are, and you're mine too. It's just hard. They're my parents, you know?"

A knot forms in my throat.

"I know." His features fill with compassion. "And I'm sorry. But you have to face them and tell them how they've made you feel. Don't keep it inside. You have for too long, and I don't want to see you carry that pain anymore."

He's right. I need to do this for myself. With a small smile, I tighten my lips and face my own demons.

"I'm ready," I tell him, not sure if it's even the truth.

My hand lands on the door, and before I can open it, he says, "I'll get that for you."

It's silly. I know I can get my own door, but him wanting to... I don't know, it's sweet. He climbs out, and seconds later, his hand holds mine and he's helping me to my feet.

I straighten the blue peacoat he bought me, and together, we climb the three stone steps and I ring the bell.

My stomach churns. I can't believe I'm doing this.

"Coming," my father grumbles, his heavy footsteps trudging closer.

The nearer he gets, the sicker I feel.

Raph squeezes my hand and leans into my ear. “You’re okay. I’m right here.”

The cadence of his voice lessens the nervous butterflies scurrying in my belly. But it’s not enough to bury the anxiety crawling through me.

The lock clicks, and the unassuming brown door creaks open. And there is my father, a beer in hand, wiping his mouth, looking like he just drank through a distillery.

“Ni-Nicolette?” he stammers. “That you?”

“Yes, Dad, it’s me.” My reply comes with surprise tethered to it.

He appears as though he’s a shell of the man he once was.

“Who’s that, Elio?” I hear Mom call, marching toward us.

“It’s Nicolette,” he slurs.

“Oh.”

That’s all she says. One word.

It stings.

Raph grasps my hand even tighter.

Seconds later, she’s there, staring at me with indifference. Her auburn strands are set in a low ponytail, her bare face assessing me as though I’m not her daughter, but one of those salespeople she’d rather see gone.

“Raph.” She reverts her attention to him with a hint of a smile. One she couldn’t afford me. Her own daughter. “What are you doing here?”

“May we come in?” he asks grimly.

“Uh, sure.”

They both move aside to let us in, and Dad struggles to lock the door behind us.

Mom tsks.

“I’ll do it. You go sit,” she tells him, annoyance laced in her tone.

It’s not like my parents to be annoyed with one another or even argue. They got along well. It’s one thing we had: two parents who loved each other. They just never loved me, and I always wondered what I did to make them hate me.

Raph doesn’t let me go, gripping my hand, letting me cling to him like he’s the only one keeping me afloat.

We make it to the living room, settling into the black leather sofa with a loveseat across from it. The glass table between is bare. There was always a vase with fresh flowers atop it. My mother loved to adorn the house with

roses or hydrangeas. But the house seems dead now. Like the life it carried has been sucked out.

They must still be mourning her.

“So...” Mom follows Dad to the loveseat. “What are you doing here, Nicolette? Why are you suddenly back? What do you need? Money?”

Her words are a knife to my chest.

I swallow over the lump in my throat.

Raph releases a low growl beside me, and I’m the one squeezing his hand now.

“I’m not here for money. I never asked you two for a dime. Why would I start now?” The anguish carries my voice, and I try to keep myself together.

“So what do you need, then?”

I scoff. “Did you guys even miss me? Wonder why I wasn’t back for so long? I mean, I wrote a note saying I’d be gone for a while, but so much time had passed, and...” I clench my jaw to stop from crying.

“And what?” Mom asks harshly.

“And neither of you even called me. Not once.”

“Well, my daughter had just died.” Her features harden. “We were very busy with that while you decided to abandon your family in their time of need.”

“I didn’t abandon anyone,” I briskly say, needing to justify my actions. I’m not heartless like she’s making it seem to be. “I had no choice. Bianca had some bad people after her, and I was a witness to something she did, so I—”

“Don’t you dare tarnish your sister’s name with your lies!” she hollers. “She can’t come back from the dead and defend herself.”

Not anymore, she can’t.

“It’s the truth, Mom! She’s not who you think she was. She did a lot of bad things, like sleep with Raph’s father!”

Dad grumbles, taking a swig of his beer, while Mom’s eyes widen.

