

L'Appel du Vide

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L'Appel du Vide

by [queeny407](#)

Summary

Clara Edwards wants nothing more than to help her loving husband, James, earn enough money to move them into a larger home, so they can finally start the family that she's been dreaming of. She manages to secure a position as a maid in the household of the wealthy, well-respected De Luca family, but on her way home, she's attacked by a man, and left traumatized. Clara hopes that she can just forget the assault and try to move on, but on the first day of her new job, she meets her attacker once more, and he has no intention of letting her go this time.

As Adriano De Luca continuously uses her for his own enjoyment, Clara is slowly dragged further and further into a dark world, and she struggles as her guilt and self-blame begins to slowly affect her marriage. She's desperate not to get caught in Adriano's ambitions, but it's all she can do to even keep the abuse from James. While she navigates through a new life of pain, fear, and blood, Clara tries to buckle down and find a way out that will keep her and her husband safe, but a young French housewife can only do so much against the mafia...

Cheek to Cheek

Chapter Notes

Every chapter is going to be named after a song from the first half of the twentieth century.
We're starting out with Cheek to Cheek by Fred Astaire!

TWs for this chapter: graphic rape and aftermath. DO NOT READ IF YOU ARE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH OR TRIGGERED BY NONCON

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Clara gripped her coat around her tightly, shivering as she walked down the dimly-lit streets. She should have had James come with her, but the housekeeper had required that she come alone, because the De Lucas valued their privacy, or so she said.

Well, it was alright. She was only fifteen minutes from home, she didn't need a cab even if she could find one - she'd be fine.

A few locks of her hair fell away from her bun and brushed her neck slightly, sending a shiver down her spine. A bar up ahead was bright and loud, and she could hear the men inside it laughing raucously, and unconsciously hunched her shoulders. She turned the corner quickly, and tried to speed up as she walked.

Clara bit her thumb and tried to think about what changes she'd need to make in her schedule with her new job. *Poor James*. It wasn't that he couldn't take care of himself or cook, but she loved making dinner for him. He was always heaping praise on her cooking, and he was so tired after his work day that she did it without complaint. She didn't like the idea of trading off dinner duty. But she had to get a job if they wanted to afford a better apartment, especially since James' mother had disowned him after their marriage.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't notice the soft clicking of leather shoes behind her. When a large hand wrapped tightly around her arm from behind, she barely had time to scream.

A hand covered her mouth and she was yanked back into an alley. The man holding her was huge, at least a foot taller than her, and he shoved her unceremoniously against the wall. The young woman opened her mouth to scream, but he pushed his lips against hers roughly, his tongue immediately slipping into her mouth.

Clara's eyes were wide open as he ripped her coat down her small shoulders. He had her lifted up, his hips pinning hers to the wall, and his gaze met hers through a fringe of thick black hair that just slightly hung over his eyes. They were a startlingly deep green. He tasted like minty ash and bourbon.

She tried to bite down on his tongue, but he shoved his lips against hers even harder, practically swallowing her cries of fear. His hips were already thrusting prematurely, and she could feel something stiff pressing between her thighs. Her panic heightened as he pulled her coat off of her

completely, dropping it on the ground next to them. His movements were frantic, not as though he was in a rush, but like he couldn't wait to violate her. His tongue was blocking her screams, and she wanted to gag the farther he pushed it down her throat.

She was left in her day dress she had worn for her interview, and he forced the long skirt up so that it pooled around her stomach, shoving her thighs upward with a thrust.

No, no, no!

His grip briefly left her wrists as he shoved his pants downward, and he momentarily relaxed the press of his lips against hers. Clara immediately took his lower lip between her teeth and bit as hard as she could. He snarled in pain and pulled away from her, and for just a moment, the two were still, breathing heavily against each other in the dark alley.

The faint moonlight slightly illuminated his face, although she could still barely see. Blood dripped from the cut she'd opened in his lip, and the look in his eyes was one of lust and anger. He grabbed her throat and slammed her back against the wall, knocking the air out of her lungs completely. She gasped and choked, her vision blurring for a moment. The man pushed her underwear to the side and-

-she nearly screamed as he entered her.

He was too big, *too big*, and her cunt felt like it was being torn apart with every thrust. He'd grabbed her wrist and pinned it against the wall again, resting his head next to hers and keeping his other hand on her throat. "Stupid bitch," he hissed in between grunts, and she sobbed. His hand squeezed threateningly against her windpipe as her voice escaped her, and she tried to hold back her cries, tears of pain dripping down her cheeks.

"I would have made it pleasurable for you," he muttered, and Clara shook her head, gripping his shoulder with her free hand to keep from falling, her back scraping hard against the brick wall with every thrust. "All you had to do was keep still."

He grabbed her hip and pulled her down hard, reaching so far in that her mouth opened in a soundless scream. Something was dripping down her legs, and she was bleeding, she was sure of it - he was ripping her to pieces with each movement.

She was crying into his shoulder, gripping him so hard that she thought she felt her nails cut through his skin, but he only groaned and fucked into her even harder. His cheek was warm against hers, and if he was bothered at all by her tears, he didn't show it.

She felt his hips stutter, and he pulled out of her quickly, his seed splattering all over her thighs. He dropped her easily and she fell into the ground in a heap, shaking and sobbing. Her vision was blurred with tears and her throat felt raw. She was broken, she was sure of it - agony bled out from between her legs, and she could feel her hips aching horribly.

She thought she caught a glimpse of him tucking his cock back into his pants, and briefly adjusting his tie, before he walked off, not even sparing her a glance.

Clara cried earnestly against the hard concrete of the alley, no one around to witness her breaking. She couldn't believe it, she just couldn't - this can't have happened, it was just a bad dream, it wasn't real...

...but the pain between her legs was horribly real, and she glanced down to see a mess of blood and the torn petals of flesh between her thighs gleaming wetly in the dim light of the moon.

Her sobs eventually quieted into hiccups, and she tried to wipe the thick spend off her legs, but there was too much and her handkerchief was too thin. Shakily, she pulled herself up to stand, pain lancing through her cunt, and let her full skirt fall down to cover her legs, thankful for the way it billowed at her hips slightly. She slowly pulled her coat back on, fastening it with shaking fingers.

She leaned against the wall, trying to force herself to walk, but she couldn't. She wanted to melt away and die, and *James, oh James*, how could she face him like this? How could she come home to his sweet smile and warm embrace after letting this happen to her?

She hunched over and puked, the little food she had eaten burning her throat, and started to cry once more, this time small, gasping whimpers as tears pricked her eyes again.

She stood in that position for what felt like hours, before straightening up and making herself walk. She took one step forward, but when her thighs touched she nearly fell again, agony in every movement. Clara made herself limp out of the alley, clutching the side of the buildings with one hand as she tried to make her way back home, choking back sobs.

James was asleep.

Thank God.

Maybe it had been a tiring day at work, or he had fallen asleep waiting for her, but she didn't care. She didn't want him to see her like this.

Clara turned on the shower quietly, doing her best to strip without agitating her wounds. She stepped in and slowly washed off her legs, watching blood and semen swirl and disappear down the drain. She tried to wash out her cunt, but the sensitive, bloody flesh sparked with pain and she hissed, hunching over.

She stood in the cool shower, still and watching the water pool around her feet. She could still feel the hard grip of his hands around her thighs, and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

She pulled her hair out of its bun and let the water soak her dark strands, desperate to cleanse herself completely. The wet locks were plastered against her sore back, which had been rubbed raw against the brick, and the chill of the water somewhat soothed her bruises. She tilted her head up to wash her lips and opened her mouth, still tasting the alcohol and smoke of his tongue against hers.

She remembered the harsh look in his eyes, and curled in on herself, water dripping off her lashes for a long time.

Clara examined herself in the mirror, and realized how teary and bloodshot her grey eyes were, her lips red and swollen. She patted a towel over her waves, getting rid of some of the water, before giving up. She didn't bother trying to put on underwear - she ached too badly, and every faint brush against her cunt caused pain to spike into her hips.

Instead, she just pulled on a soft, long nightgown, her wet hair over her shoulders, and let out a shaky breath. *Just go to bed*, she told herself, trying to stop the tremble of her lips, *just go to bed and don't let him know*.

When she opened the door, James had rolled over on his side, his eyes opening blearily and meeting hers. He gave a sleepy smile. "There you are." He held out his hand and gestured for her to come to bed, and Clara felt her heart swell with sorrow. She couldn't tell him, she just couldn't - he was so happy to see her, and he would hate her if he knew.

She barely managed to climb into bed without screaming as pain flared between her legs, and laid on her back, gently stroking her husband's cheek. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

He nuzzled closer to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I'm sorry I fell asleep before you came home, work was exhausting today." He pressed soft, sweet kisses against her neck, pushing her wet hair away. "So? How was the interview?"

"She...she said I was welcome to start next Monday," Clara murmured, trying to force a smile on her face. She was so glad the room was dark - she didn't want him to see how much she had been crying.

James grinned widely, planting a kiss on her jaw. "That's wonderful, sweetheart!" His exhaustion seemed to have been forgotten as he pushed himself up onto his forearms and softly pressed his lips against hers. Clara shivered, suddenly scared he'd taste the other man on her lips.

He gently pulled at her lower lip, tugged her skirt up slightly, and nudged her legs apart with his knee, making her panic. She pressed against his shoulders hurriedly. "I-I'm sorry, James, I'm really tired. Can we just sleep?"

He rested his forehead against hers, and smiled softly. "Of course, I'm sorry." He pressed one last kiss to her lips, and she felt like crying as he pulled away and slung his arm over her waist. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight..."

She slept fitfully, holding back her tears.

She healed slowly over the next week, and tried to force herself to forget what had happened. She plastered her usual smile on her face whenever James left for work, then took warm showers and wore her loosest underwear. She walked slowly, trying not to agitate the tears, and pretended everything was normal.

James was noticing Clara's change in behavior, though. She pushed away from him while they slept, and refused him every time he tried to initiate intimacy. At first, he was scared he'd upset her, but she avoided his gaze and just mumbled that she wasn't in the mood.

One night, when they went to bed, Clara began to fear that he'd get angry with her if she kept saying no, or that he'd get suspicious, but she was still tender, and needed a few more days to heal. Yet, she didn't want her husband to feel unloved, so she gently placed her hand on his cheek and kissed him deeply. He returned it eagerly, grateful that his wife had stopped avoiding him.

Still, he wanted an explanation, so he pulled away and took her hand off his cheek, rubbing his thumb over her palm. “Is everything alright, Clara?”

“W-what do you mean?” Fear gripped her heart as he met her eyes. “You’ve been distant lately. Did I do something wrong?”

“I haven’t been distant!” His eyes widened at her outburst, and she cringed when she realized what she was doing, so she pulled her hand back and rolled over. “I-I guess I’m just scared about starting my job. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

She felt the mattress dip slightly as James moved closer and gently wrapped his arms around her, pressing kisses to her nape. “It’s alright, you don’t have to be nervous. You’ll do wonderfully, I just know it.”

He rubbed her hip, his other hand drifting upwards to her breast, massaging it gently through her satin nightgown. She gasped at the sensation, and squirmed slightly in his hold, shaking his head. “No, James, I-I really don’t want to.”

She felt him pull away, and a note of frustration entered his voice. “You’re not being honest with me,” he accused, and she sat up in bed, staring at him incredulously. “Yes, I am!”

He sat up and gave her a hard glare. “Oh, you’re nervous about your job? That’s why you never kiss me anymore? Why you can’t even look me in the eye? I suppose it’s nerves that keeps you from treating me like your husband?” His gaze softened slightly, and put his hand over hers. “I know how you act when you’re nervous, Clara. You get even more clingy. You’ll climb into my lap and tell me everything troubling you, so why are you lying to me now? Did I upset you?”

She looked down at her lap. “No, you didn’t.”

“Have you been seeing someone else?”

Her head snapped up and she gawked at him. “No! How could you think that!?”

“What am I *supposed* to think when my wife has been avoiding me for a week?” His voice was pleading. “Just tell me what I can do to help you. I hate seeing you like this.”

Clara covered her face with her hands. “I-I...” She searched desperately for an excuse. She couldn’t tell him what had happened, he would hate her. “I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

Her mind worked rapidly, and she remembered something she had been afraid of when first looking for a job. “I’m afraid that we’ll grow apart because of my work now.”

James raised an eyebrow, but gently pulled her into his arms. “I promise that won’t happen, why would you think that?”

She pressed her face into his chest, guilt climbing up her throat. “I won’t be here when you get home anymore...and I’ll have to make sure my days off line up with yours, and we’ll both be too tired to cook dinner, and-”

Her voice broke and she shook in his embrace. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t pretend she was alright, act like she was fine to start a new job in two days when she felt like throwing up every

time she looked in a mirror.

Still, the truth stuck in her throat, and it was all she could do to keep from breaking down in his arms. He kissed her brow and gently laid them both down, pulling the covers over them.

He didn't say anything, but he rubbed her back gently, and she fell asleep with her face tucked against his neck.

Monday came, and Clara pulled her dark hair into a bun. Her uniform was to be given to her when she arrived, so she grabbed her coat, which she'd made sure to thoroughly clean after that night.

Her vision went blank as she remembered that alley, but she heard James call to her from the living room, and took a deep breath.

She left the bedroom to see her husband smiling widely at her, despite the early hour. "You didn't have to wake up this early for me, sweetie." It was seven in the morning, and he normally didn't wake up for a bit, but his expression was bright as he kissed her. "I have to at least see you off to your first day of work, don't I?"

He helped her put on her coat, and kissed her again, softly. "I'll see you when I get home," he murmured against her lips, and she smiled. "You have a good day at work."

Clara felt good for the first time in a week. She was healed completely, she was starting a new job, and she could focus all her energy into it, making sure to forget about that night.

She'd make it up to James when he got home tonight - she'd pick up something good on her way home, maybe a roast? It was the start of a new chapter of their lives, and she wanted to open it with something a little grand.

She kissed him back eagerly, and they held each other for a moment, before he pulled away with a soft grin. "I don't want to make you late."

He opened the door for her, and she waved to him, blowing him one last kiss before heading off.

Chapter End Notes

This is my first explicit noncon fic, so if it shows, I'm really sorry. I'm trying!

Ain't That a Kick in the Head

Chapter Summary

Clara looks forward to starting her new job and forgetting about what happened to her, but the moment she begins, her luck betrays her once more.

(Ain't That a Kick in the Head by Deana Martin)

TWs: forced oral sex (female receiving) and forced kissing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re a little young, aren’t you?” Mrs. Christopher remarked, looking over how Clara looked in her maid uniform - a deep black dress that went to her knees, with white buttons and white collar.

“I’m twenty-one, miss.”

“Hmph. You should be off at school.”

Clara flushed slightly. She hadn’t been able to afford to go to university, despite her good grades in school. Maybe once she and James had more money, she’d be able to take night courses, though. Excitement bloomed within her, and she stood straight as the housekeeper circled her.

“Come with me.”

The De Luca mansion was incredibly large and opulent, and Clara had to stop herself from gawking as Mrs. Christopher guided her through the halls. “Mr and Mrs. De Luca are usually the most important residents here, but their eldest son has come home from a business trip, so we need extra hands on deck. Do you speak Italian?”

“No ma’am, only French and English.”

Mrs. Christopher hummed. “Perhaps we’ll also have you help the children with their language, then. In any case, you should start learning. The family will like you more.” Clara noticed how frazzled the older woman was. “Now that Master Adriano is engaged, our work has increased tenfold. We may have you do extra work, but not to worry, you will be compensated fairly if that is the case.”

She stopped outside a large pair of dark oak double doors. “This is Master Adriano’s room. You will start your work here every day at nine. He usually leaves for work by then, so do not worry about seeing him; he has a personal maid who brings him breakfast. Afterwards, you will clean the library and foyer along with two other maids. Any questions?”

“No, ma’am.”

"Good. He did not come home last night, so you can start in here early, to get a feel for the work. Just make the bed, organize the drawers, dust where necessary, and arrange the closet. Do not touch anything else, especially not the nightstand."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Christopher gave her an approving nod. "You are obedient, that is good. If you ever run into any members of the household, simply look down. Do not speak unless spoken to, and always announce yourself." Her gaze sharpened slightly. "Do not ever try to eavesdrop. Understand?"

Clara blinked at the severity of her tone, but nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Go on." She opened the doors and gave the young woman a feather duster. "Report to the library by nine, and I shall explain your work there."

She shut the door, and Clara turned, her jaw dropping at the sheer size of the room. The bed could fit at least four people, and she could see the doors to the bathroom and walk-in closet off to the side. The dresser was even taller than her. *Dear God*, she thought, looking around. *Our apartment feels smaller than this room.*

The bed was indeed empty, and the thick covers were messily thrown aside. She decided to start there, and move outwards.

The covers were incredibly heavy, but so soft. Clara and James's bed was comfortable, but she couldn't help but wonder how easy it would be to fall asleep in this one. *Perhaps I'll bring up a better bed to James when we look for a new apartment.*

She made sure to fluff the pillows and turn down the covers, before turning to the dresser. *Now to organize the drawers.*

A basket of clean, folded laundry had been left next to it by the personal maid. Clara carefully arranged everything in the proper drawers, hanging the suits in the closet, and took the basket to the bathroom, placing it next to the hamper.

She picked up the duster, and stared up at the dresser. She stood on her tiptoes, but was still too short to see. *Oh no...*

There was a footstool in the closet. She was loath to misuse anything, but just this once would be okay, right? She could ask Mrs. Christopher for something else to use later - Clara was of average height, but clearly Master Adriano was much taller, given the size of everything in the room.

Still, she decided to start out with the desk, and cleaned off the surface, before grabbing the footstool and stepping onto it. Thankfully, she could now see on top of the dresser, and coughed at the thick layer of dust on it. This man must've been gone for quite a while.

She carefully dusted off the top of it, when she heard the door open.

"You must be the new maid."

She blinked, thinking the voice was familiar. She shook the feeling away and quickly stepped down. "Yes sir, my apologies."

When Clara turned around, her heart stopped.

Adriano De Luca was taking off his tie, not looking at her, but she could see his face so closely, the thick black hair that brushed his neck, the olive skin, the sharp, deep green eyes.

No.

He tossed his waistcoat over the chair, waving his hand at her. "You've done enough, just tell Mrs. Christopher I sent you off early."

The last time she'd been touched by those hands, her wrists had been bruised into purple.

She needed to run, run far away and never return to this house. But she couldn't move, fear keeping her frozen in place.

He looked up from taking off his tie, raising an eyebrow at her. "Well? Did you not hear me?" He was about to turn away, before something stopped him. He looked back at her, scanning her form, his gaze coming to meet her eyes. The moment they did, recognition flashed across his face, and his expression twitched. "You."

The single word sent Clara into overdrive. "I'm so sorry, sir, I'll leave right away—" She practically lunged for the door, but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her backwards so that the backs of her thighs touched the bed.

He was utterly silent as he moved away from her, and she watched, in horror, as he slowly locked the door. When he turned back to her, a cruel smile had spread over his face as he stared at her. She remembered the harsh push of those full lips, and stood stock-still, terrified.

"Isn't this a lovely surprise. I never expected to see you again after our last encounter."

Encounter? Was that what he called it?

"The light suits you better. I'll be the first to admit the alley wasn't the ideal place for it."

Adriano raked his gaze over her again, stopping on her left hand. Her gold-and-diamond ring sparkled in the sunlight. "You're married?"

Clara said nothing, only clutching her hand to her chest, and he chuckled, not taking his eyes off of her. "I understand why you're afraid. I hurt you, after all." His gaze fell to between her thighs, and she trembled.

"But you hurt me too, *tesorina*." She blinked at the unfamiliar word, and he tapped his lower lip, drawing her attention to the slightest pale red cut across the skin. "It healed rather quickly, but it stung for quite a while. Don't you think you should apologize?" He stepped towards her, and Clara's heart leapt into her throat.

"Ahh, don't look so frightened." She couldn't help but notice he seemed to relish her fear. "I promise I don't usually treat women so roughly. You met me at one of my...lower moments." His eyes gleamed as he kept moving towards her, and she could feel herself leaning back, unable to move because of the bed. "Shall I make it up to you?"

She shook her head rapidly, holding up her hands in fear. "P-Please, I'll quit, y-you'll never have to see me again, I promise—"

"Why would I want you to do that? I've missed you, you know." He was right in front of her now, close enough that her breasts brushed against his chest, and took hold of the back of her neck, pulling her head so that she was looking up at him. She whimpered as he stared into her eyes hungrily.

He crushed his lips against hers, and she slammed her fists against his chest, her screams muffled against his mouth. His tongue lapped across her lips, but she kept her mouth shut, struggling against his hold.

His eyes were shut this time, and she felt his free hand slide down to her thigh. He pulled her completely against him and lifted her, throwing her onto the bed easily. The wind was knocked out of her and she gasped as he climbed over her, forcing his lips against hers. His hands quickly started undoing the buttons of her dress, and she squirmed fruitlessly, shoving against his shoulders.

Once he'd fully opened her dress, he pulled back onto his knees and stared at her half-naked form, seemingly entranced. Clara opened her mouth to scream, but his hand wrapped around her ankle and squeezed hard, cutting her shriek off. "If you scream, I'll break it."

She snapped her mouth shut, shaking her head as he rubbed his thumb over her ankle bone, and quivered as he drank in the sight of her body, clad only in a plain white set of underwear. "I did not get to appreciate you properly last time, *tesorina*," Adriano breathed out, his hand coming up to fondle her breast through the fabric of her bra. "I shall make sure to give you pleasure this time."

He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled his undershirt over his head swiftly, making Clara shrink back into the mattress. He was muscular, intimidatingly so, his abdominals clearly defined and his arms thick and veined. He leaned down over her and she turned her head to the side, squeezing her eyes shut. "Let me go, please," she sobbed as she felt his tongue sweep over the hollow of her neck. "I'm married, I don't want this-!"

Her voice cut off into a squeak when he sucked at the delicate skin of her throat, her back arching slightly at the warmth of his mouth against her. Adriano slid his palms underneath her, expertly unfastening her bra and pulling it down her arms. "Ssh," he chided, dipping his tongue between her breasts, making her moan. "Just relax and let me apologize for my behavior."

Clara whimpered as he circled her nipple with his finger, glancing down and seeing his eyes gleam as he watched red creep up her neck. She moaned as he swirled his tongue around her breast and pinched her other nipple. "Ah, no!" She tried to push him away by the shoulders, but he resisted her easily, sucking hard at her nipple and making her bite down on her forearm. His chest was warm against her bare skin, and her knees brushed at his strong waist as she pulled her legs closer.

She tried to pull away from the experience, shaking as Adriano's fingers rubbed under the band of her underwear. But as he traced his lips down her body, she could feel tears pricking her eyes. He sat up on his knees and pulled her legs over his shoulder, gently tugging her underwear off while pressing kisses against her calves. The young man pulled her legs apart, and her heart dropped into her stomach. "Wait, what are you-"

Clara gasped as he knelt between her legs, his breath warm on the inside of her thighs, and slid his tongue over her skin, mere inches from her cunt. She tried to kick her legs out, trying to get away, but his grip was like iron around her thighs as he pushed her legs over his shoulders. She shook at the sight of his smirk and he chuckled at the fear on her face. "Shed your fear, *tesorina*. I want to hear you scream from the pleasure I grant you."

When his mouth lowered to her cunt, Clara let out a strangled cry. His tongue rasped over the sensitive skin, making her moan loudly. "No, no!" She turned her head to the side, clutching the covers between her fists. "I don't want this!" Adriano ignored her pleas, lifting her hips closer and dipping his tongue into her wet folds. He groaned as he fully sealed his lips against her, plunging his tongue as deeply into her as possible.

"Ahn, ah!" Her face tilted up towards the ceiling, and as he thrusted his tongue into her, James's face flashed before her eyes. She sobbed as she thought of her husband, sending her off in the morning with sweet kisses and his ever-present smile, only for her to be ravished by a man she didn't know, who'd already stolen her dignity from her. Tears spilled from her eyes as she imagined what the look on his face would be if he found out. Would he hate her?

"No," Clara cried, praying, begging for him to let her go. "James...!"

She felt Adriano stop moving for a moment, and glanced down to see his face frozen into a stony expression between her thighs. His gaze flicked to her left hand again, to the finger that wore her ring, before it sharpened and he lowered his head once more.

She squealed when his tongue swirled around her clit before he closed his mouth around it, her hands unconsciously burying themselves in his hair. Two of his fingers slipped into her, making her hips jump as he scissored them inside her.

James *never* did it like this, he was always slow and sweet, he smiled when he looked up at her and he never went so roughly. He built her pleasure slowly, made satisfaction pulse through her as he tasted her.

Adriano took her like he wanted her to scream, like his pleasure depended on finding hers. It was overwhelming and she felt as though she couldn't breathe as he sucked harshly at her clit, the bundle of nerves still somewhat sensitive from the first night he had taken her. It was as though her whole body was on fire, and she didn't like it - she wanted her gentle, loving husband, not this rough stranger who took pleasure in watching her cry.

Clara could feel her muscles tightening, sweet agony building up inside her as his fingers reached a spot deep inside her that made her eyes roll to the back of her head. "Ah, w-wait! I-I'm-"

His eyes brightened and he briefly pulled his lips away from her, still working his fingers deeply inside her, even slipping another in. "Look at me, *tesorina*," he growled, watching her chest heave as though he was captivated. "I want to see your eyes when you come on my tongue."

She lifted her head briefly, meeting his gaze through a thick fog of ecstasy and shuddered when she saw the green of his eyes. He smiled and spread his fingers apart as widely as he could, making her scream as she hit her climax more intensely than she ever had. Their eyes were locked onto each other as she came, her pleasure spilling into his mouth, making him groan with satisfaction.

He fucked her with his tongue, drawing out her climax and making her moan loudly. As she started to come down from her high, he cradled her clit in his mouth and sucked hard. Her back arched high and she shook her head wildly. "W-wait, I just-!"

Her words lodged in her throat as Adriano pushed four fingers into her cunt, making her scream. He flexed them inside her, looking for her sweet spot, and the rough stimulation so close after her orgasm made her thighs clench around his head, her hips tensing and her voice breaking as she came again on his fingers.

Clara whimpered as she felt his tongue lap at the sensitive flesh, taking every last drop of her pleasure into his mouth. "You taste incredible, *tesorina*," Adriano moaned against her cunt, making her shake as his voice traveled up her spine. "Like Heaven..."

It was like he was trying to calm her twitching body with his tongue, as he slowly and gently licked at her folds, her inner thighs, stroking her hips with his hands carefully. When he pulled away, sitting up on his knees with her calves around his waist, she could see him drag his tongue over his lips, making a red flush spread through her now sweaty form.

He lowered himself back over her, cradling her cheek in one hand, and she could feel the sweat of his own skin as he pressed his chest against hers.

His hand lowered to her jaw, holding it up. "Open your mouth."

Dazed and exhausted, Clara did so, if only to make sure he didn't hurt her, and he nodded at her obedience. "Good girl."

Her gasp was muffled as he slipped two fingers into her mouth, wet with her own pleasure. "Go on," Adriano murmured, amused at the panic in her eyes. "Suck."

She let out a muffled whimper and closed her lips around his fingers, slowly tracing her tongue over him. He exhaled at the feeling, pushing his fingers in carefully, intent on reaching her throat. "Good," he breathed, watching the expression on her face twitch the deeper he worked his fingers.

She'd never done this before, she'd never tasted *herself*. The feeling of his fingers dipping into her throat was so alien that she didn't know what to think. Tears pricked her eyes the farther he went, and she pushed at his shoulders, moaning around his fingers. He kissed her tears away before dragging his tongue across her cheek. "Well? Do you enjoy how you taste, my darling?"

Clara hummed around his fingers, a pleading look in her eyes for him to stop. He smirked at her expression and whispered into her ear. "Will you kiss me if I let you go?" She let out an affirming whimper, desperate to be released, and he smiled, slowly pulling his fingers out of her mouth. She gasped at the feeling, blushing at how her saliva clung to his fingers.

Adriano barely gave her a moment to breathe before he plunged his tongue between her lips. He buried one hand in her hair, pulling her head back to give him easier access to her mouth. He pulled her leg over his waist, tugging her chest closer against his. Her eyes darted around, looking for a way to escape, but her arms were pinned against his chest.

She felt like something was climbing up her throat, and she tried to imagine the man on top of her as James, her wonderful, loving James, but she couldn't, no matter how hard she tried. Because James was warm and comfortable, and this man wasn't - he was hard edges and rough hands, and the memories of that night came flooding back to her, a sob rising into her mouth.

When he pulled away, she was in tears, and turned her face away as he tried to brush back her hair. "Let me go," she begged, her voice raspy from how much she had exerted it. "Please, I want to go home, don't do this to me again..."

He opened his mouth to answer her, but there was a rattle of the doorknob and loud knocking on his door, followed by a reproachful voice. "Why is this door locked? You were supposed to be in the library half an hour ago!"

Clara froze as Adriano turned his head towards the door, raising an eyebrow. "Well, *tesorina*, looks like we've been found out."

Her eyes went wide as he pulled her up to sit. "N-No." She looked around at how her clothes had been thrown on the floor, and felt fear envelop her at the thought of being found by someone like this, splayed naked across a bed, wetness seeping from between her legs.

She watched Adriano stand up to open the door, and found herself talking before she even realized. "Please."

He stopped and turned around slightly, eying her with a blank expression. Then he smiled slightly, and leaned down to her. "Lie back down."

She stared up at him, confused, but rested her head on the pillow once more. He threw the covers over her upper body, making her yelp, and swept her dress under the bed.

He opened the door and smiled down at Mrs. Christopher, who jumped at the sight of him. "M-Master Adriano! I didn't know you had returned to the house."

"Ah, my apologies, Mrs. Christopher. I would have let you know, but I had a prior engagement."

It was at that moment she realized he was shirtless, and peeked past him to see a pale pair of legs visible from under the covers. She glared up at the young man. "Master, you are to be married within the next year! You cannot keep bringing young women into your bed like this, what if the Bianchis find out about your faithlessness?"

"Forgive me, I had a brief moment of weakness." He grinned at his housekeeper. "You won't reveal my secret, will you? I shall make sure not to repeat my mistake."

Mrs. Christopher shook her head, then sighed. "Very well. Did you happen to see the new maid? I was to train her in the library."

"Ah yes, her." Adriano stroked his chin. "I sent her out to pick some things up for me. Perhaps you could resume her training when she comes back?"

"I suppose. Send her to the kitchen when she returns, if you would."

"I will." He inclined his head back towards the bed. "May I?"

She fixed him with an exasperated stare before curtsying and walking away. He shut the door and turned back to where the young woman lay, noticing the tremble of her legs. He pulled the covers back to reveal her, and she shook under his gaze. "It appears we'll have to part ways sooner than expected."

She leapt up and tried to stand to dress, but her legs buckled under her, her cunt still sensitive from Adriano's ministrations. He caught her in his arms easily, and she clutched his forearms tightly out of reflex. He smiled down at her, and she pushed away from him, terrified of being near him.

He watched her pick up her underwear, sitting down in the armchair by the window. "What is your name, *tesorina*?"

She hurriedly pulled her underwear up her legs, feeling like she was going to throw up. "...Clara."

“Cla-ra.” His tongue curled around her name in a way that made her tremble. “And your family name?”

“Edwards.”

A sinister note entered his voice. “And this James...is your husband?”

Clara froze in the middle of buttoning up her dress and looked up, and when she saw the cruel smile on his face, she reflexively held her left hand to her chest. He stood up and walked towards her, making her step back. “How did he react when you came home with another man’s spend between your thighs?”

“I-I...” Her back hit the wall, and he pressed her into it, rubbing a lock of her hair between his fingers. “What did his face look like when you told him another man had touched you? Tell me, Clara.”

She held up her arms, hanging her head. “I-I didn’t tell him.”

“Oh?” Adriano raised an eyebrow, before lowering his head so that his lips hovered next to her ear. “Why not? I remember how much you cried when I left you on the ground in that alley. Shouldn’t you have run into his arms and sought his comfort?” His hand cupped her waist, and she cringed, curling in on herself when she felt his breath against her neck. “Did you kiss him when he came home? Do you think he tasted me on your lips?”

Clara could feel something dripping down her cheeks, and humiliation flooded her veins. “Just let me go home,” she begged softly, turning her head away when he pressed his nose against her neck. “I-I won’t come back, I swear...s-sir.” She added the title hesitantly, in case respect would make him more lenient, but her heart dropped when she felt him chuckle against her skin.

“Oh *tesorina*, I could never make you do that. I mean, we’ve grown so well acquainted, haven’t we?” He pressed a soft kiss to her nape, before sucking hard on the skin. She squealed, and tried to push his shoulders away, but he was immovable.

He bit down, making Clara yelp, then soothed the hurt with his tongue. He pulled away, and she shoved him off, stumbling in front of the mirror. She whimpered when she saw the blooming red mark on her nape, and Adriano stood behind her, placing his hands on her arms. They looked like some strange, broken couple, as Adriano rubbed his hands up and down, and tears dripped off Clara’s long lashes, her hands over her mouth in horror at the sight of the hickey.

Adriano moved his hand around her, doing up the rest of the buttons on her dress, and murmured to her softly. “I want you coming back here tomorrow, Clara. Do not even *think* of quitting; I’ll find you either way.”

He fastened the last button and released her, and she limped hurriedly to the door, feeling the walls close in on her. She practically slammed the door behind her and ran through the manor, not caring if someone found her. She blindly ran into what seemed like an empty study, and when the bright sunlight of midmorning fell over her, she sank to her knees in front of one of the windows, and began to cry.

This chapter and the last were pre-written. And I'd just like to let you all know that it took me five straight hours to write the... kitty scene.

So, I really hope you enjoyed!

Everybody Loves Somebody

Chapter Summary

Clara tries to rationalize quitting her job and never coming back to the manor, but Adriano's threat sticks deeply in her mind as she struggles through the rest of the day. In the mean time, James tries to find a solution to his wife's apparent sadness.

Everybody Loves Somebody by Dean Martin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Michele noticed almost immediately.

Adriano had shown up to the room as usual, not a single hair out of place, as usual. He'd changed out of his old suit and into a new one, and despite having been up nearly the whole night, he looked quite fresh-faced, as though he'd gotten a full night's sleep.

Well, that wasn't strange. Adriano had been like that since they were children - always immaculate and presentable, a master of hiding whatever he truly felt.

But Michele noticed. While his leader examined the man slumped in the chair before them, he scrutinized *him* instead. There was something about his demeanor, the smallest thing that made the young man take a minute and stare. What was it?

It was then that it occurred to him. "Who was she?"

Adriano looked up from the man's broken fingers. "Hmm?"

Michele crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow. "Who'd you sleep with?"

His friend chuckled, straightening up. "A lovely young woman."

"Married?"

"Naturally."

Michele shook his head. "Your father will kill you."

"He could, but that would leave Giovanni as the next leader." Adriano stroked his chin as he met the eyes of his right hand man. "When was the last time you fucked anyone, Mick?"

"We're not having this conversation."

"Shall I find someone for you?"

Michele decidedly did not like the gleam in Adriano's eyes - he wasn't stupid enough to believe the man could ever be wholly benevolent. "I don't need anyone."

I don't need to give you anymore leverage.

"Mm. If you insist. But I can't always be generous enough to let you join my escapades." Adriano slapped his friend's back, turning back to the man tied to the chair. "Wouldn't you agree, Joseph? A man needs his own woman every now and then, don't you think?"

The man muttered something under his breath that made Michele's eyes sharpen, and he walked around him to yank his head up. "Say it clearly."

Blood dribbled down his chin, but he coughed and stared at Adriano hatefully. "Fucking faggot."

The young man smiled in that way that always made the hairs on the back of Michele's neck stand up. His gaze flicked to Michele, who took the cue and swiftly gripped another one of Joseph's fingers and twisted harshly, savoring the sharp crack of bone as the man screamed.

"Tsk, tsk. Saying everything but what we want to know is going to leave you destitute, Joe." Adriano squatted so that he was at eye level with him, and twirled his switchblade between his fingers, never letting his gaze leave the man's face. "My man here has already broken seven of your fingers. You'll never be able to work again."

"Fuck you."

Adriano casually scraped under his already manicured nails. "Maybe I'll pay your daughter a visit instead."

Joseph's eyes went wide. "No."

"Oh yes. She's...what, seventeen now?"

Michele knew what he was doing, but played along. "Fifteen."

"Ah yes, fifteen. That's old enough to start working, don't you think?" Adriano cocked his head to the side, smiling at Joseph. "At this rate, you'll have to rely on her to make a living for you. So humor us, hmm?"

Michele could hear the man's breathing picking up. But he kept silent, and the enforcer shook his head. *Stupid, loyal man.*

"Still nothing?" Adriano sighed and stood up, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, I suppose I have to thank you. It's been a while since I've gotten my hands dirty."

Michele watched him flick his blade open and closed, over and over, and held Joseph's head up by his hair. Something occurred to him, and he groaned.

He hadn't had breakfast yet.

Nicholas watched how slowly James picked at his food, frowning. "What's wrong?"

“Huh? What? Nothing’s wrong.”

“Right....you’ve been staring at that sandwich for at least twenty minutes. Should I give you two some time alone?”

He expected James to give him the dead eyed, unamused look that he’d mastered in high school, but instead, his expression barely changed. “I’m just worried about Clara.”

“You’re not fighting, are you?”

“No, no it’s nothing like that.” He sighed and sat back in his chair. “She’s been so scared about her new job and she’s sad all the time...” He sat up, his eyes widening. “What if she wants to leave me!?”

Nicholas rolled his eyes, making James fume. “This is serious, Nick!”

“James, you’ve been scared of Clara leaving you since you met her.” Nick wiped off his fingers with his handkerchief. “And every single time you get scared, you’re fine the next day. I’m sure she’s just having those ‘first job’ fears.”

“But this is different, Nick! She barely looks me in the eye and it feels like she’s been avoiding me.”

“That bad at it, huh?”

“Bad at-“ James’s eyes went wide and he felt the urge to flip the table onto his former classmate. “That’s not it!”

He chuckled, but when he saw the disheartened expression on his friend’s face, his smile melted away. He leaned forward. “Alright, alright, I’ll tell you what. You two should come over for dinner tomorrow night.”

“I can’t put you and Ella out like that-“

Nick waved him off. “It’s fine, they haven’t seen each other in a bit, have they? Besides, I’m sure Clara just needs some time with friends. After a week at her job and some support, she’ll be back to normal before you know it.”

He could see that James didn’t look very convinced, but he nodded. “Alright. Thanks, Nick.”

“Any time.” Nick straightened his coat and wiped his mouth. “Who is she working for, again?”

James refolded his own handkerchief and tucked it back into his pocket. “She was hired as a maid for the De Luca family.”

He looked up and caught how Nick’s fist clenched on the edge of the table. “What is it?”

His friend’s smile was relaxed in an almost forced way. “Nothing, I just thought I forgot something.”

“Oh?” James raised an eyebrow as his friend stood up and pushed his chair in. “Does the family have some checkered past I should be aware of?” he asked teasingly, and Nick chuckled drily. “Nothing like that.”

"Well, whatever you say. You're the policeman." He stood up as well, and seeing that Nick was still quiet, frowned. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, yes, everything's fine." He massaged his temples. "Just wondering about Ella."

"You said your neighbor is looking after her, right? I'm sure she's okay."

Nick opened his eyes and forced a calm expression on his face. "You're right, you're right..."

James could still tell that his friend was worried, and slapped him hard on the back. "Weren't you just lecturing me about worrying too much?"

Nick smiled weakly. "I know. I guess I can't help it."

Guilt seeped through him as he watched his friend grin at him and get ready to say goodbye.

He prayed that Clara wasn't hurt or scared.

She must be alright , he thought desperately, she's just a maid. No one should care...

Clara's head had begun to ache badly, after several minutes of sobbing, sunlight shining directly into her face.

She'd wrapped herself in one of the curtains, leaning back against the wall, her throat feeling raw from everything that had happened. Agony pulsed in her brain, and her weeping had quieted into soft, shuddering gasps. Her nails had dug so deeply into the thick fabric of the curtains that when she unclenched her hands, her fingers were aching.

She pressed her hands against her eyes, her tears having dried and blurring her vision slightly.

She had to quit. She needed to go find Mrs. Christopher and come up with some excuse to leave.

I'll find you either way.

Clara felt something crawl up her spine as she remembered the look in his eyes. What did that even mean? The De Lucas were certainly wealthy, and very well-respected, but that didn't mean they could just get a hold of her address, did it? That was private information, and she was just a maid. He...he couldn't do anything to find her, could he?

Domizio De Luca was a manufacturing CEO. An influential one, certainly, but that didn't necessarily mean his son could spend time and resources finding a maid who quit on her first day.

Clara slowly straightened out her legs, shakily standing up. The antique clock next to the large desk read that it was ten-thirty. How long had she been in here? Half an hour? An hour? She had to go to the kitchen...

She remained frozen in place, though, her arms wrapped around herself. The mark on her neck felt like it was burning under her dress. A part of her was telling her to run all the way back home and look for a different job - no, to never leave her apartment again. She didn't want a single person to ever look at her, not after what Adriano had done.

She felt like a failure, somehow. Her parents had spent their money to send her here from France and she already had to quit her first job. She'd married her highschool sweetheart only to let herself get attacked like this. She wanted to sink into the floor and never come back.

Clara, ma fille, just tell us if you want to come back home. We do not want you to be scared in New York.

The thought of her parents cooing and crying over her made her sick to her stomach. No! She hadn't gone to an esteemed American private school just to go running back to Barfleur because of her weakness. She'd sworn after her wedding that she wouldn't rely on them again - she wanted to carve her own place in the world, she wanted a family with her husband.

She wiped furiously at her eyes, forcing the lump in her throat down. *I must look terrible*. Her purse was down in the rooms near the kitchens - she could at least make herself look presentable before going to see Mrs. Christopher.

Clara tried to straighten out her hair, but without a mirror in the study, it was difficult to tell if she was actually doing anything. She decided that it would be better to go find a bathroom, maybe wash her face, so that she didn't wander about her place of employment looking like a ghoul.

She slowly opened the door to the study, and finding no one in the hallway, she hurried down to the kitchens silently, hunching her shoulders and crossing her arms over chest.

When she did eventually reach the kitchens, she could hear Mrs. Christopher ordering around some of the cooks, and carefully approached. "Mrs. Christopher?"

The older woman turned around and frowned when she saw Clara's expression. "Good lord, girl! What happened to you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I--"

"No, I don't need to hear it." She waved her off and pointed towards a door a little bit away. "Go freshen yourself up, you look horrible."

"A-Alright."

The young woman went into the washroom and splashed cool water onto her face.

When she looked up at the mirror, he was behind her again, rubbing his hands up and down her arms and smiling widely. She could almost feel his cock pressing against her as the image leaned even closer to her, the mark he left on her neck prickling.

She stumbled to the toilet and heaved, her throat burning as her breakfast came back up.

The rest of her day went by strangely quietly.

Mrs. Christopher trained her in cleaning the library and the foyer, and she met a few other maids and workers whose names she promptly forgot, too wrapped up in her thoughts to properly register anyone else.

Clara jumped at every noise and was constantly glancing around, terrified that she'd catch sight of those deep green eyes again, and her legs would lock in place once more.

Around the time she was to eat lunch, she instead felt her stomach shrink to the size of a marble, and her food went untouched. Her energy had left her almost entirely, and it felt like she was moving through syrup for the whole day.

She told herself that tomorrow, she would quit - she would just tell Mrs. Christopher that she no longer needed the job, or that it wasn't right for her.

A part of her felt a little ashamed, especially watching the older woman bustle around, her stress levels skyrocketing.

But then she would remember that bedroom, and her wedding ring felt like it was tightening around her finger the more she thought about Adriano. She tried to force herself to get through the day and at least not disappoint her employer for now.

She'd discuss quitting with James when she got home. He wouldn't be angry, right? No, James was so understanding, he'd be alright, and she could find another job....

...at least, that was what she tried to tell herself. After today, she never wanted to leave her home ever again. She was seeing Adriano in every reflective surface, always standing behind her and holding her the way he had before he'd let her go. She kept finding herself dragging her nails up and down her arms, desperate to get rid of the ghost of his hands on her, leaving the skin scratched and raw by the end of the day - she barely managed to stop before drawing blood, and quickly pulled on her coat to make sure Mrs. Christopher didn't see the marks.

The older woman bid her a good night, and Clara gathered her things together, intent on finding a cab before it got too late in the evening.

She was rifling through her purse to find her wallet, walking around the front of the mansion, when she heard someone call out to her.

"Clara!"

She blinked and looked up, confused. "J-James?" Her husband was standing in front of a cab, holding a bouquet of soft pink roses. He was smiling so brightly that her heart felt like it was tearing itself into pieces. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to pick you up!"

The full weight of her exhaustion hit her as she stared at him, and she ran into his arms, tears threatening to spill over once more. He embraced her tightly, confused but content.

Neither one of the pair noticed the dark pair of eyes watching absentmindedly from one of the windows.

Michele exhaled, the plume of smoke clouding his vision momentarily as he focused on the young couple outside the manor. He watched as the woman pulled back, unable to see her expression as her husband held up the flowers. He had an idiotic smile on his face that sparked envy in the enforcer's heart. The idea of there being men who could so carelessly buy the woman they love flowers, not a fear in the world...it was both aggravating and saddening.

Michele had always had a penchant for imagining people's lives. He wondered if the couple would go home together and spend their evening in each other's company. Did they have a nightly routine? Would the wife cook dinner and they would both relax on the couch? Did they go to bed early or stay up late?

He watched the man open the cab door for his wife before slipping in after, and as the car drove away, he felt a familiar pang of longing. Such acts of normalcy cut deeply for someone like him.

"Michele."

The young man looked up to see Adriano heading towards him, his leather shoes clicking against the hallway floor.

His expression dulled as his boss approached him. "What is it?"

He was talking, and although Michele was paying attention, some far off corner of his mind was still thinking about that bouquet of pink roses, and if that woman had been happy to receive them.

Chapter End Notes

we've met a couple new characters this chapter! I hope you guys are enjoying so far! Sorry, this chapter was comparatively more tame. I want to set a few more things up before we get back to the spicy things, though, so just bear with me! Thanks for reading!

P.S. if you want to see Clara's wedding ring, take a look at the latest post on my Tumblr,
11daysofapocalypse

Mack the Knife

Chapter Summary

After a day spent in fear and pain, Clara tries to retreat to the safety of her husband's arms, only to find her guilt holding her back. She finds a glimmer of hope in her friend Nick, and returns to work the next day, intending for it to be her last at the De Luca manor. However, she discovers something suspicious in the library, and meets a man intent on making sure she never returns to the manor...

(Mack the Knife by Bobby Darin)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“James! Hey, James!”

The young man looked up from his work to see Ella approaching, with a girl he didn’t know behind her. He put his book on the ground and stood up. “Yeah? What is it?”

She tugged the girl forward. “This is my new roommate, Clara Gardinier. She just transferred from Barfleur in France!”

James felt a slight flush on his neck when he looked at her. She was a head shorter than him, with long, wavy black hair and bright grey eyes. She smiled up at him, and he swallowed, barely hearing Ella.

“I’m introducing her to everyone, so be nice to her.” She wagged her finger at him teasingly and he blushed. “Of course I will, what do you take me for?” He turned back to Clara, holding out his hand. “I’m-“

His voice shut off when she leaned closer, standing on her tiptoes. Her lips brushed gently against his cheek, then again on his other cheek.

What.

She leaned back and smiled at him. “It’s lovely to meet you.” Her voice was soft and lilting, slightly accented, and he was sure that his face was tomato red now.

“I-I’m James Edwards,” he stuttered, his hand dropping back to his side. “I-It’s a pleasure.”

Ella squinted at him knowingly, then took Clara’s hand. “It’s almost lunchtime. Will you join us, James?”

“Oh uh...okay.”

“Great!” She pulled Clara away, and James grabbed his things and followed hesitantly, his eyes darting to and away from the girl.

What just happened.

Had a cute girl just... kissed him? Him? James had never been popular with girls; he barely even had friends.

Had he changed? Was something different about him? Was he considered attractive in France?

They all sat at one of the outdoor picnic tables, and the young man found his eyes glued to Clara.

She was so...bright and happy when she talked to Ella. Were her eyes sparkling? He was pretty sure they were. She seemed so excited to be spending time with them.

James was red the whole evening, even when they waved goodbye.

James was sitting on his bed, deep in thought. Nicholas stared at him, concerned. “Are you alright? You’ve been sitting like that for a while.”

“Nick, am I attractive?”

“Huh?”

He saw that his friend was serious, and scratched his head, confused. “Yeah, I suppose. Why?”

James stared at his lap. “Is there anything about me that girls would like?”

“Is this a roundabout way of saying you want a girlfriend?”

His friend looked up at him, and Nicholas started at how intense he looked. “I met a new girl today. Clara Gardinier.”

“Oh, Ella’s new roommate? Yeah, she’s pretty cute.”

James exhaled slowly. “She kissed me.”

Nick’s eyes bugged out of his head. “Wait, really!?”

“Yeah, on the cheek.”

Nick blinked. “Wait. Both cheeks?”

James looked at him. “Uh-huh.”

His friend rubbed the back of his neck and sat next to him. “I hate to break it to you, but that’s a French custom.”

James’s face froze. “Huh?”

“That’s how French people greet each other. She kissed me, too.”

He watched his friend stay still for what seemed like forever, before slowly lying back on his bed. He grabbed a pillow and pressed it over his face. “DAMMIT!”

Ella watched her new friend get ready for bed. “Hey, Clara?”

“Yes?”

“You know, people don’t kiss each other in America.”

Clara froze in the middle of brushing her hair. “What?”

Ella giggled. “Yeah, we don’t say hello like that. We just give handshakes.”

“But-! I-!” Clara covered her face in embarrassment. “Oh no! And I kissed both of your friends! Why did you not tell me!?”

Her friend gave her a comforting hug. “It’s alright! I’m sure they thought it was cute!”

The young girl wilted. “No wonder your friend James could not look me in the eye the rest of the day. Do you think he hates me!?”

Ella raised an eyebrow, recalling the aggressive flush taking over James’s face the whole day. “Trust me, he does not hate you.”

James watched how Clara absentmindedly traced the petals of one of the roses, her eyes somewhat blank. “Sweetheart?”

After a moment, she blinked and looked up at him. “Y-Yes?”

“Is everything alright? Was work tiring?”

“Oh...” she glanced back down at the roses, and he caught a glimpse of several emotions warring in her expression before she answered. “It was fine. More of what I already do, I suppose.”

James was fairly sure that cleaning a tiny apartment and a large mansion were two vastly different things, but he could see that his wife was in no mood to discuss it, so he gently put his arm around her and stayed quiet as the cab drove down the street towards the apartment.

When they arrived and James handed the driver a couple of bills, he was slightly surprised to see Clara practically running inside.

“Clara?” He followed her and she jumped. “What’s wrong? You’re being fidgety.”

“I-I...” She smiled tremulously, although she was avoiding his gaze. “I’m sorry. I just...starting this job is a little overwhelming. I’m just glad to be back home.”

“Was it that stressful? Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, James, I promise.” She turned around quickly. “I-I’m going to go find a vase to put these in.”

"Alright..." He frowned as she quickly went into the kitchen. He scratched his cheek, trying to think of how to put her at ease. He called after her. "Do you want me to draw a warm bath for you?"

She was probably just really tired. People were often irritable or jumpy when they were tired, right?

She poked her head out of the kitchen, and he noticed that her lip seemed to be quivering slightly. "That would be lovely, sweetie. Thank you. I'll make dinner once I'm done."

"I can do it. You should rest." James's brow furrowed as he looked her over. "Aren't you going to take off your coat?"

Clara looked startled. "O-Oh, um..." She looked away from him. "It just slipped my mind. I'll take it off and put it in the laundry."

Didn't she just clean it only a few days ago?

Maybe he was worrying too much. But still, the way she was acting was concerning. "Well...alright then. I'll go get the bath ready for you."

She nodded, still not completely meeting his eyes, and he turned away, frowning.

The water was warm and smelled sweet - James must have added something to it to help her wind down.

He'd waved off her protests about dinner and gently kissed her forehead before pushing her towards the bathroom. *You just relax*, he'd said, with his ever present smile, *and I'll take care of everything.*

She felt miserable as she undressed, his kindness only making her guilt worse. When she eyed the shallow scratches on her upper arms, and the deep red, near purple hickey on her nape, her throat tightened.

The scratches faded easily in the bath, although they stung slightly, but she knew that there was no way to make sure the love mark would be gone by tomorrow. She'd have to wear high-collared dresses and nightgowns for a while.

After what had happened that night, Clara had felt like she was being forced to hide from her husband, in her own home. Like she would have to shut herself away in order to make sure she didn't hurt him, to make sure he didn't know about how his wife had been ripped apart on her way home. She had been so sure that she would be able to move on after a little bit, after starting this job.

But now she felt even worse. With the way Adriano had attacked her today, she was left dirty and disgusting. She slid even deeper into the bath, trembling. *I could have fought harder. I could have gotten away. I could have...*

She swallowed thickly before scrubbing at her skin as hard as she could. The scratches on her arms burned in protest, but she ignored it, desperate to clean herself of his touch, of that mansion. If she had to shed her whole skin then she would.

How could she bring up quitting to James without sounding pathetic? She knew how it would look - his poor, weak little wife was too delicate to actually contribute, and he'd have to earn them a new house all on his own. But she never wanted to tell him the truth. She didn't want to imagine what his expression would be.

Clara curled her legs against her chest, resting her chin on her knees. She realized that her fingers had become pruny, and the bath had cooled off. She wiped at her face, quivering, before standing up and stepping out of the tub.

She'd made sure to bring her clothes into the bathroom, so that James wouldn't see the marks left on her skin. The thought of him seeing the hickey on her neck was horrifying.

She did her best to ignore the way her reflection looked at her in disgust.

Clara had taken quite a while in the bath, but James was thankful for the extra time. He'd just managed to finish setting everything up by the time she came out of the bedroom in a simple dress. She stared at the table, eyes wide. "Bouillabaisse?"

"I made it earlier. Your mother taught me your favorite foods for occasions like this." He grinned widely. "I thought you might like it in celebration of your new job." His brow furrowed slightly as he stared at her dress, with its long sleeves and high collar. "Are you sure you're not hot in that?"

"O-Oh, I'm alright." She fiddled with the sleeves. "The fabric is light, so..."

"Well, if you're sure." He pulled her chair out for her, and felt relief sweep over him as an amused giggle escaped Clara's lips. *There we go.* It felt like it had been ages since she'd sounded so carefree.

She sat down and looked up at him sweetly. "It feels like we're back in school."

James felt a flush in his cheeks. He'd taken to pulling out Clara's chair for her almost all the time to try and seem like a gentleman to her. The habit had extinguished somewhat after marriage, but it was still a nice memory, the type that couples knew was unimportant but were fond of anyway.

He sat down and as Clara lifted her spoon, he suddenly felt nervous. "Wait!"

She blinked and looked up at him. "What is it?"

"J-Just try a little bit first. In case it's bad."

"Sweetie, it looks perfectly fine." Seeing that he was insistent, she tasted a small spoonful, and smiled at him. "It's delicious."

James exhaled gratefully. "Thank God."

"You didn't have to be so scared."

"Well, I'd never forgive myself if I completely ruined your favorite food." Some of his stress dissipated, and for a moment, the two were silent as they ate. "What was work like?"

He saw his wife's expression freeze for a moment, her eyes flicking up to him. "It was...fine. Nothing much happened, Mrs. Christopher just showed me what my days would be like." Clara lifted her wine glass to her lips, as though finishing the conversation.

"Did you meet any of the family members?"

Her grip on the glass tightened for a moment. "N-No, not yet."

"Oh..." He remembered his lunch with Nick earlier. "Ah, I forgot to tell you! Nick and Ella invited us for dinner tomorrow night."

She looked up, surprised. "Really?"

He smiled at her. "Yes. It's been a while since we've all spent time together, and now we have something to celebrate."

Clara suddenly looked stressed, and he frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I-I have to make something to bring! But I'm not sure if we have the right ingredients, should I go shopping!"

"Sweetheart, calm down! I'm sure they'll be fine if you don't bring anything, it's not like this is a planned dinner party."

Some of the tension in Clara's muscles released, and she sighed. "I just feel guilty, not bringing anything...I can't put all that on Ella, not now..."

James took her hand gently. "If you're that worried, I'll go get something after work tomorrow. Just relax and don't stress yourself out."

"Alright..." She looked slightly mollified, before remembering something. "H-How is Nick's work?"

"Oh, he says it's going well. He might be promoted this year."

"Really? That's wonderful." James glanced up at his wife, noticing a sort of relief in her face. It looked as though a type of burden had lifted off her shoulders.

Clara seemed a bit more relaxed for the rest of dinner, although she kept her eyes focused on her plate.

She could feel James's steady breathing stir her hair from behind, and although the moon was high above New York, she couldn't sleep.

Her hand was tightly gripping his forearm, the feeling of him holding her both comforting and terrifying.

She'd lost her nerve at dinner, unable to tell him she wanted to quit. Clara could picture out his reaction perfectly: *But Clara, YOU were the one who wanted to get a job. Was this one really that horrible? Did something happen?*

And then when she wouldn't be able to answer, he'd never forget it, and he'd be wondering what happened that day for a long time.

She remembered the dinner at Nick and Ella's house tomorrow, and shifted slightly as she considered it. *Nick has been a cop for almost five years now...maybe he could help?* The idea of trying to tell some faceless policeman what had been done to her made her feel sick. Even mentioning it to Nick felt like a bad idea. But he was her friend, and like an older brother to her - Clara was sure that he would be able to do something, anything. Tell her what to do. Help her quit. Anything.

Her eyelids were starting to get heavy, but going to sleep scared her. She could still see Adriano's smile, feel the way his hands ripped her peace away. *I have to go back tomorrow.*

The day's exhaustion won out over her fear, and she fell into an uneasy sleep, full of emerald-eyed wolves lurking around every corner of her mind.

Every step closer to the De Luca mansion felt like a death march. Clara's limbs felt heavy, and while her dread kept her mind sharp, parts of her consciousness were going fuzzy from the limited sleep she'd gotten the previous night.

That morning, she'd been shaking the whole time she prepared breakfast, and when James had pulled her into a goodbye kiss, she'd felt herself locking up, almost unable to return it. All she could think of was Adriano pushing his tongue past her lips, his palms massaging her breasts slowly as he stripped her dignity away, piece by piece.

Clara was surprised when Mrs. Christopher opened the door for her. "Oh good, you're here." The older woman pulled her into the house quickly. "Your work will be a bit different today."

"O-oh. How so?"

"You won't have to see to Master Adriano's room for today. I'll need you in the library." She looked stressed as she directed Clara through the halls. "The children snuck in in the middle of the night to draw, and Master Domizio needs it tidy before noon."

Clara felt the smallest bit of relief at the fact that she wouldn't have to enter that room again, although it passed quickly. As long as she was in the mansion, he could find her. "They didn't draw on the walls, did they?" she asked, trying to distract herself.

"Oh no, nothing like that. They are far too well-behaved for that. But they pulled out several books and their drawing things are all around the library." As they reached the doors, Mrs. Christopher looked apologetic. "Unfortunately, the other maids are busy with further cleaning, but if I can, I'll send one along to help you."

"You don't have to worry about me, ma'am." Clara felt bad for the woman, and tried to assuage her worries. "I can do this on my own."

Mrs. Christopher exhaled, looking slightly relieved. "You're a godsend, dear. Thank you." Clara smiled tremulously in return, and as she watched her walk away, she felt dread creep through her veins once more. *Is he in the mansion? Why did she tell me I didn't have to clean his room?*

These questions faded away as she entered the library, her eyes widening as she remembered the grandness of the room. There were two floors of books, and a massive stone fireplace and two armchairs sat in the middle of it all. Off to the side, there was a large table with several chairs, and she could see numerous papers, crayons, and pencils strewn all over it. The rug in front of the fireplace also had many papers lying on it.

She knelt on the floor to pick everything up, and couldn't help the small smile spreading over her face as she stared at the drawings. Childish renditions of flowers, houses, and people greeted her, reminding her of when she used to babysit for her neighbors back in Barfleur.

Throwing the pictures out felt cruel, so she gathered them in a neat stack, wondering if Mrs. Christopher would let her return them.

She paused at one picture - two little stick figures in front of a large, blocky house. A small girl with dark hair and eyes was holding hands with a much taller man, with matching hair...and deep green eyes.

He was in several other drawings, always identifiable by his large stature and bright eyes. The children - *his siblings*, she thought, shaking - clearly adored him, his presence in so many pictures, everyone's faces adorned with large smiles.

The air was stolen from her lungs as the realization hit her, something that was so obvious, yet had been forgotten by her - Adriano's *family* lived here.

It was almost impossible to look at these sweet, childish depictions of her attacker, and she flipped the papers over, feeling her breathing starting to speed up. She pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes, trying desperately to calm down.

Clara could sense that familiar, sinking feeling, and shakily stood up, holding the drawings in trembling hands. "The table," she said out loud, attempting to focus. "I still need to clear the table."

This time, she avoided looking at the pictures for too long as she gathered them. She collected the crayons and pencils and placed them in their boxes, slowing her breathing as much as she could.

Soon, everything was placed in a neat stack at the corner of the table. Clara could see several stray books lying amongst the shelves, where the children had pulled them out. Some of them were open, pencils and strips of paper stuck between the pages.

When the young woman picked the books up, she couldn't help but be amused. Titles like *Moby Dick* and *Anna Karenina* stared up at her from the spines, and she imagined the young children trying to make sense of the novels for whatever strange reasons of their own.

Eventually, all of the books were put back in the correct spots, and all of the children's drawing supplies had been found and placed together.

Clara decided to double check the thick rug in front of the fireplace, in case any pieces of crayon had been tangled in its fibers. As she sifted through the rug's material on her hands and knees, her nail clicked against something small and metallic. She carefully untangled it from the rug, and stared at the little shard, confused. It looked like it had been part of something cylindrical that had happened to shatter above the rug.

Clara ran her finger over the small grooves on the metal, trying to think of where she had seen them before.

Nick, I'm telling you, I'm horrible at shooting!

The color drained from her face as she realized - *a bullet*. A small piece of shattered ammunition.. tangled in a rug in the house of one of the most respectable men in New York City.

How on Earth did this get here? In the middle of the library of a familial home? There weren't even any rifles or guns on the walls in this room.

She went through the rug again, searching for more fragments, but there were none. Glancing around, her eyes landed on the mantle of the fireplace. Clara stood and examined the cast iron designs inlaid in it, running her fingers over it carefully. One of the pieces felt different than the rest - it had been replaced some time ago. Squinting, the young woman realized that there were small indentations in the stone around the piece.

The bullet hit the inlay, and this piece of it broke off...they replaced the iron but the stone must have also been grazed a little bit.

Well, that explained how the bullet piece ended up in the rug. But she still had no clue as to how or why someone would shoot a bullet in the home of the De Lucas, not to mention go through all the trouble of covering up where it had hit.

She wrapped the shard in her handkerchief and slipped it into the pocket of her dress, her suspicion enough to make her want to find out about it. *Maybe I'll ask Nick about it tonight.*

The clock on the mantle read that it was ten-thirty, and Clara looked over the room once more, ensuring that it was completely clean. She gathered the drawings and supplies in her arms, intending to head down to the kitchens to find Mrs. Christopher.

She turned to the library doors to leave, and jumped as she saw a small girl peeking into the room.
“Oh, hello?”

The little girl looked about seven or eight years old, and she stared at the pile of papers in Clara's arms, still staying behind the door.

Clara recognized her as the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl in some of the pictures. “Are these yours? Would you like them back?”

After a few moments, she nodded, hesitantly stepping into the library. She was wearing a pretty, cream-colored dress, and her chin was tucked resolutely against her collarbone, her hair a curtain around her face.

Clara approached her carefully, noticing her uncertainty, and knelt in front of her to hold out the drawings. The young girl took them and sat down to look through them, her small eyebrows scrunched in concentration.

Clara couldn't help but notice that she looked a little bit down as she separated her drawings from the rest. She mumbled something out to the young woman. “...I'm sorry for making more work for you.”

"Oh, you don't need to apologize, honey." Clara offered a soft smile. "I thought your drawings were really pretty."

"...thank you." The girl seemed a bit happier when she looked up shyly at the maid. She found a paper in the stack and showed it to Clara hesitantly. "This one is my favorite."

Clara's smile froze as she saw that it was the picture of the girl and Adriano, but she forced her nausea down. "It looks beautiful."

This time, the girl really smiled. "It's me and my older brother."

"You're very talented," the maid said softly, swallowing the lump forming in her throat. As the little girl opened her mouth to speak once more, the library doors opened fully behind her.

Clara looked up at the two men standing in the hallway and felt her heart drop to her stomach. Adriano raised an eyebrow as he stared at her, at first not even noticing his little sister. "Ah."

For a moment, there was silence, before he shifted his gaze to his sister. "Viola, you aren't supposed to be out of your room."

The little girl - Viola - seemed to shrink into herself once again. "I wanted my drawings back..."

Clara stood up shakily, looking away from the two, only to find the other man staring at her. His lips were pressed into a thin line as he looked her up and down, and his gaze lingered on her wedding ring. When his eyes met hers, she forced herself to turn away - it was like staring into an abyss.

She glanced down at Viola, who was staring dejectedly at her feet, her drawings held loosely between her fingers. Instinctively, she gently patted the young girl's head, but she only shrunk away even more. When the maid looked up, Adriano was smiling at her - a cruel, knowing expression that made her heart slam loudly in fear. "Viola," he asked softly, never letting his gaze leave Clara's face, "did you make a new friend?"

She seemed hesitant to respond, as though she could not say for sure if Clara was her friend, but the other man spared her from answering. "Perhaps the maid should walk her back to her room." His voice was lower and rougher than Adriano's smooth, polite tone. "Besides, the others will want their things back." He stared pointedly at the rest of the papers and supplies in Clara's arms.

Adriano's gaze narrowed, and the air between him and the man seemed chilly. "You're right, Michele." He knelt and tapped Viola's forehead affectionately. "Viola, if you go and return these to your brothers and sister, and stay in your room like you promised, I'll keep this a secret from Mamma."

She blinked, hopeful. "Do you promise?"

"I swear. Now, go on." He stood up and turned to Clara, who'd been watching their interaction with tense shoulders. "If you could take her back to her room, preferably without being seen." He leaned in to whisper in her ear, making her flinch. "Technically, she's confined to it for the day."

"I-yes, yes, I can do that." He took too long to pull back, but Viola didn't seem to notice, instead taking Clara's hand. "I can show you where it is," she said in a determined tone, tugging the maid

towards the door. She waved to the other man, who was once more staring at Clara, this time with suspicion. "Bye, Michele!"

After a moment, he tore his gaze away, and although he remained expressionless, he gave the girl a small wave. "Goodbye, *gioia* ."

Clara pulled Viola out of the library insistently, closing the door without looking at Adriano's face. She could feel him staring as it shut.

Out in the hall, she took a deep breath, before forcing a smile on her face and turning to Viola. "Well, honey, lead the way."

"You should be careful with what you say, Mick - otherwise you'll have another one of my sisters trying to marry you."

"She is the last person you should have picked," Michele said flatly, ignoring his boss's jibe. "She is too close to everything."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Adriano studiously adjusted the cuffs of his suit, his smug grin showing how little he cared.

"She was terrified of you. She's married. She's your goddamn maid. If you had to fuck someone, you should have just picked someone off the street."

He didn't miss the glint in Adriano's eyes, like some private joke he was keeping secret, but he ignored it. "Fire her and leave it alone now."

"Ah, Michele, you worry too much." He brushed back a loose lock of hair. "I'll be married in half a year and that will be the end of it. Besides, may as well let the poor woman earn something before laying her off"

"The Bianchis could--"

"You are trying my patience, my friend. Don't speak of this any further." His eyes narrowed at the enforcer. "The meeting is in half an hour. I expect you to have abandoned this by then."

Michele's jaw clenched, but he remained silent. Adriano's behavior had been bothering him since that night he suddenly left the bar, his eyes gleaming the same way they did when he held a blade against someone's fingers. When he came back twenty minutes later, his lip was bleeding and his smile was wide.

He had not revealed what he had done or where he had gone. He was not inclined to answer no matter how much Michele interrogated him.

But he was right - there were more pressing matters to attend to. As he watched the clock, he recalled the fear in the woman's eyes, the way her delicate hands trembled as she pulled Viola out of the library. She'd looked away from him almost immediately, but he could tell that she was the woman he had seen the day before.

He remembered her husband and the pink roses, and as he stared at Adriano, whose expression was much too self-satisfied for his liking, he scoffed to himself. *Disappointing.*

Clara found herself almost entirely absent when Viola showed her her room. The canopy bed was covered in fluffy pink blankets, the white dresser crowded with music boxes, plush animals, and cups filled with crayons and pencils. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the room was the impressively large dollhouse sitting in front of the window, as wide as Clara was tall, and separated into several little rooms inhabited by small porcelain figures.

Despite her initial interest, the maid quickly began to tune out Viola's shy yet eager explanations of each of her drawings, her mind instead choosing to focus on what had happened in the library.

I froze. How could I have frozen? Was her body going to lock up every time she caught sight of him? Would she be standing still, crying, while he had his way with her again?

His sister was there, and so was that man - Michele. He wouldn't have done anything....

Her focus drifted to the tall, dark-eyed man, whom she could have sworn suspected something about her. Like he could tell from every expression on her face exactly what she was thinking, what she was feeling. But somehow, he'd seemed intent on getting her out of the library, despite Adriano's clear annoyance with the suggestion.

She jumped when Viola tugged on her hand. "Y-Yes?"

"I said that these belong to my siblings." She held up the rest of the drawings, frowning. "I don't want them."

"Oh, then I'll give them back." Clara offered her a tremulous smile and took the papers, and Viola looked down at her feet, shifting from side to side. "What is it, honey?"

The little girl's voice was quiet, and Clara leaned in closer to hear. "...please don't tell anyone I left my room. I'll get in trouble."

"Why?"

"Mamma was angry at us for going to the library so late, so she said we had to stay in our rooms for the rest of the day." She looked sad as she said it. "I don't want her to know I didn't listen."

Clara nodded and gently patted the young girl's head. "Don't worry, I won't say a word."

Viola looked a little brighter, and she smiled up at the maid. "Can I ask for your name?"

What is your name, tesorina?

"It's Clara," she forced out, waving the dreadful memory from her mind.

"Thank you for giving me my drawings, Miss Clara." Her thank-you sounded rehearsed, as though someone had strictly taught her how to say it. Clara wondered if her 'Mamma' had anything to do with it.

"You're very welcome, honey."

Viola told her what drawings belonged to who and where their rooms were, and Clara slipped the papers under the boys' doors, not wanting to bother the young children.

These are Elio's, Cesare's, and those belong to Carina.

Elio and Cesare's drawings were typical of those of young children, depicting simple houses, dogs, and family.

Carina's art astonished Clara, however - three renditions of the same face, a young woman with sharp cheekbones and thick lashes, her eyes pale green. The girl had made some effort to shade the pictures properly, but had evidently given up, as much of the pictures devolved into angry scribbles and torn paper.

She decided to return them directly, and quietly knocked on the doors to the girl's room. After a few moments, they swung open. The girl standing there looked thirteen, and possessed coppery brown hair, and deep green eyes, the same as her eldest brother. "Yes?"

Before Clara could speak, her eyes landed on the drawings, and her neutral expression melted into annoyance. "Oh." She took the papers out of the maid's hands quickly. "Thank you," she muttered stiffly, before shutting the doors loudly.

Clara stood there, concerned. Did she do something wrong? Did Carina not want her work back?

Maybe she hates for others to see them?

She wondered briefly who the girl in the drawings was, before a voice caught her attention. "Ah, you're Clara, right?"

She turned to see another maid hurrying towards her. "Oh, yes." She vaguely recognized the woman from the day before, one of the many other workers she'd been introduced to and promptly forgotten. "Can I help you?"

"I was told to fetch you for help in the dining room. Follow me."

As the two walked down the hall, Clara prayed that the rest of the day's work would keep her away from Adriano.

I just have to make it through today , she told herself, trying to stay calm and collected. *Then I can talk to Nick...he'll help me....*

Despite the largeness of the mansion, there were only a few other maids besides Clara working. Only certain rooms required their attention, and the senior members of the family had their own personal help when it came to cleaning their rooms.

"Once Master Adriano settles in more, you will most likely be switched out with someone else," Mrs. Christopher had told her. "It will be more efficient for him to be helped by a man. We'll find something else for you to do."

Clara did her best to let her work engulf her, and never let her thoughts wander from whatever was in front of her.

An idle mind is the Devil's playground...and my Devil is here in this house with me .

The sun was beginning to set as evening approached, and she looked up briefly to see the way the sky was colored orange and pink, warmth seeping through the windows to gently envelop her in its comfort.

With any luck, it would be the last view she had out of these windows, before she was able to quit for good. Even Adriano's threats could not discourage her from trying.

She turned away from the view to see a silhouette at the end of the hall. Fear gripped her lungs tightly, and as the figure approached, she realized it was the man from earlier. *Michele* .

His eyes gazed down at her in disdain, and she couldn't help but take a step back as he got close enough for her to make out the way his brows furrowed as he looked at her. She felt like an ant when he stared at her - insignificant, an annoyance.

Something he could crush on a whim.

"I would encourage you," he began slowly, as though he wanted every word burned into her mind, "to find a new job. Staying here has no benefit to you, nor anyone else."

"I...beg pardon?"

"I do not care what relationship you have with Adriano. But whatever it is, neither of you needs it." He stepped closer, and Clara suddenly, for reasons unbeknownst to her, remembered the bullet shard in her pocket.

"I-I think you're mistaken, sir." She avoided his dark eyes, feeling like her words would get caught in her throat if she met them. "There is no relationship."

-he ruined me .

"-I only know him as an employer."

She could tell right away he didn't believe her, and a scream began to build inside of her. It wasn't what he was thinking, it was nothing like that, *Adriano HURT her, he promised that he would keep hurting her-*

"It seems your husband is here to pick you up again."

Clara startled and whipped her head around to the window. The front of the manor was empty, void of any cars or people.

When she turned back to look at Michele, now trembling, he was staring at her silently. His gaze went down to her ring, before slowly traveling the length of her body back to her face. His eyes said it all.

Whore .

He walked past her, and she felt frozen once again. James would be waiting for her in their apartment when she got back home. She'd been lucky today, Adriano not having any chances to touch her again, but what if he had?

Something was clawing its way up her throat, a mixture of fear, disgust with herself, and pure sorrow threatened to overtake her mind. Her arms wrapped around herself as her breathing sped up dangerously. The urge to throw up was rising once more, and she forced it down, trying desperately to calm herself.

Blindly, she dug her nails into her palm until she felt it sting, the pain bringing her back to the present. She was so close, so close to fixing everything. She just needed to get to the dinner, to Nick, to someone she could trust.

Some small, gut feeling told her it wasn't the end, that there was something she was missing, but she ignored it, desperate to rid herself of her guilt, the pure agony she experienced just by being in these halls.

Her day would be ending soon, and she would be headed home. As Clara hurried down to the kitchen to collect her things, she forced herself to forget the contempt on Michele's face, Adriano's cruel smile as his breath brushed over her neck when he leaned in a little too close....

The bullet shard in her pocket felt even heavier, somehow.

Chapter End Notes

I am SO sorry for the two month break, school was actively trying to murder me like one of Adriano and Michele's victims. I tried to make up for it with an extra long chapter (which was actually supposed to be even longer but I cut it in half) so I hope you guys enjoyed!

I'm also really sorry about the lack of an update schedule, but I hate abandoning books, so I promise that that will never happen. Any long gaps between updates are just due to personal stuff and I fully intend to keep writing.

Thanks for reading!

Pledging My Love

Chapter Summary

Clara goes to dinner with her friends, intent on ending her misery, but discovers a shocking truth instead.

Pledging My Love - Johnny Ace

Chapter Notes

Specific warnings for this chapter include: Forced kissing, forced oral sex (male receiving), noncon vaginal fingering, and forced intercourse.

(I've decided to start including chapter specific warnings in order to be more safe, but I do insist that anyone who has any noncon related triggers avoid this book entirely. It's not worth it.)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Ella, I think you’re forgetting that this dinner is only for four people.”

She narrowed her eyes at her husband, and he quickly amended his statement. “Sorry, *five* people, but my point stands.”

“You know what, Nick?”

Oh no.

The young woman set the plate she was carrying down on the table with more force than necessary. “You’re right! I don’t know why I’m stressed or anything, it’s not like you invited our best friends over for dinner, gave me a day’s notice—“

“James said he was going to—“

“*James* would never put *his* wife through this, James would give Clara time and ask her if she’s okay with inviting people over when she’s seven months pregnant—“

Nicholas held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, I admit that I didn’t think this through. I just thought that those two were having a tough time, and I just said whatever came to mind!”

Ella massaged her temples and nodded slowly. “Right, right.” She looked back up at him, worry on her face. “Do you really think this is too much food? It’s just been a while since we’ve seen them and I felt guilty...”

Nicholas folded his arms around her gently. "Yes, I'm sure this is fine. James eats like a horse anyway, and even if we have leftovers, you at least won't have to worry about cooking for a few days." After a moment, he hesitantly spoke up once more. "And you told me last weekend that we should invite them over soon, so—"

"Yes, well, I'd still appreciate some more warning next time." Ella's voice had softened somewhat and she returned his embrace briefly. "Besides, you're the one dealing with the dishes afterwards," she said mischievously.

"I've been doing the dishes for nearly our whole marriage, why would I stop now?"

James had stopped by a bakery after work and bought a large blueberry cheesecake for the dinner at his friends' house. He knew Ella loved Clara's cheesecake and figured that if they couldn't have that exactly, they could at least have something close.

After a moment, he'd bought himself a raspberry tart, intent on remedying the sour mood he'd been left with after work. If he had a nickel for every intern-level assignment he was given...

...well, he'd actually earn more than he was already earning, probably.

His boss, a young man named Dean, seemed perfectly content to reap the rewards of all his underlings' hard work, as well as most of the pay. Every time he dropped another low-level assignment on James's desk, the young man felt like storming into his office and ripping up the framed Yale diploma on his wall.

It took a lot to get James angry, and Dean proved this to be his only notable achievement in life.

He realized that he was squeezing the pastry a little too hard and took a deep breath. He'd be fine. He had an interview at a new company set up next week, one that promised to take him and his degree seriously.

His mind wandered to his wife, and how he might break the news to her if he did get the job. Maybe a new dress? A necklace?

No, that probably wasn't the best idea. She didn't like him spending too much money on her, not since he'd had to break the news to her that his mother had cut him off when he'd told her he was marrying Clara.

He could make dinner again, perhaps? Hmm, no. He'd be doing that much more often, now that Clara also had a job.

If I do well at this interview, she might not need to be working for much longer, though.

Maybe it was selfish of him, but he didn't like to think about Clara working herself to the bone just because of his shitty circumstances. And as a *maid!* It was downright insulting. Clara deserved to be able to relax by herself in a nice house, not pick up after obnoxiously rich trust fund babies.

YOU were an obnoxiously rich trust fund baby, a small voice in his head reminded him, and he frowned.

Well, he was probably being a bit harsh. He knew that the De Lucas were respectable, and he sincerely doubted such a high profile family would mistreat their employees. Yet, he didn't like seeing Clara come home so tired after her first day.

He would get that job, and then he'd convince her to quit. She'd understand; she was his wife and he liked spoiling her. And if she really wanted to work, she could always find something else to do, something that wasn't so...demeaning.

"Maybe Ella's work has some openings..." James mused to himself as he opened the door to his apartment. "Clara?" He called, seeing her coat on the chair. "Did you get home alright?"

She poked her head out of the bedroom and smiled gently at him. "I just got back half an hour ago." Her gaze fell on the box in his hands, and she stepped closer. "What did you buy?"

"A blueberry cheesecake, for dessert. Since Ella loves yours so much."

She took the box and smiled. "Thank you, James. I'm sorry for making you go, I just-"

"-don't want to show up without anything, I know." He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "It's not a problem."

Clara blinked up at him. "You...smell like raspberries."

James covered his mouth quickly. "Ah."

He expected her to chastise him, *we're having dinner with our friends in an hour*, but she just frowned slightly. "Work didn't go well today?"

He kissed her cheek sweetly, his hands coming to settle on her waist. "Everything was fine. I just couldn't help myself."

"...well, alright." She leaned into him at first, but when his lips drifted to her jaw, she jerked her head away. "James! We need to leave soon!"

"What are you talking about? We don't have to be there for nearly an hour." He tugged her closer, his fingers playing with the high collar of her dress - *a high collar again?* - but she pulled away from him. "Clara?"

He thought her shoulders were trembling, and she looked away from him. "Y-You need time to get ready. I'll put this in the icebox for now."

As she hurried into the kitchen, he watched her carefully. "Alright, sweetheart..."

Something gnawed at the back of his mind, but he did his best to ignore it as he went to change.

They were both quiet on the drive over, and Clara felt awful. She'd wanted nothing more than to let James take her into his arms and melt away in his embrace. But the ghost of Adriano's hands remained on her hips, and she was uncomfortably aware of the mark he'd left on her neck. It was too deep in her skin to fade quickly, and every time she moved her head, the fabric of her dress rubbed against it, reminding her of his fingers slipping into her, his arms holding her to the bed as he-

She felt a soft tap on her forearm, and she turned to see James staring at her worriedly. "Are you alright?" he murmured, quiet enough so that the cab driver could not hear. "You're really tense."

"I-I'm fine." She couldn't meet his eyes. "I'm just looking forward to seeing Nick and Ella again."

Her husband looked unconvinced. "Clara...are you sure you want to keep working?"

She blinked, thrown off. "What?"

"Ever since you came back from the interview, you've been acting strange. It's like you're terrified of everything, you're so fidgety." He gently placed his hand over hers. "If you think you would feel better if you quit, it's alright with me."

"It's only been two days, James. I can't quit now," she said defensively. "And I can't just-just make you work all on your own to get us a new apartment--"

"-but I don't mind," he interrupted, his tone becoming firmer. "I don't like seeing you act like this. It feels like working is just making you miserable, and that's not worth being able to buy a new home a little faster."

Clara could feel her throat starting to close up the longer he spoke - like if she tried to say something, she would end up bursting into tears. *No, no...not now!*

"That's not--"

The cab slowed to a stop, and she realized they had reached the apartment building. "Here we are," the driver said, turning back to look at the couple.

Clara immediately opened the car door and got out, not looking at her husband.

"Clara--" James watched her stalk determinedly into the building and grimaced, flicking his wallet open quickly. "Here, thank you." He handed the driver a few bills and the man nodded at him. "Good luck with that one."

James didn't respond, instead hurrying inside after his wife. "Clara-! Clara, slow down and just listen to me!"

She didn't listen, her mind spiraling as she went up the stairs. *That's not it, it's not the job, it's not the job, you don't understand, I can't- I can't tell you why.*

Even knowing that she was hiding the truth from him, Clara still felt upset with his words. She couldn't make him earn all the money for them to start a family, not when he already struggled with his job.

James caught up with her once she reached the door to the Grants' apartment. "Clara, don't just run away from me like that!"

She stared ahead at the door pointedly, her voice still feeling trapped, and he sighed. "Listen, I didn't mean to make you upset. I just don't like seeing you like this."

She still didn't look at him. "Sweetheart?" he murmured weakly, and she swallowed thickly, trying her best to speak.

“I know. I just want to be able to figure this out on my own.”

“But I don’t want to make you do that-“

“*James.* Don’t worry about me, just...let me get used to work, at least. I’ll be okay.” *Just let me speak to Nick...*

“...okay. If that’s what you want.” He knocked on the door, his expression muted, and Clara felt even more guilt seep into her.

Nick opened the door and grinned broadly at them both. “Oh thank God. Ella was two seconds away from panicking and cooking an entirely new menu for tonight.”

“Nick, you can keep things to yourself, you know!” Ella pushed him out of the way. “He’s exaggerating, just ignore him.”

She opened the door wider to let the two in, and Clara pressed a kiss to both of her cheeks as she entered. “It’s so good to see you again, Ella. How’s the baby?”

“Hopefully, worth all the pain he’s putting me through.”

“He?”

Ella smiled thinly. “All the trouble the baby’s causing? Could only be a boy.” She jerked her thumb in Nick’s direction. “Definitely gets it from this one.”

James chuckled, and Nick frowned in mock offense. “So much for always having my back.”

Ella looked down at the box Clara was holding. “Oh, you didn’t have to bring anything!”

Clara blushed. “Well, I didn’t want to put everything on you. It’s blueberry cheesecake.”

“You’re a goddess, honey. I hope you know that.” She took the box out of her hands. “I’ll put this in the kitchen, you both can sit down. Nick has a lovely red for the people who are allowed to drink.” Clara giggled at the way Ella’s tone soured at the mention of alcohol.

Nick gave her a hug as Ella went to the kitchen. “Clara, you’re a vision as always.”

“It’s good to see you again, Nicholas.” She kissed him as well. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“Of course. Congratulations are in order for your first job, after all.”

Clara’s smile wavered at the mention of her work, but she nodded. “Thank you.”

James cleared his throat, drawing his friend’s attention. “I’ll have a glass of that wine, Nick, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sure thing.” He led them both to the dining room and grabbed some glasses out of the nearby cabinet. “How about you, Clara?”

“I’ll have whatever Ella has to drink. I don’t want her to feel left out.”

“Sparkling cider it is.”

“Wait, the kid just ran?”

“Yeah, it surprised me too. Beaten bloody and he still got away from me. Didn’t manage to catch any of the others, either.” Nick sighed slightly. “It’s a rough neighborhood, but it still surprised me.”

Clara looked frightened. “Do high school students really get into such awful fights?”

“Not all of them, but the kid was Irish, freckles and all, and he wandered into an Italian community. He was a sitting duck.”

“That’s horrible...”

Ella saw how disturbed Clara seemed, and decided to switch topics. “Oh, Clara, you haven’t told us about what it’s like working for the De Lucas.”

“Oh...”

“Is it a big house? They don’t mistreat you or anything, do they?”

“No, no...not at all.” Clara fought to keep her expression neutral. “The housekeeper is very kind to me, and so are the other maids. I haven’t actually met the owners yet, though.”

“Really?”

“No, just some of the children.”

“What about the eldest son, what’s his name?”

“Adriano,” James answered for her. “He just came back to New York, hasn’t he?”

Clara unconsciously squeezed her legs together, as though protecting herself from someone. “... yes, yes he has. But I haven’t met him.”

She noticed Nick staring at her as she spoke, and turned to look at him, seeing concern on his face. “What is it, Nick?”

He blinked when she addressed him, but he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. “Personally, I think being a maid is a waste of your talents.”

Clara raised her eyebrows, surprised. “My talents? Like what?”

Nick counted them off on his fingers. “Cooking, baking, childcare, general compassion and goodwill. You have plenty of options.”

Clara’s lips twitched. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

James considered his friend, before glancing at his wife. “He’s not wrong. There are a lot of fields you could look for a job in.”

“I...I mean, I realize that, but this is what I chose...”

Ella frowned at the men. "Oh, leave her alone. She's barely been a working woman for two days and now you're both making her second guess herself."

James glanced away, grimacing. "That's not how I meant it."

"Mmhm." She pinched her husband's arm. "And you be quiet."

He gave a strained smile. "Right, right...sorry, Clara."

"Oh, it's alright..."

Ella started to bring up some stories her coworkers had told her in her absence, about several rude and strange customers who had been causing issues at the stores, but Clara found herself unable to focus. Nick was avoiding her gaze, and she could spy hints of distress in his expression.

Why did he tell me to find a new job...?

"See, Nick? I told you the extra roast was necessary."

"James, are you sure Clara hasn't been starving you for a few weeks?"

He flushed. "Alright, I get it, I eat a lot--"

"I think you were just born with a bottomless pit as a stomach." Nick clapped his friend on the back. "I really think you should--"

"I am *not* doing the Coney Island Hot Dog Eating Contest. You ask me this every year and it's always the same answer."

"I don't even think you don't want to do it. I think you just like to spite me," Nick sniffed in mock offense, stacking plates together.

Clara stood up hurriedly. "I'll help." *I can finally talk to him.*

Ella shook her head. "Clara, I can't make you do that. You're my guest!"

"And you're pregnant and still made all of this for us, *and* my husband ate most of it, so I couldn't live with myself if I made Nick do everything."

James held out his wine glass wearily. "One more glass before you go, Nick. I need to numb the pain you two are causing."

Nick laughed as he poured another drink for his friend. "It's the truth, old friend. You two relax and we'll clean up before dessert."

"Yeah, James. And you can tell me about your asshole boss."

"Ella!"

"What? Based on what he's said already, I'm not wrong."

Nick shook his head as Clara followed him into the kitchen. "She's too much."

"Nothing you can't handle," she said, smiling, and he sighed as he set the dishes down in the sink.
"I hope so."

They were quiet for a moment as they started washing the dishes, and Clara tried to think of what to say to him, how to tell him what had happened to her.

"I was being serious, you know."

"Pardon?"

"About you finding a new job. It can't be fun being a maid. It sounds exhausting." He wasn't looking directly at her, instead staring down at the plate in his hands. "It might be easier on you to find different work."

"...do you not like me being a maid, or do you not like me working for the De Lucas?"

Nick froze, his eyes going wide. "What?"

"Do you know something about them, Nick?"

"There's nothing *about* them, Clara," he said almost too quickly. "Just... they *are* wealthy Italians. I don't trust them."

Clara had needed to learn how to read people when she moved to the United States for school, and her mouth was going dry. "You're lying to me."

Nick put the plate down in the sink and turned to her. Clara swallowed at the suspicious look on his face. "You lied, too."

"I- what?"

"You looked practically sick, talking about your job. And when Ella and James mentioned Adriano, you were *afraid* ." His suspicion melted away into worry and concern. "Did something happen?"

Clara tried to form the words, but they stuck in the back of her throat. *Just tell him. He'll help you.*

Adriano De Luca raped me. Adriano De Luca raped me twice. He threatened me and he raped me twice.

And he said he would do it again.

"Clara, you're turning pale. Do you need to sit down?"

She shook her head numbly. "N-No, I..." The words refused to come out, and she shakily reached for the buttons on the front of her dress.

"Clara?"

Silently, she undid several buttons, pulling the dress to the side. The still-deep mark Adriano had left on her neck seemed to sting under Nick's gaze.

For a moment, he didn't understand. But when he saw the pain in her eyes, his expression went slack. "You..."

She did the dress up again quickly, her breaths so rapid and shallow she felt as though she would faint. "Y-Yesterday... Adriano, he..." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "Please, Nick, I need you to help me..."

"I- Clara, fuck- " He ran his hand over his face, shocked. "Does James know?"

"No, I haven't told him-"

"You need to quit."

Clara blinked in confusion. "Yes, but you w-will help me press charges, right?"

Nicholas looked as though his world was starting to fall apart, and he wrung his hands. "Nick?" Clara pressed, beginning to panic. "You'll help me? You'll tell your captain and-and investigate?"

"I...I can't."

"What? Why not?"

He clenched his jaw, distress clear on his face, and looked away from her. "Something like this, it's - they're too prominent, my captain won't accept it."

Clara felt what little hope she'd held begin to dissipate. "But-But it's the truth..." She reached desperately into her pocket, pulling out the bullet shard she'd wrapped in her handkerchief. "And-And I found this, in their library. This should convince him to do something, right?"

Nick's eyes went wide. "Clara, what..." He took the shard from her hand, staring at it in incredulity. Then, to her surprise, he dumped it into the trash can next to the counter.

"Nick, what are you doing!?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders, his voice shaky yet imperative. "Clara, I need you to listen to me. You need to forget about everything that's happened, forget about that bullet, and quit *now*."

Clara stared at him, almost horrified. *Forget? How could I forget what was done to me?*

How can he ask me to do something like that?

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Clara-"

"Why can't you help me? Why can't you do something, Nick?" He looked at a loss, and she continued, almost hysterical. "You can't just make me ignore everything-"

"Hey, Nick?" The two heard footsteps approaching the kitchen, and Nick jerked away from Clara as James appeared at the entrance of the kitchen. "Ella thinks that now's a good time for dessert. Apparently, my storytelling skills lack the necessary drama for entertainment."

Nick forced a chuckle. "Ah, yeah. We'll be done in a few minutes."

James glanced at his wife. "Sweetheart, are you okay? You look faint."

"I-I'm alright." She smiled tremulously. "I think the day is just catching up with me."

"Oh. Well, just let me know if you think we should go home."

"I will. Thanks, sweetie."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he turned away and went back to the living room.

Nick reached a hand out to Clara in order to reassure her. "I—"

"Don't touch me." Her voice was weak and woven with betrayal, and she looked away from the pain on his face. She dropped her gaze to the floor and left, her arms wrapped around herself as she felt her freedom begin to slip away.

The rest of the evening passed in a dull blur. When she returned to her seat, James took her hand and murmured into her ear. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes," she managed to breathe, squeezing his hand tightly to keep herself from losing it.

She barely ate any cheesecake, although she drank deeply, her glass clutched tightly in her quivering hands. There was a memory tugging at the back of her brain, something her father had warned her about back in France, but she could not focus long enough to remember anything. She laughed thinly at Ella's stories and never once looked at Nick. She leaned against her husband's shoulder as the wine worked its way through her blood to numb her mind and dull her attention.

Eventually, night began to really settle in, and the last of the wine was drunk, the leftovers packed into boxes for the Edwards' to take home, save for the cheesecake, which Ella refused to give up. Clara felt dizzy as she pulled on her coat, before realizing something. "Ella, would you mind if I had a quick drink of water before we leave?"

"Oh, sure!" The woman moved to go to the kitchen, but Clara hurriedly stopped her. "I'll get it."

She stumbled into the kitchen, looking behind her to make sure no one was watching her, and crouched in front of the trash can. She could see the bullet shard glinting underneath a few discarded napkins and picked it out quickly before placing it back in her pocket. She stood and washed her hands before grabbing a glass and filling it with water. As she sipped, something was slowly teased out of her mind, so close she could almost taste it, but it teetered on the edge of recognition, letting her only view a cloudy silhouette of a memory that she knew meant the world right now.

But it refused to reveal herself, and she returned to where the others were saying their goodbyes.

"I hope you get that promotion, Nick," James said as he put on his coat. "It's long overdue."

"Yeah...we'll just have to pray Captain Davis is in a forgiving mood sometime soon." Nick was smiling in a way that hinted at discomfort, and he glanced at Clara as she approached. "...good luck with your job, Clara."

She nodded stiffly, still unable to look at him, and managed a smile at Ella. "Good luck with the baby, *mon amie*. I'm sure it will get easier."

"I'm hoping you're right." She pressed one last kiss to Clara's cheek. "Good luck at work tomorrow! You'll have those kids eating out of your hand in no time."

The friends exchanged goodbyes and James wrapped his arm around Clara's waist as they left the apartment. "You really got into the celebratory mood," he commented, eying the pink of her cheeks.

"...I just felt like it had been a while since I relaxed." She leaned her head against his arm as they walked. He felt her forehead, frowning. "You're a little warm, sweetheart. Do you feel okay?"

Clara blinked, seizing on the opportunity. "I might have a small fever...do you think I should call out of work tomorrow?"

James nodded, worry clear on his face. "It's best to make sure it doesn't get worse. Do you want me to stay home tomorrow for you?"

"No, no. I'm sure it's not too bad, sweetie. I'll be fine on my own." She could take the time to think, find out what she was missing. Besides, she had drunk so much that she was sure she wouldn't be in a fit state to work the next day either way.

James hailed a cab and made sure to hold Clara tightly against him. "If you're sure." He brushed a kiss against her forehead, guilt slipping into his voice. "I'm sorry about what I said--"

"It's okay," she interrupted, starting to feel the box of leftovers slip from her hands. Their argument seemed so far away, a pale memory of vaguely angering words compared to what loomed over her now. Besides, she understood - James had always been protective, and she hadn't been herself ever since the night of her interview. She could accept his worries if it meant he would feel a little better.

On the drive back, she leaned against him completely, feeling the last of her energy slip away from her. He was gently rubbing her waist, taking the box from her hands, but she couldn't focus on him. Nick's despair flashed before her eyes, and anger bubbled up inside of her once more.

Why...why is this happening...?

The next morning, she woke up with a pounding headache, hearing some clattering coming from the kitchen. "James?" she called weakly, her voice raspy, and sat up slowly. Her mouth felt like sandpaper, and she could only vaguely recall coming back home and going to bed.

Her husband entered the room, dressed for work, and smiled softly at her. "Good morning." He handed her a glass of water and sat on the edge of the bed. "Do you feel any better?"

She took a few sips and grimaced, massaging her temples. The fever had broken already, but her hangover was already attacking her. "No...I'll probably still be staying home, today."

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay home and take care of you?"

"Yes, yes, I promise, I'll be fine." She leaned in and kissed his cheek delicately, but when he moved his head to kiss her lips, she pulled away.

"Clara!"

“Do you want to get a fever, too?”

“It’s only a kiss,” he insisted, leaning in once more, but she covered his mouth with her hand. “Go to work,” she chided. “I don’t want to get you sick.”

He frowned, but relented and stood up. “Alright. I made breakfast for you, it’s in the kitchen. Try to call when you have lunch.”

“I will. Have a good day, *mon cher*.”

“Bye, sweetheart.” He kissed her cheek again before leaving, and she heard him lock the door as she stood up.

After washing up, she went into the kitchen to find a plate with an omelet and toast sitting near the stove. She started to make herself a cup of tea, and as it steeped, she took out the bullet shard and placed it on the kitchen table. Looking at it, she realized that she needed to call Mrs. Christopher to let her know that she would not be coming in to work.

She dialed the number hesitantly, hoping that the housekeeper wouldn’t be too angry. Despite the horror she’d faced in the house, she had a healthy amount of respect for the woman, and couldn’t help but feel guilty for not coming in.

“*Hello, this is the De Luca household. To whom am I speaking?*”

She recognized the voice as Mrs. Christopher. “This is Clara Edwards.”

“*Oh, Clara. Is everything alright, dear?*”

“I’m really sorry, ma’am, but I woke up with a fever and I’m afraid I won’t be able to come in today.” She cringed at her lie, but she couldn’t bear to return to the house.

“*Oh.*” She thought she heard a bit of annoyance in the woman’s tone and swallowed nervously. “I’m very sorry...”

“*It’s fine, dear. Let me know tonight if you’ll be able to come in tomorrow.*”

“I will, thank you.”

Mrs. Christopher hung up, and Clara set the receiver down, taking a deep breath. The kettle whistled behind her, and when she looked back, the bullet shard glinted at her from the table.

Mrs. Christopher sighed as she put down the receiver. *Now I need to redistribute her work for today...*

Maybe it was not as big of an issue as she was making it to be, but it was an extra burden to deal with for the day, and she’d had other maids call out before for “waking up with fevers.” They tended to be the most irresponsible girls she’d ever hired, and that excuse had stopped being believable for her. Still, in the two days Clara Edwards had worked at the house, she seemed like a capable, sweet young woman. Her interview had gone well. Perhaps she could be given the benefit of the doubt for today.

“Mrs. Christopher.”

She turned to see Adriano standing there, a smile on his face. “Good morning. Is something wrong?”

“Good morning, Master Adriano. One of the girls called in sick today and I’ll need to find someone to take her workload.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, not looking sorry at all. “Who was it?”

She felt slightly unnerved by his question. He normally never cared about the work of those in the house, preferring to focus on his own ‘projects’ with his father. “Her name is Clara, I only just hired her...”

“Ah, yes. I remember her.” There was a certain look in his eyes when he said the word ‘remember’ that only further served to unsettle the housekeeper. “Do you have her address?”

“Her address?” Mrs. Christopher repeated, confused, and he just stared at her expectantly, until she realized that this was one of the times when she was supposed to ask no questions and just give him what he wanted. “...yes, of course.”

As she went to her office to retrieve the information Clara had given her during her interview and on her application, she felt the slightest bit of worry for the young woman that quickly vanished when she handed the address to Adriano. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Christopher. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

He walked away, still smiling, and the housekeeper stared after him for a moment before returning to her work.

Clara rolled the shard between her fingers, her breakfast finished as she sat at the table. She recalled how Nick stated that his captain “would not accept” any accusations against the De Lucas, and the worry on his face when she first talked about working for them.

What would explain how wary Nick was of the family? What would give a reason for a bullet to be found in their home?

The memory she had been trying to recall the previous night floated to the front of her mind. Her father’s warning to her in their home in France, something about the dangers of Marseille, certain men to be avoided...

A name came to her suddenly, making her drop the shard. *The Guerini...the mafia.*

Were...were the De Lucas the same as the Guerini brothers? Was that why Nick had wanted her to stay away from them? *‘Just...they are wealthy Italians. I don’t trust them.’*

Fear slid up her spine as she realized the implications of this. Adriano really *could* make good on his threat if she was right. She’d put herself into the household of a family that had endless resources to make her life hell. And James...what if they tried to hurt him, too?

She tried to calm herself down, but it was impossible. Her parents had told her about friends of theirs whose lives had been ruined because they'd gotten involved with the mafia. They'd always told her to be on the lookout, to know who to distrust and avoid...and instead, she'd walked right into their gaping jaws.

But maybe she could still quit? She'd heard the other maids whisper about their attractions to eldest De Luca son - he clearly had plenty of women to go to for his pleasure. Perhaps he would leave her be if she quit. It was worth it to try at least.

Clara knew about the grip such people could hold on their respective towns; she'd witnessed it back home, and she had no desire to get herself involved any further. Even her mother, who'd been a part of *La Résistance* after being left on her own with a baby, advised her to keep her head down when it came to such matters. *Sometimes, mon ange, it is best to look the other way and keep yourself safe.*

It occurred to her that Nick's precinct may have been a part of it, and that that was why he could not help her. She sincerely doubted that Nick would ever support organized crime, but if his captain was being bribed or threatened, then there wasn't really anything he could do. Some of her bitterness towards him melted away into sympathy. *He's just trying to protect Ella and his baby...I understand.*

She decided to make herself a second cup of tea to calm down, and as she sipped at the warm drink, a bit of guilt made its way into her mind as she looked at the shard again. She did want to make sure that herself and James didn't come to any harm, but what about everyone else in the city? They didn't know what she did, and what if Adriano found some other unwilling woman to use for himself?

Maman and Papa would know what to do. Her parents had been through a lot more than she ever had, and they'd had their own dealings with gangs back in France. They could tell her how to handle everything. Or they might just yell at her and tell her to move away...

She retrieved some stationary and a pen from the drawer and thought about how to word the problem discreetly so that anyone else looking at her letter wouldn't be able to understand. She always wrote to her parents in French, but that was useless if someone else looking at it could understand it.

A rat problem. That was how her father had always referred to them. She penned out her question carefully, slipping it between news about James's work and certain apartments they had been thinking of looking at.

Ce problème de rat duquel tu m'avais prévenu à la maison est ici aussi. Devrais-je faire quelque chose ou chercher une nouvelle maison?

Hopefully, they would catch the meaning of her letter. On a whim, she mentioned how James had made bouillabaisse and thanked her mother for teaching him. After sealing and addressing the envelope, she went to change to drop the letter off at the post office. Maybe the fresh air would help clear her head, too.

“What’s that?”

Adriano stopped folding and unfolding the piece of paper he was holding as Michele narrowed his eyes at him. "Something I've been considering."

Michele frowned as he put it back in his pocket, but didn't dare ask. Adriano stared out the car window, tapping his fingers against his knee impatiently.

"...that woman wasn't at the house today."

Adriano's fingers stilled, and Michele watched his expression carefully. "Viola seemed particularly disappointed."

"You are determined to continue this line of questioning, are you?"

"And *you* are determined to insult the Bianchis by fucking some low class maid."

His boss barely glanced at him. "I was not aware I have to justify myself to you."

Michele did not reply, although his frustration was clear on his face. Ordinarily, he wouldn't care, but now, when the De Lucas was in the middle of aligning with another powerful mafia family, relations were delicate - if his relations with the maid were discovered, the Bianchis could break off the engagement...or worse.

"Stop the car."

Michele blinked. "What?"

The driver pulled over, and Adriano started getting out.

"What are you doing?"

"I have something to take care of." He shut the door and Michele watched him walk away, irritated. "Dammit," he muttered, signalling for the driver to head back. Deep down, he knew that nothing he said would convince Adriano to stop, which meant that he would have to intervene directly if this continued.

He felt a headache coming on, and groaned. He needed to sleep soon - he'd been awake for thirty-six hours, and he had run out of patience for his friend.

"If he makes me pick him up after this..."

Clara yawned as she walked back to the apartment. It was almost one, and she needed to call James once she got home. *Maybe I should take a nap after lunch...* Her hangover was wearing off, but she still felt exhausted.

She paused for a moment, pulling her coat around herself more tightly. It felt like someone's stare was burning into her neck, but before she could turn around, an arm slid around her waist, pulling her back against a broad chest.

"This is the second time we've met like this, *tesorina*," he purred into her ear, and her blood turned to ice as his fingers traced the line of her waist. She didn't dare look at him, keeping her gaze to the ground. "I missed you today."

"Let go of me," she managed to whimper, trying to pull her arm away out of his grasp, but he only tightened his grip on her, continuing. "If Viola hadn't been in the library yesterday, I would have had you on that table. Unfortunately, I wasn't so lucky..." He turned her head back so that she was looking at him. "Mrs. Christopher said you had called out sick, but here you are, as lovely as ever. Were you trying to run away from me?"

"Please," she begged, struggling in his arms. "Please don't do this to me again."

He cut her off by pressing his lips against his, and then he was kissing her in the middle of the street, his tongue pushing into her mouth. Clara could see passers-by glancing at them, disgusted, and clawed at his arms, trying to make him release her. In response, he only kissed her more deeply, holding her tightly against him.

Eventually, his lips left hers, but he did not let go of her. They were both breathing heavily, and when he smiled widely, Clara felt her stomach turn. Adriano squeezed her wrist. "Your husband must be at work now, yes?"

She stared at him, confused, before realizing. "N-No. No, I can't"

"Clara," he chided, tracing her lips with his finger, "we have only a few hours before the day ends. I would advise you not to drag this out longer than needed."

She could feel a pit form in her stomach as he pulled her along with him. "Please, I don't want this." She dug her nails into his arm again, but he did not react. "Please, I-" She stopped as he realized he was leading her. "How do you know where I live?" she whispered, terrified.

He looked down at her sweetly, as though they were newlyweds. "I told you, didn't I? I said I would find you."

Clara prayed that her landlady would be outside once they reached the apartment building. Maybe she'd be able to help her, to see that she was in distress. But unfortunately, she was nowhere to be seen, and Adriano pushed her inside, following her up the stairs to the apartment.

Her hands shook as she pulled out the key, Adriano waiting behind her.

I don't want him in my home. I DON'T WANT HIM IN MY HOME.

He took her hand in his own, steadyng it. "Are you trying to stall, *tesorina*?"

When she didn't answer, he leaned against her, pressing her against the door. "You can either unlock the door and we can go inside, or I'll fuck you out here, in the hallway. Either way, I'll have you, so choose."

The idea of him taking her in the hallway and someone seeing them made nausea roil through her stomach, and she shakily unlocked the door with a click, opening it slowly. He followed her closely into the apartment, and she could hear his breathing grow heavier as he shut the door behind him.

"I-I really am sick. I woke up with a fever-"

"You seem perfectly fine to me," he muttered, turning her to face him so that he could divest her of her coat. "And I did not get to finish with you last time, *tesorina*. I've been rather wound up ever

since I first took you in that alley, and tasting you two days ago wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me." Her coat pooled on the floor, and a chill crept up her spine as he pressed down on her shoulders. "On your knees," he demanded, his eyes gleaming. "I used my mouth on you last time - won't you return the favor?"

She didn't move at first, terrified, but upon seeing that he would not relent, she sank to her knees, feeling guilt and fear pulse through her.

He guided her hands to his belt slowly, and as she unbuckled it, her eyes darted around as though looking for a way to escape, but her gaze fell on the table instead, and she felt a chill down her spine.

I never put the bullet away!

Adriano pulled himself out, making her look back up at him, and he ran his thumb over her lips. "Focus," he murmured, watching her eyes widen at the sight of him. "I want all your attention on what's in front of you."

The head of his cock bumped against her lips, and she looked fearful as his hold on her chin tightened, forcing her mouth open. He pushed himself into the wet warmth of her mouth, and she let out a muffled whimper as his hands went to the back of her head, holding her in place. "Go on, Clara. Don't make me do all the work."

Meeting his eyes and realizing that he wouldn't let her go, she braced her hands against his thighs, giving in. *Just don't let him see the bullet...*

She slid her tongue over the head of his cock, and his grip on her hair tightened. She pulled her head back, laving her tongue across the veined skin. He groaned above her, and she took the tip back into her mouth, making him thrust shallowly.

He tilted her chin up so that she was looking at him, a warning in his eyes. "If you bite, I'll rip every single tooth from this sweet mouth. Understand?"

She whimpered again, but managed to barely nod, trying to guide the rest of his length down her throat with her tongue. He was too big, too thick, and her jaw was aching as he pushed further into her mouth. She could barely gasp as saliva dripped out of her mouth onto the floor, the sheer size of him blocking her from swallowing properly.

His thumb brushed over her throat, where his cock was, and he thrust again, this time far enough to press her nose into the coarse hair at the base. Tears pricked her eyes as he kept going, moaning above her. "You're very good at this, *tesorina*," he hissed, his fingers tangled in his hair. "Your husband taught you well."

The mention of James made her tears spill over, joining the saliva and pre cum dripping down her chin. Adriano ignored her, still moaning. "Hah, fuck..." He held her head in place as he thrust, her hands hitting weakly at his thighs to no avail.

Her vision was going fuzzy at the edges, and she prayed that he would release her soon. She could barely breathe around him, and she even tried to dig her nails into his hips to get his attention. "Mmm," she cried, begging for him to let go, and when his lustful gaze fell to her face, he only seemed triumphant. Still, he pulled himself from her mouth and she fell to the floor, gasping and coughing as air rushed back into her lungs.

He watched her wipe her mouth and retch on the floor, smirking at the tears on her face. “We’re still not finished, *tesorina*. Don’t tire yourself out just yet.”

He took her arm and pulled her to her feet, scooping her into his arms in a way that made her lock her legs around his waist. He looked down the small hallway that led to the bedroom and smiled, before starting to carry her to it. She clung to his neck, exhausted, but when they passed the kitchen table, she remembered the bullet shard.

Trying to block his view, she pulled herself further up in his hold, but her cunt brushed against his cock when she moved, making him groan and tighten his grip on her. “Be patient,” he hissed into her ear, making her whimper.

He did not bother closing the door to the bedroom, instead immediately throwing Clara on top of the bed. “Turn around,” he demanded, taking off his suit jacket. “Get on your hands and knees.”

Clara obeyed, though she was trembling, and as she listened to the rustle of his clothes as they fell to the floor, she covered her face with her hands in shame. *Please, God...please, not again...*

He pushed the skirt of her dress up, making her stiffen as he hooked his fingers around her underwear and pulled it down her legs. When his hand cupped between her legs, she held back a squeak, and he laughed behind her. “So wet for me already, *tesorina*? ”

“N-No, it’s not-“

He slipped his thick fingers into her folds, making her yelp in shock, her head dropping to the covers as he slowly stretched her out. “Relax,” he purred, leaning over her, his other hand wrapping around her to play with the buttons on the front of her dress. “Are you always so jumpy when a man touches you?”

As one hand undid her dress, the other teased her cunt, sliding his finger tips against the warm, soft flesh. Clara gasped into the covers as he slowly rubbed her clit, feeling pleasure drip from her cunt. Adriano smoothed his thumb over the swells of her breasts before pulling the top of her dress down her arms until it gathered at her stomach. He pulled her brassiere down as well, freeing her breasts for his touch.

He spread his fingers in her cunt, making her bite down on her arm to stop herself from making any noise, to his irritation. “Don’t stop yourself from enjoying this, Clara,” he said, slowly circling her nipple with his finger. “I don’t like women who try to hide their pleasure.”

“Ngh,” she gasped as he plunged his fingers in and out of her cunt. He pinched her clit slowly, leaning down and pressing his lips against the back of her neck. “Stop,” she begged. “Don’t-“

He pushed a third finger into her, cutting her off, and she moaned this time, clenching around him as she gripped the sheets tightly in her hands. He was touching her like a lover would, gentle and considerate, and she sobbed as he dragged his tongue over the hickey he’d left on her skin two days ago. “So sensitive,” he murmured into her ear, kissing the shell of it softly. “Don’t hold back, *tesorina* .” He spread his fingers widely, making her squeal, and whispered to her lustfully. “Let yourself go. Let me please you.”

Clara moaned into the bedcovers as her climax hit, clenching around his fingers as her pleasure spilled down her legs. Adriano squeezed her breast as he watched her orgasm greedily. “Good girl.”

He kissed her ear again, almost affectionately, and if he had not been holding her up, she would've collapsed on the bed.

She felt the mattress dip as he got onto it behind her, and whimpered as he parted her thighs with one hand. "Hush, sweet girl." He slid his fingers up her folds as he pressed closer. "I can't wait to feel your tight cunt around me after so long. The days after my first time with you were torture."

He pushed into her without any warning, pulling a strangled cry from her lips, and she sobbed as he thrusted into her. He pinched her nipple, leaning over her completely so that his mouth was next to her ear. "You feel so good, *tesorina*," he moaned, his thighs hitting against hers as he moved. "Even better than the first time we met."

She let out a whine as she felt his cock push through the soft flesh of her cunt, dropping to her forearms on the covers. Her breasts swayed with his thrusts, and he massaged them generously, his lips falling to her bare shoulder to press many sweet kisses to her skin.

He took her hand in his and pressed it over her stomach as he moved. "Has your husband ever gone this deep, Clara?" She sobbed at this, and he just laughed in response. "Answer me."

She said nothing, but he only thrusted harder, making her gasp. "How does he make love to you? Tell me, and I'll do the same."

"*Shut UP!*" she wailed, feeling something snap in her heart. "Shut up, shut up—"

He forced her head into the pillow, muffling her cries. "Don't be difficult," he said gently, forcing himself in so deep she saw stars. "I want you to enjoy yourself as well, and that cannot happen unless you tell me what you want."

She sobbed freely into the pillow, gripping it hard. "Tell me," he pressed, and she screamed through her cries. "I just - I just want it to be *OVER!*"

He sped up, and Clara keened loudly, praying for it to end. "You want it over?" She nodded desperately, barely able to speak anymore as her tears overtook her.

"Then cum for me, Clara." He pushed his fingers against her clit, relishing her whines. "Cum on my cock, and then I'll let you go."

The fear that had dominated her mind every time she laid eyes on Adriano De Luca was fading into the most vile, intense hatred she'd ever felt for someone. He was violating her in her own home, in her own bed, and laughing at her pain like she was some cheap attraction for his own amusement.