“How dare you?” she barks, glancing at Raph, whose features are full of well-contained rage. “And you just sit there, letting her talk about your wife like that?”

He drags in a long breath, grabbing my hand and holding it in his lap. My mother doesn’t miss that. Her brows knit as she looks bewilderingly at us.

“Are you two...” She slaps a palm on her chest. “Oh my God... I can’t believe this.”

“Well, believe it, Bettina.” He lifts my hand up and kisses the top of it. “Nicolette means more to me than Bianca ever did.”

Mom gasps. Dad leans back and swipes the drop of beer from his mouth. I don’t even know if he’s actually present.

“Your daughter was too busy fucking my father and pretending to love me to ever be a wife,” Raph goes on. “If that’s the kind of daughter you’re proud of...” He leans in threateningly. “Then that says a lot about you. Your daughter was trash. She treated everyone like trash, unless she could use them.” He chuckles dryly. “But you never saw it, or never wanted to. While Nicolette was here in this house being tormented by her while you let it happen.” He shakes his head in disgust. “You are an awful mother. You need to know that. And you, Bettina? You owe your daughter an apology for how you’ve treated her. She deserves at least that.”

Mom glances away momentarily.

“We treated her just fine. Go ahead. Tell him.” She has the audacity to look at me and say that.

My insides boil over, and I’m ready to blow.

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to say you guys treated me well.” An angry laugh falls out of me. “Which part was fine, Mom? When you only ever told Bianca how pretty and smart she was? Or how about never signing me up for dance when I asked, while she had pictures of every one of her recitals plastered on the walls at home? Or maybe when you guys didn’t even bother showing up to my plays at school or ask me about my day? I don’t even think you could name one friend I had.”

My breathing burns through my chest even as I continue, needing to get it all out.

“Was it fine when I cried myself to sleep when my boyfriend tried to force me to have sex? Did you even care when I shed a tear?”

She slants her face downward, her jaw going slack.

“What happened, Mom? Making you uncomfortable?”

“This is out of line,” she reprimands, but her tone no longer carries that high and mighty attitude she started with.

“Why did you even have me?” I ask, tears burning behind my eyes.

“The condom broke,” Dad mutters.

I gasp under my breath.

Bianca was right. They really didn't want me.

Raph continues to hold my hand, and right now he's the only raft in this storm. If he wasn't here, I'd crumble under the weight of my sorrow.

"Your mother cried for two weeks when we found out," he offers, yawning with a hiccup, his belly rounder than I remember it in his white t-shirt with a big, brown stain on the chest.

"Shut up." Mom swats him.

"What? It's t-true," Dad goes on, oblivious to my mom's face turning red. "You wanted to get an abortion, and your mother wouldn't let you."

"You really never loved me," I murmur, unable to hold back the tears. "You couldn't even find it in your heart to love me after I was born."

She tilts up her chin, fidgeting with her crimson blouse. "I didn't want another child. It was not in the plans."

"People's plans change all the time," Raph grits. "But decent parents don't abandon their children when they're actually here. Alive. Healthy. What's wrong with you?"

His gaze burns with wrath. He starts to rise, and I follow him, realizing there's no way she'll ever apologize to me for anything.

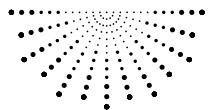
I blink back my tears. They don't deserve them.

"You will never see either one of us again. And if I see you anywhere near her, I will come back, and I will kill you both," Raph warns. "You know what I'm capable of."

Mom's face goes pale. Wordlessly, she watches us leave.

And I know for certain this is the last time I'll ever see them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



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RAPH

TWO MONTHS LATER

A MONTH AGO, WE GOT MARRIED. WE DIDN'T TELL A SOUL. NOT MY brothers. Not Brenda. Not my mom. She was mad most of all. For a minute. But then she got over it. She wanted us to have a big wedding, but in the end all she wanted was for me to be happy.

But my priority is to make my wife happy, and she had already dreamed up our life together long ago and it all began with an elopement. Who was I to ruin a girl's dream like that?