She pushed back against him, desperate to finish and make him free her, and he moaned in satisfaction. "That's it, *tesorina*. Keep moving like that."

She braced her forearms against the mattress as she moved, gasping as his finger tightly circled her clit. She was so close, *so close*, and she pushed against him harder, chasing her release with a desperation that was completely alien to her as he laughed, *he wouldn't stop laughing*, and thrusted into her even faster. "You're almost there, Clara," he cooed, pushing the errant locks of hair out of her face, and she only sobbed harder, because James treated her like that, his voice soft and soothing as he brought her to her climax, pressing sweet kisses to her lips as she moaned for him, melting away in his arms.

The only thing she could be thankful for was that she couldn't see his face. She would go insane if she had to witness the mirth in his green eyes as he watched her unravel on his cock.

He was deep, so deep it felt like he would touch her heart, and as she felt his warm breath on her neck, listened to him pant, she reached her climax, crying with relief as pure, sweet agony washed over her.

Adriano hissed as she squeezed around his cock, and dragged his tongue over the back of her neck once more. "James is a lucky man, if he gets to indulge in this sweet cunt of yours whenever he pleases."

He fucked her harder as she spasmed around him, chasing his own pleasure as he watched her writhe beneath him. He pulled out briefly, flipping her onto her back and pressing her knees to her chest, pushing his cock back inside her as deeply as he could. She glared at him, eyes glazed with tears, and he pushed her lips apart with his fingers, plunging them into her throat.

She sucked eagerly, wanting him to finish, and felt his cock twitch inside her. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him down and clawing at his back hard - that always made James finish.

He moaned, his face pressed into her breasts, and he sucked at one of her nipples, looking up at her through his fringe of black hair. Clara rocked her hips up against him, and finally, after what seemed like an eternity of torture, a shudder racked his body and he pulled out of her.

He pumped his cock with his hand twice and came on her chest, making her turn her head away as she felt his spent trickle between her breasts.

He fell onto the covers next to her and pulled her into his arms, forcing his lips against hers once more. She tried to bite down on his tongue, but he pulled away quickly, leering at her. "Very good, *tesorina*."

She tore her gaze away from him, instead staring at the mess on her chest in shame and confusion. She tried to sit up, to go clean herself off, but he locked his arm around her waist and pushed her back down into the mattress, pulling their sweaty bodies together.

"You know," he said softly, not looking at her. "I once fucked a waitress I had met while I was in college. She wasn't anyone special, just someone I had met while out at dinner with friends."

His lips were against her head as he spoke, and crowded against his heaving chest, Clara had no choice but to listen.

"I left the room to wash, and when I came back, she was emptying the used condom into herself."

Clara froze, and he continued. "She said that she had always wanted a baby, but I knew she had recognized me, realized who my family was. If she got pregnant, she would have used the child to demand her own part of our fortune."

He cupped her breast in an almost casual manner, squeezing it as he spoke. "So I dressed myself and... I strangled her."

Clara's eyes went wide, horrified as his hand drifted up to her neck, stroking it slowly. "I may be fond of bedding women, but I've always tried to be careful. I can't have some desperate whore trying to insert herself into my family's business with a child."

“So rest assured, Clara.” He squeezed her throat almost playfully. “I have no intention of getting you with child.”

Adriano relaxed into the mattress with a sigh, holding her tightly against him.

“I wish to play with you for as long as I can.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Chesnay for helping with the French letter translation!

We learned a little bit about James this chapter. Michele is as exhausted as ever. And we know a bit about Clara's mom now! (she is QUITE a woman)

Fun fact: from fifties to the sixties, the Guerini brothers, part of the Corsican Mafia, could not legally be prosecuted in Marseille, which is why Clara's father told her to avoid it. Dangerous men who could do whatever they wanted abound.

See you guys next time!

A Kiss to Build a Dream On

Chapter Summary

As Adriano leaves Clara with a damning proposition, she struggles to decide if looking into the family is truly worth it. James recalls the obstacles he faced when marrying the woman of his dreams.

(A Kiss to Build a Dream On - Louis Armstrong, 1951)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He went to take a shower.

A shower.

She could do nothing but stare in shock as he got up from the bed after a while and strode into the bathroom. The message was clear - everything she had was laid bare and vulnerable to him, be it her body or her home.

She sat up slowly, aching between her legs, and loosely wrapped a sheet around herself, avoiding her chest. *I need to wipe this off...*

Walking by the kitchen table, she remembered the bullet, and clutched it in her hand, placing it in the cutlery drawer.

As she cleaned herself off at the kitchen sink, the phone began to ring, making her jump. She picked it up hesitantly. "Hello, Edwards's Residence."

"*Hi, sweetheart. Have you eaten yet?*"

Clara's heart dropped. "James? W-Why are you calling?"

"I had a free moment and wanted to make sure you were feeling better. Your voice sounds a little hoarse, has your fever gotten worse?"

"No, I-I'm alright." Suddenly, she was keenly aware of the sound of the shower running in the bathroom. "I just took a nap..."

"*Oh, I see. Well, make sure to eat lunch soon. I could ask Mrs. Schaffer to bring something over-?*"

"No! No, it's alright. I'll just heat up the leftovers from yesterday." She wrapped the sheet around her even tighter. "Thank you, *mon cher*. You don't need to worry about me."

"*If you're sure,*" he said gently. "*And if I'm being honest, Dean is driving me up the wall. I needed to hear your voice.*"

Clara felt her heart crack a little further. "Oh, I'm sorry your day isn't going well."

"*I'm fine, sweetheart, I promise.*" She heard the shower turn off as she listened, swallowing.
"*There's a new Chinese place down the block from my office, I can get takeout for dinner if you want?*"

"That would be wonderful, sweetie. Thank you." *Tell him. Tell him tell him tell him-*

"*Alright. I have to get going before I get demoted.*" She could hear the chuckle in his voice. "*Eat soon, okay? Love you.*"

"I...I love you, too."

He hung up, and she put the phone down slowly. Her head was beginning to hurt as she turned around to see Adriano standing in front of the bedroom door. His suit jacket was hanging over his arm, and the ends of his hair dripped with water. "Was that your husband, *tesorina*?"

Clara didn't answer him, and he turned his gaze to the mantle, where her wedding photos were displayed proudly in the center. She was in her mother's dress, and James was wearing a secondhand tuxedo.

He'd felt awfully guilty about not being able to afford a grand wedding for her, his family's wealth no longer open to him, but it had been the happiest day of their lives. She wouldn't have traded it for anything else.

"How old were you?"

She stayed silent, her eyes filled with rage and humiliation. He smiled at her expression. "Come now. We should get to know each other properly, don't you think? What kind of man knows only a woman's body and not her past?"

"Get out of my home."

He raised an eyebrow, and she felt her fury spill over. "You don't need me. More than half the women working in that house want you. You can take your pick." Her throat felt like it was closing up as she continued. "Just leave me alone."

For a moment, he didn't move. Then, slowly, he draped his jacket over the back of one of the armchairs and approached her. Despite the tremble of her legs, she didn't move, knowing it would make no difference either way.

"I want to make something *very* clear."

He was right in front of her, and his hand gripped her jaw harshly. "Whether or not another woman would have me, I chose *you*. And whether or not you appreciate my affections—"

"Affections?" She couldn't stop herself from interrupting, eyes wide. She pulled at his wrist furiously, trying to get him to let go. "Is that what you call this? You think I should be happy that you force me down in my own home and rip my dignity away like it's nothing?"

He laughed in a way that chilled her blood. "Dignity? You're a maid, a child slaving away for children. You know nothing and you own nothing, not even the ring your pathetic husband slipped

onto your finger. It makes no difference if you walk around with my seed between your legs - your sad little dreams will still be waiting for you."

He released her with that, and she retreated back a few steps, shaking. He followed her, a mocking frown on his face. "Stop it," she whimpered, but he just pulled the bedsheet off of her, leaving her naked once more.

His hand drifted to her breast as he spoke softly. "You seem like a smart woman, Clara. It's not a demanding arrangement." His finger traced her nipple slowly. "You'll come to my home for your work, and I'll see how I feel that day. Then you can return to your husband and take care of him."

He pinched her nipple harshly, twisting it as he leaned in, and she bit back a cry, tears of pain in her eyes. "And know this; I'll fuck you when I wish. You can learn to like it or cling stubbornly to your marital bliss, but either way, I'll have you as much as I want. And I warn you, I don't hold with insolence. You can fight, scratch, or cry as much as it pleases you; but speak to me like that again, and you'll find that my courtesy has its limits."

She managed to hold back from crying again, and his hold on her tightened. "Tell me you understand."

"I understand," she said, her voice cracking, and he smiled, moving his hand to cup her breast. "Good."

Adriano looked back at the wedding photo as his thumb stroked over her nipple, and, still staring at her feet, Clara answered his first question softly. "I was eighteen. James was twenty."

"He claimed you as soon as he could, hm?" He mused, stepping away to sit in one of the chairs. "Smart man."

Clara leaned against the wall, shakily reaching down to pick up the sheet again. Adriano watched her, before the next, painful question came. "No children?"

The sheet was too thin to keep her warm, and she shivered as she spoke. "We want them, but we don't...we don't have enough..."

She wondered how pathetic she looked, whimpering about money in front of a man set to inherit one of the largest manufacturing companies in the northeast. A man who, just a few minutes ago, had been inside of her, laughing at her tears.

He only nodded slightly, still watching her. "That's why you came to work in my home."

"Yes." Silence fell, making Clara twitch uneasily. *Why won't he just go?*

She glanced at the clock on the mantle. It was almost two - he'd been here for barely an hour and was already sitting there like a king, as though waiting for something. His gaze wandered around the apartment once more.

After a moment, he looked back at her. "Go shower and dress yourself. You look ridiculous in that sheet."

She gaped at him, in disbelief of his nonchalant demands. Still, she gathered the bedsheet closer to her and hurried to the bathroom, eager to get away from his gaze.

Clara scrubbed furiously at her skin in the shower, as though it would erase any of what he'd done to her. She needed to do laundry before James got home - the bedcovers were ruined.

Her thoughts drifted to the waitress Adriano had told her about. It was all too easy to imagine him wrapping his hands around a woman's slim throat, his expression never changing as her last breath brushed against his face.

Was that how this would end? Would he get bored of her one day and snap her neck on a whim?

Despite the warm water flowing over her skin, she couldn't stop shivering.

Domizio was not happy to see Michele return to the house alone. He raised an eyebrow at the enforcer, who sighed. "He told me that he had someone to meet, and would be back in the evening."

He cursed Adriano, even as the lie came easily. Although, he supposed leaving him to speak with Domizio alone was certainly not the worst thing he could do.

His boss glowered, but waved him away, and Michele held back a yawn as he left, looking to leave for his apartment quickly. He was exhausted and starving, after thirty-six hours of work. He'd be ordering take out once he got home, for once he got up from passing out.

"Michele." He stopped, turning his head to see Milena standing there, smiling at him. "Won't you stay for dinner?"

He turned his body to fully face her, out of respect, but could feel the hairs on his neck standing as she approached. "Thank you, but I wouldn't want to impose." Besides, he'd seen enough of Adriano in the past two days - he wanted peace and quiet.

"I insist. It could be like when we were little."

He barely managed to stop from grimacing, watching her reach for his arm. "I may not be able to stay awake that long," he admitted, her fingers crawling up his forearm like spider legs. "And I couldn't take up any space here, it would be an inconvenience--"

"Don't be silly, you know we always have a room here for you" she said gently. "Mother will be glad to see you joining us. We're having *cacciucco* ." Her nails seemed to dig into his skin as she spoke. "Go, get your rest. I'll send one of the children to come get you when it's time."

She was adept at disguising commands as requests, leaning in with an air of nostalgic sweetness that would've fooled anyone else. Michele nodded slowly, carefully pulling away from her.

"Alright. Thank you."

Milena smiled, and her short hair seemed like a red halo as she turned and walked away. He rubbed his arm where she'd grabbed him, feeling as though something was creeping through his veins at the thought of her touch. It was a feeling he had been used to for quite awhile now, and yet, he never managed to ignore it.

Still, he walked through the familiar halls of the mansion, towards the room the De Lucas had used to let him stay in as a teenager. It was a relatively new house, bought when Carina was born, and he

was grateful that it was much larger than the two-story they'd used to own - more room to avoid the family.

The room was completely bare, a consequence of him buying his own apartment when he was eighteen; he didn't want to leave anything of his around them. But the bedcovers were always prepared for him, for the many instances when work or the De Lucas kept him away from home too long. But that was as far as he would let the familiarity go.

We're basically brothers, you know. Why leave?

His eyes narrowed at the memory and he sat on the mattress, rubbing a hand over his face. His exhaustion won out against his discomfort, and he rested his head on the pillow, sighing as he felt sleep pull at him.

He prayed dinner would be quick.

When Clara came back to the living room, Adriano was looking out the spy hole, prompting her to freeze. He turned his head, meeting her gaze, and smiled. "Don't look so scared. The hallway is empty."

His suit jacket was in his hands, and his hair was close to dry as he came towards her. She wondered if this was what that waitress had seen, the last picture her eyes had painted before its handsome subject had crushed her throat in his hands.

His hand reached for her and she flinched, but his palm merely cupped her cheek, tilting her face towards him. "I'll tell Mrs. Christopher to expect you back at work tomorrow." It wasn't a question, despite the way his eyes looked for an answer.

"...yes." She kept her hands fisted at her sides as he leaned down, his lips pressing almost sweetly against her own. His hands held her face firmly, keeping her against him. Even as she tried to turn her head away, breaking the kiss as much as she could, he pulled her back, as though he was determined to take as much as he could.

When Adriano pulled away and looked down at her, she could tell immediately that it had nothing to do with her, none of it did. It was just his interest, his way of escaping his own boredom that just so happened to present itself in her flesh.

"I'll call on you again tomorrow." He released her and put his jacket on, and smoothed his hair back. "And try not to wear such dull underthings, hmm? I can't imagine they excite your husband."

Clara crumpled her skirt in her hands as she watched him open the door to the apartment and leave, leave as one might after a simple home visit with a friend, or even just borrowing a cup of sugar.

Nausea and hatred roiled through her stomach, and she sat down at the table slowly, her mind feeling sluggish and useless as she thought about what awaited her the next day.

James was slowly refilling his pen for the third time that day, and his patience was disappearing as fast as the ink.

He'd been sitting at his desk for at least forty-five minutes with nothing to do, all of his "assignments" finished almost laughably quickly. *Almost.* Easy work was not as fun when you were getting paid equivalent to it. Thank God for that approaching interview.

He could just hear Dean saying something already: *Oh, a Mont Blanc, Edwards? Impressive. I own eight myself, one for each hour of the work day, although I never use them because I'm too busy making paper airplanes and wasting my employees' time with work meant for fifth-graders.*

Sighing, he scratched out some calculations of his potential new salary he'd done earlier, twirling his pen between his fingers. His grandfather had given it to him for graduating high school, and he could still remember his mother grumbling behind his back about how useless a pen was as a gift, no matter how expensive it was. She seemed slightly more mollified when he'd promised to pay James's college tuition in full, though.

The young man frowned at the thought of his mother. They hadn't spoken in three years, not since he married Clara. She'd been *furious* with him then, even going so far as to throw a vase at him when he'd told her his plans.

He had returned to the old brownstone, intent on retrieving his grandmother's wedding ring, which she'd left to him when she'd passed. His mother hated the sight of it - James's father had not had the ring passed to him when they'd married, because of how much his parents despised his mother.

When she'd heard that he was going to marry a girl she'd never met, whom he'd never mentioned - he *had* mentioned her, for the past *two years they had been together*, but she just chose to ignore him - she threw a fit. "Don't you fucking dare," she screamed, as he stood still at the doorway, his face stony. "I swear James, I'll never approve of this, you'll never see me again-"

He fixed her with a cold glare. "Fine." After twenty years of her dictating his whole life, with money his foolish, aging father had given her before he died, he could not wait to leave the house for good.

She looked shocked, but he was just annoyed. "If this is how you react when I'm an adult getting married, then I don't see any reason to stay."

"...I'll cut you off."

He blinked, and she smiled winningly. "You'll never see a cent of this family's money again. Your inheritance is still under my control. If you leave, and marry that French whore, you're on your own."

James could feel fury rising inside him, but he forced himself to be calm. "If that's what it takes." He had his apartment, and his tuition was paid for. "Then I won't try to contact you again." *And you'll never see your grandchildren.*

She yelled as he left. All of his things were already at his apartment. He'd be fine. He'd be fine.

"Edwards. Edwards!"

He jumped, and realized he'd pressed his pen to the paper for too long, and ink was spilling everywhere. "Dammit—" He rushed to clean it all up, and looked up at his desk-neighbor, who'd been shaking him. "Sorry, Samuel. What is it?"

He held up two files, a strained smile on his face. "Look what was just dropped off for us."

James barely managed to swallow his scream of frustration. "Goodie."

Samuel slapped him on the back. "Come on, you'll finish this up in no time, and then you can get back to daydreaming about your wife, or whatever it is you do all day."

"Don't be cheeky with me just because you don't have a wife."

His friend just slapped the file down on his desk, laughing. "Of course I do. I'm married to these lovely numbers I have to burn into my brain everyday."

James's mouth twitched slightly. "And what a poor wife they make."

He yawned as he walked up the stairs of the apartment building, a large bag of Chinese food in one hand. He blinked when he saw the figure in the lobby. "Oh, good evening, Mrs. Tate."

"Hello, Mr. Edwards. How are you?"

"Same as ever, I suppose. And you?"

She sighed. "I got a complaint from Mrs. Schaffer. She met a young man on the stairs, said he seemed fresh."

"Oh. She didn't know him?"

"No, but apparently he had some smug little grin as he was leaving." She shook her head. "The tenants are bringing in anyone they please these days. Thank you for being considerate."

He smiled. "Of course."

"Clara seems to have gotten better, I saw her leave earlier for the post-office. She said she was sending a letter to her parents." Mrs. Tate tapped her chin. "She's quite an industrious woman - I knocked on the door to check on her, and it looked like she was cleaning the whole apartment."

James groaned, dragging a hand over his face. She was supposed to be *resting*. "I see. Thank you for checking on her."

"Any time, dear. Have a nice night."

"You as well." He hurried up to the apartment, feeling a little worried. What if Clara tired herself out too much, and made her fever worse?

He unlocked the door and entered, and blinked at the sight that awaited him. Mrs. Tate was right - it looked like everything was practically sparkling. They were not a messy couple by any means, but every little thing had been organized and put away. It seemed like just sitting on the couch would be a crime.

Clara walked out of the kitchen, smoothing down her skirts, and smiled at him. "Hi, sweetie. How was your day?"

He raised an eyebrow at how content she seemed. "It was fine...."

"That's good. I'm sorry Dean gave you a hard time." She pressed a sweet kiss to his lips, and went to take the bag of takeout from his hand, but he pulled it away. "What is it?"

"Are you really feeling better? You were supposed to rest and—" he took another quick look around the apartment "-instead you gave yourself more work."

"I just finished up a lot of little things I wanted to do, that's all. And I really am better." She took the bag and set it on the dining table. "I reorganized most of the kitchen cabinets, finished all of the washing, changed the sheets—"

"The sheets? Why?"

"After lying in them all day, I felt it would be better to use fresh ones." There was a slight shadow in her face as she spoke, but James didn't notice. "I also alphabetized your bookshelf and made more room. You really should get another one, though. Soon, you'll just have piles sitting around the house."

"Okay, what's bothering you?"

"Hmm?" She turned and yelped as James picked her up and set her on the table, caging her between his arms. Despite the smile on his face, there was concern in his eyes.

"I remember in school, every time you were assigned a big project, you'd spend the whole day cleaning up and organizing your and Ella's dorm, down to the tiniest details. You said 'I can never think properly when there's other things that I have to do.'" His gaze flicked around the apartment. "You probably just finished two weeks of housework, so tell me - what's demanding so much of your attention?"

For a moment, he thought she seemed nervous, but she just shook her head, laughing. "Well, how am I supposed to be a competent maid if I can't even keep my own home clean?" She pushed at his arms. "Come on, the food will get cold."

"Do you promise you're doing okay?"

"I swear." Her eyes softened, and she cupped his cheek with her hand. "You don't have to worry."

James considered his wife for a moment, before stepping back and letting her get off the table.
"Alright, if you say so."

She offered him a reassuring smile before turning back to the bag. "Go wash up, I'll get everything ready."

"Okay, this makes no sense."

Clara looked up to see James frowning at the piece of paper in his hand. "'You have a tendency to get stuck on the details.' That's not a fortune, that's just a...kind of rude observation, actually."

Clara laughed and opened her cookie. "Let's see... 'An unexpected happiness awaits you.' Huh...."

James just stared at the paper sleepily, before jolting up, startled. “Are you pregnant!?”

His wife just sighed. “No, I’m not. Remember, we said we wouldn’t try until we have a new apartment.”

“Right, right....” He looked slightly deflated, and as she put the dishes away, he fiddled with his thumbs. “We’ll get there soon.” *Maybe sooner than you think*, he said to himself, thinking about his job interview.

“I know, sweetie. But don’t overwork yourself.” She stood on her tiptoes to put the plates back. “Our baby wouldn’t want a father who sees work more than them.”

Oh, so mine? James thought, old frustrations rising, but he just nodded and got up to help her. “I know. I won’t.”

Clara brushed through her hair slowly, staring at herself in the mirror. The bullet was tucked away safe in one of her drawers, under a stack of blouses.

The stress of the past few days had left deep bags under her eyes, although they were the least of her worries. She tugged the neck of her nightgown down - the hickey was almost gone, looking more like a slightly harsh pinch mark now. In the darkness of the bedroom, James wouldn’t notice.

She’d examined herself all over when Adriano had left, and there were no other marks. His grip on her had been firm, but not so severe that there was anything left. Not that it made her feel that much better.

The hopeful look in James’s eyes at dinner made guilt slink through her mind. Originally, she had thought that they would only have to wait a little longer, perhaps a year before they could get a new apartment and start a family. But now, with the man waiting for her in that manor, that dream was drifting farther and farther away.

Would she be able to get away from him? Heal enough that she’d feel like she still deserved a child? Maybe...but....

“You don’t just run from the mafia, mon ange. Once they know of you, you don’t leave their mind.”

She was fourteen, sitting at the dinner table with her father. “Why, Papa?”

“Because they’re like crows. Always searching for something they like, something they need. And they always remember, whether you mean for them to or not.”

“Did you ever meet them?”

“Once. During the war.” He didn’t seem keen on answering anymore questions.

She pulled her hair back, grimacing. Her parents had taught her plenty of things based on their own experiences, in an effort to prepare her for anything. Cooking, first aid - her mother was fond of recounting stories of stitching rebels’ chests closed - and a myriad of other skills. But nothing they taught her could help her now. Before they’d put a gun in her hands, she’d come to America.

No, Papa *had* to be wrong. Adriano had probably been with so many women, there was no way he would remember her if enough time passed. And yet, the bullet sat heavy in her mind.

Shaking her head, she went back into the bedroom. James was sitting on the edge of the bed, mumbling to himself.

“What’s wrong?”

He jumped when she came in, and scratched his cheek awkwardly. “Nothing, just thinking about work.”

“Oh.” She turned out the lights and James wrapped his arm around her as she got in bed.

“Do you think you’ll go tomorrow?”

“Yes.” She turned her head to tuck her face against his neck. “I called the housekeeper and told her I’d be in.”

“If you’re sure.”

She pressed a comforting kiss to his throat, feeling his grip tighten around her. “I promise, I’m okay.”

He shifted and pulled her so that she was lying on his chest. He stared up at the ceiling, contemplative. “We should get an apartment with a view.”

“Not many views here in the city,” Clara said, breathing him in. “Not like back home.”

James just snorted. “Easy. I’ll buy us a penthouse.”

Her husband had always had a habit of running away with his dreams. She smiled. “That would be nice. But it would be a lot to take care of.”

“We’ll get a maid then. And a nanny.” He smiled to himself. “To take care of the children.” Three. Three was a good number.

Clara lifted her head, raising an eyebrow. “Then what am I supposed to do all day?”

“Enjoy yourself.” His hands cupped her waist. “Kiss the children goodnight, then me when I get home.”

“You don’t need anything else?”

James gave her a smile that made her heart swell and ache all at once. “Just you.”

Hours later, deep into the very early morning, Clara lay awake, as her husband slept soundly beside her. She got out of bed slowly, careful not to wake him, and opened her drawer, reaching under the blouses to retrieve the bullet shard. It gleamed in the moonlight, and she clenched her fist around it.

Maybe it would be better if she just threw it away. Looking into whatever secrets lurked in the mansion, in its owners, could cause more pain than it was worth. It could put James in danger. And if Nick’s precinct was involved in anyway, him and Ella would be at risk, as well.

It makes no difference if you walk around with my seed between your legs - your sad little dreams will still be waiting for you.

Was he...right? Was this a storm she could just wait out? One day, he might forget about her and find someone else to hurt, and she'd be free to leave, to come back home to-

James turned over, startling her, and groaned in his sleep, burying his face into his pillow. His hair was sticking up in several different directions, like a hedgehog. Clara stared at him, trembling as she thought of the man who had taken his place in bed earlier. No, she could not wait. There was no telling if he would ever really let her go, how long this would go on for before he killed her. She needed an out, *now*, and she had no time to wait for her parents to get back to her.

She tucked the bullet into her purse so that she wouldn't forget it, and climbed back into bed. James grunted, his eyelids fluttering open. "Sweetheart?" he asked groggily, and she just tucked his head against her chest.

"It's nothing, *mon cher*. Go back to sleep," she murmured, kissing the crown of his head, and he yawned, nodding, and within moments, he was asleep once more. Clara stroked his hair gently, waiting for morning to come. Work waited for her, and so did the darkness hidden behind its doors.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was more of a filler, sorry about that! Things should get exciting again in the next one. Enjoy!

Little Things Mean a Lot

Chapter Summary

Clara meets two more members of the household, and comes up with a plan on what to do with the bullet. Deciding whether or not to go through with it, however, is another ordeal.

(Little Things Mean a Lot by Kitty Kallen)

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long, I've had some major writer's block and it hasn't been fun. I've also had to deal with a severe lack of Alex and Nicolas fics from Gangsta and that has caused quite a bit of emotional pain on my part. But I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Viola kicked her legs as she sat at the dining table, waiting for dinner to be served. Her and Cesare had convinced Elio to bawl hard enough on their behalf to convince Mamma to have the chef make something else for them to eat, only for her to sigh and say that they weren't going to be served *cacciucco* anyway, because they were too little and 'unrefined' - she would have to ask Gio what that meant later.

It didn't matter either way, as long as they didn't have to eat fish. Carina liked to tease them and say they would have to learn at some point but Viola was sure she'd be perfectly happy eating only buttered noodles for the rest of her life.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up to see Milena smiling down at her. "Viola, don't swing your legs like that. It's not ladylike."

She pouted slightly but stopped, and her older sister tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Michele is staying for dinner today. Would you go wake him up?"

Viola brightened at this and hopped off her chair easily. "Okay!"

"I'm coming too!" Cesare got up to join her, eager to not have to sit still any longer.

"And me!" Elio tried to get out of his chair but Milena stopped him, picking him up. "He doesn't need a whole army of children barging into his room," she chided, waving away the other two. "Now go on, and be quick. The food will be ready soon."

She kissed Elio's forehead upon seeing his trembling lip, and Cesare and Viola made their way to Michele's room.

"I snuck into the kitchen and saw them chopping up a squid!" Cesare said, proudly puffing his chest out.

Viola gagged, but he continued. "It was still alive when they did it too!"

She covered her ears and glared at him. "Stop!"

"It was wriggling everywhere—"

"Shut up!"

Her brother stopped and frowned. "I'm telling Mamma you said that."

"Well, I'm telling her you told me gross things!"

"It wasn't gross!"

"Yes it was!"

They continued arguing until they reached the door. Turning away from her brother with a *hmpf*, Viola knocked quietly. There was no answer, and Cesare stuck his tongue out at her. She glared at him and grabbed the doorknob. The door opened quietly and they peeked in.

Michele was still asleep in bed, and they tiptoed towards him.

"Cesare, look!" She held up one of his shoes. "His feet are huge!"

His eyes widened and he whispered to her conspiratorially. "Gio told me about a giant monster that lives in the mountains and woods named Bigfoot."

They both turned to stare at the sleeping man, who turned over, blissfully unaware of the children questioning his origins a few feet away.

"Michele's not a monster!"

"Maybe he's a sasquatch!"

"You made that word up," Viola accused, hands on her hips. "And you're being mean."

"No I didn't, it's true!" Cesare stomped his foot and glared at her. "You just don't agree because you're a suck-up!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, you are! He's gloomy and weird, and you just like him because he doesn't think you're annoying like everyone else does!"

"Are you two finished?"

The pair yelped and turned to see Michele scowling sleepily at them, sitting up. "I'll take that," he muttered, snatching his shoe out of Viola's hands and bending down to put it on.

Cesare shifted on his feet, clearly holding back a question, and Michele sighed, sensing the young boy's eagerness. "What is it?"

“Are you a sasquatch?” he blurted out, eyes sparkling.

“Excuse me?” Michele straightened up and stared at him as though he’d grown two heads.

“A sasquatch!”

He frowned for a second, before stroking his chin. “Oh, a *sasquatch*. ”

Viola’s jaw dropped. “They’re *real!*? ”

“Oh yes.” He stood up and cracked his neck. “They eat hikers and annoying little children who wake them up from their naps.”

Cesare blinked owlishly. “Children?” he asked meekly.

“Like popcorn.” He ruffled the young boy’s hair. “Dinner?”

He nodded slightly, mouth agape, and Michele yawned as he left, headed for the dining room. Cesare whipped his head to Viola, who looked pale and confused. “See?”

Ella hated mornings. She’d never liked them at any point in her life, but in these last seven months or so, the anger they evoked in her increased exponentially. There was always something new to face - nausea, dizziness, the smell of the neighbors making eggs for breakfast. She still didn’t know how she resisted throwing herself into oncoming traffic when faced with that last one.

Actually, she did. Her husband was an agreeable man at any time of day, and he was always ready with something to make her feel a little happier. Except for today. Something about him felt muted, like someone had dimmed his typically bright and excitable disposition. She’d noticed it after James and Clara had left, but she chalked it up to exhaustion, and this excuse had stretched into the next day as well, albeit thinly. But on the third day, Ella was starting to feel worried.

She watched him get ready for work almost mechanically, movements jerky and hesitant. “Nick?”

His shoulders jumped when she spoke, but he turned and looked at her. “Yes?”

She made her way to him, and seeing the slight difficulty in her steps, his vision seemed to clear a little, and he went to meet her, hands touching her elbows gently. “What is it?”

“You’ve been scaring me these past couple of days. Are you feeling well?”

He blinked, as though he hadn’t realized how he’d been acting. “Oh....” He rubbed the back of his neck, his expression settling once more into defeat, before he kissed her forehead comfortingly. “Must be a midlife crisis coming on.”

“At twenty-three?”

“I’m mature for my age.”

Ella reached up and pressed her hands against the side of his face, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

He managed a thin smile. “Just the moral quandaries of a police officer. Nothing to worry about.”

He could tell his wife didn't believe him — she had always been able to see through his lies so easily — and sighed, glancing away for a moment. "I just... I feel like I'm not in control of anything anymore."

"What?"

"I don't know, I — it feels like I have to choose between what's right and what's easy, but no matter what I pick, I'll be wrong." *Do I help my friend, or do I ignore everything and keep my family safe?*

Ella frowned at the miserable look on his face. "Nick, I'm sure that whatever it is, it's nowhere near as bad as it seems."

Oh, she had no idea. And thank God for it too, what with the baby almost here.

She pressed her hand to his chest reassuringly. "You always do this — you pretend to be a carefree idiot, but you're more sensitive than you look."

"Honey, this may seem shocking, but being called an idiot doesn't exactly make me feel much better."

"I know, but whatever this is, you're not going to tell me, are you?"

He shrank slightly under her knowing stare. "...you got me there."

Ella shook her head. "I trust your judgment, sweetie. You should, too. Give yourself some time to think, and do what you feel is best."

He wished it was that simple. Time was one of many things he didn't have, and there was nothing he could do, not without someone getting hurt.

Still, he put on a smile for his wife, and squeezed her shoulders in thanks. "You're right. I'm sorry for making you worry."

"Oh, I wasn't worried. You always find the good side to things, you know?" She kissed his cheek, oblivious to his heavy heart. "That's why I married you."

Mrs. Christopher did not meet Clara's eyes when the latter came into work that morning. By the clench of her jaw, the young maid could tell that she had had some hand in Adriano's visit. *She must've given him my address....*

She tried to find it in her to be forgiving, but there was only a cold hollowness. She accepted the tasks she was given dully, and as she left to begin the day, she could feel the guilt coming off the older woman.

Adriano was not in his room when she knocked, and she felt only the smallest relief at that. He was a busy man, and the only person who saw him regularly in the mornings must have been the maid bringing him breakfast.

There was little to do, other than making the bed and taking the hamper of dirty clothes out to be brought down for washing. It only took a few minutes, and as she stood in front of the door, ready

to leave, she paused and looked back.

Mrs. Christopher had warned her against opening the nightstand drawers, but it didn't really matter, because they were locked anyhow. The same went for two of the four drawers in the desk, and she didn't try to open the others - if she disturbed anything, he might realize she was snooping.

As she left and carried the hamper down the hall, she found herself considering the shard in her purse. What did it prove really? That a gun was shot in the library? That could be explained away easily, and the more she thought about it, the more she realized how useless it was on its own.

In fact, she realized with sickening clarity, if Adriano had never touched her and she'd still found the piece that day, she wouldn't be nearly as curious. Sure, it was strange, but why would it matter to her? There wasn't even any blood on the bullet, so it didn't really matter.

Clara spent the better part of the morning lost in thought over what to do next. Her work was mindless and easy to get done, and eventually, her lunch break arrived, unwelcome due to her lack of appetite.

She sipped some water as she tried to go over what she had seen in the library. The rug was completely clean, so it was unlikely anything had spilled on it, and while it was maintained well, it didn't seem new, so it hadn't been replaced recently. Nothing else in the library seemed strange or out of the ordinary...

She sat up straight as the realization hit her. *The fireplace*. A piece of dented cast iron would be harder to hide and would have to be replaced quickly — a metalsmith of some sort must have been called around the same time.

A slight bit of hope rose in her chest as she followed this train of thought. If it was obvious a bullet had caused the damage, then the metalsmith was probably forced to keep his mouth shut in some way. *They might have paid him off or threatened him...or maybe he knows the truth about their work, so he wouldn't say anything anyway?*

Of course, that was assuming the De Lucas' 'work' was what she suspected; given what Adriano had confessed to her so easily the previous day, she felt as though she couldn't be too far off.

The waitress...should I look into her, too? She had much less to go on in that area, considering she didn't know when it had happened. She didn't have a name or date or even the restaurant the woman worked at. And he said it was when he was in college — it could have happened ten years ago.

It was also possible he had lied to scare her, so that she'd enter his bed more easily, but something told her that if Adriano De Luca was the type to lie, it wouldn't be about something like that. He'd been so relaxed when he'd said it, as though casually recounting a fun story from his school days. After what he'd put her through in such a short time, she had to assume the worst.

Clara stared down at her uneaten sandwich, a lump forming in her throat at the thought of the woman. She might end up like that too....

...or James might...

She shook her head. *One thing at a time.* She didn't even know if the woman actually existed, but the bullet certainly did, so that was what she would pursue.

Practicality supersedes emotion, mon ange. The kind of advice only an ex-soldier could give, eyes hard and dull as pieces of flint as his mind was thrown back into the war, even as he sat at the dinner table with his daughter. Her mother nodded somberly behind him, caught up in memories of her own, and at that moment, Clara realized that such dark, sober conversations were the price to pay for being one of the fortunate children in Barfleur who got to see their fathers again. Or, in her case, getting to meet him at all.

She glanced at the clock in the kitchen, seeing that her lunch break was almost over. The rest of the day would pass slowly, now that her curiosity had a trail to follow.

But it was the thought of what she might find at the end that terrified her most.

Evening was approaching, and Clara was polishing some silver in the drawing room when another maid entered. “Oh, Clara, good.”

“Um...” she struggled to recall the young woman’s name as she set her things down. “What is it, Heidi?”

She startled as her coworker shoved a tray of lemonade in her hands. “Could you take that up to the library for me?”

“But I have to get these finished-“

“I’ll do them,” she snapped, before forcing a smile at Clara’s confused expression. “I took a bad fall yesterday and my ankle has been bothering me. I’d rather not have to go up the stairs.”

Clara could tell she was lying, but the look in her eyes was murderous, so she nodded meekly and went off with the tray. *Best not to anger her... .* Heidi was several years her senior, so getting on her bad side probably wasn’t the best idea.

She stopped in her tracks. *She didn’t tell me who the lemonade was for.*

Panic flooded her chest as she thought of Adriano’s promise to see her again. Was this some ruse to get her alone? Or was it that dreadful friend of his, Michele, wanting to threaten her again?

No, no, no....

Her breathing sped up and she could hear the glasses on the tray rattle slightly as her hands trembled. The double doors of the library seemed like the entrance to Hell, dark oak looming over her. She could hear faint voices inside...a girl?

Still shaking slightly, she balanced the tray in one hand and raised the other to knock, hoping it was some member of the household she hadn’t met yet, when the door slammed open and shoved the tray into her chest. “Ah-!”

She cringed at the sound of glass shattering, the now-empty pitcher crashing at her feet, and stared down at herself, her dress dripping lemonade. *I spoke too soon.*

Clara looked up to see a pretty teenage girl storming out of the library, screaming over her shoulder. “You fucking asshole, I swear-“

She bumped into Clara, still frozen by surprise. “Get out of my way!” she shrieked, practically spitting in her face, and the maid cowered under her ire. She huffed and stomped off, leaving the young woman to deal with the mess.

“Oh no...” She stared at the sea of sugar and glass at her feet, felt lemonade seeping through her stockings and turning her skin sticky, and felt a fleeting hopelessness in her mind.

At the very least, this was a problem that could be fixed with just a shower and a change of clothes, and she never realized how grateful she could be for something like that. But what now? *Do I call Heidi?*

She heard footsteps approaching from within the library, and glanced up to see a young man leaning against the door, watching the girl leave. “To think, about two seconds ago, she was asking me to marry her,” he remarked carelessly, more to himself than to Clara.

His gaze shifted to the maid, who suddenly felt very foolish in her lemonade-drenched maid uniform. “You’re not Heidi.”

“N-No, sir.” He didn’t look like Adriano, his face possessing a sly sharpness that was equal parts charming and disquieting. His eyes were dark, but not as dark as Viola’s, and his frame was tall and lanky.

“Sent you to do her work, hm?” He shook his head, although there was a smirk curving his thin lips. “She must still be bitter.”

“I’m sorry, uh...” She stepped backwards out of the pool of lemonade, trying to crouch. “I’ll clean this-“

“Yes, brilliant idea. You can sit there and attract more ants with that dress of yours.”

Several drops of lemonade dripped onto the floor at his words, as though on cue, and Clara grimaced. There was something in his gaze that left her confused as to what he wanted; he was almost entirely unreadable, and she still didn’t know who he was.

He waved her away, unbothered. “Go see Mrs. Christopher and go home. Someone else will see to this.”

“Oh no, I was the one who-“

“And it’s admirable that you’re so devoted to your work,” he said in a tone indicating he couldn’t care less, “but you’re as much a mess as the floor, and the longer you stand here, the worse it will get for you.” He tilted his head down the hall, gesturing for her to leave. His tone was light, but Clara could tell his patience was thin, and quietly nodded, mumbling out a “thank you” heavy with embarrassment.

She turned to go, flinching at the *squelch* of her soaked shoes, when she caught a glimpse of a figure coming down the hall. A tall, older woman was walking towards them, deep red hair flowing over her shoulders and a stern expression on her face. “Giovanni,” she said firmly, arms crossed over her chest.

“Mother,” he replied flatly, a tight smile on his face. “Watch your step.”

Whatever she had been about to say disappeared from her mind as she looked down at the mess, brows raising slightly as her gaze went to Clara, who was staring at the floor shamefully. “What on Earth happened?”

Clara hesitated, unsure if she was supposed to mention the girl, but Giovanni answered for her. “I was entertaining a guest with less-than-desirable manners, and she got caught in the crossfire, unfortunately. I was just sending her home.”

“Dressed like that?” The woman narrowed her eyes at her son before looking back at Clara. “You may use my shower, if you wish.”

“Oh, I couldn’t, I don’t want to impose.”

“I insist. After all, it was my son’s carelessness that led to this, not yours.” Her tone favored propriety rather than warmth — it was a sense of responsibility behind her offer, not kindness.

Clara swallowed, slightly nervous. This woman had the exact same eyes as Adriano, and she didn’t know if she wanted to become acquainted with his mother. Still, the look on her face said she didn’t have much of a choice, so she mumbled out a soft thanks.

“Go fetch someone to clean this up, Giovanni,” she ordered, her voice firm once more as she looked at her son. He narrowed his eyes, but pushed off the door and went down the hall, back stiff and straight.

Madiana De Luca moved with a grace befitting a ballet dancer, every gesture smooth and easy. The slight lines beneath her eyes and the hint of gray in her hair did nothing to detract from her aristocratic beauty, instead enhancing it. She wouldn’t have looked out of place in a palace, and all this only served to make Clara shrink further into herself as she followed her down the hall to her room.

The mansion contained two master bedrooms, each belonging to one of its owners. Madiana’s spoke of wealth and elegance, and Clara’s eye was drawn to the large and lavish crystal vanity against the wall.

“It was imported from France,” her employer told her, and she nodded, awestruck.

Perhaps collecting pretty French things is a family hobby, she thought to herself darkly.

She showed the maid into the bathroom. “Take as long as you require. I will have a change of clothes brought for you.”

Looking at the sleekly-cut beige dress Madiana was wearing, one that brushed the floor and cut an elegant silhouette, Clara wondered how dowdy her usual day dress would look in front of such a woman. “I-I have a dress in my bag, in the kitchens.”

“Then I will have it brought to you. Now, go on. Tell me if you need anything else.”

“Thank you so much, ma’am,” Clara murmured. “I’m sorry to cause all the trouble.”

“Not at all,” Madiana said primly, waving her off. “The mess was not your fault, and I must apologize for it happening, as well as my son and his guest.”

“Thank you.” Clara watched her shut the door, and turned to the shower.

As she stripped off her ruined clothes, she felt only the smallest relief when she saw that her underwear was still dry. Her shift was damp enough that she wouldn't be able to wear it again, and the loss of the extra layer in this house felt like she had lost an extra shield. She would have to make do, but she knew she would feel bare afterwards.

She finished quickly, not wanting to impose, and sighed as the last of the sugar and citrus was scrubbed from her skin. As she turned the water off, she paused, hearing voices outside.

"That girl stormed out of the house *very* loudly, Giovanni. Perhaps you could explain why she was here?"

"Why, Mother, *you* are the one with seven children. Can you not tell me?"

Clara covered her mouth at his crude remark, and flinched when she heard the slap. "Do not bring her here again. You are lucky your father and brother were not here to see her." Madiana's voice was cool and unbothered as she spoke, despite any anger she may have had. "At least you've listened to me and haven't tried to see that Mallozzi girl again, but that doesn't mean you can invite whomever you like here. Understand?"

"...of course. Thank you, Mother," Giovanni ground out. "If you will excuse me."

The bedroom door shut loudly, and after a moment, there was a knock, making Clara jump. "Have you finished?"

"Um, yes! Yes, thank you." She wrapped her towel around herself tightly before inching the door open.

Madiana held her bag out to her. "Please, let me know if you need anything else."

"Thank you very much, ma'am." She took her bag hesitantly, going to close the door, but Madiana caught her by the wrist.

"One more thing, Clara." She squeezed the young woman's wrist ever so slightly. "About my son's... indiscretions. I would appreciate it if you did not reveal that girl's presence at the house to anyone else. I have already had this conversation with Heidi, and I would hope you are just as agreeable."

There was a whisper of a threat in her voice, one that matched that of her eldest son's, and Clara felt something like icy water flooding her veins. "Yes, of course. I...I understand."

"Good, thank you. Take your time, there is no rush." She retracted her hand, and Clara quickly retreated back into the bathroom. She felt a shudder crawl up her spine, and resolved to dress as quickly as possible. The faster she got out of Madiana De Luca's presence, the better.

She was starting to understand why Viola had been so scared of her mother finding out about her leaving her room — the woman held an intimidating detachment, and the idea of bringing about her displeasure filled her with a certain dread.

She had her regular day dress and a replacement pair of stockings in her bag, but her shoes were ruined, so she would have to go barefoot. She folded her uniform and the other clothes that had been soaked, and hesitantly opened the bathroom door.

Lillian, Madiana's personal maid, was standing quietly next to the desk, where Madiana sat. The lady of the house looked over to Clara, raising an eyebrow. "You cannot wear your shoes either?"

"No, ma'am. They were...drenched." Clara shifted uneasily, embarrassed.

"I see." She turned to Lillian. "Go fetch a pair of flats from Mrs. Christopher, please."

"Oh, you don't have to--"

Madiana fixed her with a stare that made her voice die in her throat. As Lillian left, an awkward silence took hold of Clara, and she stared down at the pile of clothes in her arms, unwilling to look the older woman in the eye.

"Lillian has told me about you. You are French, correct?"

"Yes."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About five years now, ma'am."

She nodded, and Clara couldn't tell if she actually cared or not. Turning back to the mirror, Madiana spoke again, voice firm once more. "There is a car waiting for you outside to take you home early for today. Consider it a thank-you."

Clara raised her eyebrows, confused. "A...thank-you?"

"For returning my children's drawings to them."

The maid blinked. "How did- I mean, how did you know?"

"Cesare and Elio were quite confused as to how their pictures were slipped under their doors. Carina, interestingly, did not want to even acknowledge her own. So, I asked Viola." Madiana brushed her hair over her shoulder simply. "She told me about you, and how you promised to keep her leaving her room a secret."

She looked Clara straight in the eye. "I understand the sentiment, but be mindful not to say such things in the future. I would prefer it if you did not undermine my instructions to my own children."

"I-I never meant any harm, ma'am. She just didn't want to disappoint you."

"If so, then she wouldn't have made a mess of the library in the first place." She shook her head. "Either way, I hope you understand not to encourage such behavior again."

"Of...of course."

"Still, I know that they all appreciate you bringing them their drawings back, and Viola told me you were very kind to her. So thank you, once again."

There was a quiet knock at the door, and Madiana rose to let Lillian in. "Now, take the rest of the day off, and remember not to speak of what happened with my son." She took the flats from her maid's hands and gave them to Clara. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." She slipped on the flats quickly and slung her bag over her arm, balancing her clothes in one hand. "Thank you again for everything." *For reassuring me that this house is a den of the same kind of monster, even if the way they bare their teeth is different.*

Madiana nodded to her and, taking herself to be dismissed, Clara lowered her head and hurried out of the room. Somehow, the exit of the manor felt miles away.

Thankfully, the driver Madiana had arranged for was not a man for conversation, and the drive back to her apartment was silent.

Clara's stress about losing half of a day's pay lasted for all of thirty seconds — money seemed so irrelevant, all of a sudden — as her thoughts returned to the bullet.

Perhaps the lemonade had been a blessing of sorts; now, she had time to test her theory about the metalsmith.

As she watched the early afternoon traffic of the city from the kitchen window, she thought about what she needed to look for. Which metalsmith had the De Lucas called, and on what day? And what else had happened in that day, that warranted at least one bullet being shot in their home? Just because she hadn't seen any blood doesn't mean there had never been any. Was someone in the house injured?

Was someone else dead?

She felt a shiver up her spine, and turned away from the window. There she went, getting ahead of herself again. One thing at a time.

"One thing at a time, Alexandre," her mother whispered gently to her father as he held his head in his hands, trembling at the fact that his daughter was still scared of him, at this strange man she'd never met before. "One thing at a time."

Clara went to James's study, sitting at the desk and taking the directory from the drawer.

Whomever they had called was likely Italian as well, perhaps to ensure silence, either through respect or fear. The closer he lived to the mansion, the better, for efficiency's sake — although she sincerely doubted a metalsmith of all people would live very close to such a wealthy neighborhood. Still, the closer the better.

As she ran her finger down the columns of numbers & addresses, Clara found herself slightly glad that she'd had a soldier for a father and a *maquisard* for a mother. At the very least, they'd ingrained practicality into her brain deeply enough that even now, in such an absurd situation after five years away from home, she could look at what a situation called for and find a way to meet its requirements, no matter how dire everything seemed. No matter how much panic slammed around inside her brain.

After a while, she had narrowed it down to three potential businesses, each relatively close to the De Luca mansion and of Italian heritage. Just in case, she kept a separate note of non-Italian ones in the same area.

It was only one in the afternoon, so there were still a few hours before James came home. She could go and take a look, if she wanted to.

But Clara was not naïve enough to think she would be able to change her mind after this. If she pursued this, and she found something, she'd be stepping into the deep end.

She remembered how Nick had pleaded with her to forget everything and quit, and took a deep breath, eyes shut tightly.

The memory of Adriano throwing her against the wall in the alley, shoving her down in her own bed, forced her eyes open from terror, and as the humiliation and anger swept over her, she realized that she couldn't forget, never.

It was a cruel choice — do nothing and get hurt, or do something and get hurt. It would be six long months before Adriano was married, and there was no telling what he might decide to do with her in that time. Laying down and taking it was risky.

But if she *did* find something, and she was found out, then she could be killed, if the De Lucas were indeed what she believed them to be. James would be in danger, too.

A cruel choice, one she did not want to make. But nevertheless, she dug an old picture frame out of a box in her closet, one that held a photo of her and her family standing on the dock back in Barfleur. She stared down at the three people; her father's sturdy frame, her mother's bright smile, and herself, a pale slip of a thing at twelve years old, grinning broadly.

Clara traced the features of her younger self, suddenly feeling a sharp and deep longing for home. The salty, sea air on her face, the sun reflecting off the water as she sat at the docks with her father, bringing him his lunch for the day. Sweeter, simpler times, ones that brought tears to her eyes.

Sighing, she flipped the frame over and took the photo out. There was a sizable dent in the little embellishments on the corners, from being brought from France, and it was a convenient excuse to go into a metalsmith's, if she needed it.

A cruel choice, and certainly a difficult one. But she'd made it.

She hoped to God she'd picked right.

Chapter End Notes

Maquisards were rural guerrilla fighters in the French Resistance, typically located in southern France. Clara's mother escaped to a cell after the Fall of France, in order to protect her daughter and hopefully aid the Resistance effort.

Thanks so much for reading!

Chances Are

Chapter Summary

Clara hunts for answers while trying to reconnect with her husband, but her search proves more dangerous than she thought.

(Chances Are - Johnny Mathis)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clara picked right on her second choice.

The first business, owned by a jocular man named Francesco, yielded nothing. She'd gone inside and he informed her that she would have to wait a few weeks for him to be able to repair the picture frame, because he was 'up to his eyeballs' in work thanks to a commission he had received from a photo studio in the city. "They ordered several different props, pieces, and jewelry as well. I won't be free for a few weeks."

"That sounds exhausting," she said gently, and he gave her a grateful smile. "I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Oh, don't apologize, miss. Only a fool would resent good business. But I'm afraid I don't have time to help you." At this point, he'd gestured to a bag in the corner. "I haven't even unpacked from my trip yet."

"A trip?"

"Yes, visiting my sister's family in Pennsylvania. Three weeks in some of the most miserable weather I've ever seen, but I missed them very much."

Three weeks.... That was too long for the bullet to remain unnoticed. Someone would have had to have cleaned the library at least once in that time; she had only worked for two days before finding it.

She offered him a smile. "Well, it's alright. It's not that urgent. Good luck with your work, sir."

Clara made her way to the second business on her list, owned by a man named Dario, but stopped in front of it. A sign in the window said it was closed for the day.

"No...." Closed *now*? It was the middle of a work day. Family issues maybe?

She glanced around at the slightly busy street, making sure no one was looking at her, and slipped into the alley between the metalsmith's and the neighboring building. She crept around the back, and took note of the window, level with her chest. Peering inside, she could see that it led to a back office of some sort.

Looking close, she could see the horizontal latch of the window holding it closed from the inside. She dug through her purse for a moment, pulling out a letter opener.

You're about to break into a building, her conscience snapped at her as she slid the blade between the two sashes, under the latch.

To her relief, as she pulled the blade up, she could feel the latch lifting. As she quietly swung the window open, she inhaled. *Well, I didn't actually break anything*, she rationalized flimsily, looking around once more to make sure no one could see. Satisfied, she hoisted herself up onto the sill and clambered into the room. As she was about to swing her legs over, however, her shoe slipped on the brick, and she held back a shriek as she fell flat onto the floor, feeling the skin of her knee be scraped away on the sill.

Groaning at the sting, she pushed herself up and quickly shut and latched the window behind her. Clara carefully pulled her skirt up and winced at the sight of her bloody knee. "*Merde*," she huffed, rifling through her purse for a handkerchief. As she tied it around her knee, she smiled to herself. And to think, James told her she didn't need half the stuff she kept in there.

In his defense, breaking and entering weren't the intended uses of such items anyway.

She stood slowly, avoiding the window, and looked around. The desk was incredibly messy, and she lifted some of the papers carefully. She couldn't see any mention of the De Lucas on any of the documents, but maybe that would be too easy. He probably wouldn't keep anything questionable out, anyway.

A note of hopelessness entered her mind. What if he had gotten rid of everything? What if he wasn't involved at all?

And what if the sky opens up and dumps little flying piglets all over you? her mother's voice scolded her. *Stop second-guessing yourself and do your work.*

Damn it. Clara picked up a few more papers. Invoices, notes, drawings for different projects. The desk drawers didn't hold any money to indicate that he'd been paid off, and a notebook she found was filled with chicken scratch about people she didn't know, family most likely.

She rubbed her forehead, sighing. Her gaze fell on a calendar buried under a stack of notes. She pulled it out and looked over it carefully. Several days were marked with words indicating different projects: silverware, frames, necklace. She skimmed through the month, before her eyes caught on the word *fireplace*.

On the day the De Lucas hired her.

Her brows furrowed. A coincidence? She couldn't remember if she had seen anything that day at the house, but she had only been let in the back and into Mrs. Christopher's office for her interview. Could Dario have been called in on the same day? Had that been the day something or someone had been shot in the library?

Digging through the painful memories of the night, she thought of the loud laughter inside the bar she had passed, the one from which Adriano had seen her. The thick smell of alcohol on his breath, the taste of it on his tongue. *Were they celebrating something?*

Well, now she knew the day. She knew that something had gone well for Adriano, maybe the whole family, that day. Clara bit her thumb, mind going a mile a minute. If something had happened, she would have to try to find information inside the manor itself. The thought of it made her stomach turn over.

The day I was hired, they did something in the library. Something that gave them a reason to celebrate.

She set the calendar back down and made sure everything was back to how she had found it, or at least close. Her knee stung a little as she unlatched the window and climbed back out as fast as she could. She had to get back home, away from here. She needed a nap. She needed a drink. She needed a damn break.

James was surprised to see her home before him. “Sweethart? Back already?”

She smiled at him from the couch, setting her book down. “I have the worst luck in the world.”

“Well, hello to you too.” He took off his coat and knelt in front of her, but when he rested his hand on her knee, she winced. “What’s wrong?”

She groaned and leaned back. “I got an entire pitcher of lemonade dumped on me.”

“What!?”

“It was mortifying. Scraped my knee on the glass. They let me go home early.”

“Who dumped it on you?”

“...a door.”

He leaned in towards her. “Are you drunk?”

“Sleepy. Same thing, I guess.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “In short, I had the worst day in the world. I hope yours was better.”

He kissed the palm she rested against his cheek. “Well, we happened to get the most talkative intern on the eastern seaboard added to our department. The occasional minute or so of silence, then....”

“Oh, I bet Samuel loved that.”

“He can’t stand not being the only one who talks. I could see steam pouring out of his ears.”

Clara sighed and rested her forehead against his. “Is it too late to disappear into the Appalachian wilderness and never work again?”

“We can try. Can’t guarantee my delicate New York constitution would last long out there, though.” His nose touched hers and he watched the way her lashes fluttered as she closed her eyes. “And I don’t think they have much use for accountants in the woods.”

“Mmm.” She let her face fall to his neck, breathing him in, and he curled his arms around her waist. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, guilt clear in her voice. “I know I haven’t been the best lately.”

"Hey, you're a working woman now," James said gently, letting his lips rest against her head. "You don't need to apologize for anything."

She wondered if he would still feel the same way if he knew what had happened. Suddenly, despite the familiarity of his hands on her skin, despite their marriage of three years, his touch made her feel like she was suffocating. All she could think about was what had been done to her in her bedroom — *their* bedroom — the day before.

Clara felt a surge of anger at the thought of Adriano ripping away the comfort her husband had always given her, and she squeezed his shoulders tightly. "I've-I've missed you," she managed, drawing him closer. It wasn't a lie, she *did* miss him. She missed being able to accept his kisses without feeling disgusted with herself. She missed when everything was uncomplicated and beautiful and she could daydream about having a baby or two with the man she loved.

"I've missed you, too," he said gently, pulling back a little. "But it sounds like you've had a long day."

"It could be longer," she whispered, tugging him back to her and pressing her lips hard against his own.

Wrong, wrong, *wrong*. It all felt wrong. Not blissful, not sweet, just wrong. But she was desperate to feel him again, so she forced the pain away and wrapped her arms around his neck.

James groaned slightly as his wife pulled him down with her to the couch. "Sweetheart—"

"Ssh," she murmured against his lips, pressing his back against the cushions. "I want this."

Thank God today wasn't that tiring, he thought to himself, a little dazed as Clara shifted above him, leaning down and kissing him hard again. Damn, he'd missed her. It felt like it had been forever since they'd last held each other. But she'd been so tired and fidgety the past week that he had barely thought about it.

She pressed kisses to his neck before sitting up and undoing the buttons of her dress, pulling it over her head swiftly. James sat up and kissed her, hands skimming over her bare back to unfasten her bra. Her skin was warm and scented with white peach, and pure bliss washed through him as he traced his lips over her sternum, dotting loving kisses over her chest.

Clara sighed against him, squeezing his waist with his thighs. She ground her hips into his, making him moan into her, and raised herself in his lap, enough to reach for his waistband, but he grasped her hips, stopping her. "Wait," he whispered, letting his hand slip into her underwear. The heel of his palm pressed against her clit, and he savoured the soft whimper that fell from her lips.

His fingers traced through the wetness of her cunt before pushing inside her slowly, smiling at the way her body trembled in his arms. "Relax," he said gently, thrusting his fingers into her and watching the beautiful red flush spreading across her cheeks. "Let me take care of you."

He kept one arm around her hips, holding her still as he thrusted his fingers, enjoying how she bit her lip to hide her moans. Even after three years of marriage, she would still get embarrassed, but he loved the sounds she made, and didn't want her to hide them.

Clara moved her hips in time with his fingers, hands on his shoulders, and he had to force himself to take it slow, to not scoop her into his arms and carry her to the bed because *it's been ages and I'm going insane.*

She gasped into his neck and he felt her tighten around his fingers, bringing a smile to his face, and this time he let her undo his belt and unzip his pants.

James kissed her hard as she sank down onto him, and for a moment they held each other tight and it was like pure heaven. God, he'd never get tired of feeling her, kissing her, and for a minute he felt like she was too good for him, but then she raised her hips and pushed back down onto him and his brain was wiped clean. "Clara," he panted against her lips, and she cradled his face in her hands and kissed him again, as though to stop him from talking anymore. Well, that was alright with him — there were other things to do.

They were frantic and hurried in their lovemaking, which spoke to how desperate they were to touch each other again, although their reasons were quite a bit different. James felt her tears drip onto his face, but he'd certainly fucked her hard enough in the past to make her cry, so he didn't think much of it this time, except for a sizable ego boost.

The couch shook slightly with their movements and Clara bit his lip and tugged at his hair, like she needed proof that he was real and tangible and hers, as though fucking him wasn't nearly enough. She came around him with a sob, hips slowing, and he twisted his body to press her back down into the cushions and drive himself into her. He bent her legs against her chest and her head hit the armrest as he thrust into her.

He kissed her ear, her jaw, her neck. His lips touched everywhere they could, and as she clawed at his back, he bit down on her collarbone. She whined in surprise, but it was more pleasure than pain and it didn't matter as long as it was him.

James felt his own climax approaching and went to pull out of her, but she locked her ankles around the small of his back and held him close. "Clara... h-have to—"

"Please," she whispered, holding his face against her chest so he couldn't see that she was still crying. "Just this once?"

He wanted to ask *are you sure, what if* but she was rocking her hips up against his and he didn't have the willpower to argue so he buried himself inside her and let go, gasping and panting against her.

Clara shuddered as she felt warmth flood her, and quickly wiped her tears away with one hand, the other resting against her husband's nape. "That was nice," he mumbled, eyes closed as he lay on top of her. She didn't know how to respond, so she just gave an assenting murmur and held him loosely.

After a moment, she spoke up quietly. "We should wash up before we ruin the couch."

"Mm. Few more minutes." His whole body sagged against her, and she just sighed and let her head fall back. James let his thumb press against the hickeys he'd given her, and she felt a sudden prick of fear. What if Adriano took her again and saw it? Would he be angry?

God, who cares anymore. He knew she was married, seemed to savor the fact, and she owed him nothing. She just wanted her husband, that's all — she had a right to that.

She had a lot to do tomorrow, remembering what she'd found in the metalsmith's. But for now, she was fine just laying down and melting away.

Adriano's personal maid was a young woman named Marlene, who was envied by many of the other women who worked in the manor, mostly because she got to spend the most time with the young master. Granted, it wasn't much; merely bringing him breakfast, and coming when called, which he didn't do very much because he was out of the house so often, but it was something.

She had knocked on his door that morning with a tray, like always, and he replied with a *Come in*, like always, but when she entered, he wasn't ready and dressed like usual. He was lounging in bed, his hair not even brushed, and it seemed as though he had only woken up a few minutes ago.

"Sir?"

"Good morning, Marlene. I'll take it here, thank you." He gestured her to him, and she hesitantly walked forward to set the tray down on his lap.

"Sir, are you ill?" she managed to ask, forcing her eyes not to stray to his bare arms.

"No, I didn't sleep well and felt I deserved a few extra minutes." He gave her an apologetic frown.
"I hope it's not an inconvenience."

"No, of course not!" She squeaked, turning swiftly to the wardrobe. "I can get a suit ready for you, if you'd like."

"Thank you."

My God! The others would be so jealous when she told them. He looked so handsome, even when he hadn't gotten out of bed, and she had to keep from fanning her reddening cheeks so he wouldn't notice. She hazarded a glance back at him, and saw that he was looking out the window as he sipped his coffee.

After a few minutes, he'd finished breakfast, and there was another knock at the door. "Come in."

Marlene turned to stare quizzically as the door opened to reveal the new girl, Clara...Ellison? Evans? Something with an E. She was carrying a large basket full of sheets.

"Oh, good morning, Clara." Adriano smiled at her, and she blinked, confused.

"...good morning. I was told to change the sheets, but I see now is a bad time."

"Not at all. I've finished eating and will be leaving shortly." He lifted the tray and Marlene hurried forward to take it. "Thank you, Marlene, you can go now."

"I, uh, yes." She looked at Clara, who seemed to be gripping the basket even tighter now. Well, she wasn't someone to worry about, she was married, after all. "Good day."

"Good day," the young woman mumbled, and Marlene thought she saw a shadow pass over her face before the door closed.

For a moment, the two just stared at each other, waiting for the other to talk. Finally, Clara spoke. “Why are you still here?” she asked, lips pressed in a thin line. He was usually out of the house by now, but here he was, in bed!

“I had trouble sleeping.” Despite his earlier remark that he’d be leaving soon, he leaned back against the headboard, smiling at her. “I heard you met my mother yesterday.”

“Yes. Will you let me change the sheets now?”

“You can do that later. I’d like you to clear off the desk first, if you don’t mind.”

She huffed and set the basket down, and turned to the desk, which was covered with papers, pencils, and some other strange things she couldn’t identify under it all. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen it this messy.”

“You’ve only worked here a few days, you don’t know what’s usual. Besides, it’ll give us a chance to talk.”

Oh yes, I know how much you love talking.

She squinted at the papers as she swept them up into neat stacks, but evidently it was too much to hope they would have anything suspicious on them; they were just numbers and meaningless scribbles. A sketch or two of some kind of room. “Is there anything I should get rid of?”

“All of them. Just some old things I found in the drawers.” He still did not move.

Clara picked up one of the piles she’d made and turned to the wastebasket, but something in it gave her pause. She knelt, and pulled out a familiar drawing. “You threw this out?”

He squinted at the picture Viola had drawn of them both. “Oh, yes, you can leave that in there.”

“She drew this for you! It was her favorite!”

Adriano shrugged. “She draws all the time. Sooner or later she’ll make a new one and it’ll end up the same. It doesn’t matter.”

Clara glared at him, disgusted. “You’re horrible.”

“I feel our past encounters have proven that enough that you don’t need to be so surprised.” He narrowed his eyes in a scathing grin. “Throw it out, or keep it. We both know what you’ll do.”

Her hands trembled remembering the excitement the little girl had about the drawing. But looking at it still made her uneasy, and he was staring at her, so she hesitantly put the paper on the bottom of the stack and dropped it all in the wastebasket.

“It’s sweet of you to get so angry for her sake, but it’s not as though I tear the things up in front of her.”

“I hope she never finds out what you’re actually like,” she snapped, shoving more papers into the bin.

"Yes, and I do as well. She'd have to make me very angry for that." He tilted his head slightly as he watched her. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No." She picked up some of the pens and put them to the side.

"Really? Were you too much for your parents?"

She slammed down the new stack she had been making and whirled around to face him. "My life," she said, voice quaking in rage, "is *not* some novel for you to flip through and peruse at your leisure. You've taken quite enough from me, and I don't have to answer any of your questions."

He chuckled derisively. "*Tesorina*, if your life was a novel, it would be the most dreadfully boring affair ever written."

"How *dare* you—"

"Please, don't pretend to be complex. You left your home for something new, married the first man who looked at you, and now you're content to waste away in motherly tedium once you pop out two or three little French brats. Have I missed anything?"

"Well, if you already know everything, if you're already *so* familiar with my life, why do you even bother asking?" Clara's voice rose, her eyes burning. "Why can't you leave me be and stop with all your pointless little questions if you don't even care about the answers!?"

His grin did not budge. "Perhaps I simply like hearing your voice."

Enraged, Clara turned back to the desk, and saw something glint in the corner. For a moment, she forgot her anger, and slowly pushed away papers covering the object. It was a framed photograph of a young woman, a portrait posed and taken in a subdued but elegant manner. The woman's hair was light, her features classically beautiful, and Clara was sure she'd seen her somewhere before.

"Ah, yes. My fiancée." She heard Adriano rise from the bed and come behind her, taking the photograph in hand. "This was from a few months ago, when it was first arranged. More out of tradition than anything, but I can't deny she's lovely. Don't you think?"

Clara was still squinting at the picture, unable to place the woman's face. Adriano glanced down at her, watching her expression with amusement, and traced his finger up her arm. "Are you angry?"

"Should I be?" she asked testily.

"I would think a simple woman such as yourself would balk at my actions as an engaged man."

She prickled at his condescending tone, but he was gripping her shoulder so that she couldn't turn towards him. "Does marriage mean nothing to you?" Perhaps it was a childish question, but she couldn't help being appalled at how little he cared.

He laughed. "Of course not. Once she's my wife, she'll be the only woman I have. But it's been months, and I have my needs. She's a good Catholic woman I can't touch except in the marriage bed..." He tugged at her skirt almost teasingly. "But I'm free to touch *you* as I like."

"I admit, I lied to you before, *tesorina*. As lovely as your voice is, that is not why I ask."

He took her shoulders from behind, and she felt she had made a mistake. “I ask you,” he whispered lowly into the hair next to her ear, “because I want to hear it in your voice when you realize how pitiful it’s all been. I ask because I want you to admit how dull and uninspired the life you chose is. I ask because I’m *bored*, Clara, dreadfully bored, and you entertain me.”

“Why not have Marlene *entertain* you?” she snapped, hand reaching up to claw at his grip on her. “Or Lillian, or Heidi, or *any* of the many women who actually want you? What’s stopping me from leaving—“ *aside from what I think you are* “-and disappearing from your life?”

“Are you so stupid to think you can quit and leave it at that? What’s there to keep me from you?” He pulled her so that she was facing him, even as she struggled in his grasp, and caught hold of her left hand, looking at her ring. “This?”

She tried to pull her hand away, but he squeezed tellingly, forcing her to still. “I’m not going to let you quit, Clara, and *this* -“ he slid the ring off her finger, “-won’t protect you from me.”

“Give it back.” Her voice turned tremulous. “Give-give it back, you have no right to take that.”

“Don’t worry, Clara — ring or not, you’re still a married woman. I’ll return this to you when I’m done, though, if that’s what you want.” He held it away, and she tried to lunge for it, but he grabbed her arm harshly and twisted, making her wail.

Adriano pulled her roughly and forced her down on the bed, and when she opened her mouth to scream and cry — but not beg, not when he would only take pleasure in it— his hand pressed hard over her lips, and her voice dissolved on her tongue.

She raised her arms to shove him off, but he was immovable, and his other hand raised to undo the buttons of her dress. “As for Marlene, she wouldn’t be able to keep quiet, even if I did want her. I’m going to be married in half a year, and I can’t have some giddy little girl bragging to her friends that I fucked her. Would you have married your husband if you heard that he strayed?”

He reached the fourth button and the dress shifted, revealing her collarbone and making him stop. “Speaking of the man....” He rubbed his thumb over where Clara had covered the mark with concealer, and his eyes narrowed. “I remember everywhere I’ve touched you, and I didn’t leave that on you.”

He finally moved his hand away from her mouth, and she gasped for breath while she glowered at him. “He’s the man I love.”

“Indeed. I see you had no issue acting on my words.”

She remembered how he had told her that she was free to touch James, to “take care of him,” and her vision turned red. She lifted her leg to knee him, but he forced her legs apart so that her thighs were slung loosely around his hips. He smiled down at her, and she could see malice flickering in his eyes. “Is he good?”

He pinned her arms down and she writhed under him. “ *Va te faire foutre* ,” she spat in his face, and his grin only widened.

“If he was good, then there’s no reason for me to be, is there?”

His eyes flicked to her leg, and he noticed the bandage on her knee. "What happened here?" He let his hand skim down her thigh until it rested on her knee.

A deafening thud suddenly rocked the door, giving the pair pause. "Adriano," a low, vaguely familiar voice called.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Why can no one ever let me be?" He looked back down at Clara, who could only scowl at him. "Lady Luck seems to be on your side today, *tesorina*."

He released her, and she pushed herself off the bed, shoving away from him. "My ring," she hissed, holding her hand out. "Now."

He narrowed his eyes at her, and picked up her ring from where he'd placed it on his nightstand. She went to take it from him, and his hand shot out, crushing around her forearm and pulling her close. "I'll give this back," he murmured into her ear "if you come to my study at the end of the day, before you leave. Otherwise, you can return home without it."

She dug her nails into his closed fist, shaking with rage. "You said you would give it back—"

"—once I was done. But we've been interrupted, haven't we?" He pulled his hand away from her and let go of her forearm. "Go on, I'm sure you have much on your plate for today. I expect you on time."

There was another pounding on the door. "Your father needs to speak with us, open up already." The man sounded irritated.

"Apologies, Mick. One second." Adriano went over to the suit Marlene had laid out on his chair and pulled on the button-down. He nodded his head at the basket of clean sheets Clara had brought in. "Take those. I'm sure Mrs. Christopher will understand."

She stared at his back as he buttoned up his shirt, and beneath her anger, she felt hopelessness. He was so much taller than her, and she could see the well-sculpted lines of his muscles underneath the fabric. She wondered how everyone looked from his view — smaller, weaker, or maybe he didn't even notice them. If only she could have been like them.

She picked up the basket, and when she turned she saw him slip her ring into the pocket of his pants. She'd loved that ring so much when James had first taken her hand and slid it onto her finger, and she'd almost given it back when she'd learned what he'd given up to propose. Thinking about it always made her heart swell with love, but now, fear took its place; it seemed like he'd taken all she had and kept it in his pocket.

She was jerked out of her thoughts as he opened the door, and the other man stepped into the room, the one named Michele. "We're late—" His eyes landed on her, and there was the slightest, almost imperceptible twitch in his expression. "-ah."

Clara didn't break his gaze, but she could feel a small tremble in her hands. The black granite of his eyes bore into her, reflecting back the image of a woman he thought of as a whorish nuisance. She didn't blame him, though, not when she thought worse of herself every waking minute of the day.

"Oh, you two haven't been introduced, have you?" Adriano glanced between them. "Michele, this is Clara Edwards."

The basket gave her an excuse to not offer a handshake, but neither of them were inclined to touch each other. They were tied together by a tenuous thread in the form of the man between them, and there was no desire to know more than that.

He gave her a tight nod that she returned in kind, before she ducked her head and muttered an “Excuse me.” He stepped to the side and gave her room to leave, shutting the door behind her.

Michele looked at Adriano, who was knotting his tie. The man glanced up at him. “I see you’re saving your admonishments today.”

He just shook his head. “I’ve said my piece the same way I always do. I don’t pretend you have to listen.”

“A sound way of thinking.” He brushed past him and went to leave. “You could fuck her too, if you like. God knows you need it.”

“I appreciate the offer, but we still have work to do,” Michele replied drily. “I see she doesn’t even keep her ring on, now.”

He caught a glimpse of how Adriano’s lips twitched slightly, but that was the only answer he received.

Clara had returned to the laundry room and hid the basket in a corner, hoping no one would see it and ask any questions as to why she hadn’t changed the sheets. She was directed towards the dining room to clean, along with Amelia and Madison, the other two maids she worked with.

She wiped down the windows as Madison chattered at Amelia behind her. “Don’t you think it was a little much, though?”

“She’s rich, Maddie, why wouldn’t she wear fur? When Mrs. De Luca wears fur, you can’t stop babbling about how nice she looks, but with her-”

“Oh, you know what I mean. You see how she looks at some of the men who come in here, and she isn’t even married yet.”

“...don’t you do the same thing?”

Clara heard Madison scoff and felt a tap on her shoulder. “What do *you* think, Clara?”

“Um?” She blinked, confused. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what....”

“Oh right, you’ve only been here a few days.” She put her hands on her hips. “You haven’t met Miss Milena yet, have you?”

Milena.... The eldest daughter. “No, I haven’t. Why?”

“Maddie hates her,” Amelia remarked as she lifted a crystal vase to dust under it. “She’s jealous.”

“I’m not *jealous*, Amelia! She’s just irritating,” she snapped. “You should have seen her last week, batting her lashes at Mr. Williams. It was sickening.”

"Who's Mr. Williams?"

"You know, the shipping magnate? His son showed up at the house last week. We were off at that point, but she was all over him when we left." Madison wrinkled her nose. "It's unseemly."

"*Unseemly?* It's not the seventeen hundreds, Maddie."

"Oh, you get my point, Amelia!"

Clara watched the two bicker, her brows furrowing. The Williams Shipping Company...did this have anything to do with that night?

She frowned as she slowly dusted the sill. Domizio De Luca made his fortune from car manufacturing — working with a national shipping company wasn't exactly suspicious. But why would Matthew Williams be visiting so late in the evening? She couldn't remember seeing anything in the newspapers about the company....

Clara rubbed the back of her neck, contemplating. There wasn't much she could do without drawing attention, outside of wandering around the outside of the Williams building. She racked her brains for anything to follow, any shred of knowledge she might have held that was more helpful than it seemed.

"Oh, by the way, Clara." Amelia gave her an inviting smile. "Maddie and I were going to go shopping this afternoon. Would you like to join us?"

"I'm going to buy some furs of my own," Madison said, a proud glint in her eye.

"You know you can't afford furs, Maddie."

"You don't need to comment on *everything* I say, Amy!!"

She was about to say that she couldn't, she had errands to run — snooping, that is — and maybe some other day, when she paused. She'd seen Matthew's wife, Isabella, a few times in the boutique Ella worked at before she got pregnant. She was a regular customer, and the employees knew her well. Would they know something?

"I'd love to, Amelia. That sounds wonderful."

Clara called James at lunch to let him know that she'd be out late with the girls from work, and that she wasn't sure when she'd be back. She said she was sorry and there were leftovers in the fridge and she'd make it up to him, but he just told her to enjoy herself and get something nice. "*Show me what you bought once you get home.*"

"You just say everything looks nice!"

"*And I'm never wrong.*"

She murmured her love to him, wishing he was in front of her. She wanted to kiss him again, kiss him hard and long and never let him go. Fall into bed with him like she had when they were first married, and spend the day curled up against each other, lips soft and swollen with the taste of him. She'd been a shy, blushing bride then, but now, she could only dream of having that again.

She pushed those desires away as the day ended and she was left staring at the doors of Adriano's study. She would not let her image of her husband be tainted by the man's touch.

She knocked, but there was no answer. Once again, but still, it was quiet on the other side of the door. She let her hand rest on the handle, but it was locked.

"He's busy." She jumped and turned to see Michele standing behind her, turning a key over in his hands. He raised his gaze to her. "Told me to come see you."

He stepped towards her and she moved away, frightened, but he just reached forward and unlocked the door. "Inside."

Clara wanted to refuse, but then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. *Her* ring.

She went inside. He followed and closed the door.

She was a beautiful woman, Michele would give her that. Maybe even beautiful enough for him to understand why Adriano was fooling around with her. But the mix of fear and fury in her eyes made him wary. She looked ready to tackle him when she saw he had the ring.

While they had watched the men beat an outspoken bartender into mulch, Adriano had taken it out of his pocket and stared at it.

"That hers?"

"Indeed. She gave it to me for safekeeping." Michele didn't believe this now, seeing the anger in her gaze, but then he had just let his boss press the ring into his hand, inviting him to look.

It wouldn't have fit on his pinky finger, with how small it was. It was a little old-fashioned, but it was clean and polished. For an adulteress, she showed it a lot of care. "I'd hate to be the poor sap that gave this to her." He remembered the man with the pink roses and shook his head.

Adriano had just shrugged, glanced over briefly at a particularly loud scream from the bartender before turning back. "I'm sure she's sweet enough to him to make up for it. My mother said she seemed a polite, well-mannered young woman."

"Is she?"

He smirked a salacious little grin, the kind young men shared with each other when they boasted about the nights they weren't alone. "Not with me. She spits and scratches like a fucking wildcat."

Michele rolled his eyes and made to give back the ring, but Adriano pushed it back towards him. "She'll be waiting in front of my study for me. I was going to meet her, but you need it more than me."

"You know what I need? A good night's sleep and a boss that doesn't fuck around when he's about to get married."

"Ah, Mick--"

"If you start telling me about her pussy I'm dumping that bartender's corpse in your bed, see if he can warm it enough for you."

Adriano had just laughed. Michele was the only person who could speak to him like that and walk away with his tongue and all his teeth still in his mouth. When you were raised together twenty years, you tended to be more forgiving. "Go to her. Give her back the ring, ask for something in return if you want. Doesn't matter to me." He stared at the ring, and there was something in the green of his eyes, that sadistic glint that Michele had learned to avoid bringing about. "Take her mouth, she's good with it."

As he turned the ring over in his hands, Michele was certain that Adriano's offer had been less of a reward for him and more of a punishment for her. He'd been angry at her this morning, from the way he looked at her when she left his room.

She stood in front of him, and Michele saw the tremble of her hands, the wavering desperation in her eyes. She didn't look like a woman fucking her employer for a good time. She looked like half her soul had been taken from her and he was holding it in the palm of his hand.

Some small part of him, one that retained some scraps of decency, prompted him to toss the ring at her. Her head snapped up in surprise, but she grabbed it out of the air, cupping the delicate circle of gold in her hands.

"He told me to give that to you." Not a lie.

She stared down at it, as though she didn't believe that was the end of it. "...and?"

And I'm tired of him offering me his women just to remind me I only get what he gives.

"And nothing." He watched as she stood still, some sort of tension leaving her shoulders, and stepped forward, taking her hand and slipping the ring back on her finger. "Take it and go. Don't come back, if you can help it." At this rate, she'd be a loose end that he'd be forced to tie off.

"I can't help it," she whispered, pulling her hands away and rubbing her thumb over the grey diamonds, the ones that matched her sorrow-stained eyes. He wasn't sure how to answer.

She didn't thank him, only brushing past him and leaving. Adriano would ask him what he got in return. He would say she was, indeed, good with her mouth. And Adriano would get to feel triumphant about putting his unwitting mistress in her place.

Michele really did need to sleep.

"Clara, is that you?" Melanie stepped out from behind the counter and hugged the young woman. "Oh, it's so good to see you. How's Ella?"

"She's doing just fine. Getting bigger every day."

"Tell her we want her back soon!"

Amelia and Madison fluttered about the racks, picking out clothes and holding them up to each other. Clara wished she could join them, but there was something else on her mind. "Melanie, have you seen Isabella Williams around lately? Ella and I have been wondering about her."

Melanie's eyes widened slightly, and she tugged on Clara's wrist, pulling her to the perfume displays. "Oh, you have no idea." She picked up a tester and leaned in to hold it up to Clara, so she could whisper. "Rumor has it, her daughter's pregnant!"

Clara blinked. "What?"

"Yep, little miss Abigail Williams has a bun in the oven, or so I hear. You might've seen her in here before, brown hair, hazel eyes?"

Clara remembered the girl who had bumped into her the day before, the one who'd been in the library with Giovanni. "Yeah...?"

"Well, I heard she was fooling around with some boy, and her father heard about it. I think he got into a fight with the kid, he's got a broken hand!"

"Oh my," she murmured, glancing over at the perfumes. "What will she do?"

"I've seen the boy they think did it. He *reeks* of money." Melanie sniffed one of the perfumes and shook her head, evidently feeling it didn't suit Clara. "I think she was lying. Just wanted a way to get that money, you know?"

Clara hummed, remembering the way the girl had stormed out of the library, the nonchalance with which Giovanni considered her. "Poor Mr. Williams, getting his hand broken for nothing."

"I hope for his sake he at least got one punch on the kid — he's a little, well...sneaky-looking." She found a perfume she approved of and handed the package to Clara. "Well, most of it is rumors, anyway. The 'official' reason he got hurt is a bad fall he took a little more than a week ago. But you know me, I don't like to gossip."

"You? Gossip? Never," Clara said, laughing softly, and Melanie winked. "A little more than a week ago, huh...." *When I was hired.*

"Clara?" She turned around to see Madison holding up two scarves. "Pink or white?"

"The pink one looks nice."

"Mmm..." She glanced between them. "I'll get the white one."

"My God, you found Ella's twin." Melanie snickered and Clara giggled.

As she returned to the others, her mind walked through what she'd learned. The granddaughter of a shipping magnate lied about Giovanni De Luca getting her pregnant, and her father got into a fight with *someone* and had his hand broken.

Well, that couldn't have been all of it. You didn't celebrate something so little. And what about the bullet?

This thing's going to follow me around until the end of my days.

She said goodbye to Amelia and Madison a while later, a couple bags in her arms full of clothes she didn't really need but was pressured into buying. But they were pretty, and the perfume was nice at

least.

The light of the fading day poured over her like gold, etching silhouettes into the street. Clara had taken a taxi out to drop her near the water, so she could watch the sun turn the sea into honey. She needed time to think and she didn't want to return to James with all of this on her mind.

Back home in Barfleur, she would sit at the docks with her parents, and watch the cresting waves as the day ended. She could remember the first time her father had brought her out; she had been six years old, still not entirely trusting of the man who her mother said was her father, but her eyes had rounded in awe at the sight of the sea.

They sat at the end of the dock and she kicked her little legs over the water. Her father seemed right at home, his sun-kissed skin and tousled, honey-brown hair glowing in the muted light. He looked like a man made out of butterscotch. Since he'd come back from the war, he'd looked worn, like a shrunken shell of a man, despite his youth, but to little Clara, the sea seemed to bring him back to life.

I've spent my whole life out here on the docks, mon ange. There's nowhere I feel more at home. He ruffled her hair. *Don't tell Maman I said that.*

Now, Clara sat and let her legs hang off the edge of the dock, and closed her eyes, trying to pretend she was normal again.

Time flowed by, and the evening light turned dusky. She didn't feel much better when she opened her eyes, and stood heavily, scooping her bags into her arms and preparing to go home.

As she returned to the sidewalk, she heard a car approach, making her pause. The street was usually empty at this time of day, everyone inside and having dinner. She squinted, and saw a car all the way at the end of the block, and felt her heart drop into her stomach — she'd seen that car before, in front of the De Luca mansion.

She almost dropped all her things, but gathered herself and ducked into a narrow alley, squeezing into the small space. After a minute, the car trundled past, and she realized it was driving down to the docks.

She let a few moments pass and peeked her head out of the alley. The light had faded almost completely now, and she had to squint to see anything with the streetlamps. There were three men down there, two of them carrying something.

Leaving the bags in the alley, Clara crept out and snuck towards the back of the guard building on the dock. Every noise she made seemed magnified by a thousand times, and she pressed herself flat against the brick, edging forward and looking out around the corner.

She could only see the backs of the men's heads as they loitered around what appeared to be an oil drum. The two that were carrying the big sack unwrapped part of it, and her blood went cold as the faint light of the street lamp illuminated the dead man's face.

She didn't recognize him, but she didn't know if anyone could; at least half of his face looked like it was crushed in.

The third man seemed to be fiddling with the corpse's hand, but she hardly registered it, pure fear swallowing her whole.

So I dressed myself and...I strangled her.

The realization was the last nail in her coffin. She'd been right, but God, she wished she wasn't — of course Nick couldn't help her, of course Adriano didn't shy away from hurting her. Of course Madiana's soft spoken threats carried grains of promise in them.

She started to move away, but the hem of her skirt scraped against the brick wall. In the silence of the docks, it was a deafening noise.

She saw one of the men's heads jerk up and quickly pulled back around the corner, trembling.

"...did you hear that?"

"I'll go check."

She could hear footsteps coming towards her and froze, terrified. Could she run? No, that would only guarantee her death. *No, no!*

Before she could make a break for it, the man rounded the corner, and when he met her eyes, his own widened.

Clara blinked when she saw who he was. *Michele?*

He lunged at her, one hand gripping the back of her neck and the other pressing over her mouth. She squeaked, but he only tightened his hold on her, muffling her voice. Pure rage colored his dark eyes.

"You..."

She whimpered against his palm, and as his hand tightened on her neck, a cold, damning realization swept through her.

I dug too deep.

Chapter End Notes

Wouldn't it be funny if I ended the story like this???

Just kidding...

I hope you enjoyed! Now we can add "great fuck" to the list of reasons of why James is perfect.

There might be a slightly longer update gap than usual until the next chapter. Shitty of me, I know, especially with this cliffhanger, but I've got finals and my brain is shrinking by the minute.

Thanks for reading!

Moonlight Serenade

Chapter Summary

Clara's brush with death opens the door to a world darker and more dangerous than she's ever known.

Chapter Notes

This took an embarrassingly long time. It's almost 1 AM right now, so if there are any glaring mistakes, please forgive me. Sorry for that cliffhanger...enjoy!

(Moonlight Serenade by Glenn Miller)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It would be so easy.

Her neck was slim, his hand easily wrapping around it, and he knew it wouldn't take much. A quick jerk, and it would be over. She wouldn't even feel it.

Her eyes, which had earlier been steeped in despair, now stared at him in pure fear. Her hands were curled uselessly against his arms. Dimly, he was aware of the scent of white peach — her perfume? — and the slow, seemingly muffled sounds of the water.

“Mick? What’s going on?” Evan called to him from the dock, and her expression froze. She squeezed her eyes shut, and he could feel her body tremble.

Michele raised his head, and called back to the men. “It’s nothing, just a stray cat.”

Her eyes opened again. He could see confusion in them.

He leaned down to her, whispering so quietly she had to strain to hear him. “If you make a single noise, or try to run away, your husband is going to wake up to a very unpleasant sight on his doorstep. Understand?”

She nodded, quivering, and he slowly let her go. True to her word, she said nothing, and he gave her shoulder a warning squeeze before turning back and revealing himself to his men. “Once you two are done, go to Gabe’s and take the night off. I’ll finish up.”

“Not joining us, Mick?”

Their disappointment was almost convincing, and he waved them off. “Just leave me the car and put whatever you want on my tab. Now get lost.”

The two looked at each other and shrugged, not ones to look a gift horse in the mouth. “You got it, boss!”

Michele glanced behind him, seeing Clara standing there, eyes darting around in panic. Her feet were shifting slightly, as though she was contemplating making a break for it, but she stayed flattened against the wall, trying to slow her breathing.

Good. He knew from experience that it was practically impossible to have a productive conversation with someone who was hyperventilating. Still, her face was turning really red. It was almost concerning. Almost.

Really, her being scared worked in his favor; it would be easier to get the truth out of her.

Easier, and hopefully less messy.

How far could I swim?

That was how desperate she was. Staring into the water, which had turned oily black with nightfall, Clara was wondering if there was a chance she could escape to safety. She’d been raised in a fishing town - she could swim before she could skip.

But no. No, she could see something in the way he was standing, like he was ready to jump on her at any moment. With the strength he had gripped her with, she could tell that, under his thick coat, his arms were corded with muscle.

His hands had been covered in nicks and scars. She didn’t want to know from what. So she stayed put.

The dead man’s face was burned into her vision, and as she listened to the sounds of the other men ‘finishing up,’ her mind conjured worse and worse images of what Michele might do to her. The last time she’d been alone with only a mafioso and the moon for company, her heart had been shredded to pieces. She hadn’t even been able to make it whole again, yet.

Her breaths were becoming shorter, more labored, and strangely, faced with this terrifying abyss of a man, she did not think of James or her parents. Instead, she thought of Nick. What would he think if she turned up tomorrow with her neck snapped, discarded like a piece of trash? Surely he would realize what had happened to her. Would he feel guilty? Reveal the truth to James, or hide his knowledge?

It did not matter. She couldn’t even be angry. She hadn’t meant to come upon this grisly scene, so how could she blame him? There was nothing to do but wait and see what Michele had planned for her.

Clara’s head tilted back slightly, her whole weight against the wall. She feared that if she moved, she’d fall over. Michele did not look at her, but she could hear footsteps approaching them.

There was a clink of metal, and Michele caught the keyring the man tossed him easily. “‘Night, boss.” He was standing several feet away, unable to see her.

“Goodnight, Evan. Tell Gabe I said hello.”

She heard the men leaving, speaking and laughing with each other, and after a few moments, Michele turned back to her. His face was completely blank, which somehow only heightened her nerves. Wordlessly, he took her arm in a death grip, and pulled her with him as he walked to the car.

Terror started to climb up her throat, sharp and hot, and when her lips were able to form the words, they weren't what she expected. "My-my things."

He was just about to open the car door when she spoke. "What?"

"I went shopping earlier. My bags, they're...." She glanced back at the alley she'd left them in, swallowing nervously. It might've been silly, but if he let her go back and get them, it would have to mean he would let her live, right? What was the point in retrieving a dead woman's shopping bags? Leaving them behind would show she'd been there.

Michele scowled so deeply that anyone passing by would have assumed Clara had attacked his grandmother. He yanked open the door and shoved her into the car. "Stay there." This comment was a little unnecessary, as he then immediately locked her inside.

Clara gripped the leather seat so tightly she could have ripped it open. He would be back in mere moments, and...what did she have on her? A hairpin that might do some damage if she used enough force and her nails? *I'm dead. And if I'm not dead....* She felt nausea bubbling up in her throat.

If she had just gone back home when she was done, she would be cocooned in her warm bed, her husband lying peacefully next to her. He had a day off tomorrow, she remembered, which meant they would both sleep in for a while, one of the few vices the couple had. James liked to wake her up with his lips, darting over the skin of her neck and collarbone.

Such memories, which usually sent a warm blush into Clara's cheeks, now only filled her with longing, and a nameless dread she couldn't shake. Those days were gone and she could barely touch him without feeling she had stabbed him in the back. Did it even matter, now? What reason was there for Michele to keep her alive? She'd be dead in an alleyway before sunrise, but not before he got his use out of her.

She could feel tears streaming down her cheeks, and wiped them away hurriedly. Now she knew crying only inflamed men, and she wouldn't give him the satisfaction. She clutched her hairpin tightly and did her best to steady her hands. If she was lucky, she might be able to leave a mark before he....

She heard the trunk slam, making her jump; she'd been so absorbed in her thoughts she hadn't even heard him approach. Time seemed to slow as he rounded the car and opened the driver's side door. He glanced at the hairpin she was holding, but didn't acknowledge it. Instead, he clicked his seatbelt, and without a word, started the car.

Clara pressed further into the seat as he drove, sensing that she wasn't supposed to speak.

It felt like millennia had passed before Michele pulled the car into a small garage. They were on a familiar street, one with many office buildings and corporations. Clara's mind wandered to her

husband; was he wondering where she was? Or had he just gone to bed? She'd told him not to wait for her. Oh, she hoped he was asleep, safe and asleep. Maybe she'd be home next to him, soon.

A small spark of hope lit inside her chest, but she smothered it quickly. She was terrified to break the silence, the seemingly protective silence that ensured that if she wasn't safe, she at least wasn't dead. She didn't dare look over at Michele, instead digging her nails into her stockings, but she could feel his gaze burning a hole through her skull. "I didn't know you'd be there."

More silence. He just kept staring at her. She swallowed and tried to keep her voice steady. "I swear. I just wanted to look at the water and go home."

"I believe you." She saw the small flame of his lighter ignite in the corner of her eye, and finally turned towards him. Cigarette smoke clouded her vision to the sharp lines of his face.

"Then why am I here?" Clara asked, unable to stop herself. "If you know I didn't mean to be there—"

"What exactly," he said slowly, patiently, "did you see?"

"I didn't— nothing. I didn't see anything." Her tongue felt wooden.

"Right. Of course. Nothing at all." He exhaled, filling the space between them with more smoke. "You know, I always forget to keep an ashtray in this car." His hand shot out with almost inhuman speed, grabbing her by the jaw and yanking her close. "I have to find new places to stub the damn things out."

The cigarette hung threateningly above her eye, and she gripped his wrist, pure terror pumping through her heart. "Now, everyone gets one chance to lie to me. That was yours. I won't ask again."

Clara's eyes were starting to sting from the smoke, and she squeezed them shut, licking her lips before speaking hoarsely. "I saw the man's face."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No. He was too...no." The memory of his torn, beaten features pulled a slight sob from her lips. "Let me go."

She heard his low, answering hum, and when he did release her, she pulled back so fast she almost hit the car door. "I won't say anything."

"I know. You probably just want to go back to living a quiet life with your husband, fucking your boss while he's at work." He got out of the car and dropped the cigarette before going to her side and opening her door for her. "Hurry up, we're expected." Michele offered his hand to her, but she avoided it as she hesitantly got out.

She trailed behind him as he walked out of the garage, watching as he fiddled with a small box from his coat. It was a little larger than a ring box, rectangular and white, but she eyed it with fear. "Expected...?"

Despite the late hour, the streets were filled with people, men and women working into the night. The crowds threatened to sweep her away, and Michele paused and offered her his arm. She took it

hesitantly, and they looked to all the world like any regular couple walking through New York. She hated it. No one would remember seeing them. No one would know she had been there.

Her heart was beginning to sink. Maybe it *was* all over. Maybe he was just dragging this out for his own amusement. Maybe he, like Adriano, was bored, and wanted something to do.

When he directed her into a strangely familiar office building, she frowned, trying to pull away from him. He kept a tight grip on her arm, pulling her towards the yawning receptionist at the desk. “I have an appointment with Mr. Williams.”

She furrowed her brow, checking her book. “Mr. Christoforo? You’re...three hours late.” The look on her face said that she blamed him for her late hours.

“Traffic was a nightmare,” he replied dryly. Clara wished she had the courage to glare at him the way the receptionist was — then again, he was nobody to her, not really. To Clara, he was judge, jury, and executioner.

The woman gestured to a waiting area in the corner. “Someone will be with you in a moment.”

He gave her a stiff nod and pulled Clara along with him as he went to sit. She briefly considered screaming for help; but what would that accomplish? All she could do was sit and wait.

It took a few minutes for Williams’s secretary herself to come down and introduce herself. Even this late, her hair was immaculate, her lipstick bright and fresh. Michele allowed himself to be mildly impressed with her readiness. There was no doubt in his mind that she was as irritated with him as the receptionist.

Still, no one could top the aggravation of the woman on his arm, who hadn’t stopped fidgeting for the last fifteen minutes. As they followed the secretary to the elevator, she muttered something so quietly he had to lean down to hear her. “Why are we seeing Matthew Williams in the dead of night?”

“You’re acquainted?”

Her expression became closed off, like she knew she was treading on uneven ground. “No.”

He shrugged and pulled back, standing straight as the elevator slowed. “Think of it as a learning opportunity.”

When they entered the office, Michele had to hold back a laugh at how haggard the man looked. With his hand in a cast, his hair sticking up in all directions, and the heavy bags under his eyes, Matthew Williams looked about as much a CEO as Michele did a sugar plum fairy. He did not bother hiding his scowl from the mafioso, although his expression did flicker slightly when he glanced at Clara.

His secretary left with an accommodating smile, and Michele and the man were left staring at each other. Eventually, he seemed to recall part of his manners. “Have a seat.”

While Michele lounged in the chair like a king, Clara sat down gingerly, as though she expected the cushion to explode. Williams glared at him. “You’re three hours late to a meeting *you* called. Is this

your idea of goodwill?"

In response, Michele leaned forward and placed the little box on the desk. Williams frowned at it.
"What is this?"

"Goodwill."

Now, the older man looked concerned. He picked up the box carefully, his hand shaking. When he lifted the lid, his face drained completely of color. Michele heard Clara gasp, saw her hand go over her mouth in his peripheral, but he kept his gaze solely on Williams, who appeared to have been shocked into silence.

He glanced briefly at his watch. "Right about now, your wife is going to a dingy little bar near the docks to meet a bartender, Nathaniel Reyes. Except, he won't be there, not tonight, or tomorrow, or ever again. Would you like to know why, Mr. Williams?"

Williams swallowed, unable to look away from the neatly cushioned finger, the thick gold ring it was still wearing winking in the light. Michele tapped the edge of the box. "Well, that's the only bit of him left, you see. Hard to fuck someone else's wife missing everything but a finger."

Williams finally looked back up at him. "Why?" he managed, his face pale and drawn.

Michele's answering smile only worsened his nerves. "Mr. De Luca wanted to do you a favor. He's of the belief that problems shouldn't just be solved, but eradicated." He nodded at the finger.
"See?"

He flicked a speck of dust off his shoulder, his eyes narrowing slightly. "We don't usually let them off with just a broken hand, that's the second gesture of goodwill. He won't make a third. Point a gun at one of his kids again, and I'll be making a similar delivery to your daughter."

Williams gave the barest nod, as though he understood. Michele almost admired the man's courage to even try such a thing in the first place. Perhaps fools had no fear, and this was a lesson he sorely needed. He stood and held back a yawn. "I'm glad you agreed to meet with me, Mr. Williams. And give Abigail my well wishes; if she *does* get any bigger, we'll be the first to send congratulations."

"Of...of course." Williams also stood, watching as Michele gently squeezed Clara's shoulder. "Tell Mr. De Luca...my thanks." He looked ready to vomit.

Clara was like a doll in Michele's hands, face pale and limbs unbending. Her expression was frozen in shock and fear as he pulled her to her feet. When he brushed his thumb over the base of her ring finger, she flinched, likely imagining it in a box as well.

"Marie will see you out--"

"No need. We'll be fine on our own. Besides, I have other things to take care of." He didn't miss the quake of the woman's shoulders as he spoke, and he knew her mind had spiraled somewhere dark and horrific. Good. So she wasn't as stupid as Williams.

They stood against his car, quiet and unmoving. Michele lit another cigarette and held out the pack to her, but she shook her head. "I don't smoke."

He chuckled as he slipped the pack back into his pocket. "Real Mother Teresa, aren't you?"

She ignored him, staring at the ground. "...did he shoot Giovanni?"

"No. Bullet just missed him." She felt his stare. "How'd you know he shot at all?"

Wordlessly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded handkerchief, passing it to him. He flipped it open, and staring at the little bullet piece, couldn't stop his smile. "Well, that's a piece of luck, isn't it?" He pocketed it and gave back the handkerchief. "Why give it to me?"

"Does it matter? I can't do anything with it. And now I know what happened, so...."

Michele hummed, breathing in another lungful of smoke. "What did you know before tonight?"

"Someone shot a gun in the library. It hit the fireplace, you called a man named Dario to fix it. Abigail Williams says Giovanni got her pregnant. Her father showed up at the house late at night and left with a broken hand." She inhaled deeply, feeling a lump in her throat. "That's all I found out before I saw you."

"Huh. You got pretty fucking far didn't you?" There was a note of a smile in his tone.

Clara blinked rapidly in an effort to keep the tears at bay. "Well, I didn't get anything out of it, did I? My husband's going to wake up tomorrow with some piece of me in a pretty package at the door. That's why you brought me, isn't it?"

Michele sighed and dropped the cigarette, shaking his head. "Yes and no. That's what *could* happen. But Adriano wouldn't be very happy if I killed the first woman he's had in months."

Clara's head snapped up, and she stared at him, confused. "What?"

He gave a strained smile. "Keep your head down. Don't piss him off." He held up the bullet, leaning in menacingly. "And if you ever find something like this again, you'll come to me immediately. Don't pull your little Nancy Drew shit." He straightened his collar. "Do as I say, and Adriano never finds out about tonight."

"And if he does?"

"He'll do much worse than messing up your hand." He pushed off the side of the car and went around to the driver's side.

Before he could open the door, Clara spoke up. "I was hired the night Mr. Williams came to the house."

Michele paused, staring at her, and she stared back, a stony expression on her face. "You were all celebrating something. I know, I walked past the bar on my way home."

She watched him blink, watched the gears turn in his head. "Don't you want to know?" she asked, her voice straining and hissing. "Don't you want to know how he *celebrated?*"

He could not hide the twitch of his expression, the shock and understanding. When he spoke, his voice was tense. "Get in the car."

"You showed me what you do to men who fuck other people's wives. Are you going to do that to him?"

His eyes were narrowed. "Get in the goddamn car."

The ride back was silent and strained. Clara kept her whole body turned away from Michele, watching the city go by. When they arrived at her apartment building, she did not bother with a goodbye, and nor did he. Instead, she took her bags from the trunk and fled inside, feeling him watch her as she left.

James answered the door, his face full of concern, but she quickly kissed him and assuaged his fears, saying that the night had lasted longer than expected and she hadn't meant to stay out so late. He accepted this, if only out of relief and exhaustion, and went to bed immediately.

Clara did not cry until she was sure he was sound asleep.

The next week was fraught with tension.

Clara's job did not change, and every day became an exercise in fear and obedience. Adriano seemed to enjoy keeping her in suspense; some days, he hardly even looked at her. Others, he took her hard and fast and made sure she kept her eyes open the whole time. Afterwards, she could only clean herself up in the bathroom and continue her work.

She passed Michele in the halls from time to time, and the sense of disdain he had once held for her seemed to have retreated, replaced by threatening glares and ticks of his jaw. She knew that if anyone ever learned he'd spared her after that night, he would not escape unscathed, but she wasn't so foolish as to believe he would suffer as badly as she would. So she kept her mouth shut and focused on familiarizing herself with the house and its occupants.

Viola had grown attached to her quickly, and Clara could often spy her shifting on her feet, the look in her deep eyes saying she desperately wanted to talk to her but wasn't sure if she could. On her better days, Clara invited her to speak as she cleaned, listening to her stories and complaints about her brothers. But on worse days, when Adriano had less to do and more time with her, she could offer only a thin smile and turn away.

Giovanni stayed out of the house for the most part, but he was cordial when she did run into him, and charming when he wanted to be. If he noticed the droop of her shoulders or the tightness of her muscles when she saw his older brother or Michele, he said nothing. Carina kept to herself, but was at least polite. Cesare and Elio were rambunctious but kept out of her way. But when she met the last sibling, Clara could not find anything kind to say.

It had been in the middle of the day. Clara had been dusting the shelves in Adriano's study, trying to ignore the man sitting at the desk. He was frowning down at several papers, the *tap tap tapping* of his pen the only sound in the room. He was agitated, she could tell — how quickly she'd grown used to his moods — and she knew it was only a matter of time before he reached for her, so she tried to finish her work quickly. He had a habit of interrupting her and Amelia and Madison were starting to wonder why it took her so long to finish her tasks.

Indeed, in a matter of minutes, he shoved the papers into a drawer, evidently fed up with whatever he'd been thinking about. "Clara."

She was tucked into a corner, unseen, and didn't answer at first. He called out once more, a note of anger creeping into his usually smooth tone. "Clara."

Briefly, she entertained the thought of ignoring him. But that would only make things worse and she could tell that this was never going to be pleasant, so she took a breath and stepped out. "Yes?"

"You—"

At that moment, the door opened and Milena De Luca walked in.

Clara had only heard of her briefly from Amelia and Madison, but it was still a shock to see her in person. She was exceedingly beautiful — as all members of the family seemed to be — with her short red hair and dark eyes. Her skin glowed like honey and her lips were twisted in an amused smile. "Mother wants to see you."

Adriano scowled. "Knock next time you come here. And tell her I'm busy."

"It's about the wedding. She wants to talk about the guest list."

"There's almost five months before then, *tell her I'm busy*. And get out."

She huffed, and it was only then that she noticed Clara in the room. "Oh, hello. I don't believe we've met."

"Hello...." Clara found herself unable to speak. Something about Milena's stare unnerved her, like she was being pulled apart and examined.

Adriano cursed under his breath. "Milena, this is Clara, the new maid."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, of course! Mother mentioned you. The one Giovanni spilled lemonade all over."

Clara winced at the memory. "Ah...yes." *I'm not supposed to mention Abigail.*

"Well, this is perfect timing." She grabbed her hand, making the young woman jump. "Lillian left early today and I need someone to help reorganize my wardrobe."

"She's busy," Adriano said flatly, to which Milena looked around, exaggerated confusion on her face. "Well, everything looks clean in here to me. Unless, you needed her for something else?"

He said nothing, a muscle in his neck jumping, and she smiled. "Perfect! Come now, Clara, I need this done by tonight. Adriano, I'll tell Mother to expect you."

Clara followed, not daring to look back, but somehow, with Milena's hand closed tightly around her wrist, she only felt as though she'd been passed from one wolf to another.

Milena's closet was enormous, the size of Clara's bedroom, and filled to the brim with dresses the young woman could never dream of wearing. Silk and lace and fur jumped out at her, sparkling with diamonds, some of them sheer and cut in ways that Clara was sure would make the Devil himself blush, but all of them suited Milena. Over the next few hours, she sorted them all out, some perfect, some needing alterations, and some that Milena just wanted to get rid of.

"Hmm...." Milena held one up to herself in the mirror, turning and examining it. "I haven't worn this one in years. Perhaps Carina would like it. What do you think?"

Clara, who was exhausted, her arms weak from carrying mountains of heavy fabric, could only nod numbly. In truth, she didn't think the young girl would like such flashy clothing, but she doubted the woman wanted her actual opinion.

Milena looked back at the mirror. "It's a pity you couldn't model these for me. They just look so different when worn." Indeed, she was much taller than Clara, nearing six feet, and there was no way any of her dresses would ever fit the maid. But Clara was grateful for this; being forced to try on dresses that probably cost more than a year's worth of rent would drive her to tears, and somehow, she knew Milena would have nothing nice to say.

When she put away the last dress and straightened up the last pair of shoes, Clara emerged from the closet to see a tea set waiting on the table. Milena smiled and gestured her forward. "Thank you so much for the help, I haven't gone through all of those in so long. Please, rest a moment before you leave."

It took all of Clara's strength not to flop into the chair and fall asleep. She sat primly and accepted the proffered cup with a quiet 'thank you,' unable to muster up any conversation. Unlike her mother, Milena gave off no sense of dignified grace. She seemed more like a cat, preening and prowling. Clara felt a familiar shiver of fear in her heart as she sipped.

"How long have you been married?"

The question made her want to scream and throw the cup at the wall. "Three years," she murmured. Recently, she'd been pulling James into bed more and more, as though touching him would erase anything Adriano did to her. But often, she would only feel hollow.

Milena smiled. "So young, yet you were already so in love?" She sipped her tea thoughtfully. "I don't mind not being married. My mother will find someone suitable, as she did for my brother."

Clara blinked at this. "Oh. It's...arranged?" She'd had a feeling, unable to discern what Adriano thought of his fiancée.

"Oh, yes. Well, they are a good match, in any case. Elizabetta is younger than me, but so proper. My mother is very fond of her." The slight lift of her brow said she didn't care for that fact. "But so stiff, so quiet! I doubt she will be a fun sister-in-law, but who am I to object? Adriano should have been married years ago; I can only hope she will be an adequate addition to the family."

Clara turned these words over slowly in her head, and Milena pouted slightly. "Oh, but listen to me. You must think I'm heartless, speaking of my future family in such a way."

She knew she was supposed to disagree. "No, not at all. It's only natural to worry." She managed a pale shadow of a smile, only to be met with the woman's scrutinizing gaze. "What is it, Miss Milena?"

"Oh, I would have thought you would be more bothered, hearing about Elizabetta." She leaned back in her seat, giving Clara an appraising look. "Perhaps that dutiful expression of yours is why he likes you so much."

Clara's smile died immediately. "What?"

Milena waved her off. "Oh, it doesn't matter much in the end. They aren't married yet after all, and women like me and Elizabeth have been taught what to expect from men. I doubt she would care, if she knew. But that poor husband of yours—"

Clara stood quickly, her teacup clattering in its saucer loudly. "I-I should get going. I still have chores to finish up." She bowed her head, hands clasped in front of her. "Thank you for the tea, Miss Milena. Have...have a good evening."

"Oh, is it so late already?" She glanced at the clock on her dresser and stood, smiling. "Well, I suppose I have stolen you away for too long. You must be anxious to get back to your work I interrupted." Her voice had become silky, threatening to smother the young woman with its slow and derisive tone. "Have a good evening, *Clarina*."

The young maid hurried out of the room, running down the hall and away from those deep, prying eyes. *She knows, she knows.* How did she know? Had it been how Adriano had acted when she'd entered the study? Had she...had she *seen* him and Clara in the past several days?

"What are you doing?"

A voice she'd become aggravatingly familiar with sounded behind her, and she whipped around to see Michele frowning at her, concerned. It was then she realized she was leaning against the wall, gasping for breath. "It's late. Why are you here?"

Rage, burning and dark, suddenly filled her lungs. "Why do you care? Is this what you're going to do for the rest of my life? Lurk around corners and pray I don't tell anyone about that night?"

His eyes widened, and he snarled. "Keep your voice *down*—"

"Why!? Who will I tell? Is there a single person in this godforsaken house who would give a damn if I said anything?" She let out a sob, covering her face with both hands. "Madiana's already threatened me, and now, Milena thinks I'm a whore. And so do you. I see it in the way you look at me, I'm nothing but a pest to you. You should've just killed me." Why hadn't he? It would've been so much easier.

She heard him curse under his breath. "You wish you were dead? Do you know what I'm risking, letting you walk around with what you know?"

Clara glared at him, and stepped closer. "Oh, so I should be grateful?" She grabbed his collar, nails digging into the fabric. "*Oh, thank you, benevolent Michele, for not strangling me in an alleyway so your brother-in-arms can fuck me whenever he wants.*" She pulled him closer. "Was that enough, or should I get on my knees, too?"

He grabbed her shoulders, forcing her away. "You're acting insane," he snapped, shaking her slightly. "And I can't—" His gaze flicked behind her, and his expression froze. "Shit." He yanked open the door to the room beside them. "Get in."

"What?"

"Jesus, woman, would you just—" Agitated, he shoved her inside and shut the door.

Clara heard the lock click, and panic rose up inside of her. "What are you doing?!"

“Shut up.” He hit the door from the other side, making her jump. She glanced around herself, taking in the empty guest room. Outside, she could hear footsteps, and she stepped back, her breathing coming in rapid bursts.

“Michele.” Her eyes widened as she listened to Adriano’s voice. “I thought you left?”

“I forgot something.”

“Oh.” There was a moment of silence before he spoke again, irritated. “Have you seen Clara?”

“It’s the end of the day, she likely went home.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, and Clara swallowed, backing up enough to bump into the bed. “Milena dragged her off God-knows-where for the last three hours, just pulled her out of my study.”

Michele scoffed. “Of course she did, she was probably suspicious. You slaver over that poor woman like a starved dog, it’s no wonder she didn’t catch on sooner.” The door creaked slightly as he shifted his stance. “Watch yourself. Milena is one thing, but if Giovanni—“

Adriano barked out a laugh. “Giovanni’s a fool, and he’s barely ever home. He’s too busy chasing after that street thug’s daughter to think about a maid. This is the last time I’ll entertain your advice, Mick. If it bothers you so much, look away.”

Clara listened to him leave, and after a moment, Michele unlocked the door and pulled it open. They both stared at each other in the dim light before she spoke, dulled anger coloring her words. “You think I’m pathetic.”

A note of mirthless laughter left him. “Have you looked at yourself, lately?”

She clenched her fists. “You’re no better. You trail after him like a pet looking for a treat, and all he does is ignore you. Is that why you kept me alive? To feel better about yourself? Is that why you gave me back my ring?” His expression was blank, but she stalked towards him, humiliation and fury keeping her spine knife-straight. “You’re just as much a whore as I am.”

He grabbed her around the waist, leaning down to whisper threateningly into her ear. “You’re trying to understand something you could never know. I spared you because I pitied you, and that hasn’t changed. Go home, Clara. I won’t bother telling you to stay away; you’re too foolish to listen.”

As she brushed her hair before bed, she stared at the tired woman in the mirror. She could see it, something in the way she carried herself that screamed her frustration and fear to the rest of the world.

He was right, she thought, mindlessly returning her husband’s kiss goodnight. *I am pathetic.*

The same way James did not notice the worries brewing behind his wife’s eyes, Clara did not notice the triumph in his. His job interview had been that day, and it had gone even better than he’d expected. They would reach out to him within the week, and he could not wait to reveal the news to Clara.

I’ll take her out to dinner, he thought as he wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back flush against his chest. *And I’ll tell her then.* Surely, she’d be as excited as he was. They were

getting closer and closer to being able to start a family.

He recalled the man he'd bumped into while leaving the building, an Arturo Bianchi. He'd seemed a jovial man, and when James had retrieved his dropped pen for him, he'd clasped the young man's hand in the firmest handshake he'd ever felt. "It's a wise man who respects his elders," he'd said, and James had smiled brightly, still riding his high from the interview. "Forgive me, but I don't believe I've seen you here before, Mister...?"