"They're all going to be here soon." She nervously fumbles with the ivory linen napkins, folding them into intricate designs while I lay out the crystal glasses and wine bottles in the center of our table.

We decided to host this week's family dinner, with the Quinns joining us. Patrick has been more of a father to me than Giancarlo ever was.

He's offered me a seat at their table as his second-in-command, but I'm happy where I am, supporting Michael. But I will always fight with the Irish if they need me. They're family too.

"Why are you so nervous?" I ask her, appearing behind her and curling my arms around her middle.

My lips coast down the curve of her neck, my cock already growing hard from the mere feel of her in my hands. That's what she does to me: makes me feel more alive, more loved, than I have ever been.

"It's the first time we've hosted, and I want everything to be perfect. Elsie always does such a great job. I don't want to look like the one who doesn't have her crap together."

"Babe," I laugh against her ear. "They don't care how pretty the table looks."

She scoffs, dramatically, pivoting to me. “Women do. They pay attention to detail.”

I chuckle with a shake of my head. “If you say so, tesoro mio. But the table looks beautiful.”

And it does. She added some fancy crap with hanging candles and stuff I don’t know names for, but it’s nice.

I decided to keep my house by the woods. It’s big enough for the family I wish to have one day. And most importantly, she loves it. If she didn’t, I’d burn it to the ground. The hour-plus commute into the city for work is a pain, but it’s worth it knowing she’s happy.

The doorbell rings.

“Oh my God. They’re here!” Her eyes grow, and she pushes off me. “Can you go grab the rice balls and the clams?” she flusters.

“Of course. Anything you want.” I clutch her face in my palms and press a kiss to her forehead, breathing her in, my heart unable to contain how much I feel for this woman. “You’re the love of my life. You know that, right?”

Affection dots her gaze. “And you are mine. Forever and ever and ever.”

The doorbell rings again.

“Uncle Raph, hellllo?” Sophia bangs.

“I think I’d better go and get the appetizers,” I chuckle, walking into the kitchen while I hear her head for the door, her high heels clicking along until voices fill the house.

Carrying over the two platters of food, with many more to go, I carefully move into the dining room, seeing Michael and Elsie, Mom and Patrick, Gio with Sophia, and most of the Quinns too.

“There’s my boy,” Patrick greets with a grin as I place the hot platters on the table.

“Hey, Dad.”

He throws his arms around me and clasps me on the back. The other Quinn men all greet us too. The idea of having me as a brother seemed to bother Tynan most of all, but he’s slowly accepting it.

“Tynan.” I reach out a hand for his, and he looks at it and reluctantly shakes it.

“Raph. Smells good,” Fionn remarks.

“Wasn’t me,” I say, looking over at my Nicolette. “It was all my wife.”

She gazes at me shyly, and I know she isn't used to compliments. She missed out on so many of them, so I give them to her freely, every moment that I can.

"My God," Elsie gushes as she comes to hug Nicolette. "Everything looks so beautiful. And where did you get that vase?"

Nicolette gives me one of those *I told you so* faces while following Elsie closer to the table.

Women.

I chuckle to myself. Gotta love 'em.

Minutes later, everyone is seated, digging into the food. Nicolette refused to accept my help. She wanted to prove to herself that she can cook everything on her own from scratch. And fuck, am I proud of her.

"Everything is delicious," my mother offers, and everyone agrees.

Nicolette feigns a smile beside me, then clasps a hand over her mouth, her face going white.

"What's wrong?" I whisper. "Are you feeling okay?"

She shakes her head before she says, "Not really."

I instantly tense.

"What's wrong?" My voice booms, and everyone stops talking, eyes on us.

"Are you okay, honey?" Mom questions next, concern in her voice.

"Uh..." Nicolette pants. "Yes and no."

She grimaces, avoiding my gaze, then hurriedly releases a huge breath, getting to her feet.

I immediately follow, my heart pounding.

If she's sick, really sick... I can't even think about that without wanting to die.

"Tell me what's wrong, baby." I try to keep it together, but all I can see is her giving me bad news.

"Just a little nauseous all of a sudden."

"Should we go to the doctor?"