"Ah, Edwards. James Edwards. I was just in for a job interview." He peered at the man curiously. "Do you work here, sir?"

"Oh, no, I am just here to meet with my accountant. Mousy little man, but excellent at his job." He reached into his coat pocket and held out a card. "I own a few restaurants downtown."

"Oh, I see. Thank you." James tucked the card into his wallet and offered a smile. "I shouldn't keep you any longer."

Arturo waved away his concerns. "Not at all. Good luck to you, Mr. Edwards."

Now, lying in bed, he recalled the card in his wallet. *Maybe if his restaurants are any good, I could take Clara there.*

Lost in thought, he gently tugged his wife onto her back, making her look up at him as she held back a yawn. "Aren't you tired?" she mumbled, pushing her hair out of her eyes, and he responded by dipping his head and pressing a kiss to her throat.

"Not in the slightest," he rasped, and when his lips trailed down her body so that his head was nestled between her thighs, he was sure heaven had never heard any cries sweeter than hers.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! If you'd like, please check out my Tumblr blog, @allthemoregray for notifications about updates and some bonus material for my stories. Thanks for your support!

Only You

Chapter Summary

Clara learns that not all her foes appear the same.

(Only You - The Platters)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clara woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. She blinked the sleep dust out of her eyes to see James lying asleep on top of her, face between her breasts. She giggled and gently pet his head. “James,” she murmured, letting her fingers brush over the back of his neck. “The phone.”

He groaned slightly. “Later.”

“It could be important.”

“I don’t care if it’s the president himself. Stay here.” He latched his arms around her and pressed several gentle kisses to her skin. “With your husband.”

She couldn’t help her smile. *Husband. Husband.* It had only been a week since they’d said their vows, but she knew, deep in her heart, that this was how it was always meant to be. James and her. Her and James. Her wedding ring sparkled on her finger, and she held it up in the late morning light, admiring its gleam. *Husband.*

But the beautiful image remained flawed, the phone persisting in its ringing. “I’m going to answer it,” she insisted. “What if it’s my parents?”

James whined several indecipherable words against her chest as she gently shoved him off her and gathered the sheets around herself. She sat up and placed her feet on the floor, but when she stood, her legs immediately gave out and she fell to the ground with a yelp.

Her new husband propped his chin up on one hand and smiled lazily down at her. “Is something wrong, dear wife?” he asked innocently, and Clara blushed.

“Nothing, sweetie.” Bracing her hand against the wall, she managed to stand back up and limp out to the living room, holding back whimpers at the soreness between her legs.

The first night had been so shy and awkward, neither of them knowing what they were doing. But then the next day and night arrived, and the day after that...

Suffice it to say, James was a quick learner. And these were lessons he was eager to master.

Clara held back a yawn as she picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Clara!”

“Ella?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Ella. You know, your best friend. The one you haven’t talked to in a week.”

Clara blushed. “I’m sorry for not calling, *mon amie*, but I’ve been...well...busy!”

“Oh, I’m sure you have,” Ella said, and Clara could just *hear* the sleazy grin on her face. “And I’m hoping you’d want to tell me all about it over lunch?”

“Um, well....” She started as she felt a warm weight press into her back.

“Who is it,” James asked sleepily, his hands already once again roaming across his wife’s stomach. He was shameless in his nudity, burying his face in her hair.

“Is that James? Put him on, I wanna talk to him.”

Clara just sighed and passed over the phone. “It’s Ella, sweetie. She wants to talk to you.”

“Oh.” He raised an eyebrow as he took the phone, resting his chin on Clara’s shoulder. “Hello? Ella?”

“James!” she declared dramatically. “I am calling to tell you that I’ll be stealing your wife away for the afternoon, and you can’t stop me!”

He blinked, confused. “But...I only just got her,” he complained.

“And now you’re gonna lose her! For a few hours. Please?”

“You act like I could stop you.”

“You can’t. Oh, and Nick is probably going to call you later. He’ll want a play-by-play of the wedding night.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “He tried to bet you’d last two minutes.”

“I’m going to wring his neck,” James stated bluntly, and Clara blinked, her eyes going wide. “What!?” But he just shook his head and gave her back the phone.

“Okay, be ready by one! And you’d better give me all the details on how James is as a husband. If he’s anything less than perfect, I’ll kill him!”

Clara giggled. “I look forward to it. Goodbye, Ella, I’ll see you then.”

As she set the receiver down, James pulled her back fully against him, sighing. “I guess we have to return to the real world eventually,” he muttered grumpily.

Clara smiled back at him. “It’s not so bad. We’re seeing our friends again.”

He hummed and kissed her jaw. “I don’t know, they could wait a little longer.”

“You’ve had me all to yourself for a whole week,” she teased, grabbing his hands as they drifted towards her breasts. “You should learn to share.”

He smirked, and when she felt his erection against her, she could feel the blush creeping up her neck. "Sweetheart, I could have you for a century, and it wouldn't be nearly enough to satisfy me."

A soft bite to her neck wrenched Clara back into the present, her hands locked around her husband's neck as he fucked into her. "James," she gasped, her legs squeezing his waist. "I-I have to leave in fifteen minutes—"

He buried himself deep inside her, cutting her off in a squeak. "Then I'll be quick," he purred, popping the buttons on her maid uniform. "I mean, I can't go to work like this, can I?" he asked teasingly, grinding deeper into her and watching eagerly as soft, shy moans fell from her lips.

How much things had changed. Back then, she had been so happy when he touched her, and she welcomed his arms around her. But now, now there was something in her mind that made her heart wrench. Beneath the pleasure and the warmth and the sheer ecstasy, guilt twisted like a knife in her gut.

Her head fell back against the cabinet, and she whined as he thrust into her. He'd cornered her as she was putting the dishes away, lifting her up onto the counter and pulling up the skirt of her uniform.

Clara would be lying if she said she wanted him to stop. If he stopped, the guilt and fear for his safety would eat her alive. If he stopped, she'd sink back into the haze of terror and helplessness. She felt the need to prove to him that she was still his, that he was still hers, that what happened to her at work — *what you let happen*, the cruel voice in her head whispered — didn't change that fact that she loved him.

And James, poor James, didn't realize the struggle his wife was facing, didn't realize how she stubbornly shielded him from the storm that threatened to uproot their whole lives. He went on as though nothing had changed, because to him, nothing had. She was his wife, and he wanted to show her his affection. But it didn't matter how much he smothered her in gifts and love and lust, because it couldn't erase the horrors she faced when she left him. It couldn't change the fact that when she closed her eyes when he touched her, she could only see the dark, looming figure that stalked her in the alleys, the mansion, even in her own home.

He held her with one hand as he tilted his hips into hers, his other between their bodies, cupping one of her breasts. His pelvis pressed against her clit with every thrust, making her eyes roll and her mouth fall open. She was so close, *so close*, and words she could barely hear streamed from her lips. *James, please, yes, please....*

She came with a shiver wracking her whole body, and he followed after quickly. He breathed against her neck, kissing the delicate skin, and she gently reached up and tugged at his hair. "Now I have to clean up," she said, trying to sound annoyed, but only succeeding in bringing a triumphant smile to his face.

He helped her delicately off the counter, quite the contrast to how he'd grabbed her hips and lifted her onto it, but he didn't let her go immediately. Instead, he swayed her against him slightly, and kissed her warm and slow. Did she smell...minty?

Clara pressed her palms against his chest, let them slip to his waist, wrapping her arms around him. "Something's gotten into you, lately," she murmured against his lips, nipping them teasingly. "Has

something good happened?"

"Funny you say that," he whispered, slowly buttoning her dress back up. "Something good *has* happened."

"Hmm?"

"Well, I woke up this morning, and I looked over and I saw a very beautiful, very naked woman next to me in bed--"

"James--"

"--but that's not even the best part. See, then I remembered *why* she was naked, because last night we--"

Clara covered his lips with her hand before he could go further, muffling his laugh. "And that's my cue to go wash up. If I'm around you for another minute I'm afraid you're going to keep me here for the rest of the day."

"Maybe I should," he murmured against her palm, kissing the tips of her fingers. "You're always in your head these days, maybe you should take some time off and let me bring you back down to Earth."

Her smile flickered slightly, but she kissed him again, hoping he wouldn't notice. "As much as I would love that, you and I both have jobs to get to and I'm about to be late."

He groaned as she pulled away, his lips chasing hers, and leaned against the counter as he watched her retreat to the bedroom. "One of these days I'm gonna march into that mansion and steal you back right in front of those high-class, silver spoon-sucking--"

"James!"

Clara almost ran directly into Adriano that morning, as he rushed out of his room when she tried to enter. A sneer curved his lip when he saw her, but then his gaze fell to her neck, where she had covered the bite mark James had left that morning, and his eyes darkened menacingly. Without a word, he brushed past her.

Remembering the anger in his expression when Milena had taken her out of his study, Clara felt a deep sense of foreboding crawl up her spine. If she was lucky, his day would be full and he would return home after she had left. But she knew she would have to face him eventually, and pay for leaving him wanting. She didn't know if he was ever in a benevolent mood, but she was sure it wouldn't extend to her.

She made his bed and tidied his closet carefully, appreciating the mindlessness of the tasks. She considered Mr. Williams and his daughter, and remembered that single, remaining finger, her stomach rocking slightly at the thought.

Clara could still feel Michele's hand around her throat, and swallowed nervously. *What does he want from me?* He'd said that he spared her for Adriano's sake, but was that true? What if he planned to blackmail her?

Suddenly dizzy, she leaned against the wall, shaking. *I can't do this.* The bursts of righteous anger had ebbed away into a shivering fear. She was walking a tightrope, and she was slipping with every step. *I don't even have a plan.*

She sat against the wall, her head in her hands. At least no one would bother her here, even if the room still echoed with her cries. The rest of the world was waiting for her, but she only wanted to disappear.

Nick was exhausted.

He would be having his morning coffee, or speaking with a friend from work, almost peaceful, when his mind would suddenly force Clara's tearful face to the forefront of his vision, and that tiring concoction of guilt and anger would flood through him.

He knew his irritation with this conflict was unjustified. Clara could barely even look at him afterwards and everyday since, his heart had sank at the thought of her returning to that house. But there was nothing he could do, absolutely nothing.

When he'd started, he'd been bright-eyed, eager to help the city. And for a while, he felt like he had been helping. Then, he noticed things. Certain small cases he or other newbies brought in were dropped, never followed up on. A public disturbance here or there, misdemeanors that barely meant more than a low fine. Nothing major.

Then, there was *that* incident. That bar fight. The whole place had been trashed, and Nick had barely managed to break it up before someone got killed. But no one wanted to give a statement. The two men at the center of the fight had clammed up and wouldn't talk. The bar owner refused to press charges. None of the witnesses would say a word.

He'd been stumped. He had wanted to follow up on it later, but Captain Davis ordered him to drop it. There were bigger problems, he said, and in a city like New York, it was hard to argue.

But Nick had always been stubborn.

"What? What do you mean he left?"

The man's landlady had frowned at him. "Just what I said. He moved out a few days ago, just disappeared. I'd let you look at the unit, but it's empty, so I doubt he left behind those, uh..." She had squinted at him suspiciously. "You said he hadn't returned some magazines you lent him?"

Nick had smiled nervously. "Yeah, well, you know Eric, always flaky. Um, thank you anyway. Have a nice day."

He left, making sure she had gone back inside the building, before slipping around the back. He climbed up the fire escape, staring at the window.

Nicholas Grant. You are a cop. This is the exact opposite of your job.

He frowned at his reflection, before pulling his pocket knife out.

A thin layer of dust had settled over the empty room, and had Nick not already known the space had been lived in, he would have sworn it had been unoccupied for months.

He looked around, but absolutely nothing had been left behind. Desperate, he crouched and knocked carefully against the floorboards. But there was nothing, nothing...and then a hollow thunk.

Blinking, he tested the board, finding it loose. Pulling it up, he cursed at the empty compartment. Of course. Because that would be too easy.

Leaning in close, he raised an eyebrow. *Gun oil*. The scent was very faint, but it was there. Eric had been keeping a gun in there.

A scrap of paper poked out from between the boards. Tugging it loose, Nick's gaze narrowed. It looked like the corner of a hundred-dollar bill.

He kept cash and a gun stashed in here? Was he cautious or paranoid?

He almost didn't hear the footsteps approaching. His gaze shot up to the front door, and he fumbled with the board. *Shit. Shit shit shit!* He crammed it back into place, and lunged for the closet door, slipping inside and shutting it behind him, just as the front door opened.

"Do we really have to do this again? We made sure it was clean already, I don't get why he's so paranoid--"

"Don't say that in front of him. And it's called being *thorough*. That bastard Davis took his sweet time telling us everything, blame it on him."

Nick's jaw dropped slightly. *Davis? As in, Captain Davis?* He pressed himself further into the corner. *What the fuck's going on?*

"This is all that punk Eric's fault. Getting into a fight like that, drawing that kinda attention. He was asking for it."

"For God's sake, could you just shut up and do your job? You want Mr. De Luca to notice you, too?"

Nick held his breath as footsteps approached the closet. Sweat dripped down his forehead as the doorknob shifted. *Why did I have to leave my gun at home today of all days!?*

"Not so fast."

The doorknob stopped moving. "What?"

"You don't get off that easy. You're checking the bathroom with me, I'm not gonna be the only one combing through that."

"Fucking hell, I hate you."

The footsteps retreated, and after a moment, Nick carefully nudged the door open. He could see two men with their backs to him, inspecting the bathroom walls. Slowly, he edged out, shutting the door quietly behind him, inching towards the window. He pulled it up, praying it wouldn't squeak, and clambered out onto the fire escape.

The metal creaked underneath him, and he froze.

“What the- hey! Can you try not letting loose in this tiny-ass space? I don’t wanna lose my sense of smell before I’m thirty!”

“Oh fuck you, it wasn’t me!”

“Uh-huh.”

Nick exhaled, shutting the window and practically leaping down the fire escape. He didn’t stop running for two blocks.

Ella had asked him what was wrong that night, but he’d clammed up, unable to speak. He couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t meet his captain’s eyes. He could barely look at newspapers mentioning the De Lucas.

“Nick, are you alright?” Clara was dropping off some recipes Ella had asked for. “You seem... quiet, lately.”

“You know, Ella said the same thing? It’s funny, you’d think she’d be happy about it.” He managed a self-deprecating smile, but Clara just frowned at him. “Don’t give me that look, Clara. It’s nothing, really.”

“Are you sure? You know you can talk to me. I’m great at keeping secrets.” She smiled brightly at him, and he grimaced slightly.

“Dear God. You’re scarily convincing, you know that?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m alright, Clara. I promise.”

“Well, alright. Just remember, we’re all here for you, whenever you need us.” She pressed a comforting kiss to his cheek as she left, and he inhaled, closing his eyes. Yeah, he could ignore it. He still had his job, and it wasn’t like this affected his loved ones. He could ignore it.

The memory of Clara’s desperate expression jerked him out of his reverie, and he clenched his fist. *Goddamn it all.* He needed to fix this. But how?

Clara wiped off the windows of the study, avoiding her reflection’s gaze. The day had passed without incident, but she could feel a tension in the house, in herself.

She heard the door creak open, and her heart fell to her stomach as she turned and met Adriano’s gaze. The green of his eyes was poisonous — he must have let his anger fester the entire day. “Do you think you can ignore me, Clara?” he asked softly, threateningly.

She did not respond, holding her hands close to her chest almost protectively. He stepped forward, and fear and hatred warred within her. “Do you think of me as some inconsequential part of your routine that you can shirk and replace as you wish?”

“Milena called me away; do you think I had the right to refuse?” she shot back, keeping the quaver from her voice.

“But you think you can refuse me?” he asked, ire rising in his voice as he approached her. “You think you can avoid me and go home and cry in your husband’s arms while he fucks you?”

"Then you should have made me stay!" she snapped, anger bursting out of her. "You're not a man, you're just a mindless, raving beast who can't last a day without sticking his dick into something warm."

Adriano was right in front of her, their chests mere inches from each other. His eyes were alight with rage at her words, but she glared up at him, defiant. "You can't even say no to your mother when she calls for you."

His kiss was harsh and bruising, and she tried to push away from him as he dragged her back and tossed her over the desk. He was usually gentle, taking pleasure in her moans, but now he was furious. She did not know if it was because of his sister or his mother or something else, and he would not tell her, but she tried to raise herself up and he shoved her back down. "Would you just stay still," he hissed, fumbling with his belt buckle. "All you have to do is stay still, and *be here when I say*, and instead you just wander off and try to hide from me."

Without ceremony, he ripped her skirt up and forced himself inside her, and she could not stop the scream from escaping her lips. "You may not care for me," he snarled into her ear, taking hold of her hair. "But I will make you *feel me* in your very marrow."

It was a punishment, she knew it, and she writhed and wailed as he tangled his fingers in her hair and shoved her down. The desk jolted with each of his thrusts, and her hands clawed at its surface, seeking relief from the pain he buried deep inside her.

Adriano's hand slammed down beside her as he moaned, his engagement ring glinting in the setting sun. Clara gasped as he bucked into her, and noticed the fountain pen stand mere inches from her hand. Trembling, she reached out and closed her fingers around it, her gaze drifting to Adriano's hand.

She angled the sharp, golden tip of the pen downwards, and stabbed it down into the back of his hand. She heard him bite back a snarl, and she dug it in deeper, gritting her teeth and twisting it.

His hips slowed for a moment, but Clara did not let go of the pen. "I hate you," she sobbed, trying to catch her breath. "Let me go—" Her voice cut off in a cry as he thrusted into her so deep she felt it in her bones.

"Oh, *tesorina*," Adriano moaned into her hair, "how could I ever let you go when you do these things to me?" His arms caged her in, and she heard the pen clatter to the floor as he pulled it from his hand. He reached under her chin and held her by the throat as he fucked her. "When you make me feel this way?"

Clara reached back, her nails scraping uselessly against his cheek. He caught her hand and pressed it back against the desk, lacing their fingers together. "I don't think your husband is fucking you properly," he breathed against her temple. "You're so tight around me, it's like I can't breathe."

He squeezed her throat gently, almost experimentally, and she whimpered. She could feel the blood from his hand slipping between her fingers, warm and wet. "He's...ten times the man...you'll ever be," she panted, and he laughed, squeezing again.

"It doesn't matter in the end, does it? At the end of the day, it's my cock inside you, not his."

Adriano liked to watch her face when she came, maybe enjoying seeing how he could make her unravel. But he wasn't trying to please her now — this was all pain, and yet, it was close and

intimate, even more than it had been in the alley. She felt his hips slow, and writhed under him, panicking. “Don’t,” she begged, as he moaned freely against her skin. “Don’t—“

His hand crushed her throat, cutting her off in a strangled wail. “You wanted your husband,” he panted, driving deeply into her one last time. “Isn’t this what he would do?”

She could not escape from him, his whole body pressing her into the desk, and he would not even let her scream when he came inside her. Heat flooded her, searing her insides, and Adriano rode her through his climax, forcing his seed deeper and deeper into her. He let go of her throat, instead gripping the edge of the desk so tightly she thought it would break under his palm. She pressed her cheek against the polished wood, gasping as he finally stilled inside of her.

He slowly released her, leaving her slumped and breathless against the desk, before her legs gave out and she slipped to the floor, smearing the blood on her hand across its smooth surface.

Clara curled up into a ball on the floor, her core and hips aching so much she couldn’t move. For a moment, she wasn’t in his study, she was back in the alley, lying on the ground with his semen smeared on her thighs. Her eyes flicked up to him, watching as he examined his hand, unconcerned with the blood staining his sleeve.

He looked down at her, smiling slightly. “Look at you, Clara. You’ve made a mess of me, and yourself.” He knelt before her, taking her face in his hand. She winced as she felt his blood on her skin, his wound still bleeding. He pulled her up, making her grip his forearm tightly, and combed her hair back from her face before whispering into her ear. “I warned you before, that I don’t hold with insolence. Next time, you won’t leave whole.”

“You would’ve done this to me anyway,” she hissed, clutching his forearm. “You were already angry with me, what did it matter if I told you the truth?”

Adriano laughed, and she felt his other hand slip between her thighs, pushing two of his fingers into her. She wailed, pain pulsing through her as he curled them inside of her. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should just take something from you now. After all, isn’t that what beasts do?” He spread his fingers, savoring the way she cried. “Rip people apart?”

He slowly dragged his fingers up and down her thigh, leaving a trail of wetness on her skin. “Maybe I’ll slice open these beautiful legs and pull out your tendons. I’ll fuck you while you bleed out, so that the last thing you feel before you die is me.”

Clara felt him dig his nails into her thigh, and shivered as his lips touched her cheek. “Or,” he breathed, “you can put your arms around my neck and ask me to kiss you.”

She shook as he drew patterns on her skin, pulling back just enough so that their lips were barely an inch from each other. She tried to shake her head, but he held her by the jaw tightly, not letting her. “Beg me, Clara,” he murmured, his voice rough and wanting. “Beg me to kiss you.”

She would have rather killed herself. She would have rather taken the fountain pen and stabbed it into his jugular. But she didn’t have it. She didn’t have anything. Her fingernails scraped at the blood drying on his hand, and she whispered to him, so soft she almost couldn’t hear herself. “I can still remember how it felt biting through your lip.”

His grip tightened on her, but he smiled. “And I can still remember how hard you cried when I left.” He was so close, their noses were almost touching. “And how much you moaned for me in

your husband's bed."

Clara shut her eyes when she felt his breath on her lips, when he kissed her without her even needing to ask. She tried to lean back but he wrapped his arm around her, pressing her against him. She could feel a wet stickiness seeping through her skirt, and nausea roiled through her.

Adriano's kiss was swift, almost gentle, like a goodbye kiss from a lover. He released her, letting her rest against the desk, and when he stared at her bare cunt, seeing his semen spilling out of her, he smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow, Clara."

He walked out of the study, and Clara gripped the edge of the desk, pulling herself to her feet. She whimpered as she felt the trickle down her leg, and wiped at the blood he'd left on her face. She was filthy, so filthy. She ached everywhere and she wished she could melt away.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. She would have to be home soon, James would be expecting her. So she straightened up as best she could, and she ignored the tears streaming down her face, and she limped out of the room.

James held Clara against him as they lounged on the couch, arm slung around her waist. She leaned her head against his shoulder, keeping her gaze on the television. "James, I don't know why you like this show. It scares me."

"Really? I think it's interesting. Good moral quandaries, right?"

"Watching a man almost go insane after being left alone? I'd have a breakdown if it were me." She smiled softly. "I bet you'd love being on your own, though. You'd find a nice little corner in a library and stay there for hours."

He chuckled, kissing her hand. "Come on, you know you're stronger than that. You'd probably just, I don't know, swim to safety or sail away."

Clara watched the screen, gaze far off. "I don't know...leave everything behind like that?"

"Well, it would be empty, anyway. What's the point in staying?"

She glanced up at his face, seeing that he seemed to be staring into the distance. She took his hand, lacing their fingers together. "Feels like it's been some time since we just sat with each other like this," she murmured. "It's nice."

"Yeah...." He blinked and looked down at her, managing a smile. "Right. This is good." It seemed like the only times they saw each other was during meals and when they had a few spare minutes to forget the world together.

He nuzzled her neck, but frowned when he caught a certain scent in her hair. "I've been meaning to ask you...have you been smoking?"

She jerked slightly. "What?"

"Well, I noticed recently, but you smell like...menthols."

Clara's heart thumped, but she just shook her head. "Oh, no, no. Actually, um, Adri- Mr. De Luca, he smokes those, and since I clean his room, I guess the smell stays."

He raised an eyebrow. "Does he let you call him by his first name?"

"No, I just..." She forced a laugh. "The other girls like to talk about him, and they don't like saying 'Mr. De Luca' because it makes them think about his father."

"Oh. What do they say?" He squinted, his mouth curving into a smirk. "Do you ever put in your two cents?"

"Very funny." She pinched his cheek. "Actually, I go on and on about you for so long, they get jealous. So don't get any ideas."

"Okay, okay." He leaned his face into her palm. "Just don't forget about me when you're over there."

"I could never," she promised, giving him a sweet peck. "Now, come on, let's finish this episode. You can tell me what you think of the 'moral quandaries.'"

James laughed, pulling her tightly against him. "Oh, you don't know what you just started, sweetheart."

"The barrier of loneliness: The palpable, desperate need of the human animal to be with his fellow man. Up there, up there in the vastness of space..."

Clara laughed as Amelia helped her dust off the crystal. "She didn't."

"Oh, yes she did. But, really, I would have done the same thing. What kind of woman wears white to *her son's wedding*!?"

"Mm, you're right. I would've handed the bride the bottle of wine myself."

Lillian entered, frowning at them. "What are you two doing?"

Clara turned and let her smile loosen slightly. "Oh, good evening, Lillian. We were just--"

"Gossiping, yes, I heard." She narrowed her eyes at them. "Quiet down, would you? Mrs. De Luca doesn't need to hear you two chirping all evening." She stalked off, leaving them both staring after her.

Amelia scoffed. "Good riddance."

Clara frowned. "Is it just me, or has she been acting differently?" Usually, Lillian was reserved and quiet. She could be curt, but not harsh. "She seems stressed."

"Who cares? She's always been uppity." A crash of thunder outside made her yelp. "What the-? Oh no."

Clara stared at the swaths of rain pattering against the window, grimacing. "It won't be fun going home in that."

"I didn't even know there'd be a storm this evening." Amelia sighed. "I should go check with Madison. Will you be alright?"

"Oh, yes. I only have twenty minutes left, anyway." She waved to Amelia as the woman left.

"Miss Clara?" She turned and saw Viola and Cesare entering the room. "Are you busy?"

"Just finishing up, honey. What is it?" She crouched to meet their eyes, and Viola approached with a wide smile, while Cesare followed, slightly more sullen.

"Do you think thunderstorms are scary?"

Clara tilted her head slightly. "Not really. I like them."

Viola turned to look at Cesare smugly. "See? I told you."

"You're all weird," he snapped, crossing his arms tightly. Clara's smile flickered slightly—he looked exactly like his brother. "You like them, *she* likes them, Milena likes them. What's with all of you?"

"Are you afraid of thunderstorms, Cesare?" Clara asked, seeing how proud Viola looked.

"I am not *afraid*," he said, looking away. "I just don't like them."

"Last time we had one, he cried," Viola stage-whispered, prompting Cesare to glare at her.

"Shut up!"

"Cesare, Viola? Where are you?" A familiar voice called, and Clara looked up to see Milena approaching them. "It's almost dinner time. Stop bothering poor Clara."

"They weren't bothering me," she said softly, straightening up.

Milena smiled at her. "Will you be alright going home? Perhaps you could call your husband?" She glanced to the side, something disquieting in her smile. "Or Michele could drive you home?"

Michele entered, something tight in his expression. "I'm not a chauffeur, Milena."

"No, of course not." Her hand curled around his elbow. "I was just hoping you would be helpful."

"I don't need him to drive me," Clara said flatly. "I'll be fine."

Viola looked up at Michele, tugging at his sleeve. "Michele, are *you* afraid of thunderstorms?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you making fun of Cesare again?"

"No," she said innocently, while her brother stuck her tongue out at her.

"Yes, she is!" Suddenly, he clung to Clara's waist, startling her. "Miss Clara will tell you!"

"Um...." She swallowed as Milena and Michele both stared at her. "Well...she *was* teasing him a little," she admitted, gently patting Cesare's head as he pressed his face against her side. She wished they would all stop looking at her. *Why do members of this household always find ME?*

Milena crossed her arms as she stared down at her sister. "Viola," she said sternly, making the little girl shrink against Michele's leg. "You need to be nicer to your brother. You know how Mamma hates when you two fight."

"No, she just gets mad at *me*," Viola mumbled, looking down at her feet. "No one here likes me."

Michele tapped her head. "*Gioia*, you are my favorite person in the whole world. Now apologize to your brother and go have dinner."

She looked up at him, the back at Cesare. "Sorry," she rushed out, before running away.

Cesare glared after her. "She's being a baby."

Clara ruffled his hair. "It's alright to be afraid of things. Don't let it get to you."

"Cesare, let Clara finish her work. Come on." Milena gestured him to her, and he let go of the maid reluctantly. She smiled at her. "Have a good evening, *Clarina*."

She let her hand slip from Michele's arm as she led her brother away. He watched her go, before raising his eyebrow at Clara. "*Clarina*?"

She turned away from him, looking back at the crystal. "Would you leave?" she asked coldly. "I don't have long before I go home and I want to get this done."

Before she could continue, a hand came out from behind her, shutting the cabinet door in front of her. "Adriano had a bandage on his hand today. Was that you?"

"What if it was?"

He didn't retract his hand, and she felt his presence forcing her closer to the cabinet. "Well, if it was, then I would technically be obligated to return the favor. Tenfold."

She turned around to him, watching his blank expression. She held up her hand. "Fine, then. Break it. Cut it off. I don't care. It'll just create more questions for you to deal with." Her eyes were fiery. "And it's barely a fraction of what he's done to me."

He said nothing, but he took her hand, holding it palm side-up. Clara watched as he traced his fingertip over the lines of her palm. His hands were rough, covered with nicks and scars. They looked like the hands soldiers came back from war with, the hands sailors earned on the seas. From harsh, unforgiving work. She could only guess at what he'd done, and it was enough to let fear crawl through her mind. He loomed over her, and she looked up, meeting his gaze.

"You should learn to keep your head down," he suggested quietly. "He'll get bored of you eventually, but not if you provoke him like this."

"Would you?" she asked, voice barely rising above a whisper. "If you were me? Would you just lie there and wait for it to be over?"

Michele's smile was dry, his eyes empty. "It's called self-preservation. I value that a lot more than bravery, or pride. You should, too." He let her hand go, and pulled away from her. "I'm stuck here for the night, with the storm. I'd better not see you here after dinner."

He left her standing against the cabinet, and she tilted her head back, closing her eyes. Lightning flashed outside, and she rubbed her temples, sighing. She needed to go get her things, and see if she could find a cab.

Clara grabbed her bag and straightened out her coat. She brushed back her hair with her fingers, eager to get home, away from this place.

She knocked on Mrs. Christoper's door, the housekeeper speaking with the chef. "Mrs. Christopher? I'm leaving for the night. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, good night, Clara."

She looked at the chef, waving slightly. "Good night, Mrs. Moretti."

"Good night, dear. I was just telling Mrs. Christopher about the dog my niece just got. Yappy little thing."

"Oh. Um, what about dinner? Aren't they expecting it?"

"Yes, yes, the stew is just simmering. Lillian's watching it for me."

"Oh, I see. Well, good night." She waved to the two women, and shut the door. *Now, to see if I can find a cab....* She rummaged through her purse, looking for her wallet, before pausing. "Oh no...." *Where's my lipstick?*

She groaned, setting her bag down on the table. Glancing around, she sighed. She'd left her bag in the kitchen earlier, while helping to organize the cabinets. Maybe she'd dropped it there?

She went upstairs, approaching the kitchen door. Maybe Lillian had seen it. She opened the door and stopped in her tracks.

Lillian was hovering over the stew, something in her hands. Something in her stance was tense as she tipped it into the pot.

"Lillian?"

She blinked, looking up. "Clara? Why are you still here?"

"I was looking for my lipstick, I...." Her voice faded as she saw the unmarked bottle in her hands. "...what is that?"

Lillian grimaced, stepping towards her, and Clara took a step back, seeing something terrifying in her eyes.

The woman swallowed, unsure, before reaching for the knife block on the counter.

Thanks for reading! See you next time!

Earth Angel

Chapter Summary

Fighting for her life, Clara finally meets the man at the head of the family.

(Earth Angel (Will You be Mine) by The Penguins)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clara stumbled backwards in shock, gaping at the woman before her. Lillian licked her lips, hesitant, before her hand closed around the handle of the largest knife and pulled it out slowly. “No one was supposed to see,” she whispered, and Clara backed away further, a tremble in her hands.

She reached back, but just as her fingers closed around the doorknob, the maid lunged at her, blade aimed squarely at her chest. Clara threw herself to the side, and the knife lodged in the door, Lillian snarling in frustration.

Clara scrambled backwards along the counter, as Lillian wrenched the knife out of the door and advanced on her, something in her expression set and determined. She felt her breathing speeding up as she reached behind her, searching for anything, *anything* to use.

This isn't happening. This can't be happening. Lillian had never been cruel or rude to her. Lillian was not one of the monsters in this house. She couldn't be.

Her hand closed around the edge of a large metal bowl, and she grabbed it, swinging it forward just as Lillian moved towards her again. The bowl knocked the knife out of her hand, and Lillian hissed in pain, but she brought her fist forward into Clara's stomach, forcing the other woman to the ground. Clara lost her grip on the bowl and it clanged somewhere next to her as she gasped in pain on the floor.

Lillian straddled her writhing body, pinning her down on her back, before locking her hands around Clara's throat.

Clara's hands flew upwards, clawing at Lillian's hands, and for a moment she thought the other woman may have looked regretful, but then the pressure on her windpipe increased, and she couldn't think of such things anymore.

Sparks of pain darted behind her eyelids, and she writhed on the floor underneath her, but her vision was going blurry. *No...no!* She futilely flailed her limbs, kicking her legs, but Lillian remained firmly atop her hips, her thumbs pressing into Clara's jugular. Clara's eyes darted around in panic, and she saw the metal bowl within her arm's reach.

One hand still clawing deeply into Lillian's, Clara stretched out her other arm, curling her fingers around the rim, and Lillian's eyes went wide, but she moved back too late. Clara slammed the bowl

into the side of her head, knocking her off of her. Lillian howled in pain as Clara retched on the floor, her throat fighting to recover.

She pushed herself up slowly, still clutching the bowl, and hit Lillian once more as she tried to get up, making her collapse with a pained moan. Clara's throat burned raw, and she stumbled to her feet, looking down at Lillian. The other woman was curled on the ground, clutching her head.

Clara dropped the bowl and staggered out of the kitchen.

Michele had not gone to dinner just yet.

He considered skipping it entirely. After all, he had moved out of this house nine years ago just to escape the family sitting at the dining table. But as Adriano's wedding approached, he found himself being pulled into dinner more and more, staying the night more and more, and he feared that if it went on for much longer, he'd never be able to go back to his apartment.

Thunder crashed outside, and he looked out the window to see sheets of rain battering New York. There was certainly no chance of his returning home anytime soon, at least not for a few hours.

For a moment, he wondered if that woman had gone home. His brow furrowed slightly at the thought of her. He didn't relish his encounters with her; they only left his nose filled with the scent of white peach and a sinking feeling in his gut, one he remembered from thirteen years ago, one connected to the man he worked for.

He said I could do whatever I wanted, Mick.

He turned the corner aimlessly and there she was, the last person he wanted to see, leaning against the wall with her back to him. Aggravated and remembering that she was supposed to have left already, he approached her and reached out for her. His hand met her shoulder, making her jerk, and he yanked her around to face him.

The back of her hand collided with his cheek in a harsh slap that seemed to echo in the hall, and he felt something cut across his cheek. She flailed wildly in his hold and he grasped both of her arms, forcing her back against the wall. She looked exhausted and hysterical, and he was about to slap her back, force an explanation from her, when his gaze fell to her neck, giving him pause. The skin was red and marred with finger-shaped impressions, bruises in the making, and her breathing was harsh and labored.

Adriano was in the dining room, he'd seen him there himself. So what was this?

"What happened?" he asked, voice cold and firm. She met his gaze blearily, and in a whisper that was so ragged it almost hurt to hear, said to him, "Lillian."

"What?"

"Kitchen." She could barely get the words out, and he could tell she had been strangled. She opened her mouth to say more, but suddenly doubled over, holding her stomach. There were specks of blood on her wedding ring where it had cut into his cheek.

Michele could feel blood starting to bead in the wound, but ignored it, staring down the hall. Grabbing Clara by the elbow, he pulled her with him, heading back towards the kitchen. She tried to pull away, but he jerked her along, his jaw set.

They reached the door to the kitchen, and when he entered, he saw Lillian trying to pull herself up with a hand on the counter, her other hand to her temple, trying to stop a bleeding head wound. She met his eye, and clumsily fumbled for one of the knives in the knife block. Before she could bring it to her neck, he'd crossed the room in a few long strides and struck her hard across the face.

The knife fell from her hands, and she slumped, eyes barely open. Michele forced her against the counter, expression hard. He heard someone rap the counter behind him.

When he turned his head to look, he saw Clara holding a bottle up to him, small and unmarked.

Clara stayed quiet as the doctor examined her. He checked the bruising skin of her neck, looked inside her throat, and said things she couldn't quite hear. Michele leaned against the wall a few feet away, watching the clock. He had refused any help with the cut on his cheek.

He'd yelled for Mrs. Christopher, and the woman entered the kitchen, her face paling at the sight before her. He had her call for the doctor and watch over Lillian, before taking Clara with him back to the dining room. He'd left her outside when he went to report to his boss, but Clara still trembled at the prospect of being so close to the man.

Now, she had been taken into the drawing room for the doctor to take a look at her. She looked away from him, staring intently at Michele, but he ignored her. What would happen now?

The doctor straightened up in her peripheral vision, and she looked at him while he gathered her things. "Well, the good news is there shouldn't be any permanent damage. You'll have some bruising and discomfort for a time, but I can provide a painkiller to aid your sleep--"

"She can speak?" Michele cut him off as he approached.

"Yes, but her voice will be quite weak, I wouldn't recommend--"

Michele waved him off. "That's enough, then." The doctor took this as his cue to leave, and stood to go, following the other man out the door. Before he left, Michele gave Clara one last look, and she couldn't tell if it was concern or warning, and closed the door behind them.

Clara stared at the door, hearing voices outside. Michele, the doctor, and one more man. Someone she hadn't spoken to.

She sat in silence for a few more minutes, reaching up to touch her neck. She winced from the pain, looking down. She could only imagine how she looked at the moment, throat bruised and hair a mess. She tried to smooth it out, but her fingers caught in the tangles and she needed to work them out.

The feeling of Lillian's hand crushing down on her throat ghosted by her, and she cringed, curling in on herself. She didn't cry, if only because she knew how badly it would hurt. It had barely taken a month for this house to become a cesspool of horror. And how would she explain any of this to James?

The doorknob turned, and she looked up, expecting Michele or, worse, Adriano.

Domizio De Luca entered the room.

The patriarch of the family seated himself across the coffee table from her. She was not a terribly impressive woman, visibly exhausted, and she seemed to be shrinking before him.

“I could call for water or tea, if you’d like.”

She blinked, but shook her head, rasping out a quiet “No, thank you.” Riccardo had said that it would be painful for her to speak and swallow for a bit.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Edwards, although I do wish it was under less distressing circumstances.”

She managed a nod, and he continued, unconcerned. “I’d like you to tell me exactly what happened, if you could. Michele is not very clear on the picture and Lillian is not able to speak with us at the moment.”

Her lashes fluttered at that, but she nodded again. “I was getting ready to leave, but I thought...I had forgotten my lipstick in the kitchen.” Her voice was hoarse, but bearably so. “When I went in, I saw Lillian putting...something in the stew.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know. The bottle wasn’t labeled. She saw me and....” She lifted a hand to her throat, apparently unwilling or finding it unnecessary to continue.

Domizio’s face was neutral. “How did Michele find you?”

“He must have seen me in the hallway.”

“And you slapped him.”

She paused. “I was afraid.”

“Of him?”

“Of *anyone*. ” Her voice, though rough, had a steeliness to it. “I nearly died, sir.”

“And we are appreciative of what you did.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded, crumpled piece of paper. “I have one more question, if you’ll indulge me.”

Mrs. Edwards nodded slowly, squinting at the paper. He unfolded it and held it out to her. “Could you tell me what this is?”

She took it from him hesitantly and scanned over it. Her expression twitched in surprise, but she spoke slowly. “It’s a list of metalsmiths.”

“Yes, metalsmiths in this area. Could you tell me whose handwriting it is?”

She looked straight at him. "It's mine."

He crossed his arms and leaned back. "I thought so. Might I ask why you had it?"

"Did you go through my purse?"

"That isn't an answer, Mrs. Edwards."

The two stared at each other for a moment, before she looked down at the list once more. "I had an old picture frame I wanted fixed."

"I see. Although, I do wonder why these businesses are all close to this neighborhood, rather than yours." He did not bother hiding that he had found out her address. Mrs. Christopher had surrendered it immediately, although she seemed guilty about it.

She spoke hoarsely, but steadily. "I thought that they might do good work if they're located in such a nice area."

"And did you find someone to fix your frame?"

"Yes." She turned the list around back to him, and pointed to the first name. "This man. Francesco."

Domizio raised an eyebrow. "I see. He fixed your frame?"

"He is in the process. He had quite a bit of work piled up when I first visited him, so I didn't ask him to at first, but I went back a week later and asked him to add it to his projects."

"Francesco and I know each other, Mrs. Edwards," he said lowly, warningly. *Do not lie to me.*

She just stared back at him, not quite defiant, but not submissive either. "You're more than welcome to call him and ask if you doubt me, sir."

His eyes narrowed at the suggestion. The storm outside made it almost impossible to place a call without at least some sort of interference. And she knew that. She certainly knew it, because she looked far too calm. "Perhaps in the morning, Mrs. Edwards." He considered her briefly. "Why did you not give the frame to any of these other businesses when you found Francesco was too busy?"

"That particular day, I was very exhausted. Several things happened while I was working and I did not have the energy to keep looking, so I decided to return home and try again later." She absentmindedly toyed with her skirt. "Mrs. De Luca could tell you what happened."

"Hmm." He'd make sure she did. "Well, I believe that's all I wanted to know, Mrs. Edwards. Thank you for indulging my curiosity, especially after what happened."

"Of course, sir," she rasped, not looking at him.

He approached her, and she stared up at him, her eyes widening slightly as he got closer. "There is no need for you to report to work for the coming week. My wife and I would both greatly prefer you take the time to recover from this ordeal. Paid, of course."

She blinked up at him. "Thank you, sir."

He crossed his arms. "Needless to say, Lillian will not be returning, so my wife is in need of a new personal maid." He gazed dryly down at her. "She requested you."

The maid's face went pale. "M-Me? I-I couldn't—" Her voice cut off into a cough and she covered her mouth with both hands.

He ignored her panic. "Your hours will be longer, and there are times when you may have to stay the night, but your pay will be greatly increased. You are free to say no, but I see no benefit to that."

He turned to leave, but glanced back at her as he opened the door. "I thank you again, Mrs. Edwards. You saved my family's lives, and I won't forget it."

"Where is she?"

Any other man would have quailed at the look on Domizio De Luca's face, and it was perhaps only the fact that Michele was just as angry that his fear did not overtake him. "I had the men take her to the Block, they'll keep an eye on her."

"Good." He rubbed his forehead, eyes flashing dangerously as he went through the list in his head. "The children might still be hungry, have Mrs. Christopher make them something and *make sure she's watched.*"

"Yes, sir." Behind him, he could hear Adriano approaching.

"Everyone is in their rooms, the men are posted in the hallways and outside," he said. "I'll go to the Block to question her."

"No," his father interrupted him. "Until we figure out who's behind this, the whole family stays inside, including you. Go make sure the men posted are trustworthy and don't leave this house, understand?"

Adriano raised an eyebrow, clearly irritated, but didn't say anything, instead nodding and turning on his heel to carry out his tasks. Domizio turned to Michele, who stood at attention, hands held behind his back. Domizio clasped his shoulder tightly. "Find out who's behind this," he said lowly. "I don't care if you have to tear her apart to do it, but find out."

"Yes, sir."

"Report back when it's done, I don't care how late it is. I want to find out who tried to kill my children, Mick."

The bodyguard nodded, a threatening gleam in his eye. "Whatever it takes, sir."

The bathwater was pleasantly hot, and Milena had taken the liberty of pouring some sort of oil into it, making it silky. Clara leaned back against the tub, breathing deeply. In and out. In and out.

After Domizio had spoken with her, she had tried to request that she be allowed to go home for the night, but Madiana had flatly refused. The storm had hardly calmed, and she would not risk sending

Clara out in the downpour, not when it was so dangerous to drive. "We will put you in one of the guest rooms," she had said decisively.

"But- my husband, he'll worry...could I at least try to call him?"

"There is no point in trying, not in this weather." She cupped Clara's face in what might've meant to be a comforting gesture, but it only made the young woman shrink back. "You will return to him in the morning, but let us thank you tonight."

As though to further Clara's torture, Milena approached her and clasped her around the elbow. "I've drawn a bath for you," she said cheerfully, tugging the young woman down the hall towards her room. "Dr. Riccardo said to keep you as comfortable as possible."

So she had reluctantly accepted, although she refused any help with her bath, already feeling vulnerable enough. Now, she sat quietly in Milena's tub, staring at the wall. She tried to keep sitting straight, so as not to wet the bandages the doctor had applied around her throat.

Mrs. De Luca's personal maid? Why? She had barely been here for more than a month. It had to be a message, a sign that they were keeping an eye on her. Ordinarily, this sort of position would mean she was trusted, but somehow, she felt it was the exact opposite.

She thanked her lucky stars that she had decided to return to Francesco's shop and ask him to fix the frame. In the morning, when Mr. De Luca called the metalsmith, he would confirm that she had indeed paid him to complete the job, and hopefully, he would not be too suspicious. But she knew he would still distrust her. She doubted he had gotten this rich by being naive.

Clara thought of James at home, and hoped he was not worried. She wished she could return to the safe haven of his arms and lips, but not tonight. Unbidden, her head fell back against the porcelain curve of the bathtub, her legs opening slightly. Her fingers slid across the soft skin of her inner thigh, making tiny circles, and she shivered as she pressed them against her clit.

She missed him so much, and she thought of his mouth, sweet and firm between her thighs, and her back arched slightly as she rubbed faster-

"Clara?"

She jerked and snapped her legs together in shock. "Y-Yes?"

"I have some clothes ready for when you're done," Milena called, seemingly excited for the prospect, and Clara swallowed painfully.

"A-Alright." Bracing her hands on either side of the tub, she pushed herself to her feet, and carefully wrapped a towel around herself. There was no robe to wrap herself in. *This feels familiar*, she thought as she dried herself off. She knocked on the door. "Miss Milena? Could I have the clothes?"

"Don't be silly, you can't get changed in there. Come out."

Clara grimaced. "I'd...rather not."

"*Clarina*, don't be so nervous! We're both women. Don't leave me waiting!" Somehow, coming from her, it felt like a threat. Sensing she didn't have a choice, Clara hesitantly opened the door and

stepped out, in nothing but the towel.

Milena waited beyond, expectant, with her mother seated at the tea table behind her. "My," the young woman said, looking the maid up and down, "I had thought it before, but you *are* quite delicate. Look Mamma, she's like a doll!"

Madiana gave her a onceover, prompting Clara to shrink into herself slightly, and simply nodded, sipping her tea. Milena tipped up her chin with two fingers, clicking her tongue at the bandages. "How awful. Doctor Riccardo said they'd be gone soon, but it still hurts to see."

It hurts more to have them, Clara thought to herself. "Um, could I get changed now?"

"Of course, over here, here." Milena pulled her to the bed, where some things were laid out. "I usually wear these long kinds of nightgowns, see?" She spun, and the silky fabric of her clothing clung to her. "But these would be too long for you, and Carina's clothes wouldn't fit your figure, so I got something else."

Clara dwelled briefly on how humiliating it would be to borrow a thirteen year old's nightgown as Milena held the clothing up. "I had this in my dresser, I never wear it because it looks so silly on me. But I think it would suit you perfectly."

She was holding a white, lacy babydoll nightgown, tied off at the top with a pale pink ribbon. Clara stared at it, a little embarrassed. "It's lovely, but it...it's too much for me, Miss Milena."

The other woman pouted, holding it out insistently. "Please, *Clarina*, at least try it on for me. You'll look adorable."

The word *adorable* made Clara's eye twitch slightly, but sensing it wasn't much of a request as it was a demand, she reached out and took the nightgown. Glancing around, her gaze found a beautifully painted screen in the corner of the room, and with a glance at Milena, she retreated behind it.

She let the towel drop and stared at the nightgown once more. Something about it bothered her. Really, it wouldn't cover her much more than the towel did, but the woman waiting for her forced away any doubts, and she slowly dressed herself. She tugged on her underwear and fiddled with the pink ribbon of the babydoll, tying it into a bow.

As Clara smoothed the nightgown out, she realized what was wrong; it exposed her shoulders and collarbone so fully that the bandages around her neck demanded attention. She tried to pull her hair forward, but nothing could hide the strips of cloth, and she hung her head. She didn't want to step out looking like this. But what choice did she have?

Reluctantly, she came out from behind the screen, and Milena clasped her hands together happily. "Oh, I knew it, it suits you perfectly!" Her gaze raked over the young woman, lingering on her bandaged throat with an interested light in her eyes. Clara barely stopped herself from shrinking away. "Doesn't she look lovely, Mamma?"

Madiana raised an eyebrow. "Is that truly meant for sleeping in, Milena?"

"Of course, Mamma, what else would it be for?" No one would've fallen for the smile on her face, but there wasn't anything the other women could say.

Clara looked at herself in the mirror, frowning at how her throat stood out. Behind her, Milena flitted to the table, taking a seat next to her mother and gesturing the maid over. "Please, come sit, drink something."

She took a seat but politely refused the offer of tea for a small glass of water. Swallowing made her throat ache, so she just sipped at it occasionally. "Mamma and I were talking while you were in the bath," Milena said, sipping her own tea. "Your husband's name is Edwards, right?"

"Yes," she murmured, suddenly fearing for James.

"We were wondering, is there any relation to Nathan Edwards?"

Clara blinked. "Oh, yes...he was James's grandfather."

Madiana raised an eyebrow. "My, your husband comes from old stock, doesn't he?"

She nodded meekly as Milena jumped in. "Why on Earth are you working as a maid if that's your husband's background?"

You know why, Clara thought, humiliated. "He...he doesn't like to talk about it but...I guess by the time he was born, they weren't what they used to be."

James always hated to speak of his family, some resentment overtaking him at the very mention, but he had slowly revealed their past to Clara over the years. The Edwards' had come over from Britain centuries ago, and they'd had their fingers in enough industrial pies to make them practically American royalty. Once, they had been richer than any other family in New York. But a series of bad investments coupled with poor spending left them as near-nobodies by the time Nathan was born. He'd inherited a lump sum from his father, what was left of the family fortune, and wisely kept it from his own son to take care of his family. Now James was the owner of the last of the Edwards fortune, if only in name, and there was barely anyone left to remember his family's place in the American elite.

Her husband hated to speak of his father, and she knew his mother was a sore spot. His feelings towards his grandparents were murkier, and she didn't pry. Clara, for her part, never cared about her husband's money or prestige, although she had been devastated to learn that he had given it all up to marry her. She'd tried to convince him to take the ring back and leave her, fearing she'd ruined his life and relationship with his mother, but he had only reassured her that the falling out had been inevitable. *If not now, then later.*

"And you, *Clarina*? What of your family?"

A thin smile spread on her face. "One of my father's earliest ancestors was a gardener for an aristocrat, I think. After him came a long line of fishermen. My mother was descended from a line of sailors."

Milena leaned in, her eyes sparkling. "Any famous ones?"

"She says she's a direct descendant of Paul de Saumur, but I don't know for certain."

"How...fanciful," Madiana remarked dryly. Clara's smile died and she looked down at her lap. She hated being laughed at.

"Mr. De Luca said I'm to be your new maid?" she asked, trying to steer the subject away from her family. "May I ask what it entails?"

The older woman set down her tea elegantly. "You will assist me in keeping the household organized, bring me anything I deem necessary, look after my rooms, and otherwise. It is not too different from your current work, but we'll discuss that later. For now, I think it's time you go to bed."

"If only you could've been *my* personal maid," Milena remarked jealously. "We could have had such fun. May I borrow her from time to time, Mamma?"

"If I can spare her," her mother replied, and Clara prayed silently that such a day would never come. "Dr. Riccardo had to return home, but he left this for you." She took out a small bottle and passed it over to Clara. "He said it would help with any pain and ensure that you're able to sleep."

"Oh." She took it hesitantly. "Thank you."

"After you take your medicine, Milena will show you to a room." Madiana met her gaze fully. "Thank you, for what you did."

Clara nodded quietly. *If it hadn't been for the children...* she thought as she unscrewed the top of the bottle, although she wasn't sure what she would have done instead.

She stared at the wall, her eyes starting to flutter shut. Milena had left her in the room with a quick kiss on the cheek, and she tucked herself in, waiting for sleep to come. It wasn't very late, but whatever drug the doctor had had her take was working its magic, pulling her down slowly into a dreamy world of ether.

Clara could hear the door opening, and stayed curled on her side, not bothering to see who her visitor was. Who else would come to her room at this time of night?

He slipped into bed behind her, and she flinched when she felt the warmth of his skin against her. His finger slowly stroked the bandages on her neck, before sliding down her back and tracing the line of her shoulder blade. Clara immediately wished she could have fought harder for something more modest, even if he would have pulled it off of her anyway. She hated leaving this much of herself open and exposed for him.

Well, he would have done this either way, some traitorous part of her thought, and she cringed at how easily the acceptance came now. *And, well, look at you. It's not like you ever do much to stop him.*

She felt him hook his fingers around the neckline of the nightgown, tugging it down below her breasts, and impulsively, she crossed her arms over her chest. Clara felt him still against her back, and twisted her neck to look at him.

The window was at Adriano's back, casting him in shadow. "I can't," she managed softly, her throat still aching.

Ignoring her, he let his fingers knead into the stiff muscles of her back, and a barely audible whimper fell from her lips. She turned away from him, pressing her face into the pillow and trying

to stay silent, but he worked his hands steadily. She hadn't noticed how much of a toll the last few weeks had taken on her body, and tension roiled through every muscle.

It was painful, but it was also so relieving, like she was feeling all her stress pool into liquid and dissipate from her body. She did this for James sometimes, when he had particularly long days, and he did it for her gladly as well. Although, she could never recall feeling as dreadful with him as she did now.

If Clara had been a bit more lucid, she would have shoved Adriano out of bed or hit him or considered the merits of screaming for help. But her mind seemed to have gone a bit malleable because of the drugs, and she felt so heavy, so all she could do was keep staring at the wall, and let him move his hands down her body.

He moved from her shoulders to her hips, and she felt as though she was melting into the mattress as he expertly pulled the tension from her muscles.

He lifted her leg with one hand, and his cock slid into her like a dream. She gasped softly, clutching the pillows, and when he started to thrust, she let her eyes close.

She was no longer in the mansion, she was at home, in her own bed, and the man between her legs was none other than her husband. She reached back and her nails dug into his side, making him groan into her ear.

Clara felt him slowly dragging against her walls as though there was nowhere else in the world he'd rather be. She pressed back against him, chasing the friction, and felt his laugh against her nape. It wasn't the right laugh.

It's not him-

She shoved that thought away. No, of course it was. Who else could it be? She wondered briefly if she could convince the doctor to give her more of that painkiller. Sex was so much better when she couldn't think. And she had so much to think about these days.

He reached somewhere deep inside her that made her whine, and he inhaled slightly. "There it is," he murmured in that all-wrong voice, angling his hips to better please her.

He was holding her leg up with one arm, the other slung above her head on the pillow, and she felt fireworks burst behind her eyelids as he tilted his hips into hers, making sure to hit that same spot every time. She pressed her mouth against her forearm, trying to hide her moans, and let her other hand slip from his side to between her legs.

She rubbed her clit in swift, desperate circles, and he moaned behind her, "*Fuck, tesorina, you take me so well,*" and fucked her harder.

Her throat still felt raw from what had happened — what had happened? She could barely think with how well he was fucking her — and every whine, every squeal made her voice rasp and ache. But she didn't stop.

They moved passionately, bathed in moonlight, and Clara could feel something winding tight inside her, so close, but so far. There was a wrongness to it, like her body knew the truth her eyes shut out, and it wouldn't let her pleasure peak.

She could feel his bare body pressed completely against hers, and she savored the feeling. She preferred it this way, naked in bed with all the time in the world. Her fingernails pressed into her bottom lip as she gasped “God, yes,” and rubbed her clit faster.

She wanted it to end. She *needed* it to end. It was wrong, wrong, so wrong. But if it was wrong, how could it feel so good?

She clutched the bedsheets, her moans a soft but never ending cadence in the room. His lips were next to her ear, and she could hear every grunt and whine coming from him. He was enjoying it, too. His fingers dug into her thigh, and she was certain he would leave marks there, later. His breathing heavy, he pressed several open-mouthed kisses against her shoulder, and she arched back into him, seeking more of his touch.

She turned her face against the pillow and came with a cry, her hand falling away from her clit to grab at his side and dig her nails in deeply. He snarled as she tightened around him, and kept fucking her through the high, made even better by how the drug made her feel like she was floating.

Clara came down slowly, and she whispered James’s name into the pillow, so quietly the man behind her certainly didn’t hear. Perhaps she knew, deep down, that it wasn’t him, and that he would hate to hear it.

His thrusts became harsher and more erratic, the bed creaking slightly underneath them. Her body had become soft and pliant, and she didn’t protest when he cursed and bit down on her shoulder, his hips stilling as he thrusted as deeply as he possibly could. Heat flooded her, making her shiver.

When she opened her eyes, the room seemed to sway and bend before her. Exhaustion seeped through her veins, and when the man pulled out of her, she could feel warmth spilling out from between her legs. He pulled her back against him, but she was already falling asleep, unwilling to look at him and face the truth she already knew.

“ *Tesorina*. ” As Clara’s eyes fluttered shut, he leaned over her and kissed her shoulder, and she managed to catch the last thing he murmured to her before exhaustion dragged her under. “ I will miss you, I think, when I’m married.”

Despite the fact that Michele and Lillian both worked so closely with the De Luca family, it was rare that they crossed paths. Michele spent most of his time handling business outside of the manor, while it was the only place Lillian worked. He could probably count the number of times they had spoken on one hand.

This would be the last time.

He dismissed the rest of the men, and cracked his knuckles methodically before opening the door to where she was. She sat with her back straight in the chair, face stony, and when he entered, she said nothing. He pulled a chair from the corner to sit across from her at the table. “ How’s your head?”

She didn’t answer, and he shook his head. “ Ah, no, Lillian, that’s not how this works. I need you to answer *all* of my questions, and we aren’t off to a good start.” He leaned forward slightly with an accommodating smile. “ How’s your head?”

Finally, she ground out a reply through her teeth. "Fine."

"Wonderful. After all, you can't tell me anything if you don't remember anything, and well, from what I've heard, that maid almost caved your head in." He sat back, studying her. "You worked for the De Lucas for a long time, Lillian; you know what's about to happen. Make it easier on both of us and just tell me who hired you, so we can skip the mess."

"No one hired me," she stated flatly.

"No one hired you."

"No one."

"I don't think that's the answer you want to go with, Lillian." He crossed his arms. "See, that would mean you made the decision to murder Domizio De Luca's wife and children all by yourself. And *that* would mean that you're worthless to me." He narrowed his eyes at her, still smiling. "Do you know what happens to the people in here when I don't have any use for them anymore?"

Her expression trembled slightly, as though she was losing her nerve. Still, she shook her head. "No one hired me."

Michele sighed and nodded. "I understand." He stood, and didn't miss the startled blink of her eyes, the slight way her breathing sped up. She watched as he carefully rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, revealing his lean forearms. "Well, it doesn't matter anyway. Torture doesn't always work, you see; people can still lie to me."

He stepped around the table to stand behind her, and Lillian shrank, unable to stop the tears from welling in her eyes. Almost gently, Michele tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back so that she was staring at the ceiling, with him just out of sight. He leaned down and placed his lips right next to her ear. "So I want you to know that everything I'm about to do to you, I'm not doing because I need to—I'm doing it because I enjoy it."

She was turning sixteen soon, and her mother had pressed some money in her hands and asked her to go buy groceries. It was a warm day, and she decided to wear her new dress, loving the way it swished around her legs when she walked.

She made her way steadily through the market and picked up eggs and bread and cheese, and smiled at Mrs. Arnaud and chatted with her about the woman's daughters and yes of course she could watch them this weekend.

Her mother needed a new knife sharpener so she went by Mr. Calais' store to buy one. His son, Marcel, was there, looking very nice and official in his new uniform, for he had just been recruited to a sailing ship. He was twenty, and quite tall and handsome, and Clara smiled at him shyly at the counter. He smiled back, and she felt the blush creeping up her neck.

She finished her shopping and began to make her way back to her house, humming as she walked down the road, when a hand closed around her wrist. She turned to see Marcel holding her and smiling. He tugged her closer to him and asked for a kiss, so she shook her head and smiled nervously as she pulled back. His brow furrowed slightly and he pulled her in again, and her

admiration of him melted into fear as she said again that *she didn't want to*. But he would not let go. She dropped the basket and wrenched her arm out of his grasp.

And she ran.

This startled him and he was a few steps behind as her feet pounded the roads towards the docks. She could hear him yelling at her, but in one smooth, clean leap, she dove into the cool, salty embrace of the ocean.

Seawater saturated her dress, but she dove deeper, turning her gaze above. Marcel was a sailor now, and more than capable of swimming after her, but he was also vain, and did not want to ruin his new uniform so soon after getting it. She could see his silhouette at the dock's edge, and watched him pace, agitated. But Clara's family had seawater in their veins, and she could stay under for a long while. So she waited.

After a few minutes, Marcel left, thinking she had swam somewhere else. She surfaced slowly, and watched the sun start to sink into the waves. She squinted in its light, before lying on her back in the water. She swam a little longer. Some fishermen passed by and when she waved to them, they waved back, because to them, a girl in a dress swimming in the sea wasn't really that strange.

Eventually, she forced herself to pull herself out of the water. She wrung the seawater from her hair and squeezed out the skirt of her dress before walking home. Her basket was long gone.

When she opened the door to her house and her parents saw their daughter standing there, no groceries and dripping with ocean, they groaned. Her mother grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her, shaking her head. "We send her to the market and she goes swimming instead. You're not a mermaid, *ma fille*, you can't go jumping into the waves whenever you please."

"Why not?" she asked, stubborn, but they both just shook their heads at her.

Her father gave her a conspiratorial smile when her mother's back was turned. "Did you have fun?"

She grinned widely. "Yes," she said, wanting to go back, "so much fun."

When Clara woke up, the bed was empty and the moon was high in the sky. She rubbed her eyes, frowning. She remembered that day. Her mother had forced the truth of what happened out of her, and her father went and broke Marcel's jaw that same day.

She sat up hesitantly. The storm outside had died down to a rainy night. She looked down at the space next to her, the rumpled sheets still warm, and swallowed, disgusted with herself. She fixed the babydoll, pulling it back up her chest and smoothing down the skirt, before slowly getting out of bed. She stared out the window, into the dark and rainy streets. *I could go*, she thought suddenly. Run through the city and return home. She could deal with their anger if it meant she could leave.

As she stood, she swayed slightly, her head still foggy. Carefully, she slipped on her shoes, and realized that they had taken her purse and coat. She didn't care. Rain wouldn't stop her from trying.

Clara cracked open the door, peeking out into the hallway. There was no one there. *Maybe that's how he got in*, she thought, raking her nails down her arm to try and focus. Violet-tinged clouds seemed to crowd at the edges of her vision, and she screwed her eyes shut, willing them away.

She crept down the hall unsteadily, trying to orient herself. How far was she from the main door? Or should she try to leave through the kitchen? No, they'd be watching the kitchen. But then how-?

"Well, if it isn't our savior."

The smug, oily voice above her made her jump. In all her thoughts, she hadn't even realized that she'd nearly walked into him. She stared up at Giovanni, who waited for a response, and the words fell out of her mouth before she could stop them. "I'm tired of you people sneaking up on me."

He blinked, before bursting into laughter. She cringed, the sound making the world shake. "You know, I didn't believe it when they told me," he said, still smiling at her. "That *you* saved my family. Then again, I almost didn't remember who you were."

"Well, I wouldn't mind if this whole family forgot me." She tried to move past him, but he blocked her.

"The dress suits you," he remarked. "But I wouldn't leave in it. Haven't you heard?" he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "This city's filled with...unsavory souls."

"Like yourself?" she asked, thinking about Abigail.

He held his hands up, and she noticed the bottle he was holding. "I never claimed to be otherwise. Anyway, if you are trying to leave, you're going the wrong way. You'll end up at Milena's room going this way." He raised an eyebrow. "Unless that was your goal."

"No," she snapped, and he chuckled before slipping his jacket off and draping it over her shoulders.

He offered her his free arm. "Come with me. It's not fun drinking alone. Although maybe I shouldn't be giving you anything if the medication has you this bad."

"I'd rather go back to bed," she replied, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"No, no, Clara, that wasn't what you were supposed to say, because it wasn't a question." He smiled a little wider. "So try again."

Staring at him, wondering if it was worth it, she sighed and took his arm, letting him lead her down the halls. "Good. I'm sure your husband misses you, and I can't say I blame him, but it's rude to leave without saying anything, you know?"

"I'm older than you," she muttered, concentrating on not stumbling. "Don't patronize me."

"You're right, my apologies." He stopped, and she realized they were at the steps before the foyer. He pulled her down to sit with him, placing the bottle between them. "You're quite like another girl I know."

"I'm sure you know plenty," she replied, watching him open the bottle.

"A fair point." He looked up, noticing something, then sighed. "Carina, it's rude to eavesdrop."

Clara blinked, and turned around to see the young girl step out from behind the corner sulkily. "Papa said we aren't supposed to leave our rooms."

"And yet, here you are," her brother replied drily as she approached them. "Did you sneak out?"

She nodded, sitting on the step above them. "Mamma wouldn't tell us what happened," she said, looking at Clara. "Why are you hurt?"

"A vastly complicated question," Giovanni said, opening the bottle he'd brought. "Let's say our lovely Clara discovered something new about this family."

Carina squinted at him. "You shouldn't say those things to married women, Gio, it's disrespectful."

"Of course. There's nothing I respect more than the sanctity of marriage." He took a swig from the bottle and sighed, satisfied. "And good scotch."

He held out the bottle to his younger sister, who reached for it with a curious sparkle in her eye, but Clara snatched it away quickly. "She's only thirteen!"

Gio furrowed his brows, playfully confused. "What's the problem?"

She scowled and shoved the bottle back at him. She knew boys like him, who cared little for the rules and the feelings of people around them. She turned to Carina instead, offering a smile. "You should go back to your room, honey, it's late."

"But--"

Someone cleared their throat at the bottom of the stairs, and all three of them looked down to see Michele staring at them, his arms crossed. "What are you all doing?"

Giovanni winked at Clara. "Remember what I said about unsavory souls?" He called down to the man. "Evening, Mick. Had a good time snapping poor Lillian's bones, I hope?"

Carina cringed and shrunk in on herself, but Giovanni either didn't notice or didn't care. "You know, Clara, you're not the only one who's saved someone in this family, you know. When Carina was born, one of the maids tried to kill her. Mick was the one who saved her."

Michele, who had been stalking up the stairs towards them, narrowed his eyes. "Giovanni," he growled warningly, but the young man just looked him straight in the eye with a smile.

"Remind me what happened to her, Mick?"

The two men stared at each other, challenging, until Michele spoke. "Carina. Go back to your room."

"But I--"

"Now."

She hung her head and stood, hurrying away. Clara stared after her, wanting to follow. She didn't want to be here with these two men.

"She was held for three days," Michele said flatly.

"Held and tortured," Giovanni corrected. "But you're the one who finished it, aren't you?"

A pause. "Yes, I was." A murderous glint entered his eyes. "What are you doing out here with her? Your brother posted men to guard the house."

Giovanni shrugged. "I told the ones in front of my door to go away. Wouldn't you know it? There weren't any in the hallway of Clara's room. Interesting."

"Right. Interesting. Get back in your room."

"Afraid I can't." He stood and pulled Clara up. "I've got appointments to keep, so I'd best be off. And don't you need to go report to my father?"

He moved past the enforcer easily, before he felt a hand close around the back of his neck. "Get back in your room," Michele whispered threateningly, "or I make it look like you were so drunk you tripped down the stairs."

Giovanni turned his neck to look back. "You have a witness."

"I won't when they find you."

The young man sighed. "Fine. You're boring, but never let it be said you're not effective." He shrugged off Michele's hand. "Have a good night, Clara." He took her hand and kissed it, before disappearing back into the manor.

The maid tried to get down the stairs, even as they swirled in her vision. "I'm-I'm going home."

Michele grabbed her by the arm, snarling. "Like hell you are." He dragged her down the halls, and she could only follow, staggering. "You just don't get it, do you? It's not up to you anymore." He wrenches her door open and threw her inside, watching her stumble and following her to the bed. "I told you to leave so many fucking times. You had your chance and it's over."

Clara scrambled backwards across the bed, trying to get away, but he grabbed her ankle and yanked her back towards him, pinning her against the sheets. "Your home, your husband, that shit doesn't matter anymore." His hand cupped her cheek. "So just be a good bitch and come when called."

In the dim moonlight, she realized there was blood on his collar, and she flailed underneath him, clawing at his arms. Her stomach roiled and her exhaustion and pain and fear and the drugs jumbled together until the words burst from her mouth. "I hate this place," she sobbed, trying to push him off of her. "I hate him and I hate this family and I hate *you!*" She wept as her strength gave out and she beat against his chest senselessly.

For a moment, he seemed to lean in closer to her, and she turned her head away. "Yeah," he muttered, "me too, sweetheart," and she didn't know she could hate a word so much. He let go of her, disgust clear in his endless eyes, and left her there on the bed, shutting the door behind him.

Clara clutched at the covers, unable to stop her tears. She was no different from her sixteen year-old self, only able to freeze in fear and run for her life. And she couldn't even do *that* now.

Evelyn thought she saw blood on the man's shirt.

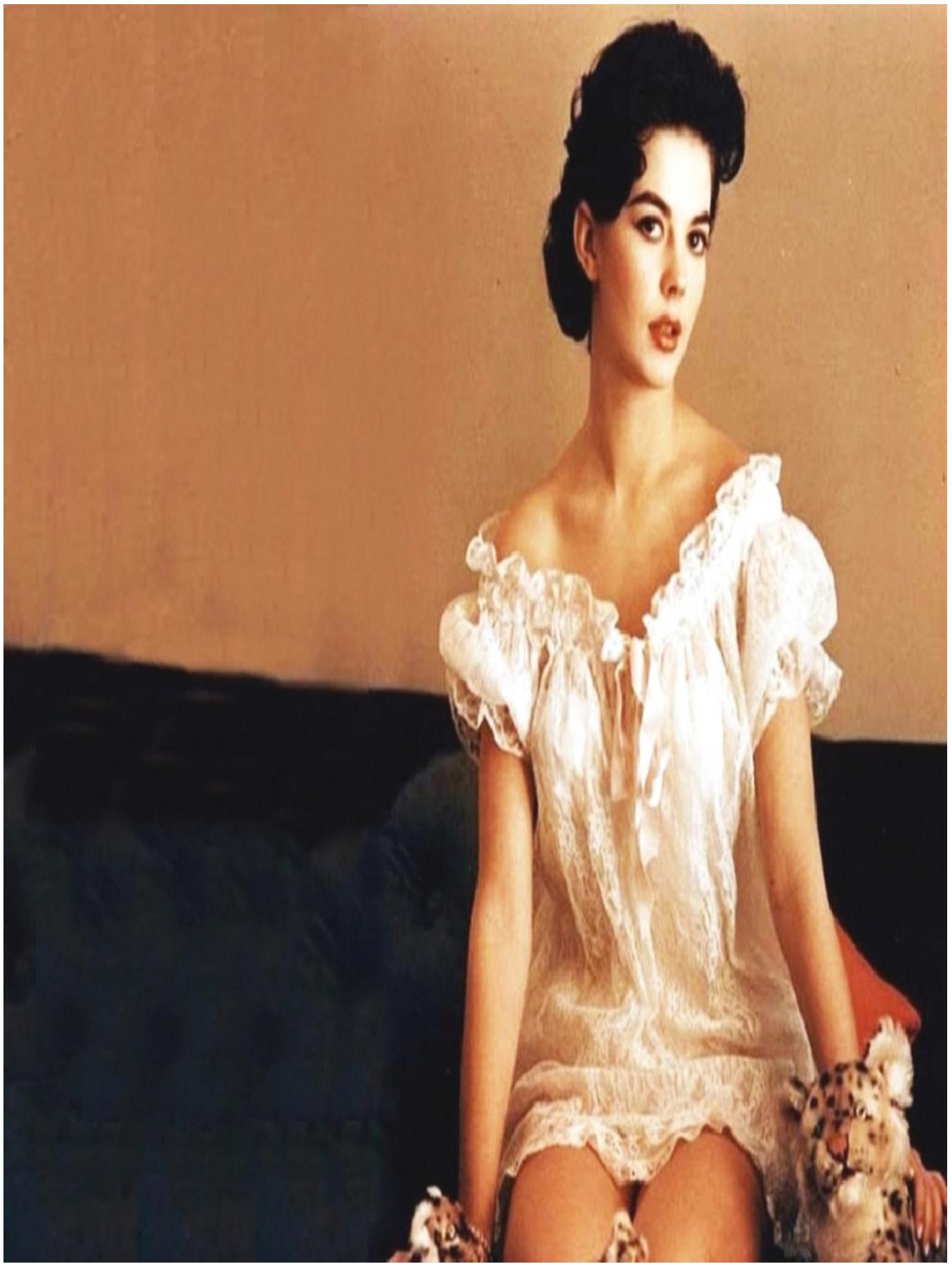
Well, it wouldn't be that strange. Most men that came weren't stand up citizens anyway. She chose to ignore it and get on with her work.

He has such dark eyes, she thought briefly as he watched her bob her head between his legs, sucking his cock with as much eagerness as she could muster. It had been a long night, and she was so tired, but he had money and she wasn't going to give it up. Not even if he had blood on his shirt and something dimly terrifying in his eyes.

She rubbed the inside of his thigh with one hand and felt him tangle his fingers in her hair, pushing her head down. She relaxed her throat and let him, letting out muffled moans as he thrust into her mouth. Listening to his grunts above her head, she glanced behind him out the window, and saw the moon nestled amongst the clouds.

He came down her throat and she swallowed without complaint. And when he picked her up and pushed his cock inside of her, she stared into his face, and wondered quietly at the cut on his cheek, but his eyes were closed now, and she couldn't tell what he was thinking. But when he fucked into her, she could see stars.

Here's a picture of Clara's babydoll nightgown:



Chapter End Notes

I've always imagined Milena as more of a peignoir kinda gal, if you were curious.

I Only Have Eyes for You

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the attack, Madiana makes Clara's choices clear; stay, or die.

(I Only Have Eyes for You, Al Dubin)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James was pacing.

It was not something he did often, but lately, the habit had been creeping up on him more than usual. Perhaps it was the impending transition to his new job. But he knew, deep down, it was because of his wife.

Before, it had only been little things. She was spacing out more often and there was something slightly different about her smiles. He thought it might have been stress from work. He had had trouble adjusting to his first job as well.

But then she didn't come home.

It was late, very late, and the storm crashed outside almost ominously. *Where is she?* He paced. And paced. And paced. Into the kitchen. Into his study. Through the hall and into the bedroom. The question repeated itself over and over until it turned into some sort of demanding mantra. *Where is she where is she WHERE IS SHE.*

It was too late in the night and the storm was too dangerous. Had she been in an accident on her way home? Or had she not even left the De Luca manor? Perhaps they hadn't let her, seeing the downpour outside.

Was that all it was? Was she simply enjoying the hospitality of her employers? God, he hoped so. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if she got hurt in this storm. But it was too dangerous to try and brave the rain to go fetch her and phoning was nearly impossible.

He hated this. He hated sitting in the apartment useless. He got ready for bed just to have something to do, but he was too anxious to sleep.

James stared at the ceiling, trying to ignore the coolness of the other side of the bed. The rain thrummed steadily against the window, a sound that might have been comforting if Clara had been in his arms.

Knock knock.

Clara awoke with her eyes closed. She could sense the sunbeams streaming into the room, and the excited knocking at her door. *Go away*, she pleaded silently. *Just leave me*.

A beat. Then another knock. She pushed herself up on her forearms, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Come in,” she called hoarsely. The door opened wide, revealing a brightly-smiling Elio.

“Miss Clara!” He rushed in as quickly as his little legs could carry him, and jumped onto the foot of the bed. “Good morning!” he chirped happily. He was dressed in his school uniform, his red hair tamed by Mrs. Christopher.

She blinked at him. “...good morning, honey,” she managed, her voice a little less rough, yet still aching. She glanced back towards the open door. “What are you still doing here? Don’t you need to get to school?”

He nodded. “Mamma said we could say good morning before we left. And Gio said we should bring you breakfast!” He glanced back at the door, frowning. “Cesare and Viola were right behind me....”

A voice came from down the hall. “Elioaaaa,” Viola whined. “You ran too fast! And this tray is heavy!”

“*I’m* the one doing all the work!” Cesare insisted, as the two came into the doorway, holding a breakfast tray carefully between them. They approached the bed, struggling to lift it up.

“Oh, here, let me.” Clara reached down and took the tray from them, setting it in her lap. She ruffled Cesare’s hair gently, smiling. “This was very sweet of you all. Thank you.”

Cesare flushed and looked down. “It wasn’t my idea....”

Viola chimed in, climbing onto the bed. “Gio told us to before he left. He said it would make you happy.” She tilted her head slightly, frowning. “But he didn’t say why you slept over. Are you sick, Miss Clara?”

“No, honey.” She felt conscious of the bandages around her neck. “It was raining too hard last night for me to go home, that’s all.”

Viola nodded, swinging her feet off the side of the bed. Elio bounced slightly, shifting the mattress, and Cesare looked torn, as though he wanted to climb onto the bed as well but wasn’t sure.

Clara felt a shudder crawl up her spine as she stared at them. She remembered the look in Lillian’s eyes as she had tried to strangle the young woman, the poisoned stew bubbling on the stove. The stew the children would have eaten if not for the fact she had walked in.

She straightened up slightly, drawing their attention. “This was wonderful of all of you, but it’s getting late and you need to get to school.”

Viola and Elio deflated slightly. “Alright,” the little girl murmured, dark eyes cast downwards.

Clara smiled softly and playfully pinched their cheeks. “Now, now. I’m really happy that you brought me breakfast, but it’s important for you to get to school on time.” She could see they still looked a little sad, so she looked over at Cesare. “Isn’t that right, Cesare?”

He blinked, green eyes wide, before nodding eagerly. “Yeah! Come on, we need to get going.”

“But-“ Elio protested.

“No buts.” Cesare puffed out his chest slightly. “I’m the oldest, so you have to listen to me. Let’s go.”

The two youngest children sighed but hopped off the bed. Viola glanced back as they filed out of the room. “Feel better, Miss Clara!”

“Thank you, honey.” She waved as they left, and when the door shut, her hand dropped to her lap, her expression turning wary. The way Gio had seemed to purposefully push the kids to her made her uneasy, although she wasn’t quite sure why. Still, something told her, deep down, to be cautious around the young man.

She ate her breakfast quietly, but while her throat no longer ached as much, the food tasted like dust to her, and she pushed most of it away, grimacing. Her memories of the night before were nauseatingly twisted and dizzying, and she could just barely recall dreaming of having sex with James-

-James! She needed to call him right away. She lifted the breakfast tray and set it to the side before reaching for the phone on the nightstand. As she entered the number and listened to it ring, she scratched at her upper arm with her free hand, her nails tracing familiar paths, before she realized what she was doing and forced herself to stop.

“Hello?”

“James? It’s me-”

“Clara! Dear God, where are you!?”

“I’m at the De Luca house,” she said, trying to make her voice soothing. “They wanted me to stay the night because of the storm, and I couldn’t call with all the rain. I’m so sorry, *mon cher*....”

She heard him take a deep breath. “*No, don’t be sorry, as long as you’re safe. I thought that might have been it, I just wasn’t sure.*”

“I wanted to try to get home, but they insisted,” she said quietly, her fingertips lightly touching the bandages at her throat.

“*No, it’s better that you didn’t. It would have been dangerous in that weather.*” His voice had considerably brightened. “*I’m glad that you’re safe. You actually caught me in time, I was about to call the house to ask after you.*”

“Oh.” Clara swallowed, and shut her eyes, suddenly wary of who might hear. “Well...I’ll try to go back home soon. You should head to work, don’t let me keep you.”

“*Oh, uh, alright. Be safe. Do you want me to pick you up from work?*”

“No, that’s alright. Don’t worry yourself. Have a good day, *mon cher*. ”

“*...you too, sweetheart.*” Something seemed tense in his tone. “*Love you.*”

“Love you too.” He hung up, and Clara set the phone back down, slightly worried about him. Did he suspect something? Was he angry with her?

She was so consumed with her thoughts that she almost didn’t notice anything amiss when she went to the bathroom. She caught sight of herself in the mirror, and her gaze landed on her shoulder, where something peeked out from beneath the neckline of her nightgown. Slowly, her hands shaking with foreboding, she tugged the fabric down to reveal a bite mark, fading but red, the faint imprint of teeth left in her skin.

So it hadn’t been a dream.

And it hadn’t been James.

As Clara combed through her hair with her fingers, a knock came at the door. “Clara? Are you awake?”

She grimaced as she recognized the voice, and hurriedly fixed her nightgown and hair to hide the bite mark. She slowly opened the door a crack, meeting Milena’s gaze. “Good morning,” she said softly.

“I’ve brought you your clothes.” She held up the folded bundle in her hands, Clara’s bag hanging off her arm, and Clara reluctantly opened the door more to let her in. She spun around and sat on the bed, looking the maid up and down. “You look much better than you did yesterday. And you sound better as well.”

“Thank you.” True, her voice and throat did not hurt as much, although they were still sore. In truth, she did not *feel* much better; after discovering the bite on her shoulder, she had sunk against the wall of the bathroom, unable to stop shaking. Beneath the sleeves of the nightgown, fresh scratches adorned her upper arm, her nails coming just short of drawing blood.

“I see you’ve already had breakfast,” Milena observed, looking at the tray still sitting on the bed.

“Yes, the children brought it. They said Giovanni sent them.”

“Kind of him,” Milena mused, arching one delicate eyebrow. Clara didn’t like the curious expression on her face. “My little brother has never been known for his generosity, but then again, he’s never been known for anything at all.”

“Oh.” She didn’t really know how to respond to that. “Um, may I have the—”

“We’ll have so much fun now that you’re Mamma’s maid. Lillian was always looking down her nose at the others but she never actually did much.” She leaned forward, an eager glint in her eyes. “You can come shop with me and keep me company.”

Clara just managed to hold back a grimace at this. “Oh. I was under the impression that I was just going to be assisting Mrs. De Luca with whatever she needed.”

Milena glanced at her nails, painted a flawless red. “No, not exactly. Mamma and Mrs. Christopher will speak to you once you’ve changed, to explain more.” She stood and approached the maid.

"Please, keep the nightgown. It suits you so well." Her gaze skimmed Clara's figure in a way that might've made her blush, if she hadn't been so terrified.

"Thank you," she mumbled, and barely kept from jerking back in shock when Milena brushed two kisses against her cheeks.

The other woman pulled back, noticing the surprise on Clara's face. "Oh, I thought that was how the French did it. Did I get it wrong?"

"N-No, I just...." She swallowed and looked away. "I'm sorry. After last night I... I'm just nervous, that's all."

"Oh, you poor thing." She took both of Clara's hands in her own and squeezed. "Rest assured, you're safe with us. I'm not in the habit of letting my friends get hurt."

We're not friends, and I did get hurt, she wanted to yell back. *I nearly died.* But her skepticism must have shown on her face, because Milena smiled. "You don't believe me? That hurts me, *Clarina.* I thought we were becoming close. Would it be more reassuring from my brother, perhaps?"

Clara blanched, and Milena laughed out loud. "Oh, you *are* darling. Perhaps that is why he likes you, but I've never known him to be complex."

"I want to change." The words tumbled out of her mouth, clunky and hard. "Please. I need to be home soon, my husband is worried."

Milena's eyes narrowed, and Clara felt her nails dig ever-so-slightly into her hands. "Of course. Forgive me, I forgot the time." She swept by, and turned back before shutting the door. "Mamma is waiting in her room for you."

Clara watched her go, her shoulders tense as she listened to her footsteps fade down the hall. She didn't know what it was, but even when the woman was kind to her, she had the distinct feeling something was closing in on her, slowly encircling her and squeezing just tight enough to let her fear rise. She prayed that being Madiana's maid would mean she wouldn't have to see Milena or any of the other De Lucas as much, but somehow she knew she would have no choice.

It's not up to you anymore.

The memory made her flinch. He was right. It was out of her hands now. Whatever Madiana would tell her now would decide the rest of her days in the De Luca household.

She pulled off the nightgown, bundling it up and shoving it to the bottom of her bag. Her day dress felt like plate armor in comparison to the wisp of fabric Milena had called a nightgown, her flats like anchors attached to her feet.

She left the room quietly, her fingers brushing over her neck.

Madiana sat at a small tea table in her room, accompanied by Mrs. Christopher, who shifted uncomfortably when she saw Clara enter. Madiana waved her over to sit with them and poured her some tea. "Good morning. I hope you slept well?"

“Fine, thank you.” She picked up the cup but did not drink.

“I trust my husband has already informed you of my request.”

“Yes, I...I’m afraid I don’t understand why...?”

The matriarch leveled her gaze at her, and Clara resisted the urge to flinch. “Lillian, as you already know, won’t be returning to us. Working so closely with me, there is a level of trust to be expected, a trust she broke. I feel we can expect you not to follow in her footsteps.”

Clara looked down at her reflection in the tea’s glassy black surface, and thought of everytime Michele told her to leave. “I only wanted to earn money for a new apartment, ma’am,” she said quietly. “I...I don’t think I should stay. I’m sure you can find someone far better.”

Madiana set her cup down on its saucer, the little *clink* seeming to echo in the vast space. “Unfortunately,” she said, her voice soft with warning, “the decision no longer lies with you.”

You had your chance and it’s over.

“I asked for you for many reasons. You do your work diligently and without complaint. The children adore you. And you seem like a smart woman—too smart to turn me down.” She folded her hands in her lap and narrowed her eyes at the maid. “You can stay here—in this manor, attending to the needs of the family—or my husband will find something else for you to do. Something not quite as delicate, working with people far less forgiving than I. Do you understand?”

“Respectfully,” Clara murmured, looking up to meet her gaze, “attending to this family’s needs nearly killed me.”

Madiana looked away and exhaled lightly. “An oversight, and a terrible one on my part. One that caused you undeserved pain and fear. In return, I am offering you more money than you’ll make anywhere else in this city. I am offering you and your husband protections that will keep you safe until the day old age overtakes you.”

When she looked back at Clara, her eyes seemed to gleam. “As I said, you are a smart woman, Clara. Someone tried to kill my family last night. Why didn’t they succeed?”

“Because of me,” she answered, a terrible understanding dawning on her.

“Because of you. We owe you an unpayable debt, Clara; but those people have no such sentiments. You can either accept what I so generously give, or walk out this manor’s front doors looking over your shoulder for the rest of your days.”

Clara’s hands trembled slightly in her lap. She could abandon ship now, and whoever had tried to kill the De Lucas would come after her; or, she could willingly dig herself deeper into this hole. The unfairness of it made her sick.

“Inconvenient though it may be, you need to decide now. I have given you the next week off to rest and recuperate, with substantial compensation. A small reward for the service you’ve done me. But you must tell me whether you intend to return when the week is over, or not.” Madiana’s voice was commanding and firm, and Clara cringed under the weight of it. Oh, it was so tempting to quit, to

stride through the doors and never return, but she knew it would do her no good. She could return to the comfort of her home, but there would only be a new evil coming to knock.

“Alright,” she said softly, keeping the tremor from her voice, even as she felt she was sealing her coffin. “I’ll stay on. Thank you for...for the offer.”

Madiana smiled, and with a jolt, Clara realized she had never seen her make such an expression before. It was one of cool approval, and perhaps a hint of self-satisfaction, the confidence of a mother who always knew best. “Very good. I knew you were an intelligent woman.” She leaned back slightly, looking over at Mrs. Christopher. “I’ve been discussing your new workload with Mrs. Christopher.”

Clara turned her gaze to the housekeeper, who blinked and cleared her throat. “You were originally hired in order to assist with the increased work from Master Adriano’s return, from tending to his room to tidying up after any business he and Mr. De Luca may attend to in the house. Additionally, you were to provide general support in planning for Master Adriano’s wedding. Ordinarily, if you were Mrs. De Luca’s personal maid, you would not be expected to clean any part of the house except her room, but....”

“Circumstances have changed. With what has happened, I do not wish to introduce another new face to the house to replace you as a maid,” Madiana continued, her tone slightly dark. “But the fact remains that Amelia and Madison will not be able to take on all of the necessary work by themselves.”

“So...I’ll still be a regular maid?”

“Not quite. Heidi and Marlene, as you know, usually attend to any requests from me or my husband, or my eldest children, but until we can confirm that they have no designs on my family, they will be taking on more of your regular responsibilities. Amelia and Madison will be looked into as well.” Madiana folded her hands in her lap. “Mrs. Christopher will assign you tasks if necessary, but for the most part, you will be expected to fulfill any requests from the senior members of the family. That includes my husband, myself, Adriano, Milena, and Giovanni.”

Clara blinked. “Excuse me, but that sounds like far too much for me alone,” she said meekly. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to keep up.”

Madiana waved her concerns off. “My husband and sons are rarely in the house, and hardly call on anyone when they are. With the wedding coming up, they will be gone even more often. As for myself and Milena, we will also be organizing the wedding, and may send you on errands if necessary. I assure you, it will not be overwhelming.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “And if any of my children appear to be making it so intentionally, you will let me know.” It was not a question. It didn’t matter how powerful her husband was in the outside world; in this house, everyone had to answer to his wife.

“Oh....” She felt a cruel prick of hope at the older woman’s words. If Adriano tried to touch her again...would his mother guard her from him? “I understand.”

“Good. Well, I believe that is all we have to discuss. There is a car out front to take you home. Any particulars will be gone over once you return to work.” Madiana stood, prompting Clara and Mrs. Christopher to stand as well. “You have not asked about your pay,” she noted. “I would have thought it would be one of the first questions you had, if you’re trying to save for a new apartment.”

Clara glanced down at the floor. How long had it been since she had thought about money? Such a trivial thing, now. And with threat after threat looming over her, bringing up a bigger apartment for a bigger family to James was the last thing on her mind. “I...suppose I haven’t thought about it.”

A pair of slender hands appeared in her field of vision, and Madiana De Luca grasped her hands tightly, causing Clara’s gaze to snap back up to her. “I am truly sorry for what happened. I owe you the lives of my children and my husband, and I will repay you with any means at my disposal. This, I can promise you.” Despite the kind words, the look in her eyes was cold and determined.

Clara stared back at her, confused from how her mood had changed, but nodded. “Thank you,” she whispered, and Madiana let her hands slip from her grasp. Clara picked up her bag and coat, and nodded to the two women, before turning her back to leave the manor.

“Oh, and Clara?”

She turned back, and now, there was a cool warning in Madiana’s expression. “We will be checking your background as well. If there are any...unsavory connections in your past, you might tell me now.” *And we will go easier on you*, her eyes seemed to say.

Clara felt a morbid amusement on her tongue. Who could be more unsavory than this family? Still, she shook her head. “No, ma’am. None whatsoever.” Before this job, she had been a good girl from a good family, with a kind husband and wonderful friends.

She wondered if the De Lucas would pity her when they realized how utterly ordinary she had been before them.

The drive home was silent, and when Clara entered her apartment, she took out the bundled up nightgown from her bag, and stuffed it into the trash, unwilling to look at it.

Domizio had been enraged when Michele reported to him the night before. Lillian had not given up who had hired her. After her tears and cries and pleas went unheard, she could only say one thing; *he’ll kill me*.

Michele had met many who’d said such things. In the end, they’d all given up the names. Lillian had stayed silent to the end. Admirable, but worrying. There were very few men who incited as much fear as Domizio De Luca; this was no embittered lowlife trying to exact revenge for a bad business deal.

“It could be one of the other families. If we’re gone, then they could take over our sector,” Adriano suggested, sitting comfortably in one of the chairs in his father’s office. Michele caught sight of long, wavy black hair caught on his collar, and held back a frown. Adriano noticed where he was looking and brushed the hair away, his expression blank.

Domizio shook his head. “None of them has the capability right now. And if one of them could easily take over, it would be too obvious who attacked us.” He looked at Mick. “She said nothing else?”

“Nothing,” Michele affirmed, hiding how disturbed he was. If Lillian considered *him* the lesser of two evils, he did not want to think about what the other was capable of. He steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “Could the Bianchis be displeased with your agreement?”

Adriano looked up at this, while Domizio considered. “The only way Arturo can ensure his business’s stability is by marrying off Elizabetta. Our family is his best option.” He leaned back in his chair, aggravated, and looked at Michele. “Find out what she was promised.”

He nodded, and the three men stood. “We’ll continue this tomorrow,” Domizio said, rubbing his temples. Michele took the casual dismissal for what it was and nodded, turning to leave.

Adriano walked with him, much to his chagrin. “Returning home, my friend?” He made sure the door to Domizio’s office was shut and they were several feet down the hall before continuing. “Or is my sister waiting on you?”

Michele grit his teeth slightly. “I’m going home,” he muttered. “I’ve intruded here long enough.”

Adriano shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He looked down a nearby hall as they walked, and Michele realized it was the hallway where Clara’s room was. When he turned back, he saw Michele’s expression and chuckled. “I already saw her tonight.”

So did I. “She’s no longer a maid, I take it?”

“My father has not deigned to tell me. I’m sure my mother has thought of some reward for her.” Adriano paused, his brows suddenly knit together. “How did you know that was her room?”

Michele met his gaze, unwavering. “It’s the closest guest room to Milena. Where else would she stay?”

The two men stared at each other, and Adriano laughed out loud. “My sister does have a fondness for her, true enough. It will be a shame if my parents do get rid of her.”

“Hm.” Michele turned away from him. “I should get going, while the rain has let up.”

“Safe drive home, Mick,” Adriano said in a tone that seemed as though he would not at all be bothered if Michele wrapped his car around a streetlamp. He strode down the hall, Michele watching him go.

He remembered the way she screamed at him when he pinned her to her bed, the way her skin was still scented of white peach even after the day that had passed. Her breasts had been pressed against his chest and when he cupped her cheek, his thumb brushed the corner of her lips.

He was struck with the sudden but familiar urge to sink his teeth into something. And though he turned away from the hall where her room was, he knew he would not be heading home after all.

James trudged up the stairs, his body as heavy as a cinder block, and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. Perhaps it was because he was so close to quitting, but work seemed to take more and more out of him every day.

When he opened the door, he saw Clara curled up on the couch, flicking through one of the harlequin romances she kept hidden away. He’d found her stash once, and she’d come home from a shopping trip to find him perusing one of the filthier dime novels in the bunch. The edge of his mouth quirked up ever-so-slightly; that had been a very fun afternoon.

She looked up at him and smiled softly. "How was work?"

He pulled a face that prompted a giggle from her. "And you? How was your stay at the Chateau De Luca?"

"The room service was dreadful and the décor made me ill." She shut her book and pressed her hand to her chest proudly. "But the staff was outstanding."

He smiled and sat next to her, leaning his head against hers. After a moment, she spoke up. "I'm sorry for worrying you," she murmured, taking hold of his hand. "I didn't expect the storm."

"It's okay." *She's losing her voice*, he thought to himself. His gaze wandered to her throat, and he wondered where her sudden penchant for high-collared dresses had come from. "It was safer for you to stay."

She closed her eyes, as though she had no answer, and lifted his hand to her mouth, pressing her lips against it. James smiled as she leaned into him. "We haven't gone out in a while. I was thinking we could go see Nick and Ella and see a movie or something."

Clara's eyes fluttered open, looking beyond him. "...no. Ella needs her rest. Let's just stay in tonight."

"She wouldn't be very happy to hear you didn't want to see her."

She curled up against him. "I was away from you the whole night, I want to keep you to myself for a little."

James chuckled as she pressed her face into his shoulder, not seeing the despair crossing her expression.

Milena thought Ricardo might've been more handsome if his mouth didn't hang open in that strange way when they had sex. She wondered if he realized how stupid he looked, but his eyes were shut and his head was pressed back into the pillow as she rode him, so she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Perhaps he was thanking God she had called him. She wasn't so sure if she was as grateful.

Still, with her palms pressed flat against his chest, she rocked her hips back and forth desperately, clinging to the shreds of pleasure building up inside her. She glanced out the window of her apartment, the city buildings shining in the moonlight, and felt Ricardo's breath hitch, his hands clinging to her waist. She could have slapped him as he moaned, reaching his climax and leaving her woefully behind.

Michele hadn't returned to the manor that day, and she wondered if he had gone off to one of the whorehouses her father's men frequented. The thought of him with one of those women both enraged and aroused her, as she fell back into her familiar fantasies of what he would be like. She wanted to see how he fucked them, and wondered if he would be different with her.

She could feel her pussy getting wetter, and pulled off Ricardo's cock, moving up his body so that her knees were on either side of his head. He eagerly pulled her hips down, and she might've been

glad for the enthusiasm with which he lapped at her, if not for the fact her mind had abandoned him for another.

As her hands clenched on the headboard, she thought of the one and only time Michele had kissed her, when she was thirteen and she'd found him lying in the sun outside the new house, his eyes closed in bliss. She'd asked him to kiss her, asking him if he wouldn't feel reassured to know her first kiss would be with someone who cared about her. He'd given in eventually, seeing that there was no arguing with her, and delicately cupped her cheek when his lips touched hers.

The memory of the gentle touch caused a moan to spill from Milena's mouth. She knew what he could do, the kind of pain her father was teaching him to inflict. But he had given in to her, and she wanted to see that expression again, the realization that he had no choice but to obey her. She wanted to be the one to hold him and touch him and keep him in her bed. She wanted to watch him fuck one of those whores, because she knew he'd be rough and make them cry, and then have him turn around and kiss her as gently as he had that day.

She rocked her hips faster. She wanted to tell him exactly what to do to her with his hands, his hands she knew could cause the worst pain with the most precise movements. She wondered if she told him to hurt her, would he refuse or be rougher with her than he'd ever been with anyone?

She reached her peak, her nails digging into the headboard as her head fell back, and she pressed two of her fingers against her lips, still thinking of the kiss. As her hips slowed, she let out a small sigh as reality crashed down onto her. She would have to get up sooner or later, and look at Ricardo's face, his handsome, all-wrong face, with too-light eyes and too-full smile.

Slowly, she moved off of him, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and fluffing her hair with one hand. She felt the bed shift as he sat up behind her. "You haven't called me in a while," he said to her back.

Milena rolled her eyes, irritated. "I've had to help plan my *dearest* brother's wedding—I don't have as much time as I would like." Indeed, the blissfully empty days she'd once had were over, and everything was all about what flowers would look best and who to hire to make Elizabetta's dress. In truth, she simply did not want to see him. She found more pleasure in making herself climax in her own bed than she did with Ricardo, because at least at the end of it, the wrong person wasn't lying next to her.

She lay back down, staring at him. "Well?" Finally, he took the hint and stood to dress. Her apartment, her rules. Her father had not asked when she expressed her wish for one after coming back from college, writing her a blank check for whichever one she liked. She couldn't tell if he wanted her out of the house, or if he simply dealt with her the same way he dealt with all of his children; by throwing money at them and getting on with his day.

Her mother had been less pleased, saying it was improper, like she knew what her daughter was using it for, but what could she do? Before Milena answered to her mother, she answered to her father, and if he said yes, there was nothing else to be done.

She realized Ricardo was staring at her, frowning slightly. "After Adriano gets married, what about you?"

Milena yawned and stretched, arching her back in the way that made people trace their gaze over her. "After a few months, Papà will find someone for me to marry."

His jaw clenched slightly. “So it’s set, then,” he said bitterly, and she resisted the urge to scoff at him.

Of course it’s set, you fool. It has been ever since I was born. It was a harsh truth she had raged against for much of her life, until cold acceptance overcame her. What was marriage anyway, she told herself, but a piece of paper left to collect dust in a drawer? Her mother would say duty, but duty was just popping out one or two little brats for her family. Her father would marry her off to some well-connected weakling who wouldn’t object to a single thing he was told. It wouldn’t stop her from taking what she wanted.

Besides, she didn’t know why Ricardo was so upset by the idea. He himself had been married when he’d met her, but he’d left his wife in favor of being at Milena’s beck-and-call. Apparently, after his nights with her, he grew tired of returning home and looking at his wife’s face.

He of all people should have understood how flimsy a bond marriage is.

Still, she smiled and beckoned him to her, and when he sat beside her on the bed, she slowly carded her fingers through his hair. “Ricky,” she cooed, and he melted the way he always did when she called him that, “you know I can’t go against my father. If he says I’m to be married, then that’s that.”

Ricardo couldn’t stop his frown. “I know, but....”

Keeping up her smile was almost painful at this point. “We were here together, today. Isn’t that enough for now?”

“...yes.” He seemed to realize that was the end of the conversation. Milena watched him stand and gather his things. “Another time, then.” But she’d already turned away from him.

Suddenly, she thought of Clara, and held back a laugh. Although she had never met the maid beforehand, when she’d entered Adriano’s study that day, she had known immediately. She recognized want easily, and it was all over her brother’s face when he watched Milena pull the young woman away.

He’d been on edge for months, evidently tired of abstinence in the face of his impending marriage. It was prudent, considering that any news of infidelity on his part reaching the Bianchis’ ears would be considered the highest of insults, at least until the marriage contract was signed. Once Elizabetta was his wife, her family wouldn’t care what he did. It seemed like he didn’t care to wait for that day.

She wondered at the way Clara’s ring was so polished, at the way she seemed to shrink at the mention of her and Adriano’s affair. When Milena had visited her that morning, she could catch a glimpse of a bite mark on the maid’s shoulder, one that hadn’t been there the night before. She’d tried to hide it behind her hair, but Milena was well-versed in the art of lovemaking, and she was familiar with the traces it left behind.

She heard Ricardo leaving, the apartment door shutting with an echoing *click*, and smiled to herself. He had never once felt bad for straying from his wife. She doubted Adriano had any qualms about his disloyalty to his fiancée, and she knew she would never once regret any affairs she might have once she was married. Her friends often regaled her with tales of passionate encounters fueled by the guilty pleasure of knowing someone was waiting for them back home.

Clarina was one of the few women Milena knew who seemed to feel truly awful about what she was doing.

The poor, silly woman, Milena thought to herself, looking out the window. Life is for pleasure; why feel guilty for taking it?

She thought of Michele, with his deep, dark eyes and hard, cruel mouth, one that she couldn't stop thinking about, and slipped her hand between her legs, her eyes closing in anticipation.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween! @janeimes made a lovely fan art of our dear Clara, which I had trouble linking to this chapter, but please go to my blog @allthemoregrey on Tumblr if you'd like to see it! Thanks for reading!

A World Without Love

Chapter Summary

James surprises Clara with some news, but the couple finds themselves at odds when an unexpected presence ruins their night out.

(A World Without Love - Paul McCartney and John Lennon)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“These boys are useless,” Alexandre sneered, gesturing wildly as Jeanne placed his breakfast in front of him, hiding a smile at her husband’s ravings. “They’re scared of everything — cutting themselves on the ropes, tangling the nets, steering the boat...how am I supposed to teach them if they’re afraid to learn?”

“Well, they’re still young, my love. There is plenty of time for them to learn.”

“I was working with my father when I was thirteen.”

“When you were thirteen, you were the most dreadfully serious boy I knew,” Jeanne teased as she went to fetch the mail. “I don’t think you could have had fun if you tried.”

“Hmph.” He stared at his reflection in his coffee. He was not as old as many other men on the docks, but he certainly felt it. His gaze was drawn to his left ear, the bottom half of which was gone completely. If he looked closely, he could pick out individual scars on his face and neck, long healed but cruelly aching as a reminder of the war. Scowling, he set the cup back down.

Jeanne hummed as she came back to the table, flicking through the mail. “Juliette sent a postcard from Spain, she’s doing well...there’s something from Mister Barbier, he’ll probably need help fixing his roof...” Her eyes widened in pleasant surprise as she pulled an envelope from the stack. “A letter from Clara! Perhaps she hasn’t forgotten us after all.”

Alexandre watched as she opened the letter. “It’s a good thing she left; if she’d had to marry one of these boys, I’d weep.” Truth be told, he doubted James would fare much better on the sea, but at least the man had brains where he lacked brawn. What could he say for those with neither?

“Oh, she got a job! And James made her bouillabaisse as a surprise.” Jeanne smiled brightly. “I knew teaching him would be worth it. Her friend Ella is doing well, she thinks she and James will be the godparents.” Her brow furrowed slightly as she read on. “A rat problem...?”

Her husband looked up. “What?”

“She says there are rats there, and she’s asking if she should do something or move.” She shook her head. “Silly girl, hasn’t she heard of mouse traps? Or an exterminator?”

"Give me that." Alexandre held his hand out expectantly, and Jeanne shrugged and gave it to him. He scanned the letter quickly, his brow furrowing.

Jeanne sat with her own breakfast, stirring her tea slowly. "Maybe we should visit her soon," she mused. "It's been three years, I'd love to see her and James again." She chuckled slightly. "And you'd get a break from teaching those boys—"

She was cut off as her husband stood up suddenly, something like fear and concern twisting his expression. "Alexandre? What is it?" She watched him rush to the door, pulling on his jacket. "Where are you going?"

He grabbed his keys, his hands shaking. "I need to call someone. I'll be back soon," he said, sticking the letter between his teeth as he buttoned up his jacket.

"But your breakfast—"

The door slammed behind him, and Jeanne was left sitting alone, bewildered.

"I wish you would tell me what this is for, *mon cher*," Clara remarked, holding up different dresses to herself in the mirror. "I mean, I can't pick what to wear if you keep me in the dark like this."

Her husband approached from behind and kissed her cheek. "The blue one. You always look lovely in it." He checked himself in the mirror. "Is my bowtie crooked?"

Clara pouted slightly at the way he avoided telling her the truth, but she nodded. "No, you look very dashing. Now shoo, let me change."

James laughed as she pushed him out of the room.

It had been two days since her week off had started. Unwilling to explain why she would be given a week off so early in her job, she had resorted to leaving the apartment at the same time in the mornings, so James would think she was going to work. The deceit seemed to stick in her lungs like a hot knife, and as she wandered around the city aimlessly, she wondered if anything she had said to him since the first night she came back from the manor was true at all.

But tonight, he'd come to her excitedly, telling her he had a surprise for her and to get ready. She felt a bit of excitement and curiosity overcome her exhaustion, and agreed, forcing herself to put her fears at the back of her mind.

James called a cab for the both of them, and tugged Clara against his side, resting his chin on her head. She smiled slightly, tucking her face against his neck. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." He kissed the crown of her head, and she sighed, giving up on wringing the truth from him. Her hand drifted up to tuck back a strand of hair that had escaped from its pins, and her fingers ever-so-slightly traced a line down the healing skin of her neck.

The bruises Lillian had left on her throat were fading quickly, and she'd wiped away the remaining traces with a layer of makeup. At the same time, the way this dress left her neck bare made her

nervous James would see them. But he'd insisted that she wear one of her nicer dresses, and she didn't want to seem stiff or strange. So she made do.

After several minutes of driving, the cab slowed in front of a large building, the parking lot of which was filled with expensive cars. Clara's eyes widened as she peered out at the restaurant's entrance. "L'Origine?"

She turned to see her husband smiling widely at her. "I thought we deserved a nice evening." He got out of the car and came around to open her door.

"James, this place is...." ... *more than a little expensive.*

It must've shown on her face, because he rushed to reassure her as he helped her out. "It's part of the surprise. You'll like it, I promise."

"...Alright." Clara plastered a smile on her face as she twined her arm with his. She knew many women would love to have a husband eager to shower them with gifts the way hers did, but sometimes, his gestures made her a bit uncomfortable. She had grown up modestly, and her parents had long been wary of the more glamorous sides of society, her father especially.

Besides, she was happy living simply with him, even when he strived for more.

They walked in and the maître d' escorted them to a table. Clara hummed to herself slightly as James ordered them a bottle of wine to start with. "Why do they call it L'Origine? The origin of what?" she asked, as the waiter left.

He blinked, stroking his chin lightly. "...food?"

His wife giggled, and he smiled to himself. When the waiter came and poured their wine, they clinked glasses, although Clara watched him as he drank before taking her own sip. "Do I get to learn about the surprise now?"

"Alright, alright." He set his glass down. "But you have to close your eyes."

Clara raised an eyebrow, but pressed both hands over her eyes. She heard the slight rustle of his suit jacket, and the sound of something being placed on the table. For a moment, she felt a shiver crawl up her spine, like eyes boring into her. "Okay, now you can look."

She took her hands away from her eyes, and stared down at the black jewelry box he had placed before her. "What's this?" She lifted it, looking up to see her husband's wide smile.

"Open it," he urged. Hesitantly, she unlatched it and lifted the lid, her mouth parting slightly at what was within. A double-stranded pearl necklace sat upon a bed of velvet, gleaming in the light of the dining room.

"Oh, James," she murmured, almost at a loss.

His eagerness faded slightly, worry replacing it. "What's wrong? Do...you not like it?"

"No, I *love* it, *mon cher*, it's beautiful but...but it's too much." Her expression reflected back to her from the surface of each and every pearl, and she was sure there was guilt in her eyes.

"Nothing is ever too much if it's for you, sweetheart," he said gently. "I'd give you the moon if you only asked."

Oh, she knew he would, and she would not deserve it one bit. She felt dirty and deceitful under his loving gaze, and wished she could sink deep into the Earth, where he couldn't see her.

"Do you want my help putting it on?"

Clara shook her head, taking the necklace in her own hands. She clasped it at the back of her neck, and each pearl felt like a cool kiss against her skin.

Another shiver went up her spine.

James smiled at her. "You look beautiful."

She blushed slightly; but her curiosity won out. "But what is this for?" It wasn't her birthday, or their anniversary. Had she forgotten something?

"Well, that's the third part of the surprise." His grin took on a bit of pride. "I got a new job."

The questioning smile on Clara's face gave way to surprise. "You...what?"

"I got a new job at Nicholson Financial Group. I start next Monday." James was beaming, and Clara could tell how proud of himself he was.

"When did this happen?"

"I heard about the opening a few weeks ago, so I decided to take my chances."

She smiled at him. "That's wonderful, *mon cher*. I'm really happy for you." She laughed to herself slightly. "Samuel will be sad to see you go, though."

"Ah, he'll be fine. Pitched a bit of a hissy fit when I told him about it, but he's glad for me." He played with the stem of his wine glass a little. "Since I'll be paid more, I wanted to surprise you with a gift."

Clara touched the pearls adorning her collarbone, feeling her love for him well up in her heart. "Seeing you happy is enough of a gift for me." A part of her wished to scream it from the rooftops, that she'd give up every comfort and luxury she could for his smile.

And he looked so genuinely happy, that for a moment, she felt happy too, and when the waiter came for their orders, they got another bottle of wine as well. and, hidden by the tablecloth, Clara teasingly touched the tip of her foot to his leg, making James laugh.

When their food arrived, they talked as they ate, about James's new job, and a lovely apartment building Clara had passed by one day, and anything and everything under the sun.

As she sipped her third glass of wine, Clara got the feeling that someone was watching her. The same eyes that made her skin crawl earlier. Carelessly, she glanced around the crowded dining room, filled with glittering couples and friends alike. There was a table a ways away with only three men at it, how strange.

She paused, her glass hovering inches from her lips, her gaze locked onto the table. There was a man she did not know, drinking whiskey as he spoke with Domizio De Luca, who had not yet noticed her as he nursed his own glass.

From next to his father, Adriano De Luca was looking right at her.

He was sipping bourbon, and when her gaze met his, he raised an eyebrow slightly. She could see his full lips curve into a smile behind the rim of his glass.

Clara's hand shook as she placed her glass back down, her palms suddenly sweaty. She looked back at her husband, trying to refocus her attention on him, but she only felt her stomach turning. James didn't seem to notice, cutting another piece of his steak for himself. She immediately wished they were anywhere else, sitting at the cheapest diner they could find, eating the greasiest meal possible. Somewhere Adriano De Luca would never poison with his presence.

She glanced at the table out of the corner of her eye, and saw that he was exchanging a few words with his father. She looked back down at her plate, and bit the inside of her cheek, terrified. Surely, he wouldn't do anything? Surely, in this vast, crowded restaurant, he'd leave her be?

She forced herself to eat a forkful of bourguignon, but now it tasted like chunks of rubber between her teeth. In an effort to swallow, she drank the rest of her wine in one gulp. James chuckled slightly. "Whoa there, sweetheart. If you're not careful, you won't make it to dessert."

"But we're celebrating," she replied quickly, hoping he wouldn't notice the way her fist was clenched around her fork. "Shouldn't we make the most of it?"

"I guess so..." he watched her as she pushed the bourguignon around with her fork. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, yes..." She forced a smile. "I was just...thinking of my parents, that's all."

"Oh." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Why not invite them to visit?"

"I don't know, James. I mean, I'm still adjusting to work, and now you have a new job, too..." Real sadness entered her expression. "It could be a while before they could come."

Her husband gently put his hand over hers. "I know you miss them," he said softly. "I'd like to see them too. Maybe in another month, we'll be ready."

She nodded, her thoughts drifting to her mother and father. She hadn't received a reply to her letter yet – had it been lost? There had been times when her letters took a while to reach them. Now, though, she wondered if they would even be able to help her. She knew her father had briefly encountered the mafia when he was a soldier, but she doubted he had been in the thick of it the way she seemed to be.

She looked back at the table again. Adriano was looking at her again. Their eyes meeting, he slowly inclined his head, his gaze wandering to James. There was something familiar in his eyes, the look of a hunter poised to strike. *He's going to come here*, she realized, fear piercing her through the heart. *He's going to come here and say something horrible and James will know.*

James will know everything.

Abruptly, she stood, her stomach turning. Her husband blinked up at her. “What is it?”

“I...need to powder my nose. I’ll be back in a minute.” She took her purse and rushed away, not meeting the eyes of either man watching her.

As the water streamed over her hands, she took a deep breath, trying to keep from trembling. Before, she might’ve thought he wouldn’t do anything, that here in public, he would rein in his cruelty. But hadn’t she ran into him that night in the alley, where he’d done the exact opposite? Hadn’t she spent the past several weeks ducking away from his gaze, hiding where she could to avoid his touch? She recognized the look in his eyes, the gleeful glint that said it saw the opportunity to make her hurt in one way or another.

She prayed that while she was gone, he hadn’t gone up to James. The thought of him being in the same room as her husband already made her angry.

Perhaps then, it was almost relieving when she heard the soft clicking of his leather shoes approaching the bathroom. And though that old, aching fear pulsed through her when he entered, his expression strangely neutral, she was quietly glad that at least she was the only one in his sights. That he had foregone approaching James in favor of the familiar pleasure of tormenting her, instead.