"No. I...oh, God...I'm terrible at this." She runs a hand down her face while I grasp her other one.

"At what?"

"I wanted to plan this amazing surprise and put the surprise into a cake, but then I burned the cake, and so I had no idea how to tell you..." She goes on and on, not giving herself a moment to breathe.

Mom gasps while I stare at my beautiful wife with a heavy tightness in my chest, not understanding what the hell is going on.

“Raph...” She takes my hand in both of hers. “I think you’re the most amazing husband. You’ve loved me like I’ve never been loved by anyone.”

“Of course I do.” My heart races.

“So I know that you’ll be an amazing father too.”

The room spins.

“What?” I pull back, dragging my gaze to her other hand, resting around her stomach. “Are you?”

My pulse skitters, and my throat tightens. How is this possible? I really thought I couldn’t have children.

She nods, tears flooding her eyes. “I am. I found out a few days ago.”

The room goes quiet, other than Mom’s soft cries.

“Are you sure?” I whisper incredulously, my palm gradually cupping her belly.

“Yes,” she sniffles, grasping my forearm. “I confirmed it with my doctor just to be sure before I told you. I hope you’re not upset I went without you.”

“Upset?” I look up at her, my own eyes pounding with emotions. “I never thought I’d be able to... Oh, sweetheart.”

My hands quickly clutch her hips, and I shove my chair to the side and hold her against me by the back of her head. “We’re going to have a baby.”

“Yes,” she sighs softly. “We are.”

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” I breathe. “Thank you for this gift.”

She drags her gaze up to mine and holds my face in her tender hands. “And thank you for loving me when I couldn’t do it myself.”

“I’ll always love you, Nicolette. You’re my home.”

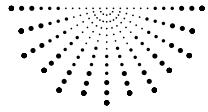
“And you’re mine.” She presses her cheek against my beating heart.

And with her, I no longer have to wonder what love truly feels like, because she’s love.

She always was.

It just took me some time to see it.

EPILOGUE



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GIO

“DON’T STOP,” ISEULT QUICKLY WHISPERS.

I don’t have any plans to. If watching her fall apart is the last thing I see before Hell calls to me, then I’ll gladly meet the devil with a smile on my face.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she cries when I thrust deeper, sucking her clit into my mouth, her body trembling like she’s about to let go.

And with another stroke, she screams out a curse, her fists yanking my hair as she comes all over my tongue. “Oh, fuck!”

Before she can realize what I’m doing, I gradually climb up her body while reaching into my pocket.

My body drops over hers, fitting just right, my cock rocking between her thighs as I lift her hand in the air. Silver cuffs dangle from my grasp, and within seconds, I have her wrist in one cuff.

“Wha—what the fuck?” She looks up, trying to push me off just as I fasten the other end to one of the poles of her headboard.

Iseult yanks her arm, eyes laced with rage, just as I start to rise off the bed. She stares up at her bound hand before her gaze darts to mine, daggers shooting out of it.

“You have two seconds to let me go.” She grinds her teeth.

I fold my arms across my chest, popping a brow. “Don’t think I will.”

The flush on her cheeks is all kinds of sexy, and so is that glare.

I chuckle with a satisfied expression. “You look too good lying there, all flushed and spread open like my personal offering.”

She groans, balling her hands. “I’m going to kill you for this, whoever you are. And nothing and no one will save you.”

“I’d like to see you try, bambina.” My eyes take a lazy stroll down her body, her pussy still completely bare. “Seems like whenever you pretend to hate me, we end up with you coming like my personal little whore.”

“You bastard!” Her cheeks turn crimson and her eyes narrow. “This is not funny. You have to let me go.”

“Nah.” A smile plays on my face. “I think instead I’m going to teach you a lesson that lying to someone will get you into lots of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Her chest rattles with forceful breaths, her wrathful gaze hungry to make me her next kill.

“This kind.” I settle on the edge of the bed, taking the right side, my hands cupping her hips, fingers delving deeper while she watches me, making no attempts to push me away.

She clasps the sheets with her free hand, her gaze hard yet slinking with her unsurmountable desire. When will she realize fighting me will get her nowhere?

Before she has a chance to protest, I flip her over, her hips on my lap, her ass mine for the taking. And what a beautiful ass it is.

“W-what the hell are you doing?” she stammers, peering over at me from behind her shoulder.

But the way her voice swells with an erotic current lets me know she has no qualms about what my hand plans to do to that ass.

I fist her hair while my heavy palm lands hard and loud against her round and curvy behind. “Does that answer your question, Red?”

“You are not spanking me.” Indignation settles on her features as she fights my hold, staring at me with a twist of her neck.

So I do it again, spanking her ass harder with a grin on my motherfucking face. “Who’s gonna stop me?”

“Shit,” she cries when I let my palm slide under her, working her clit on it, pushing deeper.

She’s slick and sensitive, throwing her head back, her moans of satisfaction trembling through her body.

“Look at me.” I spank her again. “Look at me, Red, or I stop and leave you here begging for it.”

“Fuck you,” she grits when my finger sinks inside her real slow, my eyes locked on hers, refusing to let go.

She sighs, her lips parted, brows furrowing.

“You like that?”

She clenches her jaw.

“Stubborn girl.” I add another finger. “I asked you a question.”

I slide in until my last knuckle, twisting them inside her, thrusting deeper with every stroke. She fights the orgasm, mouth parted and trembling.

“Maybe I should stop.” I slip out of her, grab a fistful of her ass, and take a little bite before I throw her back on the mattress.

As soon as I rise, she attempts to grab me.

“Wait,” she calls.

But I’m already walking away.

“Don’t you *dare* leave me like this!” She flips to her front and roughly pulls down her dress, but that short thing barely covers her.

And I’m back to wondering why she didn’t want to take it off for me in the first place.

“I’m not leaving.” I stare at her pussy for a moment, flicking my eyes back to hers. “But I’m hoping in the meantime that the ache between those gorgeous thighs tortures you into obedience until I return.”

“Where the hell are you going?” Her eyes go round.

“Going to take a shower, then order some takeout. And if you’re a good girl, maybe I’ll feed you.” My smirk makes her huff with rage.

She stares at me with a curl of her mouth, like she’s going to rip my head right off. It only eggs me on.

“Where are your clean towels?”

A vein practically explodes from her neck.

“Fine, don’t tell me.” I shrug. “I’ll find them myself.”

“Folded in the *fucking* bathroom,” she hisses, ready to stake me. “Don’t you dare go rummaging through my things.”

“Why? Hiding a vibrator in your panty drawer?” I start for the dresser.

She instantly sits up against the headboard, her shoulders rocking with such force, I wonder why there’s no steam coming out of her head.

“Maybe I can use it on you when I’m nice and clean. Would you like that, Red?”

She stares heatedly at me while I chuckle, heading for the top drawer, and as soon as I open it, my grin widens.

“Look what we have here...” My fingers skim across all those lace panties and bras neatly folded.

And just as predicted, there's a bright pink vibrator tucked in the corner, one end with a suction cup and a tongue-looking thing.

Wow.

"My, my. Little Red likes to play, huh? Well..." I grab the vibrator and stride back to her. "Lucky for you, I have all night to see how many times I can make you come with this thing." I lean into her ear. "And when I finally give you my name, that's all you'll be screaming for the rest of your life."

"I'll never say your name," she jeers, her breath scorching across my neck. "Unless it's to curse you to the pits of Hell."

"Will you come with me, baby?" I roll the vibrator up her thigh, straightening to my full height.

My smirk only pisses her off, blistering contempt snagging her features.

"Uncuff me and get the fuck out of here."

I place the vibrator on her nightstand. "I know you're used to telling people what to do, expecting them to listen."

I drop my face close to hers a second time, my lips feathering over her ear. Her breath hitches.

"But I'm not your boy-toy, Red. So I'm going to go take my hot shower, and when I'm done, I expect you to be on your best behavior."

I right myself, starting to undo the buttons of my suit jacket, shrugging it off before placing it on the edge of her bed. My fingers lower to my belt, and I begin to remove it, the clinking reverberating through the room as she watches me, unable to take her eyes off my movements.