“This is the women’s bathroom,” Clara said, her hand clenching on the countertop as he came closer to her.

Adriano raised his eyebrows in mocking surprise. “Truly?” He looked around at the empty space. “But here I am, not having burst into flames just yet. But I think you might enjoy it if I did.”

She kept silent, her eyes narrowed, before turning back to the sink and staring at herself in the mirror.

“No sharp rebuttal for me tonight, *tesorina* ?”

“You know what I think of you. Why say anything more?” She lightly touched the high point of her cheekbone, examining her blush.

Adriano’s laugh echoed against the high ceiling. “Ah, I see why your husband is so smitten with you. I too would drape a woman with pearls if I thought it might soften her to me.”

Clara’s fingers went down her cheek to touch the smooth surface of the necklace. Oh, James, who gave her pearls because he couldn’t give her the sea. “What do you want?” she asked tightly, making sure not to meet his reflection’s eyes.

“Oh, only to speak with you.”

“To...speak with me.”

He shrugged. “I’m a man of various appetites, one of them my curiosity.” He moved a little closer, and lightly touched his knuckle to her cheekbone, making her freeze. He dragged it down to brush the soft skin of her throat. “You are well?”

Clara jerked her head away, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I'm fine." The bruises were fading, her voice had returned. And if she still felt a touch of fear when James's hands brushed her collarbone, she wouldn't tell this man.

"That is good. Everyone misses you at the house. Cesare and Viola have been asking where you are." He leaned against the counter, stroking his chin. "I still haven't offered congratulations on becoming my mother's personal maid. I could send a bottle of wine to your table. A good vintage, not whatever swill they've given you."

"No," Clara said sharply. He glanced at her from the side, and she took a deep breath. "We're fine, we don't need anything."

Adriano waved her remark away. "Nonsense. You're celebrating your promotion, aren't you? It's the least I could do."

"We're not—" she cut herself off suddenly, not wanting to share anything with him. She could feel his gaze on her, and looked away, frustrated at her cowardice.

"Oh, I see. This dinner has nothing to do with you. I suppose the place is a little...upscale for a maid, even one who works for my family." If he noticed the quake of anger in her shoulders, he said nothing. "Actually...Arturo did mention he recognized your husband. Saw him at his accountant's company one day."

Clara blinked, looking back at Adriano, and saw that his eyes were narrowed, suspicion tainting his lighthearted smile. "An interesting coincidence," he said quietly. "You get hired in my home. Little more than a month later, your husband gets a job at the same company as the accountant of my future in-laws."

She recalled Madiana's warning that they would look into her, and realized what he was implying. "He isn't—it isn't what you're thinking."

"I see. And tell me, Clara, what exactly am I thinking?"

"I didn't know he was looking for a new job," she admitted, panic creeping into her voice. "I didn't know anything until tonight."

"You didn't know, I can accept that." He smiled down at her, his hand coming up towards her neck. She flinched away, but he merely toyed with her necklace. "You certainly seemed surprised when he gave you this, at least." Her brows furrowed in confusion, and he chuckled. "I am at dinner with my father and soon-to-be father-in-law. You are far more appealing to watch."

"James didn't plan this," she said, suddenly terrified. "He just—he hated his old company, he didn't apply for this one for any other reason than wanting something new."

"I had planned to confront you when you came back," Adriano mused, rolling a pearl between his fingers. "Have my mother send you to do some little chore and find you then. I wouldn't have damaged you too much, oh no, the children are worried enough about you." He slid another finger below the necklace, examining more of the pearls. "But what Lillian did had me...curious."

Clara's eyes went wide, and she tried to step back, but his fist closed tightly around her necklace, threatening to snap it. "I remember that waitress's eyes seeming to bulge out of her head. She

clawed at my hands, flailed her arms to try and free herself. She tried to speak, but all that came out of her mouth was spit and a swollen tongue.” He wrinkled his nose in disgust. “It was repulsive.”

Clara felt her breath speeding up slightly, unable to look away from his fist, how close it was to her throat. “I want to know,” he continued, a curious light behind the green of his eyes, “if you would be the same. Would your eyes go bloodshot? Would you rake your nails anywhere you could? You fight when I kiss you, when I bite you, but how long would you stand against me if I took your throat in my hand and squeezed?”

His fingers uncurled slightly, brushing against the hollow of her throat, and her hand flew up, smacking him away. She shook her head, horror turning her mute, and Adriano chuckled. “But, I suppose if you don’t know anything… I might just ask your husband.”

He made to pull away, but she clutched at his wrist. “Wait,” she heard herself saying, “wait, don’t. He doesn’t know anything, I swear. Please, please don’t speak to him. He hasn’t done anything.”

“I see.” He looked at her hands, wrapped around his arm. “So, you want to bargain, then.”

“Bargain?” she questioned aloud, apprehension stiffening her expression.

“You are asking a lot of me, Clara; to both trust your word and not ask your husband’s. What do I receive in return?”

“I....” She released his arm slowly. “What do you want?”

He stroked his chin, looking down at her contemplatively. She scowled up at him, as harmless a resistance she could manage, her fists clenched at her sides. He smirked slightly at her anger. “Ah, don’t give me that look, *tesorina*. Haven’t I given as much pleasure as I ask from you?”

“The only thing you give me is grief,” she snapped, her lips curling in disgust.

He frowned slightly. “Truly?” His hand drifted from his chin to her cheek, even as she leaned away. “Then I suppose I should remedy that,” he mused, and when he stepped forward, it took every bit of restraint she had not to step back. His hand went to the back of her neck as he kissed her, and she kept her lips together tightly. A laugh rumbled in his chest at her reticence, and his other hand pinched her rear, making her yelp. He quickly slipped his tongue into her mouth, crowding her onto the counter.

Clara grunted and pressed her hands against his chest, trying to press her legs against each other to block him from her. As her back hit the mirror, his hand left the back of her neck, coming to the inside of her thigh. He pried her legs apart easily, slotting his hips between them and making her dress pool around her stomach.

She tried to push him off, but when he wouldn’t budge, she turned her head to the side, gasping for air and feeling his lips bump into her jaw. She could see from the corner of her eye how her lipstick had smeared over his leering mouth, and humiliation bubbled up in her throat.

Adriano took hold of one of her wrists, pinning it against the counter. He laced the fingers of her other hand through his, holding it against the mirror. He kissed the corner of her mouth, then her jaw, making her shift with the sensation. He trailed his kisses down her throat, stopping just above the first strand of pearls. Clara strained her neck away from him, twisting her wrists to get them out

of his grip. She could feel how his pelvis pressed into hers with an uncomfortable friction, and desperately wanted to flee.

He released one of her hands, and brought his free hand up to her bodice. He slowly pulled it down to reveal one of her breasts, and she gasped as he massaged her, digging her nails into his bicep, both to stop him and to anchor herself.

He kissed her collarbone briefly before he closed his lips around her nipple, making her whimper. Her back arched slightly, and she thought she felt him smile. “*Stop*,” she hissed out between clenched teeth. “Just get it over with.”

He pulled away, sighing. “I rarely reward impatience,” Adriano chided, prompting another glare from her, “though I suppose our time is short.” His hand slipped under her skirt, and yanked her underwear down her legs. Clara pushed them down as well, kicking out with her legs and praying that he would be quick.

But when Adriano knelt before her, she froze, almost confused. He caught the expression on her face and smiled, before putting his head beneath her skirt. Clara gave a strangled cry when she felt his mouth on her, and tried to pull away, but he grabbed her thighs, holding her in place.

He dipped his tongue into her pussy, thrusting it slightly before pulling back and swirling his tongue around her clit. He seemed torn between pleasuring her and simply tasting her. Clara trembled as he devoured her, her back arching as she leaned against the mirror.

Through a cloud of teary ecstasy, her gaze found the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, its crystals throwing bits of light across the walls. *Why would anyone want a chandelier in the bathroom?* she asked herself, her arms straining to hold her up as she slid down the mirror. It was far too extravagant. She knew she never wanted to return to this place, whose patrons were too rich for their own good, who could force others to act on their whims whenever they wanted.

Adriano’s tongue felt almost cool against her pussy, and she moaned as his hands gripped her thighs and pulled them closer to him. Shaking, she reached out a hand and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. She just wanted to finish, finish so she could return to her husband and continue pretending everything was alright.

Clara wrapped her legs around his head, her underwear dangling off one ankle, and prayed no one would walk in. She almost wished he would fuck her instead, because this felt so good her brain might’ve short-circuited. She grinded her cunt against his mouth, and he moaned against her, into her, sending vibrations through her core. One of his hands left her thigh, and she whined as she felt two of his fingers slip into her.

She turned her head away, and when she opened her eyes, she could see the side of her face in the bathroom mirror. Her mouth was hanging open, her cheeks flushed, her eyes clouded with pleasure. *This isn’t who I am.* She was not this woman who let monsters between her legs and moaned as they feasted on her.

Adriano sucked at her clit as she rolled her hips forward. His fingers pushed in and out at a steady pace, and she detested how easily he played her, hated the sloppy noises of his mouth that only seemed to make her wetter, make her want *more*.

She almost didn’t realize the word had escaped her lips until she felt him chuckle. In response, she yanked his hair, but he only groaned into her cunt and continued lapping at her. Clara gasped and

slid further down the mirror as her hips bucked against his face. Of course he'd chosen this, what better way to humiliate her than make her want it?

His fingers hit a spot inside her that made her bite her lip to hold back her cry, and when she climaxed, Adriano held her against his face as she shook with pleasure. He slipped his tongue back into her cunt, and she whined, trying to pull away. "Stop, stop...enough!"

Finally, he raised his head from under her skirt, and she shrank back from the way he licked his lips and sneered at her. "No," he said, his voice hoarse with want. "Not enough. My turn."

He rose from kneeling and licked his fingers clean, and she saw the way his pants strained at the front. When he took her by the hips and pulled her so she was at the edge of the counter, she struggled against him. "Stop," she demanded, trying to pull his hands off of her. "It's been too long, they'll wonder where you are."

She thought he might've seen the sense in this, but he just laughed darkly. "Then I guess you'd better do your best and make me come quickly," he whispered menacingly, one of his hands going to the back of her neck. "Or else your husband is going to find you with another man's cock down your throat."

He started to pull her off the counter, and her underwear fell off her ankle to the floor. His lips met hers, and Clara felt a wave of anger sweep over her. She flattened her palms against his chest and shoved him back harshly. She'd caught him by surprise, and her hand cracked hard across his face. For a moment, there was no sound in the room but the echo of her slap, and her own heavy breathing.

She slid off the counter, grabbed her purse, and ran out of the bathroom, leaving Adriano alone in the grand room. When she came out into the hall, she retreated several feet, catching her reflection in a decorative mirror set above a faux vanity. Her hair was rumpled, her eyes watery, and her lipstick smeared. As she stared at herself, she realized she had left her underwear on the bathroom floor, and Clara felt a sob rise in her throat.

The expression of the woman in the mirror crumpled, and she covered her face with her hands, not wanting to look. She could still feel her arousal staining her thighs. *He did this to me.* He'd turned her into a dirty, disgusting *whore* who fucked other men while her husband waited for her.

Shaking, she took a deep breath, and looked at herself in the mirror again. She wiped away the smears of makeup with her fingertip, and smoothed her hair back into place. She blinked away the tears, straightened her necklace, and made her way back to the dining room.

"Is everything alright, sweetheart? You were gone for a bit."

"I'm alright," Clara said quietly. "I just wanted to fix my makeup."

"Oh. Well, you always look lovely to me." He beamed at her, but she just smiled back thinly. "I... hope you aren't too upset that I surprised you with this. I thought it was a good opportunity."

"I know, honey. I'm happy for you, I really am. I just..." she looked down at her lap. "It feels like so much is changing, that's all."

James nodded, although he didn't quite understand. What was so different? It was a new job, sure, but it didn't change their routine too much. He'd be working the same hours. He decided not to say anything, and made to take a sip of his wine, when a shadow fell over the table. He looked up to see a large man with green eyes smiling down at his wife. "Hello," he said charmingly. "It is good to see you again, Clara."

Clara stared back up at him, seemingly shocked into silence. James cleared his throat quietly, drawing the man's attention. "I'm sorry, you are...?"

"Ah, my apologies." The man held out his hand for James to shake. "Adriano De Luca. Your wife works for my family."

"Oh." James returned the handshake, trying to hide the surprise on his face. "James Edwards. It's good to meet you."

"Likewise."

Mr. De Luca looked back down at Clara, whose expression seemed frozen. After a moment, she cleared her throat quietly and nodded at him. "Hello, sir," she said, her hands folded in her lap.

"I was here with my father and a colleague and thought I should say hello. And offer my apologies for taking more of her time with you," he added, appearing thoughtful.

James' brow furrowed in confusion. "Sorry? 'More of her time'?"

"Well, as my mother's personal maid," he said matter-of-factly. "Suffice it to say, her work ethic impressed my parents immensely. Although I am sorry to keep her away from you longer as a result."

Personal maid...? James looked back at his wife for explanation, and he saw something akin to fear flash across her expression before she swallowed it down with a tremulous smile. "I...wanted to surprise you with the news," she said softly, fiddling with her ring.

Mr. De Luca glanced between them. "Ah, I hope I haven't overstepped."

"No," James said distractedly, "not at all."

The man nodded at the two of them. "I'd best get back to my table. I didn't mean to interrupt your conversation. I'll be seeing you, Clara."

"Sir," she replied, seeming to want to sink into the floor.

James watched Mr. De Luca leave, before looking back at Clara. "Why didn't you tell me you got promoted?" he asked, feeling slightly frustrated. She had been hiding this from him?

"I was going to, but...but I didn't know how and..."

"Why not? And what did he mean, you'll be away more?"

She bit the inside of her cheek. "Well...being Mrs. De Luca's personal maid is a lot of responsibility, and with the wedding coming up too, I might be at the house for longer."

"How much longer?" James demanded, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Hours...." she couldn't meet his eye. "Possibly overnight sometimes."

He could only stare at her in disbelief. *Overnight? As a maid? It's barely been a month and they're asking that of her?*

He took a deep breath. "You should say no."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"You should say no. Just say you appreciate the offer but you want to continue as is."

She seemed confused. "But...it's more money, James, a lot more—" she paused when she saw the look on his face, pinched and frustrated. "I don't understand, what's wrong with it?"

"Clara," he said flatly, tamping down the anger slowly boiling in his chest. "You wanted this job so we could have a family." He saw how she seemed to curl in on herself at this, but continued. "It doesn't matter how much money they're offering—you can't work that much and raise a child."

"I can't just say no, it would be rude—"

"Then quit!" It burst out of him before he could stop himself, and she stared at him, shocked. Everything came pouring out of him at once. "Ever since you started working, you've changed. I've noticed, I'm not an idiot. You're jumpy and sad and you keep...you keep drifting away." His voice cracked slightly at the end. "I hate seeing you like this, and this is when you work normal hours. You have to quit."

Clara looked away, her expression closed off. "I'm not putting everything on your shoulders. If we want a family, we both need to work together for it."

"Hiding that you were promoted and working longer hours without telling me *isn't working together*," James ground out through his teeth.

Clara looked back at him, her own anger showing. "Quitting your job for a new one without telling me *isn't either*." She stabbed her fork into her food with a viciousness he rarely saw from her. "I'm done talking about this."

He sat back, barely able to keep from scowling, but he knew by the set of her shoulders, by the hardness in her eyes, that the conversation was over.

The rest of dinner passed in silence. At times, when James glanced up from his food, it seemed as though Clara was watching the restaurant, searching for someone.

The couple did not exchange a word during the cab ride home. Clara did not miss how James angled his whole body away from her, and hurt stabbed deep into her heart.

When Adriano had come up to the table, she'd wanted to scream, scream so loud someone would come and drag him away. When he'd shaken James' hand, she'd wanted to take her steak knife and drive it deep into his chest, and twist and twist until his lungs were ribbons.

But she didn't feel true fear until he'd begun to speak. When the news of her promotion had passed through his lips, she'd caught the gleam of triumph in his eyes, and knew he was punishing her for

pushing him away. And punish her he had, for now her husband couldn't even look at her.

When they got back to their apartment, James wordlessly went to shower. Clara sat at her vanity and carefully removed the pearl necklace she had clasped around her neck mere hours before. She held it in both hands, brushing her thumbs over the smooth surfaces, before tucking it into her jewelry box. She would never wear it to work.

As she unpinned her hair and took off her makeup, she remembered Adriano's suspicions towards her, and swallowed thickly, suddenly nervous. Would there be a De Luca man waiting for her tomorrow, to wring answers from her she didn't have? Would they believe it was only her bad luck that drew James to his new company, and nothing more?

She sniffed, curling in on herself in the seat. How deeply she'd dug this hole for herself.

She heard the shower turn off, and a few minutes later, the door behind her opened, James stepping out. He was dressed for bed, and she turned around to plead innocence, to try and make him listen even as every terrible truth of the past month curdled in her stomach, but her words died in her throat as she watched him take his pillow from the bed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sleeping on the couch," he said flatly, taking a blanket from their closet.

"What- James." Clara stood, shock on her face. "You can't be serious."

"Goodnight," was his only reply, and as he stalked out of the room, she followed hastily.

"Please, *mon cher*, can't we at least talk about this?"

"You seemed to have said everything you were willing to say at dinner," he snapped, turning to face her. "Was there something else?"

Clara felt anger start to bubble in her stomach. "So, you get to keep secrets from me, but when I do it, it's unforgivable?"

"No, don't do that," he warned her, eyes flashing. "Don't make it sound like it's the same thing because it's not, and you know it."

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Then what's the difference!?"

"The *difference* is I kept one secret, and you? I don't know how many you're keeping. Lately, it seems like you don't want to trust me."

"Fine, what do you think I'm hiding, then? You've obviously been thinking about this, so what is it?"

James's expression turned dark, and even though there was a little voice in Clara's head screaming at her to stop, she only glared in return. "When were you going to tell me about the promotion?"

"I wanted it to be a good time."

"When? Over the phone, when the first night comes that they make you stay there? Maybe after you leave me sitting here wondering where the hell you are, if you're even safe?! Is that when you were going to tell me?" He was starting to yell, demanding an answer, and although she wanted to

yell back, she didn't have anything to say. She could only stare at him, willing the tears back into her eyes. "When?" he asked once more, tired.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. She heard him sigh.

"...so?"

Clara looked up, blinking in confusion. "'So?'"

"Was the promotion the only secret, then?" James tilted his head slightly, real concern bleeding into his expression. "Or was there anything else?"

Her anger faltered, and she wanted to start crying, because how had it become this way? How had this web of misfortune tangled her so? He didn't deserve any of the pain she was causing him, but she was so afraid of what might happen if he knew. What they might do to him.

What he might think of her.

"That was the only one," she murmured, staring at her feet.

A moment passed, and she heard him laugh softly, sadly. "I don't believe you," he whispered back, and when she looked up, he had already turned away from her, leaving again.

The next morning, Clara awoke slowly, blinking the remnants of sleep away. She couldn't remember if she had dreamt at all, but maybe that was for the best.

Last night, she had come out of the shower, sniffling as she saw the bed empty. She had come out to the living room, wringing her hands. "James?" she said softly, afraid if she was any louder she'd start to cry. "Please, come to bed."

She had received no answer. She went back to bed, turned the lights out, and pressed her face into the pillow as the tears finally came.

Now, when she looked into the living room, there was no one there. The pillow sat on the couch next to the neatly folded blanket, and a pot of coffee sat still warm on the counter. The spot on the table where he normally left the morning paper was empty.

He'd just left. Without telling her.

They'd argued before, but never once had he slept on the couch. Never once had it gone unresolved. It was all her fault, and she knew it.

She dressed herself and brushed her hair, applying a swipe of lipstick before she left. She'd rather have breakfast by herself at a diner than sit at home alone, the echoes of the argument still hanging in the corners.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Clara jumped at the noise, jarring in the empty silence of the apartment. She approached the door, and through the peephole, she saw a young boy standing there. She opened the door to him. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Telegram for you, ma'am." He held out a small envelope addressed to her, and she stared at it for a moment, confused, before taking it.

"Thank you." She gave him a couple of quarters for his trouble and waved him off. As she closed the door, she frowned down at the envelope, bringing it back to the kitchen table. She opened it and pulled out the telegram, reading it quickly.

Got your letter. Happy to know you are well. Will come to visit soon. Be safe.

Alexandre

She read and reread it several times, feeling more confused each time. Her parents never sent her telegrams; they always sent letters. And why had only her father signed off? What about her mother?

One sentence kept tugging at her as she read it. *Will come to visit soon.*

Surely, he wasn't going to come to her? What could he do? And was he leaving Maman behind? Had he not told her anything?

Be safe.

She stared at the words, letting them run through her head over and over, before standing to leave, tucking the telegram into her purse.

Clara wandered. She glanced in shop windows, not seeing any of the clothes. She had a vague idea of where she was going, but she was unsure, and meandered on her way. It was still early, and she was in no rush. She was barely a few blocks away from the apartment.

She could hear a car approaching, but paid it no mind, until it slowed beside her. The window rolled down, revealing a familiar man. They stared at each other for a moment. "Oh," she uttered. "You."

Michele raised an eyebrow at her. "Me."

"What do you want?"

"Get in, and I'll tell you."

Clara wanted to tell him to go away, that he and his employers had caused her enough problems, but something stopped her. "...no."

"It wasn't a question."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Not alone. For all she knew, Adriano had convinced his family that her and James were part of some grand conspiracy against them, and Michele was here to take care of it.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, his patience clearly low. "You're not in any danger," he said slowly, as though she was a skittish deer.

"Then why are you here?"

He gnashed his teeth, before rubbing his temples. "Fine. There's a diner a block down. Come find me." He made to roll the window back up, before pausing and leaning back over. "And please *try*," he said slowly, "to be quick. I don't have all day." Without waiting for an answer, he rolled up the window, and drove off.

Clara watched him go, frowning. A part of her wanted to just go back home, but she knew he would just come to her. She sighed to herself, before walking again. Although she was tempted to be slow, she quickened her pace, not wanting to test his temper.

Several minutes later, she entered the diner and spotted him in the corner, sipping coffee. He didn't look up as she sat next to him. A waitress came by and poured her a cup, but she didn't order anything—she wanted this to be quick.

They were both silent as Clara mixed cream and sugar into her cup, her knee bouncing slightly with her nerves. He seemed to be waiting for her to speak. "What is it?"

Michele reached into his breast pocket, and she flinched, but he only pulled out an envelope. "This is for you."

She took it cautiously, and when she opened the flap, her eyes widened slightly. "What's this for?" she asked, her gaze lifting from the cash-stuffed envelope.

"Overtime, for the past week." He held back a yawn and leveled his gaze at her. "I'm sure Madiana discussed it with you."

Clara's brow furrowed. She *had* been told she'd be paid for the week off, but this was far more than she expected. Somehow, it made her uneasy. "I don't want it," she said, holding it back out to him.

"Turning it down won't look good." He took another sip of his coffee.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Not my problem. Hide it under your mattress for all I care." He raised an eyebrow at her, and she reluctantly slid the envelope into her purse.

"Is...is that it?" Clara asked, slightly bewildered.

He shrugged. "That's it."

"They sent you just for that?"

"Let me put it this way; if I'd sent one of my guys, would you have even talked to him?"

She grimaced. *No. Not at all.* Ever since Madiana had made it clear someone might be after her, she feared nearly everyone she passed on the street. She took a sip of her coffee, and wrinkled her nose; she'd added too much sugar.

Michele took out his wallet and set down some money for the coffee, preparing to leave. Suddenly, something occurred to Clara, and she looked up at him. "Wait."

He paused, frowning at her, and she swallowed nervously. “Am...am I being watched?”

He narrowed his eyes at her, but she didn’t pull her gaze away. “...I think you know the answer to that.”

“They’re suspicious of me, aren’t they?”

“Let’s go with *cautious*. ” He rested his chin in his hand, staring at her. “But you shouldn’t be worried about that if you have nothing to hide.”

She bit her lip, her hands clamped around her cup. “The money,” she said suddenly. “Can I do whatever I want with it?”

He blinked. “World’s your oyster.”

“I want to buy something.”

He held up a hand. “Sweetheart, I don’t have the time or patience to listen to your shopping list, alright? Do whatever you want—”

She cut him off. “But I need you to tell them what it is. And why.” She would rather be upfront about it now than have them find out later.

Michele furrowed his brow, a confused frown twisting his lips. “...what, then?”

Ronnie was dozing off behind the counter, only a few hours into his shift. But the store was empty, and he had nothing to do.

He looked at the clock and sighed. He wanted to go home and relax on the couch, but he was stuck here until the evening, and he doubted it would be busy until at least a few hours later.

Then, the bell above the door chimed, jerking him out of his reverie. He looked up to see a young woman entering, looking around curiously. He straightened up and cleared his throat. “Good morning, ma’am.”

She looked at him and offered a small smile. “Good morning.”

“Can I, uh, help you?” Women didn’t typically come in on their own, and the ring on her finger seemed to indicate she was married.

“Yes, thank you.”

She came up to the counter and folded her hands atop it primly, staring him right in the face. Ronnie noticed there was an uncertainty in her smile, and a slight tremor in her hands, but her eyes looked bright and clear.

“I’d like to buy a gun.”

Not Adriano asking for dessert early-

Hope you enjoyed! I expect this will be my last update before summer, so I'm sorry for the wait. Thanks so much for reading!

To Know Him is to Love Him

Chapter Summary

Hidden resentments explode as James and Clara's marriage is under strain. Meanwhile, Michele tries to find out why Lillian made her choice.

(To Know Him is to Love Him — The Teddy Bears)

Chapter Notes

The last few months have been a bit loaded, so I'm glad to get this out. Enjoy!

"This one could work for you. Relatively small, not too much kickback." Ronnie watched her expression as he walked her through some different models.

"It's a little bulky, though...do you have anything smaller?"

He scratched the back of his neck, considering. "Let's see...." He thought for a moment, before directing her to a small revolver. "This one's the smallest I've got. More power behind it than the other one, but that makes it harder to shoot."

Her eyes seemed alight with curiosity as she held it. "...yes, I think this will work just fine."

He set her up with the revolver, and a couple boxes of ammunition. He couldn't help a bit of surprise when she took several bills from her purse and handed them over. She watched him scrutinize them. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, sorry, just...policy."

The cash seemed real, alright, but when he went to retrieve her change, she shook her head. "No, that's alright. Thank you for your help." She took the bag and offered him a smile, which he returned reluctantly.

As he watched her leave, he couldn't help his curiosity. She had a sort of intensity about her as he'd shown her around the store, but he couldn't quite place it. He hoped that whatever she needed the gun for, she didn't hurt herself. Women didn't always understand how to handle a gun.

"She bought a *gun*?"

Michele watched the scowl spread over Madiana's expression. "The woman almost died, Madiana. Of course she wanted a gun."

"And you let her? You didn't say anything?" Her voice turned shrill. "That fool Williams almost shot Giovanni, and now you think it appropriate to let a *maid* bring a gun into my home. A maid we might not even be able to trust!"

Michele narrowed his eyes slightly. "Just have Mrs. Christopher lock her bag up when she arrives. I doubt she'll try to carry it around the house."

"You—"

Milena yawned loudly from where she lounged on the bed. Madiana's head snapped towards her eldest daughter. "Do you have something to say?"

Milena examined her freshly painted nails, evidently bored. "Mamma, you told poor Clarina that people would be after her and her husband for one reason or another. You have Papà's men watching her around the clock and, well," she gave Michele an appraising look, "not all of them are as welcoming as dear Mick."

Michele couldn't help the slight frown on his face as he sat up and shrugged. "As he said, of course she'd want some way to protect herself. It was a smart decision on her part. She even had him tell us."

Madiana exhaled, still aggravated. "Milena. You aren't taking this seriously. I don't care how much she might've endeared herself to you; she could still harm any of us."

The young woman scoffed. "Oh, she 'endeared' herself to you too, Mamma, don't pretend. And I am taking it seriously. She's being watched all the time, and she knows it. She won't do anything." She played with a stray lock of her hair. "And if she does, perhaps we'll be lucky and she'll finish what Williams started."

"Don't joke about such things," her mother warned. "When you're married, you'll understand. Now, out."

Milena narrowed her eyes, but stood and swept past Michele, her hand brushing his side as she left. As the door shut, Madiana leveled her gaze at him. "I do not think she has ill intentions," she said finally, but her voice was tinged with suspicion. "But I trust you will be keeping a close eye on her."

He held back a scowl. "Of course I will."

She paced slightly. "The children love her, Viola especially." She raised her head. "We can't rule out the possibility she was working with Lillian, to gain our trust. She might still hurt them."

This was a far-fetched possibility, and Michele knew it, but he said nothing. The matriarch stalked up to him, her eyes cold and angry. "You will watch her every move. You will let me know if she steps out of line."

"I will," he replied dully.

"You owe us a lot, Michele. You owe *me*. If something happens because of her, I will collect, I promise you that."

His fingers twitched slightly, but he kept his expression blank. "I understand."

"Good." Madiana exhaled, her whole form still wound taut. In the twenty years he had known her, he didn't think he'd ever seen her relaxed. "Leave," she said coldly. "Remember what I said."

As he left, Michele sighed slightly, rubbing his temples. He noticed a shadow cast over the floor, and saw Milena down the hall, beckoning to him. He frowned, and as he approached her, she disappeared into her room. Reluctantly, he followed, shutting the door behind him.

Milena relaxed on the chaise lounge near the window, staring at him. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Did you tell her?"

He frowned, settling into the chair across from her, and she rolled her eyes. "About Clara," she said slowly, "and her affair with my brother."

His eyebrows twitched in surprise, but he schooled his expression into nothingness. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Michele," she chided. "You know you can't keep secrets from me. I've seen how he looks at her... I've seen the marks he's left on her."

His head snapped up at this, and she giggled, a gleam of triumph in her eye. "He *bites* her, the poor thing. I can't imagine it's easy to hide from her husband."

Michele narrowed his eyes at her. "Do you think I would tell her?"

Milena nodded, almost understanding. "She wouldn't be pleased, certainly. It's such an unnecessary risk to take, after all the work her and Papà did to arrange this marriage...." She sat up slightly, her eyes gleaming. "How long has it been going on for?"

"I have things to do, Milena." It wasn't even a lie, for how much he had on his plate now. "I'm not going to sit around and gossip."

"Don't be a bore, Mick. Tell me," she leaned forward, curious. "Why did Adriano choose her? Why not Marlene? I know she wants him, and she's pretty enough. And so eager to please..."

"What is this for, Milena?" He stood, trying to keep his annoyance out of his tone. "Go ask Adriano these questions, if you want to know these things so badly."

She watched him, a strange calm entering her tone. "Have you fucked her, too?"

He paused, looking back at her. "What?"

"You have, haven't you?" Her voice was unreadable, her expression frozen. "I know you and my brother like to share." Suddenly, her face split into a sneering grin. "How is she? Shy? She seems like a bore. Or maybe," she cackled, "Adriano makes you watch. Does she like it?"

The two stared at each other, her face challenging, his empty. Slowly, he walked up to her, leaning down to meet her gaze, so close she could feel his breath stir her lashes. "Milena," he said slowly, in his low, smoky tones, "before I answer to you, or even your mother, I answer to Adriano. Remember that the next time you try to bait me into answering your demands."

He had one palm flat against the chaise, inches away from her thigh. She felt her breath quicken slightly, her gaze flicking briefly to his lips. “You did,” she whispered, the heat from his body seeping into her, “didn’t you?”

His dark eyes narrowed, and she saw a muscle twitch in his neck. For a moment, they remained like that. “I didn’t,” he uttered, and with that, he pulled away, straightening up and turning his back to her. “Tell Madiana about it, if you want. But we both know it won’t end well.” He left, shutting the door behind him, leaving her practically panting on the chaise, her thighs pressed tightly together.

James had been looking forward to his last week of work with an excitement that would have better suited a month’s vacation in the French Riviera. Now, he only felt a listlessness taking over his mood, numbly going through a list of accounts he couldn’t care less about.

She’s lying to me. She never lies to me.

He scowled to himself, his grip tightening on his pen. He’d been nervous that Clara might struggle at her new job, but this was far worse than he’d imagined. All it was doing was stressing her out and pulling her away from him. So why didn’t she quit? Why force herself like this?

She doesn’t believe in me. She doesn’t think I can earn enough money for a family.

No, no, that couldn’t be it. Clara had only ever been supportive of him. She had even seemed happy about him getting a new job.

He shouldn’t have left this morning. He should have stayed and spoken with her. She’d always listened to his rants about his work — his boss, Dean, in particular — with patience and understanding. If she needed him to listen to her about something, he would. She knew that, right?

James felt a wave of uncertainty. Had he done something wrong? Something he hadn’t thought about that made her unwilling to confide in him?

He sighed, setting his pen down and pressing his palms to his temples. He needed to apologize. If she was worried about something, he needed to know.

A thought came to him, making him frown. She’d seemed almost...afraid of Mr. De Luca. Why? He’d been polite, if strangely familiar. She hadn’t met his gaze once.

He shook his head. He would talk to her once he was home. For now, he just wanted to get through the day.

A sudden whisper caught his ear. “Hey. Edwards!” He turned to see Samuel glaring at him. “You’re really leaving? You’re leaving me here with *him*?” He jerked a thumb at Dean’s door theatrically.

James cracked a smile. “It’s every man for himself out here, Sam. You know that.”

“Come on, you can’t have a cushy job and a good wife. Something has to give eventually.”

“When it does, I’ll let you know,” James replied, even if the thought stung more than he expected.

“Well, one of these days, I’m joining you in the club.” Samuel pointed at him. “Just wait and see.”

"I'll miss you, too, Sam."

Lillian's apartment was incredibly lacking, in both evidence and character.

Michele frowned as he took in the empty walls and bare shelves. Sure, his own apartment was quite barren, but Lillian had been a young woman, who was paid extremely well. Aside from a few now-dead potted plants, there was nothing that would've told him anything about her, had he not already known her.

He had not brought anyone with him for this, concerned that his men might accidentally destroy something useful to him. After all, this wasn't as simple as cleaning out the apartment of a run-of-the-mill troublemaker.

When he opened her bedroom closet, he found it populated only by two small suitcases. She was prepared to leave afterwards. He opened the smaller one, sifting through the clothing for anything helpful. Folded within a dress was a small roll of bills that amounted to a measly two hundred dollars, most of it seeming to be from Lillian's own savings. From what he could tell, the fifty-dollar bill — the only large one in the whole roll — was likely payment for the attempted killings.

Michele rifled through the rest of the luggage, coming up short of anything else. *She would've killed all of us for only fifty dollars?* No, she said someone would kill her. This didn't sit well with him — she should have been paid extremely well for both her participation and silence.

Another thing was bothering him; he could not find any pictures of Lillian's family. In fact, there was nothing in the whole apartment that even indicated she had any relatives. He could just barely remember looking into her when she was first hired, and he knew she had a mother and younger brother. *She must not have been in contact with them.*

Michele stood, grimacing. Whoever had hired Lillian must have known she had no friends and was not speaking to her family. Coupled with the fact they had paid her so little, the pieces began to fall into place.

They were going to kill her, too.

She knew too much, and no one would have been looking for her. It was a practical plan, if brutal. Michele wondered if she had known.

He searched the rest of the apartment, and cursed as he found nothing. There had to be some trace of whoever had hired her. As he was about to give up, he noticed something in the kitchen. Hidden behind a wilting plant was a small dent in the wall. He traced it with his fingertip, and it came away with bits of glass grit.

He narrowed his eyes, before glancing back at the cabinets. He opened each one, looking as he had when he first entered. Lillian kept all her dishes meticulously organized in pairs, and he realized that one of the glasses did not have a partner. *Someone threw it at the wall.*

Michele hummed to himself. Lillian did not appear to have much of a social life, and it seemed likely that she only ever spent time at work or her home. Whoever hired her must have met her at her apartment to avoid suspicion. And whoever it was seemed to have a temper.

It was a start, but not a very good one. In his experience, it was rarer to meet someone well-adjusted in the business. Still, there was a chance this person could slip up if they had such a short fuse. He just needed to make sure he realized when they did.

That was the last of anything he would find in the apartment. Michele took a last glance at the empty rooms and abandoned luggage. The dead plants were the only sign the woman who had lived here had had something that needed her. The landlord would throw those out. His job was done.

He left, and locked the door behind him.

Clara examined the revolver closely. Her mother had had one like it, but she barely remembered seeing her use it. As for her father, she couldn't remember him ever holding a gun. He kept a knife on him instead, his skills honed by a life on the sea and an eternity at war.

She felt angry with herself for her lack of knowledge. But she needed some way to protect herself, even if just staring at the thing unnerved her.

Her parents, as loving as they were, had always had a sort of hauntedness about them, some cloud of death that never seemed to leave. She could remember her mother keeping vigil with a shotgun in hand as she rocked her young daughter to sleep in a Resistance hideout. She could remember her father waking up screaming as she huddled under the bed, afraid of this man she didn't know.

The war, the war, the war. It echoed through Barfleur, and little Clara did not understand why her parents had done what they had.

Why, for you, mon ange, her mother had answered when she had asked. *How could we face you if we didn't fight for you?*

She didn't like that answer then, and she hated it even more now. No, they were wrong. Her father never should have enlisted, her mother never should have become a maquisard. They should have stayed together and raised her. Let others fight the war while they busied themselves loving her.

Clara had thought, when she'd kissed James in the little church and sealed their vows, that she would never do that. She dreamed of a baby, one to cradle and kiss to her heart's content, one she would never have to leave behind, one who would never feel the burning scars violence loved to inflict.

She hated this gun, and everything it represented. *I won't let that happen,* she vowed to herself. She'd get Madiana to assign someone else to Adriano. She would ride out the storm, resist where she could without inciting anyone's anger. She wouldn't be at the center of something she couldn't control. This gun would shield her, protect her, but she wouldn't go to war. She would not lose James to it, and she wouldn't lose their children to it either.

Three of them, she thought to herself, closing her eyes. Two boys and a baby girl. She was so close to it now. She would be patient. Adriano would marry in a few months, and then she'd be free.

She would have to be.

James returned home quietly, his usual smile absent. Clara heard him from the bedroom, where she tucked the gun away carefully in her dresser. She emerged, reluctant, and their eyes met briefly before his gaze dropped to the floor. "Hi," she managed, her words failing immediately. "Um... dinner's ready, if you want."

"Right. Yes. Uh, thanks." He still did not look at her, so she turned away, busying herself with taking out the plates.

They ate silently, chewing slowly, searching for words they thought might help. Every time James opened his mouth to say something, anything, he just took another bite of meatloaf instead, nerves overtaking him.

Clara tapped her heel against the floor in a steady tattoo, not sure of what to say. She tried to make eye contact with her husband, but he kept his gaze squarely on his plate. Frustration pricked her insides, and she returned to her food.

After dinner, she washed the dishes as quickly as she could manage, just wanting to go to bed.

"You're not wearing the necklace."

She blinked, looking behind her. James was still sitting at the table, staring at her neck intently. "It's a bit much for work, sweetie." Oh, how easily the lies seemed to come now.

"If you don't like it, I can take it back."

Clara frowned. "I like it, James, I just don't want to wear it to work."

He narrowed his eyes slightly, but exhaled. "I just mean...you can tell me things, you know? I'm an adult, I can handle it." His expression melted into wide-eyed pleading. "If something is bothering you, I want to help."

"I know. But I'm telling you, nothing is wrong." She dried the last of the dishes and turned towards him fully. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the promotion, alright? I should have done that sooner. But there's nothing else."

"It's not about the promotion," he said, gripping the back of his chair tightly. "It's about you. Why won't you just tell me—"

"*I've told you,*" she snapped. "I've answered every single question you've had for the past month, and now you think I'm keeping secrets. Like you don't?" She approached, ticking them off on her fingers. "You didn't tell me you were looking for a new job. You didn't tell me your mother disowned you until after we were engaged. You refuse to tell me anything about your family." She threw her hands up in exasperation. "You know everything about me, and I can't say the same for you. Do you know how much that hurts? Did you even care how devastated I was when your mother didn't want to meet me, or were you too busy feeling like you won against her?"

Clara could see the surprised hurt in his expression, and felt more guilt pile on her shoulders. "Just leave it alone, James," she said with a sigh. "Please. The same way I do for you."

Her husband opened his mouth, but she didn't hear what he had to say, for she had already retreated into their bedroom.

Later that night, as she lay alone in bed, Clara heard the door open, but she stayed on her side, giving no indication she was awake. She watched the shadows on the wall until she felt the bed dip behind her, and dread crawled up her spine as she recalled that night in the mansion.

James gently touched her waist, and when she didn't pull away, he wrapped his arm around her gently. With his face hidden in her hair, he began to speak softly, almost shakily. "I don't...know why my mother hated you so much. I want to say I didn't expect it but...I did. She hated my father, my grandparents. She hated Nick and Ella, and they were the only friends I ever had. So when she said she'd cut me off if I married you...I just had enough."

Clara stayed silent, but her hand came up to his forearm, squeezing it slightly. "I was glad to get away from her. I thought I was doing you a favor by keeping you apart. I didn't think about how you felt." His grip on her tightened slightly. "Your parents...they were so good to me when they came to see us. If they hadn't wanted anything to do with me, if they'd cut you off for marrying me, I-I don't know what I would have done." He pressed his face against the nape of her neck. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry that I didn't think about you."

Clara swallowed, tears beginning to well. James had used to give excuse after excuse as to why Gina Edwards could not meet her son's sweetheart — she was out of town, she had legal affairs to see to, her schedule was just full. It wasn't until two days after they'd become engaged that he'd told her he'd been disowned, and everything fell into place. Clara knew immediately that it was because of her, and she'd cried herself to sleep for almost a week, not knowing what she had done wrong.

She curled her shoulders forward, away from her husband, and shut her eyes tightly. She felt his breath falter against her neck, before his arm slipped from around her waist, and they were no longer touching each other. After a moment, he got up and left.

The next day passed the same as the one before; James left before Clara woke up without so much as a goodbye. She wallowed in bed for the morning before forcing herself to get up. She didn't much feel like leaving the apartment today, and resigned herself to flicking mindlessly through the paper.

This can't go on. The atmosphere in her home was growing oppressive and as upset as she was, she at least wanted her husband happy once more.

Learning that his mother had never liked those around her hardly made Clara feel better; she could not imagine being raised in such a way. Surely she had loved her son, if no one else? James had always seemed so eager to start a family, and she felt she was starting to understand, for she too wanted to right what her own parents had done wrong.

I'll make a celebration dinner for his last day of work. She could clean today and go out for the ingredients tomorrow, and he'd come home to his favorite food and champagne and she would promise to be better. He would have to forgive her, then.

James took one last look at the office before he turned on his heel and left it for the last time. He should have been excited, and a part of him was. The other part didn't want to go back home. He was sure Clara was still upset with him, and he wasn't ready to face her.

He didn't understand how it had gone so wrong. Good things were happening, and they were so close to being able to have a family. Why were they drifting away from each other?

It's my fault.

He drifted, almost like an untethered buoy caught in the city's waves. He made it to the docks, and as he walked slowly down the street, his eyes were focused solely on a point on the horizon. A wisp of pale pink and orange cloud floated there, and before long, he found himself in front of a bar.

James frowned at its dingy facade, its windows grimy and paint peeling, but he could hear voices inside, the raucous laughter of its patrons.

I should go home. She's waiting.

He went inside.

He slumped slightly over his glass at the bar, staring down into his reflection in the dark brown liquor. He'd lost count of what number it was.

Deep within, he was angry and ashamed of himself. He recalled the day his grandparents had passed — within mere hours of each other — and how he'd gone to Nick's place with a bottle of cognac, freedom and grief warring within himself. He remembered Nick's concern as James went through most of the bottle himself, and he'd drunkenly sworn his best friend to secrecy, that Clara could not know, because if she saw him like this, she'd hate him.

Suddenly, he remembered what he'd shared with her last night, and clenched his hand tightly around his glass. He'd wanted to keep that part of himself tucked away forever, in a neat little box where it wouldn't harm anyone. But it had harmed someone, hadn't it? He'd never realized how much it hurt Clara to be so separate from his family — had never bothered noticing — and when she'd told him, he was mortified.

It was always going to happen, wasn't it? *Truth will out, as the bard once said*, he thought deliriously, and yet, he was still hiding things. But he had to tell her, didn't he? About his mother and father. About the hatred that seemed to poison his whole family. She would hate him, he was sure of it.

Or maybe she'd sensed it already. Perhaps she was already drawing away from him, holding secrets tightly to herself so he wouldn't see. He needed to fix this. But how?

It was then he realized his glass was empty. He scowled down at it, and he knew he should probably leave, *she's waiting*, but another wouldn't hurt any worse than he already felt, surely.

Before he could raise his head to ask the bartender for another, a voice spoke up.

"Get him one more, would ya? One for me, too."

James blinked and looked up, and saw a man sitting at the end of the bar. His eyes were flat and dark — shark like, almost — and cigarette smoke partially obscured his face. Or maybe James had indeed had one too many. He opened his mouth to politely refuse, he really should get going, *she's waiting*, but all that came out was a hoarse “Thanks.”

The other man shrugged, stubbing out his cigarette in an ashtray the bartender set in front of him, along with his drink. “It’s fine. You seem like you had a shit day, anyway.” He raised an eyebrow at the box sitting next to James, filled with his things he’d cleared from his desk. “Fired?”

“Oh, no. I quit.” The bartender brought him his drink, and he sighed as he picked it up. “Greener pastures, that stuff.”

The other man raised his glass to him, nodding. “To better things, then.”

“To better things.” *If they ever come*, he thought moodily, even as he raised his own glass.

The man stared at him. “You don’t seem like a man who’s celebrating.”

A dry laugh escaped him. “You should’ve seen me a few days ago.” A pearl necklace, because she always loved pearls, and a dinner that cost more than his left arm, and he’d still managed to screw it all up. What else was new?

“Ah, so a different problem, then.” The man considered him, and alarms went off in James’s head, some primal instinct screaming *danger, danger!* Another sip muffled it, and with one more, it was silenced. “Wife trouble?”

He stared down at his gold wedding band, his misery reflected back at him, before looking up at the man. “You married?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t been lucky enough.”

“It’s . . .” Incredible. Everything he’d dreamed of. The best thing that had ever happened to him. “. . . strange.”

The man said nothing, but he gestured to the bartender for another, this time leaving the bottle with him. He leaned over, long limbs perfectly coordinated, and poured some of it in James’s empty glass. “She’s not happy with you?”

“No.” Suddenly feeling terrible, a burst of defensive energy bubbled in his chest. “But it’s not her fault. I just . . . I messed it up. I want her to be happy. She’s amazing, you know? She-she-“ and though alcohol had stolen away his usually sharp tongue, he managed to find the words. “She’s everything I ever wanted.” Beautiful and kind and perfect and somehow, out of his reach.

The man stared at him, expression blank. James suddenly felt embarrassed, and was sure he was about to be ridiculed. Instead, the man looked down into his glass. “She sounds like quite a woman,” he said simply.

James nodded. “She is.” He turned back to look at his own drink, sipping the last of it. “And she loves me,” he said quietly to himself, almost in reassurance. *Me, of all people*, he thought, as the man poured him another drink.

Clara had begun to wilt at the dinner table. The steak had long gone cold, the champagne wept condensation, and the pink lace set she was wearing, the one that James always loved her in, had let a chill raise goosebumps on her skin.

She stared at the empty plate in front of her, strangely numb. Despite the twisting in her stomach, she had no desire to eat. She could not even find the strength or wish to cry, because she was so tired, and she had run out of tears.

Clara stood and slowly began to put everything away. One by one, she placed the silverware back in the drawer, and then the dishes back in the cabinet. She moved at a snail's pace, in the small hope that James would arrive before she was done. At the very least, the chocolate cake she'd made was fine in the fridge, and would still be good later.

She looked at the meal she'd laid out so carefully, and sighed. She looked down at herself, and felt even worse. What had she been thinking? That James would come home and see her and sweep her into his arms, forgive her for everything she had said and done, and carry her off to bed like he was so wont to do? A few scraps of lace could only do so much; they couldn't take back everything that had passed between them.

Suddenly, she heard shuffling outside the door, and then a large bang, like someone was pounding on it.

Michele had scarcely believed it when he'd seen the man, hunched over a drink at the bar he and his men so often frequented. The man who'd picked his wife up from work with a bouquet of pink roses, the man he'd thought was being played for a fool.

But James Edwards — of course, Michele already knew most everything about the man — had shown neither fear nor wit as he downed glass after glass of liquor. He merely looked as though someone had spent the afternoon kicking him in the mud, and he was trying to drown his sorrows.

The man in question groaned as Michele held him up in front of the apartment door. For a man so slight, he was far from a lightweight, but hopefully he would remember little of their meeting. Towards the end of the conversation, he'd seemed to have lost his grip on reality entirely, clumsily grabbing at the box of his things and mumbling *she's waiting* under his breath. He was in no condition to get back, so Michele had helped him to his car, with the man so out of it he didn't even realize that his drinking companion already knew where to go.

Michele raised his free hand and banged on the door, somewhat impatiently. James Edwards was two seconds away from passing out on his feet, and despite his initial amusement at the man's plight, Michele found himself wanting to be anywhere else. But if he hadn't helped him, then the man would've likely been mugged in an alleyway trying to get back home, which would cause more trouble than he was worth.

The door swung open, and Clara Edwards appeared, her appearance harried and her expression one of pure shock. No doubt the image before her was beyond bizarre, he supposed.

He himself considered her. Her hair was loose over her shoulders, and a robe that seemed to have been hastily thrown on was tied loosely around her waist. However, rushed as she was, she must have missed how it gaped open over her chest, and his gaze fell on the delicate pink lace cupping

her breasts. His lips thinned in displeasure and he found himself tempted to drop his cargo on the floor and leave.

Clara, on the other hand, had recovered from her surprise, and her eyes were only for her husband. She cupped his cheek gently, before grabbing his upper arms, like she was trying to pull him to her. Michele took one step into the apartment, then two, before he released his hold on the man, who slumped forward before being caught by his wife. With a surprising strength, or perhaps sheer determination, she helped him to their bedroom, and Michele was left standing at the door, blinking. No words had passed between them. He dropped James's box on the ground, a scowl spreading across his face, though he didn't know why.

It was time for him to leave, and he should have, but instead he shut the door and locked it, before allowing himself to move further into the apartment.

From the bedroom, he could hear James groaning and blubbering incoherently as Clara cooed at him, hushing him with a gentle tone she never used in the De Luca manor, save for some occasions with the children. That she now had to employ it for her husband was almost amusing.

He approached the mantle and examined the photos displayed there. A picture of the couple on their wedding day sat in the center, in a place of pride. There was another photo of them and two others, their smiles bright and real.

Michele moved away, and found himself before the dinner table. A large meal sat atop it, steak and potatoes and more, with a bottle of champagne sat in a tub of mostly melted ice. A celebration that had never happened.

A noise caught his attention and he looked up to see Clara emerging from the bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind her. She had changed into a dressing gown, which she held over her chest tightly as she looked up at him. She was frowning, but her expression was more exhaustion than displeasure. "You're still here." It wasn't a question.

"Food looks good," he replied, gesturing to the table.

She blinked. "You're not serious."

"I am. I haven't eaten, and well, Mrs. Moretti isn't at the house anymore, so I don't have tons of options." He slid the chair out and sat, staring at her expectantly. "Why let it go to waste?"

A wrinkle appeared between her brow. "What? Why isn't Mrs. Moretti there?"

"She was careless. Lillian wouldn't have gotten a chance if she had been doing her job properly." She still didn't move, and he sighed. "Come on, I brought your husband home, safe and sound. Don't I deserve some sort of thank you?"

Clara's eyes narrowed, and he expected her to kick him out, but her shoulders just sagged in defeat. "I'll have to reheat it," she muttered, taking the plate back to the stove.

As she set a pan on the burner, Michele felt his stomach grumble. "Forget it. You got anything else?"

"There's cake in the fridge." She glanced at him, almost suspicious. "If you like that sort of thing."

“What the hell do you think I eat? Babies?”

She opened the fridge, pulling out a sumptuous chocolate cake. “It wouldn’t surprise me.” She cut him a thick slice and placed it in front of him, stabbing a fork into it roughly. “Eat. Then leave.” With that, she turned away, putting dishes back into her cabinets.

“You won’t have any?”

“I lost my appetite.”

“You could at least sit down,” he mused, taking a bite of the cake. It was so rich he had trouble opening his mouth again to speak. “Keep me company.”

“I’m still in the room, aren’t I?” she replied dryly, her patience reaching an end. For a few minutes, there was silence as he ate and she continued cleaning. She paused to set a glass of water in front of him, which he took gratefully.

The water washed the thick frosting from Michele’s teeth, freeing his voice again. “You’re not curious to know what happened?”

“He’ll tell me, when he wakes up.” Clara crossed her arms and stared at him, annoyance twisting her lips.

There was a surety in her voice that irritated him. “Oh, I don’t think he will, sweetheart. Not with how I found him.” He cut through the cake with his fork. “Mumbling your name at the bottom of a bottle. You’re breaking his heart.”

Now, a familiar anger cut through her cold expression. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh yeah? There’s a person-shaped dent in your couch,” he sneered, his voice turning venomous. “And I saw that pretty little number you had on when you answered the door. He leaving you cold these past nights?”

Her fists clenched, and he, satisfied, took another bite of cake. “This is good,” he remarked. “You really should have a piece.”

Clara imagined him choking on the next bite, his face turning blue and his eyes begging for help as she watched him die. The picture soothed her for a moment, stilling her tongue before she said anything too rash.

What he said worried her, in truth. Had James really drunk himself near-unconscious because of her? No, the man in front of her had played a part, of that she was sure. “Eat as much as you like,” she said simply. “It must be difficult going home to no one.”

She saw him pause, and continued, rinsing off a plate as she spoke. “I can box it up for you to take, if you want. But I don’t think you really need it, you always show up at the manor for dinner anyway. I’d say you’re not happy about it, but I guess it’s better than being alone.”

“I’d rather be alone than have my wife in another room,” he replied, but his voice was dark with warning.

Clara found she didn't care. "I don't know what you'll do when Adriano gets married. Will they find someone for you? Oh, don't tell me Madiana can't get anyone to agree to marry you. I certainly wouldn't." She turned to look at him, tilting her head slightly. "I'd die of shame if my husband was someone's dogsbody."

She seemed to have hit upon his last nerve, by the way his whole body seemed to tense, and for a moment, she thought he might hit her, but he only set his fork down on his empty plate. "Thank you for the cake. I don't want to keep you any longer, you have someone to babysit."

Clara watched Michele stand and straighten his coat. "I know what James is like when he's drunk. You wanted him to slip up and say something, didn't you? But there was nothing to say."

"Believe me, he said plenty. Maybe not about some grand conspiracy, but I certainly know more than I'd like about you." At that, he looked up at her. "And I told them about the gun."

She blinked, suddenly nervous. "And?"

"And nothing. Mrs. Christopher will be locking up your bag from now on." He looked up at her. "You know how to use it?"

She huffed, crossing her arms. "Of course I do."

He narrowed his eyes at her, unsmiling. "You need to learn how to shoot or how to lie, or you won't last much longer."

He turned away and she followed, incensed. "I'll get the door for you," she said, wrenching it open so that it almost hit him in the face.

He scowled at her. "Goodnight." And he was gone, without so much as a backwards look.

Clara just managed to stop herself from slamming the door behind him, and locked it roughly. *Damn him. Damn every one of them.*

She quickly put everything else away, and when she went back into the bedroom, James was sprawled across the bed, snoring. The sight did not ease her in the slightest.

She pushed his limbs away to make enough room for herself, and waited for sleep to come.

Always

Chapter Summary

Tempers reach their ends between Clara and her husband, and she must decide how much longer she can hide the truth from him.

(Always, by Ella Fitzgerald)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a small black dot hovering in the corner of the ceiling. It swayed back forth ever so slightly, and each time Nick blinked, he lost sight of it.

“Davis seem in a bad mood to you, these days?” he heard Jack ask over the sound of the coffee pouring into his cup.

He looked up at his colleague, whose brow was raised, questioning. “What do you mean?”

“Not sure. He seems...stressed? Annoyed? I don’t know.” Jack swirled his coffee around, staring into it. “Maybe it’s nothing.”

Or not. But Nick kept such thoughts to himself. The world was slowly crushing in on him, and sleep seemed to come sparingly. He could only see Clara’s eyes, the baby clothes Ella was knitting, Clara’s betrayal, the list of boy names pinned on the ice box. He was losing it. Maybe he’d lost it already. He felt stuck, pulled in several directions without budging an inch.

His gaze wandered to Captain Davis’s door, where the man was having one of his many meetings. A deep loathing for him burned in Nick’s stomach, and he hated the man for his spinelessness, his greed, to give up the oaths he swore so easily for the sake of money. And he hated himself and his colleagues for accepting it, taking their share and looking the other way when the criminals walked out without so much as a slap on the wrist. Or now, when *that man* was here again, the one with the dead eyes whose arrival at the precinct signaled disruption, an order from above that would have disastrous consequences if not followed.

The door opened, and Davis stepped out, shaking hands with the man behind, speaking with him quietly. He listened to the captain in silence, before his black eyes flicked up and met Nick’s. The cop froze, not daring to look away as something inscrutable passed over the man’s face. It was, Nick realized with horror, a sense of knowing. Though they had never spoken, that man stared at him a familiarity that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He made no expression, gave no clue as to what he was thinking, and simply bid the captain goodbye before stalking out of the precinct.