The shirt comes next, the pants and boxers following, until I'm completely bare. My cock is thick and heavy, and her eyes definitely don't miss that.

"Like what you see, bambina?"

"No." She snarls. "I bet you don't even last long."

"Oh, baby, you didn't just say that." In one quick step, I'm right beside her, my hand snapping around her nape, tugging her hair back and forcing her to look up. "Just for that, I'm gonna fuck you for hours until your body can't physically come anymore."

"That's not even possible," she challenges with a glint in her eyes.

"I'll make it possible."

Her exhales ravage faster, her chest climbing higher and higher, and fuck, I have every urge to rip that dress to shreds and love on every inch of her skin.

“Now...” I drop my hand away. “I’m going to go get clean, and I expect you to stay here and not cause trouble. Think you can manage that?”

“Fuck you,” she grates.

“I’d love it if you did.” I chuckle coldly. “Preferably while you’re saying my name and not looking at me like I’m Satan.”

She flips me off just as I turn to head out into the living room, finding the door to the bathroom. Stepping inside, I turn on the water and steam fills the room. The scorching drops run down my body when I walk in, washing away the invisible grime on me from someone I killed tonight.

Minutes later, the sound of a bang, then another loud noise, swells through the room.

What the hell?

I quickly shut off the water and grab a towel from the stand beside me. Drying myself with one, I take another to wrap around my hips.

I’m out in seconds, marching back to the bedroom, wanting to make sure she’s okay. But when I return, I don’t see her at all.

And that pole she was attached to? It’s missing.

“Shit.”

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Cruel Lies!* Want more Raph and Nicolette?

[CLICK HERE](#) for a bonus scene!

Will Gio ever win over Iseult? Will Patrick let them be together? Find out in [*Twisted Promises*](#).

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- “Dark Outside” by Klergy feat. Marie Gallo
- “No Rest for the Wicked” by Klergy
- “Moondust – Stripped” by Jaymes Young
- “Love in the Dark” by Adele
- “Close” by Noelle Johnson
- “You Don’t Want Me” by Tassia Zappia
- “Always Been You” by Jessie Murph
- “Party of One” by Brandi Carlile feat. Sam Smith
- “Buried” by UNSECRET feat. Katie Herzig
- “Stoned on You” by Jaymes Young
- “See You Later (Ten Years)” by Jenna Raine
- “Under the Influence” by Chris Brown
- “Dancing Under Red Skies” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Back to Friends” by Lauren Spencer Smith
- “SNAP” by Rosa Linn
- “Secret Love Song, Pt. II” by Little Mix
- “I’ll Stay Here” by KEMAL
- “What Ifs” by Kane Brown feat. Lauren Alaina
- “I Hate This” by Tenille Arts
- “Lips On You” by Maroon 5
- “Carolina” by Taylor Swift
- “No More Hiding” by Gina Brooklyn
- “Innocence and Sadness” by Dermot Kennedy

- “Hurts Like Hell” by Wrabel feat. Sadie Jean
- “Men on the Moon” by Chelsea Cutler
- “Dangerous Game” by Klergy feat. BEGINNERS
- “Echo” by Alexander Stewart
- “You’d Never Know” by BLÜ EYES
- “I Miss You (Skin to Skin)” by Dylan Conrique
- “You’re Gonna Get What’s Coming” by Klergy feat. VG LUCAS
- “Kiss Me” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Salt” by Trella
- “Falling Faster” by JAC feat. Sean Kelly

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For Lilian, a love of writing began with a love of books. From *Goosebumps* to romance novels with sexy men on the cover, she loved them all. It's no surprise that at the age of eight she started writing poetry and lyrics and hasn't stopped writing since.

She was born in Azerbaijan, and currently resides in Long Island, N.Y. with her husband, three kids, and a dog named Gatorade. Even though she has a law degree, she isn't currently practicing. When she isn't writing or reading, Lilian is baking or cooking up a storm. And once the kids are in bed, there's usually a glass of red in her hand. Can't just survive on coffee alone!

Join her readers group to get all the latest scoop, excerpts, or even discuss your favorite new show:
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