Davis merely nodded in Nick and Jack’s direction before disappearing back into his office, not seeming concerned or even curious. Nick blinked, realizing his hands were trembling slightly, and

forced himself to still. *Clara*. Was she in trouble? Were the De Lucas investigating her now for some slight, trying to find any liability in her background to make note of?

Was he one of them?

He looked back up at the dot, which had unfurled eight skinny legs and was now descending towards him, a strand of silk stretching behind it. “Hey. Jack. Hand me a newspaper.”

“Hmm?” Jack looked up to see the spider settle itself on the table, fat and hairy. “Ah, hell, hold on-” He jumped up and grabbed a rolled up newspaper from his desk, smacking it down on the table. The spider scurried away, and he cursed. “Damn, slippery little pest.” He tried again, but it dodged him once more, scrambling towards the edge of the table to freedom.

Irritated, Nick slapped his hand down on the table, feeling the spider squish beneath his palm. “Got it,” he grunted, and Jack cringed.

“Man, I’m sorry, here-” He handed his friend some napkins, and as Nick wiped the smear of blood and legs off his hand, his mouth hardened into a scowl. There had to be a way to help Clara, without drawing the ire of the De Lucas. Could he speak with that man? Promise something in exchange for her safety? He thought of Ella again, and his stomach turned over. She and the baby were vulnerable now, too. What would he have to sacrifice to keep everyone safe?

James awoke feeling as though his mouth was stuffed with cotton. He coughed and retched, his head swimming with pain, and when his vision focused, he realized he had awoken in his own bed for the first time in days. He turned his head slightly, seeing the bed empty, and looked the other way, where a glass of water sat atop the nightstand for him.

He chugged it greedily, his throat like sandpaper, and when he sat up, a wave of nausea hit him. He steadied himself, and stood slowly, making his way to the bathroom.

He splashed water over his face and rinsed his mouth, but his eyes were still bloodshot, his skin still pasty white and splotched with red. His hair stuck out in all directions, and he looked to all the world like a ghoul come to haunt the good people of New York.

James could hear sounds coming from the kitchen, and knew his wife was waiting for him. He vaguely recalled her taking him in her arms and tucking him into bed and pulling off his shoes, before disappearing back into the living room. Shame and frustration welled up within him, and he trudged to the door.

He emerged from the bedroom, rubbing his temples.

“I made breakfast.”

He looked up wearily, but Clara had her back to him, plating scrambled eggs at the stove.
“Clara....”

She placed the plate on the table stiffly, not looking at him. “I’ll be going out today. There’s leftovers in the fridge for lunch. I’m not sure when I’ll be back so feel free to order take out for dinner-“

"Clara, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to- I'm sorry."

"What exactly are you sorry for?" At this she finally looked up at him, anger simmering in her eyes. "For coming home drunk out of your mind? For leaving me sitting here wondering if something happened to you?"

He approached her, frustrated. "I should've come home--"

"I thought you were hurt! Or worse!"

"What would happen to me!? I'm home, aren't I? I'm in one piece!"

"That's not the point, and you know it!" She raised her voice, her finger poking into his chest.

"Then I guess we're even!" he snapped, pushing her hand away. "You go to work and don't come home or call, and I'll do the same, and maybe if we're lucky, we'll see each other once in a while!"

Clara's eyes rounded, her face red with anger. "Fine," she muttered, gray irises hard as stone. "Fine." Without another word, she picked up her coat and purse, and strode out the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

James stared after her, left in the wake of their destruction. His rage cooled, solidified into a tiny pebble, and he slumped down into a chair, exhaustion winning out.

Clara walked aimlessly through the city, her head down and her gun heavy in her purse. Would she even be able to use it? It might as well have been a lump of metal in her hands, and as she remembered the fear from last night, the thought that James might be hurt, or worse- no. No, she could not afford to think like that.

But what could she do? He was only getting angrier with her, and the secrets weighed on her like stones. She did not know if she could keep acting in front of him, if she might break down one day and reveal everything. Would he stop loving her, think she was dirty and unfaithful?

Would he...leave her?

You need to learn how to shoot or how to lie, or you won't last much longer.

She clenched her fist at the memory. He was right, but oh, she'd been lying every minute of every day, and she didn't know how much more she could take.

When her mother had taken her to hide with the resistance, she had learned from the others several skills that would serve her well in wartime. How to stitch a wound. How to restart a heart. How big a pool of blood could get before it was too late. All this, Jeanne had taught her daughter, but she had never taught her how to shoot. Clara wondered if her mother had wanted to keep it from her, in the hopes she would never need the knowledge.

But need it she did, and she did not have an army willing to teach and shield her. There was only herself and what she made herself do.

Frustrated tears threatened to spill over, and she forced herself to take a deep breath. She could at least teach herself to hold the gun, to be able to load it and aim. She did not know where she could

practice shooting, but she would find somewhere. She had to. She could wait this out, but she couldn't stomach the idea of James in danger, or of Nick and Ella being threatened because of her, with her helpless to do anything.

She didn't know if she could make herself pull the trigger on anyone, but she could make sure she didn't miss if she did.

She sighed, clutching her arms as she thought about her husband. A gun could fix no problems she caused at home. *Learn to shoot, or learn to lie.*

She closed her eyes, thinking of James, of their wedding day, of the feeling of waking up next to him. He deserved more from her. Maybe she could give him that, but carefully. The thought of saying, out loud, what had been done to her every day she entered that house stuck in her throat like a hot lump of tears. But now, James was in danger, and he at least needed to know who the De Lucas truly were.

Her lips thinned with determination. She could learn to shoot, and she could learn to choose her lies with care, give her husband the truth he needed, and keep the rest hidden. Clara shivered, nervous and doubting, but she made her way back home steadily, reality looming before her with every step.

She held her husband's arm firmly, almost leading him with her somewhere new. The path in the park was lined with trees, and with the wind blowing and the leaves rustling, she didn't think they'd be overheard.

James resisted her tugging slightly, still upset. "You said you wanted to go on a walk, not drag me around. I'd ask what you want, but you won't tell me, will you?" Clara paused, and turned to look at him. He startled at the despair in her face, her lip trembling. "What's wrong? Clara?"

"I need you to listen to me," she began softly, before taking another step. "Please, just listen to me, James."

"What is it?"

She pulled his arm again, forcing him to walk next to her. Although he stared intently at her, her gaze was directed at the horizon, as she took a deep, shaky breath. She looked at him, her grip on him tightening. "I can't quit working for the De Lucas. They'll never let me."

James scoffed. "'Let you?' Do you even hear yourself? I don't want to beat this dead horse again—"

"James."

He stopped at the hushed urgency in her voice, and closed his mouth, although his frown remained. "Please," she said again. "I'll tell you everything. You might think I'm crazy. But you have to promise to believe me."

He stared at his wife, his sweet, beautiful wife, not recognizing the pure fear in her eyes, and his annoyance gave way to concern. "Alright," he agreed softly, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I promise, sweetheart." It felt like it had been ages since he last called her that. "Tell me." He wanted to hold her in the day's fading light, his arms aching for the feel of her in them. Most of all,

he just wanted her to smile. Angry as he was, he couldn't stay that way forever, not with her. Never with her.

She squeezed his hand back, her teeth digging into her lower lip. Then she took a small breath, and the words began to flow, like a dam breaking.

"No."

"James-"

"No." Her husband's hands went to his hair, searching to anchor himself. "You're mistaken. You have to be."

"They as good as told me! And you promised you'd believe me!"

"To hell with what I promised, Clara! Weeks of me trying to find out what's bothering you, and now you tell me you're-you're working for the mob!?" It came out as a strangled hiss, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

She grabbed his shoulders. "Shh! Someone will hear you!"

"God, I-" He clutched the sides of his head, horrified. "Clara, we have to tell somebody. The police-"

"No." Her grip on him tightened. "James, you can't say a word. They're already suspicious of us both."

"What do you mean, 'suspicious' of us? What the hell happened?"

He looked like he was about to sink to the ground in shock, and suddenly furious, Clara dug her nails into his arm, nearly hard enough to break skin. "You are *not*," she whispered harshly, "going to break down on me, you understand? You're going to take my arm and lead me down the path and anyone who sees us is going to think we're a normal couple taking a walk." She shook him slightly. "Look at me, James."

Her husband turned his gaze towards her, wetting his lips nervously. "Are people...watching us?" he asked weakly.

Her anger extinguished itself almost immediately at the fearful look in his eyes. "Yes," she answered, her grip on him loosening slightly. "Please, let's keep going."

James covered his face with his hand briefly, and she feared he was going to collapse, but he took a shaky breath and covered the hand she had on his arm with his own. "Okay. I...okay."

As they walked, Clara quietly recounted the goings-on of the De Luca manor, from the bullet in the fireplace, to the murdered waitress, and finally, Lillian. James, who had been squeezing her arm in alarm with each revelation, stopped in his tracks. "You never said anything. Why, why wouldn't you tell me that happened!?"

"You haven't met those people, *mon ange*. They hardly cared what happened to me, only that I kept my mouth shut."

"But...but what about Nick? Couldn't he help?"

Clara's gaze went to the ground. "They probably pay the police off, James. It wouldn't do any good." She had carefully avoided any hint of what had been done to her, and she would not reveal Nick's knowledge of it either; her husband was angry enough already and she knew she would never be able to tell him anyway.

She heard him sigh as he squeezed her hand. "You kept all this from me?" he asked in a small voice.

Clara bit her lip, unable to look at him. "I-I thought I was protecting you. I thought...if you didn't know, you would be safer."

"What changed, then?" He raised an eyebrow, a bit of resentment entering his tone. "You think I'm old enough now?"

"It's your new job," she blurted out, her real fear coming to light. "Adriano's getting married to a woman named Elizabetta Bianchi, and..."

"Wait, Bianchi?" She looked up to see a confused recognition in his eyes. "As in...Arturo Bianchi?"

She blinked. "...yes. You know him?"

"When I went to interview with Nicholson Financial Group, I bumped into a man outside. Here, wait—" He went through his coat pockets, fumbling his wallet. "Look, he gave me his card, told me he owned some restaurants."

Clara took the card from him, staring at it. "...you met him."

"Yes, he said his accountant worked at the company." He watched her brows furrow slightly, and touched her arm. "What is it?"

"He's Adriano's fiancée's father. And his accountant works where you work now."

James blinked as it dawned on him. "He's involved with them. And they think I picked this place...on purpose?"

"That's about it, yeah," Clara whispered. She ducked her head, passing the card back to him. "I'm so sorry, my love."

She felt him hover in front of her for a moment; before his arms encircled her, and he pressed his face into her shoulder. "Well this is a fine mess, isn't it?" he asked weakly.

Unable to help herself, a broken laugh bubbled through her lips. "Yes, it is." She wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, shivering despite his heat.

"You should have told me."

"I should have."

He pulled back and cupped her face in his hands, searching her face. "Just tell me," he murmured, "are you safe in that house?"

She stared back at him, her teeth worrying her lower lip. "I don't think I'm safe anywhere, anymore," she finally admitted.

"...and they won't let you go?"

"No. Not until the wedding. Maybe then--"

"'Maybe'?"

She took a deep breath. "After the wedding, they'll have to let me go. There'll be no reason to keep me on."

Her husband frowned, still worried. "And you're still just a maid, right? They aren't making you do anything bad?"

She nodded. "Nothing bad." It was not so bad if she managed to just lay there. Not so bad.

James stared at her, as though his gaze might pull the rest of her secrets from her lips, but he just sighed. "I'm sorry for being angry with you," he said, full of shame.

"I didn't tell you," she said reassuringly. "I...I'm sorry about it all."

He was still conflicted, she could tell. But he seemed to have calmed down, at least a little, and squeezed her hand tightly as they walked back to their apartment. Perhaps he had realized, like her, that there was little to do in the face of any of it.

Dinner was quiet, but not wholly uncomfortable. James looked pensive, but he wasn't angry with her, at least.

She picked at the meatloaf, slightly uncomfortable, before clearing her throat, catching his attention. "Will-will you sleep in the bed tonight?" she asked softly, hating to sound desperate. She missed his warm presence next to her, but most of all, if he came back, it meant she was forgiven.

He paused, and looked over at where his pillow sat on the couch. "...yes, I will. If that's alright."

"Of course it is," she said, relief flooding her.

James saw her hesitant smile, and pressed his lips into a flat line. "You can't do this again, Clara."

She blinked, her smile dropping. "I-yes, I know. I'm sorry--"

"This isn't your cross to bear alone, alright? If you're in danger, I need to know. If you're afraid, I need to know. Hell, if one of them snaps at you one day, you have to tell me." He grimaced slightly. "If you were so worried for me, don't you think I'd feel the same about you?"

She bit the inside of her cheek, looking down. "I hoped everything would blow over," she admitted. "I thought that...there was no reason to worry you."

His eyes widened. ““No reason?”” he repeated in disbelief. “I’m your husband! You can’t just—” James stopped and took a deep breath, clearly trying to keep himself from yelling. “I need you to be honest with me about this, Clara. Please.”

She nodded mutely, shame and anger coloring her cheeks red. *He can’t know.* “I understand.”

He squinted at her slightly, before relaxing, picking up his fork again. “Good,” and his voice was warm in that way that couldn’t help but bring a little smile to her face, and she knew that even if he hadn’t completely forgiven her, he still loved her.

Clara fidgeted in the bedroom slightly, curling and uncurling her fingers in the bedspread. She had remade the bed for the both of them, but although the room once again looked the same, she could feel the change. Like they had crossed into unfamiliar territory somehow, that their trust in each other had been shaken in a way it never had been.

She shivered and shook her head, tucking herself beneath the covers. *He forgave me. It’s okay now.* She could fix whatever anger he still held. She just needed to wait this out.

Clara could hear the shower still running, and as she stared at the door, knowing her husband was beyond, she felt a wisp of desire shudder through her. Oh, she’d missed him. She’d been prepared to do anything for him to forgive her, and she still was. Her eyes closed, she imagined straddling him in the bed — *their* bed — and fucking him until he couldn’t think of anything but her. Once, they’d gone on a picnic, and she’d ridden him beneath the evening sun, James’s face turning red when he realized she’d purposefully left herself bare beneath her dress. The memory made her press her thighs together.

Suddenly, the door to the bathroom opened, and her eyes shot open to see him emerge, rubbing a towel over his hair. She sat up, watching him almost expectantly as he shuffled across the room, turning out the lights. In the shadowy light of the moon, she could hardly see his face, and she wondered if he could see the want in hers.

He pulled the covers back and settled beneath them, his eyes already closed. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

Clara blinked, staring down at him. “Goodnight,” she breathed, and leaned down to press her lips to his. He returned her kiss, arms wrapping themselves around her lazily, but when her hand toyed with the top button on his shirt, he took her by the wrist, stilling her. She jerked back, breaking the kiss as he stared at her. “James?” she asked fearfully.

“Not tonight, Clara,” he said quietly, releasing her wrist. “I just...need to sleep.”

“Oh,” she said, swallowing nervously. “Alright. Goodnight, *mon ange.*” She kissed his forehead, before tucking herself into his arms.

“Goodnight,” he murmured into her hair. “I love you.” And these words relaxed her as she nuzzled into his chest, breathing them back above his heart.

Long after his wife had fallen asleep, James lay awake, staring at the ceiling. He thought of her going back to the manor tomorrow morning, and his grip on her tightened, making her shift slightly in his arms.

He had promised her parents that he would keep her safe when he'd asked permission to marry her. They had trusted him, *she* had trusted him, and now, they were surrounded by criminals, cornered like rats. He clenched his jaw, thinking of how Adriano de Luca had approached them at dinner, the unease in Clara's eyes with every word he spoke. He thought back to his seemingly-welcoming smile, and suddenly hated him deeply, anger burning in his blood.

Did they torment her, in that place? Or was the threat of harm enough? Were they grateful for her almost dying, or suspicious? And did that man, Arturo Bianchi, want to hurt her as well?

He buried his face in Clara's hair, feeling her chest rise and fall with every breath. *How could she have kept this from me?* Didn't she trust him? Did she think he was...useless?

He sighed, pressing his lips to the crown of her head. He didn't care what it took, he would keep her as safe as possible. He knew little of the mob's workings, but he doubted they saw much value in hurting a simple maid. Still, he could hardly stomach the thought of her returning to them.

James gently stroked her back, watching a slight smile spread over her face as she slept. *More than anything, I need her safe. I don't care how much they pay her; how much they might do to me, but I owe her that.* If she had thought he wouldn't be able to do anything for her, she was wrong. He was no fool, or coward. He knew he had to be careful, so that the family wouldn't become too suspicious, but he had to find some crack in their armor, some way to get them as far from Clara as possible.

One thing at a time. He thought of Arturo Bianchi once more, and hoped he would run into him again, soon. His trust might be valuable in the coming weeks.

He pulled the covers up over his and his wife's shoulders, clutching her to him like a lifeline. When he closed his eyes, he kept seeing Adriano de Luca, smiling like a wolf that caught a rabbit.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry it's been a minute, it's been a rough year and this chapter was really hard to write, with Clara breaking (some) walls down between her and James. I hope you enjoyed! This was originally supposed to be WAY hornier, but we're saving that for next chapter lol. Thanks for reading!! Love you all!

Love Me

Chapter Summary

Clara returns to the De Luca manor, hoping to keep her head down and do her work. However, an unexpected guest throws a wrench in her plans.

(Love Me by Elvis Presley)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clara woke slowly, cocooned in blankets and her husband's arms. She sighed and rolled over, and saw him staring at her, smiling slightly. "Good morning," he said, voice still raspy with sleep, his eyes watching her expression.

She smiled back. "Good morning." She raised herself up on her elbows, before kissing him gently. His hand went to the back of her neck, holding her to him as he returned her kiss fervently. She could feel him, hard against her stomach, and when his free hand slipped under her nightgown to palm her ass, she giggled. "Now?" she whispered teasingly. "It's your first day at work, you need to get ready."

He seemed to purr as she ran her hand across his chest. "I won't be able to focus if I let you get away with just kissing me. I'd be useless the whole day." He groaned as she let her hand stroke down over his stomach, until she was tugging down his waistband. He grabbed her hips and pulled her so she was straddling him, kissing her jaw all the while. She wrapped her hand around his cock, stroking gently, and he groaned. "Clara," he murmured, "need you."

Happy to oblige, she hiked up the skirt of her nightgown and lifted her hips, angling herself so she could sink slowly onto him. Unable to help herself, she whined at the familiar sensation of him inside of her, teeth digging into her lip. He moaned beneath her as she started to rock against him, taking her by the hips and thrusting up into her. She lay herself back over him, lips meeting his again.

They kissed and made love sleepily, messily. Although she still held her secrets close, Clara felt lighter, and could scarcely bring herself to pull her lips away from her husband's, rocking her hips against his incessantly. James, for his part, was glad to hold his wife again, but there was fear in how he gripped her, desperation in how he sucked at her tongue, like he was terrified of letting her go. He felt her gasp into his mouth, her body stilling as she clutched him. He held onto her hips and thrust once, twice, and moaned as he spilled into her.

Clara sighed happily, nestling against him, making no attempt to separate from him. James's arms curled protectively around her, and he kissed the shell of her ear before whispering, pleading, "Don't go."

Her smile flitted away at the reminder of what the day held, and she felt frustration needle at the base of her skull. She pulled away so she could look at the concern on his face. "I have to," she said quietly. "You know I have to."

She could see the anger in his expression, the refusal to accept, and looked down, before she pulled herself from his embrace and left him in bed to ready herself for the day.

They ate breakfast quietly, and while Clara was usually gone before him, she gave herself some extra time to see him off to work. She knew he was still upset, and tried to act as normal as possible, to reassure him that it was all fine.

As he readied himself to leave, a bit of his usual awkwardness returned. "Is my tie straight?" He asked nervously, tugging at it.

She smiled, placing her hands on his chest gently. "You look perfect. Very smart." She kissed his cheek fondly, and heard him sigh, before he held her to him, pressing his face into her shoulder.

"You have the number for my work," he said softly, pulling back and cradling her cheek in his hand. "If you want me to come get you early, call."

"I know," she said, her shoulders slumping slightly. "I'll be alright, *mon ange*. I promise."

"Maybe I should come drop you off--"

Clara shook her head firmly. "No. I don't want you near those people."

"I can't let you go like this--"

"You have to. They're already suspicious, what would they think if they saw you at the house now?" She frowned up at him. "That Bianchi man may already be ready to watch you at work."

He grimaced, nodding. "I'll keep myself out of trouble. We'll...we'll figure this out."

She didn't like the determination in his voice. "We only have to wait a few months. They'll leave us be, then." No more searching, no more fighting. It was like Michele said; she just had to keep her head down.

James looked doubtful, ready to argue, but he merely pressed his lips together and nodded. "Be safe," he said in farewell, kissing her forehead.

"I will. You, too."

His hold lingered on her waist, before he managed to force himself to leave. She watched the door close behind him, dread crawling up her spine.

"Your purse."

Mrs. Christopher's hand was flat, her palm facing the ceiling, as she stared at Clara expectantly. The quiet apology her eyes used to hold seemed to have disappeared entirely, replaced with cool

professionalism. Clara bit her lip, gripping her bag closer for a moment, before relenting and handing it over.

Mrs. Christopher opened her purse and peered into it without shame, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the gun resting within. Clara did not shrink from her almost accusatory glare, keeping her chin up and meeting the woman's eyes with no remorse. Finally, the housekeeper looked away. "Mrs. De Luca is waiting for you in her room to explain your duties."

Taking this as the most the housekeeper was willing to say to her, Clara nodded stiffly and made her way out of the kitchen, forcing her breathing to be steady.

I just have to keep my head down. If she said it to herself enough times, perhaps it would be easier. A wave of nausea rippled through her at the thought of wanting any of it to be easier, before she pushed it away.

She knocked on Madiana's door and flinched at the quiet "Come in," that greeted her. When she entered, the lady of the house was sitting primly at her tea table, staring her directly in the face. "Good morning, Clara," she said, her voice void of any warmth. "I see you've healed."

Clara resisted the urge to touch her throat. "Yes ma'am, thank you."

"Hm. Sit."

The young woman held back a grimace and sat across from her employer, waiting for her to continue. Madiana sipped her tea, before looking back up at her. "Michele tells me you bought yourself a gun."

Clara blinked, surprised at her even tone. "Yes ma'am. I wanted to protect myself."

"From who?"

Clara frowned, feeling a sense of warning. "From whoever hired—" Madiana's eyes flashed, and she shut her mouth abruptly, searching for different words. "...from whoever was behind what happened."

"I see." Madiana set her teacup down without making a single sound. "Mrs. Christopher will be keeping your things locked in her office from now on. I'm sure you understand I can't allow you to carry it in the house, not with the children."

"Of course." She tapped her fingers on the teacup, nervous. "Did you need anything else from me?"

The older woman stared at her, not saying a word, and Clara forced herself to hold her gaze. "...the foyer needs to be cleaned before my husband and son return. If you finish early, find Mrs. Christopher and help her with dinner. You'll have to do so until we hire a new cook."

"Yes, ma'am." Clara stood, and Madiana waved her away. Her suspicion turned the atmosphere heavy, and when the young woman left, her shoulders felt noticeably lighter.

As the day went by, Clara noticed how empty the manor felt. As far as she could tell, none of the other maids were in for the day.

She finished wiping down the windows when she heard a knock at the front door. She glanced around, and sensing that no one else would answer, she glanced through the front window to see a familiar girl on the front step. Abigail Williams shifted her stance nervously, biting her fingernails.

Clara opened the door cautiously. "Yes?"

If Abigail recognized her, she gave no sign. "I want to see Giovanni," she said with no preamble.

The maid grimaced. "I'm...sorry, he isn't home." He was, in fact, but she did not think Madiana would appreciate seeing Williams's daughter after the scene she had made last time.

The girl inhaled, and Clara flinched, convinced she'd scream like she had before, but Abigail only gritted her teeth. "Please," she said, frustrated. "I just need to speak with him, that's all."

"I understand, miss, but he is not home right now. I could give him a message...?" Her voice trailed off when she realized there were tears in the young girl's eyes. "Miss?"

She sniffed, her hands trembling. "I saw him in his window," she whispered, so soft Clara almost didn't hear her. "Please. I need to see him."

Clara's eyes widened, and she offered her handkerchief to the girl, who took it gladly, even as she continued to sniffle. "...if you go around to that side," she said softly, feeling she would regret this. "I'll let you in the kitchen." Mrs. Christopher was out getting groceries, and this would at least offer privacy.

Abigail blinked, surprised, but nodded hesitantly and hurried off. Clara shut the door, looked around the foyer once more, and ran back to let her in. "Here," she directed her to a seat at the small table. "I'll get him."

"Thank you," she breathed, and Clara nodded, swallowing nervously. She thought of Giovanni's easy gait and careless words, and felt anger at his flippancy well up. She left and hurried up the stairs determinedly.

Clara knocked firmly at his door, and he opened it with an air of pleasant surprise. "Clara. You're back." His hand reached toward her throat, a smirk flitting across his face. "And I see you've healed."

She slapped his hand away impatiently. "You have a guest," she said pointedly, which made him frown. "In the kitchen."

Giovanni raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't expecting anyone. Why would you-?" It was then he noticed the anger in her face, and scoffed. "Nosy woman, aren't you? It's a nasty habit of yours, I've noticed."

"She's crying. She needs you." If Abigail was really pregnant, how could he turn her away so callously?

"A good slap is what she needs," he said coldly, but shut the door behind him. "But my mother taught me not to hit girls." Clara scowled, and he sneered at her. "Very well, I'll speak to her. You

can even stay, if you're so worried." He stalked off, and Clara hurried after him, slightly unnerved by the iciness of his eyes.

"Don't hurt her," she said, alarmed.

He snorted. "The only person who'd hurt her is herself."

As Clara and Giovanni entered the kitchen, Abigail sat up straight, her eyes wide. "Gio," she breathed, her voice both disbelieving and adoring. "You're here."

"It's my home, of course I am." He crossed his arms, watching her coolly. "You, however, have no reason to be here."

Abigail stood abruptly and strode over to him, and Clara opened her mouth to say *wait*, thinking she'd hit him, but instead the young girl threw her arms around him, clutching him to her like a lifeline. "I called," she cried into his chest. "Why didn't you answer? Why did you just—" her voice broke off into muffled sobs.

Giovanni sighed, and rested his hands on her waist in a way that made it look like he was trying to touch as little of her as possible. "You were being childish. My mother was furious with me because of you."

Clara, feeling uncomfortable, turned to leave, but Giovanni turned to glare at her in warning. She froze and looked down at the ground, trying to ignore the couple.

Abigail pulled back slightly to look over at her. "Can she leave?"

"Why? So I can fuck you on the kitchen table?" he asked acidly, and both Clara and Abigail flinched. "She stays. What do you want?"

"I d-didn't mean to get you in trouble, I swear," she gasped, tears streaming down her face. "I'm not even supposed to be here, my father's so angry—"

"Then you should go home, Abigail."

"Why are you doing this to me!?" A fresh wave of tears welled up. "I said I loved you, I said I'm sorry. Please, Gio." She grabbed at the front of his shirt, fevered determination in her eyes. "We can leave. You said you wanted to, we could go to California—we could get away. Please? I love you."

Giovanni stared down at her, quiet, before gently cupping her cheek. "Abby," he murmured, and she smiled, leaning into his touch, waiting for a yes. "You were never pregnant, were you?"

The young girl froze, staring up at him in shock. "What?"

Giovanni was smiling now. "I'm not a fool. I was careful with you. I treated you well. And then you had to ruin it with your whining, your greed. You're not pregnant, and I'll have nothing more to do with you."

Abigail's jaw dropped. "No," she protested, "no, Gio, I *am* pregnant, I am, you—you can't just tell me to go away—"

"I can do a lot more than that, Abigail. Either you tried to trap me, or you lied." His eyes flashed with an icy menace. "Which one do you think makes this better for you?"

Clara's hands trembled, and she wanted to scream for the girl to run, because she'd seen that look in a De Luca man's eyes before, the one that spoke of painful things, but Giovanni's hands were so close to Abigail's neck already, and she thought of Adriano's waitress and shut her mouth.

Abigail trembled, fear palpable in the way she gripped his shirt. "I just...." She swallowed, staring up at him. "I just wanted you to stay. I thought...you would want to stay, if I said...."

"I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have cared if you stood on the steps with the baby in your arms." He shoved her away from him, looking disgusted. "Get out of my house before I throw you out myself."

Abigail stared at him, shocked. She opened her mouth, maybe to plead with him, but he'd already turned and left the kitchen without a word. She met Clara's gaze as more tears began to stream down her face, and, sobbing, turned and ran out of the house.

Clara, horrified, hurried after Giovanni. "Why would you ever say those things to her?"

He brushed her off, making his way up to his room. "You know this family well by now. Do you think she would have been happy if I married her?"

No. Not even slightly. Still, she ran after him. "Don't do that, don't pretend you were doing her a favor. You just wanted to be cruel." She remembered the way he had spoken to Michele, to her, that night she had stayed in the house.

He stopped abruptly, looking back at her. "...maybe so. Who cares? She'll wipe her tears with her daddy's money and move on. Whatever the case, she isn't my problem anymore." With that, he left her in the hall, the sound of his door echoing in her ears.

She hated him immensely, then, and she hated Abigail too, and everyone else in the house. Then, her shoulders slumped as everything went out of her. Her anger didn't matter here. Abigail's tears didn't, either. Nothing mattered to these people except themselves.

She continued her chores.

Amelia arrived a few hours later, and squeezed Clara into a brief hug. "We missed you! Mrs. Christopher said you were ill?"

"Oh yes, a small fever. Nothing to worry about." Clara smiled thinly in reassurance. Marlene would be arriving soon as well, although Heidi and Madison would not return for a few days. Madiana seemed cautious of letting all the maids back at the same time. Clara doubted any of them had anything to do with what Lillian did, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Well, I'm glad you're back, anyhow." She whispered almost conspiratorially. "Honestly, I couldn't tell you *why* Mrs. De Luca isn't having everybody in. I mean, Lillian quit and now she's keeping us out? With all those cabinets of crystal and silver to polish? Not to mention the wedding!"

Clara laughed uneasily. "Maybe she's trying to see if she needs as much help?"

"Hmph. Well, she can do what she likes." Amelia fluffed her hair primly. "If she wants to clean up after all those children herself, so be it."

Clara couldn't picture Madiana scrubbing her own floors, but she had no doubt that the woman could keep the entire house in order singlehandedly if pressed. She had an absurd attention to detail and a determination about her Clara might have admired, under different circumstances.

The door opened behind them, and they both turned to see Marlene entering. "Oh, hello." She seemed slightly surprised to see Clara standing there. "Um, how are you?"

"Fine, Marlene, thank you. It's nice to see you." The young woman didn't reply, her lips pressed tightly together. Clara furrowed her brow. "Is everything alright?"

Amelia scoffed, drawing her eye. "Oh, she's just unhappy you're taking Lillian's place and you'll get to see *the young master Adriano* even more than her." She had adopted a breathy, swooning tone at this, and Marlene blushed furiously.

"That's not true," she protested, although she certainly looked upset. Clara blinked, nonplussed, and Marlene huffed. "It just...it isn't fair," she sniffed, looking down.

"Ugh, keep it to yourself. If Mrs. De Luca hears you gushing over him the way you do, she'll fire you for sure." Amelia rolled her eyes, although she seemed to be enjoying herself.

"If you saw him in the mornings, you'd gush too," Marlene snapped. She turned to Clara, her eyes wide. "You agree, right?" she asked, seeming to have forgotten her envy of the other woman.

"Um. Well...."

Marlene groaned. "I *know* you're partial to your husband, but you have eyes, don't you!?"

Amelia giggled, then nudged Clara with her elbow. "I mean, you do have to admit...those shoulders." Her words brought another flush to Marlene's face, and she couldn't hold back her laughter.

Clara's smile felt more like a grimace as she watched the two young women. *He could have had anyone. Anyone at all.*

She saw from an upstairs window when the men returned to the manor. Domizio De Luca was followed by his eldest son as he strode into the house. Behind them stood a lone man, and she watched as Michele went to get back in the car before Domizio called to him and waved him into the house. She could see the man's expression shutter briefly before he obeyed. She wondered what they had spent the day doing, before pushing the thought away. Curiosity would not help her, nothing would now.

Madiana had said she would be required to stay later now, so she had watched wistfully as Amelia and Marlene wished her a goodbye and left for the day. The sun was beginning to set now, and she was alone as always.

She was hanging suits up in his wardrobe, and she could almost hear his footsteps on the stairs. She did not entertain the idea he might leave her be, she had been hurt in this house far too often for

that.

The door clicked open, and she shut the wardrobe door and steeled herself.

“Clara,” came the gentle call from behind, and when she turned around, she was met with a kiss as Adriano wrapped his arms around her and drew her into him. *He is always kissing me*, she thought absently, her hands curled against his chest as he forced her mouth open and his tongue brushed against hers. He was good at it, and when he pulled away, leaving them both breathing heavily, she thought the natural fullness of his lips was almost obscene. Adriano de Luca was beautiful to look at, and so tempting she suddenly understood why so many women forgot their marriages to be touched by him.

The thought sickened her, because he didn’t want any of those women anymore. He wanted her instead.

He did not let go of her, and she felt his gaze trail from the top of her head to her feet, then back up again. “You look well. I wanted to be here this morning, to welcome you back, but there were urgent matters to take care of. I hope it has been quiet for you.”

She looked away from him, instead reaching up to unbutton her dress. He grabbed her wrists, stilling her hands, and she looked up at him, brow furrowed in confusion. His expression was carefully blank. “I might have thought you were eager for me,” he said quietly, staring down into her eyes. “But you seem tired, *tesorina*.”

She supposed the truth would do no harm. “I don’t want my uniform dirty,” Clara said plainly, and his eyes lit with anger at her tone, at the idea he was only another task for her to complete.

“Such a prudent maid I have,” he said mockingly. “But I didn’t tell you to take it off.” He released her, and she watched as he began to take off his belt instead. “You remember what I wanted from you before,” he hissed, and she could see how hard he was, how large he was, and her jaw almost seemed to ache from the memory of him. Before he could push her to the floor, she got down to her knees, careful to arrange her dress so she wasn’t kneeling on it, and undid his pants. She heard him curse as she pulled down his waistband, seemingly angry with her lack of hesitation.

She thought to pretend James had come back from a long day at work, and she wrapped her fingers around his cock, wanting to please her husband. She stroked him gently, felt him tangle his hand in her hair and push her face closer. He was impatient today, but it made her happy to know how much he wanted her, and she flicked her tongue over his slit teasingly, enjoying his answering groan.

When her gaze went upwards to his face, she saw Adriano watching her, mouth open with want, and felt her stomach drop as she remembered what was happening, but she shook the feeling away, instead leaning forward and taking his cock between her lips. *Pretending never hurt anyone*, she reasoned, and moaned slightly at the feeling of him, heavy on her tongue. Her eyes had drifted shut, and she imagined James moaning above her, his fingers in her hair, and she guided him further down her throat.

Suddenly, he grabbed her skull and ripped her away, making her cry out in pain. Her eyes flew open and she was staring up at Adriano, not James, and he glared at her so hatefully she shook and looked away.

"Look at me," he snarled, pulling her hair so hard she whimpered, but she didn't listen, and he shook her. "Look at me, damn you."

Clara shut her eyes and shook her head, because no, she didn't want to, if she looked then she wouldn't be able to go through with it, and then he'd be even angrier. But it felt as though he was going to rip her hair out at the roots, and tears welled in her eyes, so she lifted her chin and stared up past him, at the ceiling. His grip on her hair tightened and she couldn't hold back her whimper. "I said, *look at me.*"

Finally, her gaze met his, and his lips were twisted into a sneer. "I'm not your cuckold of a husband. When I have you, you'll look only at me. You'll *think* only of me, not him." His eyes were poisonous with rage. "You'll keep your eyes open, you won't dream me away, or I'll break every bone in his hands while you watch. Understand?"

She saw plainly that his anger had been festering since she'd left him at the restaurant, and her heart clenched when she realized she could do nothing in the face of it. "Fine," she choked out, glaring up at him. He wore a look of dissatisfaction, and she hissed at his insistent pulling of her hair. "I understand!"

"I don't think you do," he said, his voice suddenly soft, and in a panic, she reached up and pulled at his wrist, trying to get him to loosen his grip. "Open your mouth."

Blinking away the pained tears, she stared up at him, her hands falling to her lap, and her lip trembled slightly, but she opened her mouth for him obediently, not moving her gaze away from his.

His hands went to either side of her head, and she resisted the urge to squeeze her eyes shut, because she knew what was coming and knew it would hurt, but maybe that was better than the pleasing fantasies she had constructed. At least she would not forget where she was and who he was and what was happening, no matter how much she wanted to.

He forced his cock between her lips, and this time there were no teasing touches, no playful beginning. He fucked her throat mercilessly, and she could do nothing but grip his legs and try to keep from sobbing as he stared into her eyes, angry and unforgiving.

She whimpered around him, which only seemed to arouse him further, and his hold on her was so tight she thought he might crush her skull. It would be better if he did. "I prefer you like this," he sneered, thrusting himself deeper into her warm, wet mouth. "Maybe you prefer it, too. Whenever I fuck you, you fight and scream, but when my cock is down your throat, you take it so well." When she only stared up at him, her gaze damning, he gritted his teeth and pulled her off, only enough so the tip of him rested against her lips. "Well? Tell me. You were so eager before, I can only imagine you love sucking your husband's cock for him, hmm?"

She coughed slightly, grimacing. In truth, she did enjoy it with James. It had been a shameful realization, but she liked pleasing him this way. When she had still been pretending Adriano was James, she'd felt a familiar spark of pleasure between her own legs as she'd slid her lips over him.

But. This wasn't James.

She stared at him, and said a bit hoarsely, "You told me not to think about him."

He blinked, and suddenly he laughed. "I suppose I did, didn't I?" And with that he pushed his cock back into her mouth, but it seemed some of his anger had dissipated, and he sighed as he leisurely guided her along his length. She could taste the salt of his pre cum in the back of her throat, and not wanting it to drip out of her mouth and make a mess, she swallowed around the head of him, making him moan. She was still meeting his gaze, and he almost seemed to purr, swiping his thumb over her cheekbone. "You listen well. It makes it better, doesn't it?"

Of course, she had no response, merely looking up at him as he used her. The temptation to close her eyes, to let her mind carry her away, was overwhelming, but she knew he would realize, and get angry again. So she listened.

He was handsome like this, she thought absently, eyes bright with lust, supple lips parted, a trickle of sweat dripping down the muscle of his neck. If she had still been a girl in Barfleur, and met him on the street one day, she was sure she would have turned redder than a tomato. It was no wonder Marlene was infatuated with him — who wouldn't be? And his fiancee, Elizabetta, did she have a picture of him like he did her, did she sigh dreamily at the image of the man she would marry? Did the women he had been with hold a memory of him like this close, to remember mournfully when returning to their husband's side?

Had she offended him, not wanting him the same way? But she was only a housewife, and the maid. What did it matter?

"Fuck...I hope Michele doesn't come back to you too soon for this, *tesorina*. I'd like to keep you to myself, this way," he groaned, and she ran her tongue over his head so his grip on her tightened.

Then she blinked, confusion blooming within her. *Michele?*

Through his lusty haze, Adriano seemed to recognize the questioning look in her eye, and frowned, going still. After a moment, he laughed again, this time darkly. "The ungrateful bastard," he muttered, and Clara's eyes went wide in alarm, perhaps she'd done something wrong and he'd be rough again, but he only pushed her head forward again, drawing a muffled yelp from her.

He panted as he drew closer to his peak, and she was almost glad for it, because then it would be over. She braced her hands against his legs, her lashes beginning to flutter with fatigue, and even as he choked out a moan and came down her throat, she looked up at him as he'd demanded. He held her there in place, and she swallowed around him again, the taste of him heavy on her tongue. Finally, he pulled his cock from between her lips, and she coughed, pressing her fingers to her mouth in the hopes she wouldn't throw up.

"Good," he murmured above her, and she staggered to her feet because surely she could leave now, surely it was over. Instead, he grabbed her arm and pulled her back into his chest, and when she looked up she could not read the smile on his face. He kissed her temple, her cheek, the curve of her ear, and then whispered to her. "Now," he said, his breath raising goosebumps over her skin, "you can take off your dress."

Clara's hands shook as she unbuttoned her uniform, not from fear, but exhaustion. He seated himself at the edge of the bed, watching as she slid the dress down her body, and stepped out of it delicately. He was not upset with her for not meeting his eyes now, and she kept her gaze fixed on the floor as she reached back and unhooked her brassiere. His eyes lingered on her bare breasts for

a moment, before following the way her underwear slipped down her legs. Her arms hung limply by her sides, and her eyes were heavy with sorrow and fatigue.

Adriano gazed at her a moment longer, before reaching out and cupping her hips firmly. He pulled her to him, and she perched one knee on the edge of the mattress between his thighs, holding onto his shoulders for balance. She feared she might collapse, and did not feel that her dreams that awaited were at all pleasant.

He let his fingers trace a line over her thigh, before slipping between her legs. She winced, squeezing his shoulders reflexively, but he hushed her and slowly stroked his thumb over her clit. Clara gasped, her shoulders jumping, but he held her still with one hand, pleasuring her with the other.

He moved his finger in slow, steady circles, making her legs tremble and small cries spill from her lips. “Stop,” she begged, trying to pull back from him, but he held her fast and slipped two fingers into her, a smile spreading across his face. Clara barely managed to stop her legs from buckling, nearly seating herself on his thigh, but he was teasing her, curling his fingers and making her whine.

She tilted her head back so that she was looking at the ceiling and let out shaky breaths, moaning as he pushed another finger in. The heel of his palm pressed against her clit, and she writhed, but she knew this wasn’t the end of it just yet, and he would draw this out as long as he could. What better way to welcome her back to the house.

His fingers thrusted into her pussy with slow, gentle strokes, so different from how he had treated her mouth, and it made fire erupt under her skin. She felt him shift slightly, and then there were kisses being pressed against her throat, drawing gasps from her. “Where’s your necklace?”

The pearls sat safely in her jewelry box at home, and she didn’t think she’d ever wear them here. They were lovely and clean, and they wouldn’t remain so if she brought them. “At...home,” she managed, biting down on her lip as he pushed his fingers so deep she moaned.

“That’s good,” he murmured encouragingly, stroking his thumb over her hip as he played with her. “Although, I can’t deny it looked beautiful on you. He has good taste.”

Clara’s pleasure reached her peak and she bit down on her gasp, although she could still feel his smile against her skin. Her legs turned to jelly and she sank into his hold, too tired to even push away.

Carefully, he turned and pressed her naked body into the plush bed, kissing her warmly as she clutched at his shoulders, before drawing away. She stared up at the ceiling through her lashes, tired, her knees aching. She could hear the rustle of clothing, and lifted her head to see Adriano taking his clothes off, eager but in no rush. After all, she certainly wasn’t going anywhere.

He caught her eye and smiled strangely, before pulling his shirt over his head, leaving the whole of him bare to her. He was built powerfully, reminding her of the sailing men back home, the ones she’d fancied when she was still young and silly.

He leaned over her, planting his hands on either side of her shoulders, and she couldn’t stop herself from looking down his body. His cock was hard again, and the muscles of his stomach seemed to ripple with strength. Caught in a horrified sort of wonder, Clara could not stop herself from

stroking her hand over his chest, and he chuckled gently, pleasingly, as she felt the firmness of his body.

The question escaped her as he pressed down on top of her, eager for the feel of her. "Why?" Why her, why here, why now?

He stared down at her, and she thought he might have been confused. "Why not?"

Her eyes went wide in disbelief, but he'd slid his hands beneath her hips to lift them, and when she felt the tip of his cock slide against her cunt, she grabbed his arms in panic, digging her nails into his biceps. He pushed into her, and she cried out, his low groan echoing in her ear as he rested his head against the mattress. She thought he might say something else, but he only tilted his hips into hers, making her gasp, before pulling out and pushing back in.

He set a firm, deep rhythm, one hand keeping her hips up against his, the other reaching up to grip the back of her neck. Clara whined as he sank into her again, her arms wrapping around him to cling to his back. Adriano brushed his nose against her cheek, almost seeming to purr, before capturing her mouth in a kiss.

She let her head go back, nails digging into the skin of his back. Lately, he had tended towards pulling her skirt up and taking her wherever he found her. This felt different, and she hated him for it, but with every push against him, he only gripped her more tightly, so she was forced to take it.

His body burned against hers, her breasts pressed against his chest and his hand caressing her ass. Her mouth fell open against his, and he eagerly devoured her with his kiss. She moaned into his mouth and felt her nails break the skin of his back, scoring lines down his body. In response, he bit down on her lower lip, causing her to squeal in pain, before pushing his tongue back into her mouth to taste her.

Then, he wrapped one arm tightly around her hips, and she clung to him as he pulled them both up, cradling her in his lap as he sat back on his heels. Trying to keep her balance, Clara put her arms around his neck, panting as he rocked her hips atop his. He broke the kiss, and she pulled back, looking not at his face but his throat. Sweat dripped down his skin, and she could see the bob of his Adam's apple, the thick cords of muscle, and knew beneath it all was his windpipe.

Her eyes narrowed, a fevered recklessness overtaking her, and she gripped his shoulders once more, this time pushing herself up before forcing her hips back down again. Adriano moaned in pleasure, watching with bright eyes as she rode him, and she did it once more, twice, before letting her hands wrap around his throat.

He grunted in surprise, but she squeezed as tightly as she could, her whole body now still but for the shaking strength of her limbs. "You want to know how it felt?" she hissed, her face inches away from him, teeth gritted. "You want to know what I'd do, if you did this to me?"

He almost snarled at her, reaching up to pull her hands away, but she only tightened her grip. "I'll do this again, and again, and again," she spat, bracing her thighs against his hips, his cock still hard inside her. "So you'd better kill me now, if you want to stop me."

His eyes were wide, his jaw clenched in rage, and she prayed that he would die, *please, please let it end*, and his hands fell from where they were reaching for her own, and her eyes brightened and she exhaled-

-Suddenly, he grabbed her hips harshly with both hands and thrust up into her, making her shriek and her hold on him loosened, and before she could steady herself he grabbed the back of her head and wrenched her forward in a kiss.

She wailed in rage against his lips, writhing atop him as he dug his teeth into her lip. He grabbed hold of both her wrists, holding them behind her back with one hand, and kept the other on her hip, still fucking himself into her. He gasped and panted into her mouth, before pulling back so his lips were next to her ear. “Clara,” he moaned, the smallest rasp to his voice, “*tesorina*, treasure, won’t you say my name?”

In response, she sank her teeth into his shoulder viciously, and he snarled in pain before wrenching her off him by the hair. He kissed her furiously, and when he broke the kiss, he glared triumphantly at her. “Say it, Clara, I want to hear you.”

She shook her head, and he was fucking her brutally now, savoring the hoarse cries of pleasure escaping her lips. “I want to hear you when I come inside you, Clara,” he panted, lifting her hips over and over. “Say it, say it and make me happy.”

She did not want to, but stars were bursting behind her eyelids now and she was so close, and she’d already failed in everything she tried, so maybe it didn’t matter. “Adri-” she managed before breaking off into a sob of pleasure at his next thrust. “A-Adriano!”

Moaning, he pulled her into another kiss, gripping her harder. “Again.” He let go of her wrists, using his arm to pin her tightly against him.

“Adriano...” She clung to him, keening as she peaked, and her climax crashed down upon her. “Adriano, Adriano....” She’d do whatever he asked if it meant he was done.

He cursed into her ear, and she felt him come inside of her, making her sob and bury her face in the crook of his neck. He rocked his hips against hers gently until they’d both come down from their highs, and Clara felt her limbs go slack with bliss, with exhaustion. She might’ve toppled over, had he not been holding onto her.

He lowered her back onto the mattress, and she felt the plush pillow beneath her head. He pulled out of her, making her whimper, but he hushed her with a kiss before tucking the blanket around her and getting up from the bed.

She thought she could hear him dressing as her eyelids fluttered shut, and she wanted to leave, but she was sore all over and didn’t move. She pressed herself further into the bed as she sank into sleep, fleeing her body for as long as she could.

“She will not come back, then?”

“If she does, Mother, I’d assume she was disturbed.”

Madiana raised an eyebrow at her son, her lips pressed thinly together. “I explicitly told you I did not want her in the house.”

“Circumstances called for it,” Giovanni replied smoothly. “Anyway, she won’t bother us again, so I’d say I did us all a favor.”

“Hm.” Madiana turned away, flicking through a bridal catalog. “Fine. Is that all?”

“Not exactly, no.”

She looked up to see a cool smile on his face. “Well, what is it, then?”

“Clara has been very...dedicated to her tasks, don’t you think?”

Madiana frowned and set down the catalog. “It’s been a long day, Giovanni. I don’t have the patience for this.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, she’s been in Adriano’s room for quite a while now and I’m wondering what’s keeping her so long.” He gave her a sly glance. “I’d expect this from Marlene, perhaps, but certainly not Clara.”

His mother stared at him, before her eyes widened. “If you’re playing some tasteless prank....”

Gio pressed a hand to his chest. “I’d never do that to you, Mother. In fact, why don’t you go check on her? Maybe my dear brother has been keeping her busy.”

Chapter End Notes

Heyyyy, sorry for going AWOL haha. I'm back! I'm sorry it takes me long to post chapters, sometimes life just gets in the way. Thank you all for reading my work and sticking with me!!

Dream Lover

Chapter Summary

Messy half-truths and terrifying realizations put Clara's position in the household in jeopardy. However, a welcome but unexpected appearance promises chaos in her own home as well.

(Dream Lover by Bobby Darin)

Chapter Notes

Happy almost autumn everyone! Sorry for going AWOL in terms of answering comments, I had a lot to do and couldn't give them my full attention. But I read every single one, and I am so so grateful for all of you!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Mick did not completely understand why his parents never came with him to dinner with Adriano's family. The food was good, and they always let him and Adriano have ice cream after. They had him over every weekend, and never once had his parents joined them. His mother would mumble some excuse and leave him at the doorstep.

Mr. De Luca didn't smile a lot, neither did his wife, but they weren't mean. Adriano could be bossy sometimes, and Milena never stopped following Mick around, but overall, he liked visiting.

Mr. De Luca said that he and Papa had been old friends, back in Sicily, so Michele didn't know why his father seemed to hate going to the house. His parents had had to come over a bit more lately; Mrs. De Luca was going to have a baby, and Mama was helping her. She helped all the women in the neighborhood with their babies.

"Are you excited?"

Adriano looked up from the wooden car he rolled around on the floor. "For what?"

"For the baby!" Michele idly spun the wheels on his own car. This one's paint was scraped and chipped, so Adriano didn't want to play with it and Michele had gotten it instead. "Mama says it'll come soon."

Adriano yawned, shaking his head. "It's just a baby. Babies are boring."

"I'd like a baby sister," Michele said absently, not understanding how his friend could be so uninterested. "Mr. Giuseppe at the barbershop lets me play with his daughter sometimes. She likes peek-a-boo."

Adriano snorted. “If you want a sister so bad, take Milena with you the next time you come. She’s always whining about seeing you, anyway.”

Mick frowned. Milena wasn’t annoying, but often whenever he’d come over, she’d immediately latch onto him. She followed him around the house, sat next to him at dinner, and insisted on him playing with her instead of Adriano.

As if on cue, the door to Adriano’s room burst open, and the little girl walked in. “Mama says it’s dinner time, Adri.”

“Go away,” Adriano said flatly, turning his back to her. “Tell her I’m not hungry.”

Instead of leaving, she plopped herself on the carpet next to Michele. “No,” she said simply.

Michele looked at her. “Are you excited for the baby?”

Milena hummed, stretching her legs out and knocking her shoes together. “I like babies.”

“You’ve never met a baby,” Adriano sneered.

“I have a baby doll,” she said defensively. “I sing to her and dress her up.”

“You spilled juice on it and Papa had to buy you a new one.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I dress my new one up, too.”

Michele wondered if his parents would give him a little brother or sister if he asked really nicely. Adriano almost never asked for anything nicely, and he got everything he wanted..

Eventually, Mrs. De Luca got tired of waiting and came to Adriano’s room to order them all to the dining table. Michele was surprised to see Mama there, speaking with Mr. De Luca. It looked like she’d stay for dinner, too.

“I’m thinking of keeping her.”

Michele twitched, and an errant fleck of ash from his cigarette landed on his shoe. He turned to the man beside him, voice taut. “‘Keeping’ her? What are you saying?”

Adriano blew a plume of smoke into the air, his expression thoughtful. “Having her in the comfort of my own home...it’s nice, but we keep getting interrupted. And what about when I’m married? I’m not coming back to my parents’ house whenever I want her.” He rubbed his chin, eyes gleaming. “I’ll get an apartment. Then we can do what we like.”

“Adriano,” Michele said, his expression one of disbelief. “If this is a joke, it’s a shit one.”

“No joke, old friend.” He took another drag from his cigarette. “Any man of my station worth his salt keeps a mistress.”

“Maybe, but most men don’t have a mistress who wants nothing to do with them.” Michele might have laughed at the idea, if he hadn’t witnessed the woman’s despair. “And she’s married.”

Adriano only scoffed. "Yes, I've met the man. He can't be as pathetic as he looks, if he got her to marry him. Or maybe he plied her with jewelry until she said yes."

"*Or,*" Michele said, exasperated, "she loves him. In which case, she would never agree to be your mistress."

His boss was quiet, so he continued. "If you want a mistress so badly, there are other women, prettier women who'd beg for the chance—"

"You say that as though she's ugly."

No, she wasn't ugly. Far from it. He thought back to how she'd looked when she'd answered the door, barely hidden beneath pink lace, her hair flowing over her shoulders. He jerked, realizing Adriano was squinting at him. "*I'm saying* she isn't worth the trouble."

"Hm." Adriano just stared at him. "Do you think she's ugly, Mick?"

Michele blinked. "No."

"Then why didn't you have sex with her?"

It took great effort to conceal the surprise that threatened to show on his face. "What?"

"She told me, you know. And you lied to me." There was a strange sort of petulance in his voice, like he couldn't conceive of Michele lying to him.

Michele scoffed, forcing a disinterest into his tone. "She *told* you?"

"Not in so many words. If she isn't to your taste, you might've just said so. Instead, you told me you had her and tried to make a fool of me."

"And what a fine gift she is, a married woman you fuck whenever you get the chance," Michele said coolly. "Should I throw myself at your feet and beg for another opportunity to taste your leftovers?"

They stared at each other, Adriano's expression blank. Michele felt all his muscles tense, like he was about to be attacked. Then, a smile broke across Adriano's face, and he threw his head back in laughter. "You're too picky, my friend. You'd fuck a whore but turn your nose up at another man's wife?"

"A whore won't bore me to tears telling me how diminished her husband has gotten."

"Oh, Clara doesn't do such things. Whatever she thinks of that man, she keeps to herself." Adriano dropped his cigarette butt and ground it under his heel, and Michele thought he heard something threatening in his voice, but didn't say anything. "Well, you've missed your chance, Mick. If you change your mind, you're not welcome to her."

"I wasn't going to," he said acidly. "Between you and her husband, she'd probably appreciate a break."

Adriano chuckled. "Mm, yes, maybe. She must have a lot to think about, these days." At Michele's questioning look, he smiled. "I know what kind of woman she is. She thinks pleasure and passion

come from love, and now that she has found them with someone else, she feels as though she's betrayed her husband."

"How close-minded of her," Michele replied drily. *And she hasn't found anything like that with you.*

The man shrugged. "All the women in the families we know are taught that their husbands will inevitably stray. And of those husbands, the smart ones know that their wives could, too."

"So all of this is to, what, teach her a lesson?"

"All of 'this' is to open her eyes to the truth. I enjoy her, and she enjoys me, even if she wants to pretend she doesn't. The faster she accepts it, the happier her life will be. Who knows? I might not even be the last man she does this with."

Michele stubbed out his own cigarette, feeling faintly nauseous. "Adriano," he said quietly, "I've known you for a long time. And I am telling you that this will go badly."

Adriano merely straightened his collar. "Well, you'll be there to clean it up if it does," he said with a cool grin. "But until then, I don't want to hear this from you again. If you breathe a word of it to anyone, if you so much as *say her name in front of me*, I'll cut your fucking tongue out." His usually light tone, Michele realized, was deathly serious.

"...Fine. You don't mind me talking to her?"

"Talk to her, stare at her, do what you want. But remember what I said; you missed your chance." Adriano glanced at his watch. "She's resting in my room right now — go wake her up. Mother will wonder where she is."

Michele bit the inside of his cheek, scowling at the man, but turned on his heel and went inside.

Clara drifted in and out of sleep, waking each time from a new hurt, a new ache. In her more lucid moments, she could hardly bring herself to move. She was tender all over, her mouth tasted like cotton, and she wondered if something had shattered within her. She could still feel the shape of his name on her tongue, and she wanted to wash it out of her mouth.

It's fine. There's only a few more months. I just need to keep him happy until the wedding.

She sniffled. But it was so difficult. She'd tried to just accept it, but he wasn't pleased with acceptance. She'd tried to hurt him, and it only seemed to encourage him. He forced pleasure onto her and pulled his name from her lips just to make her more miserable. She felt like she had lost a piece of herself to him when she'd done it, and she never wanted to again.

But she would. She would have to do anything and everything he asked.

Distantly, she heard footsteps approaching the room. The fast, harsh clicking of high heels cleared some of the haze in her mind, and just as she pushed herself up onto one forearm, the door burst open. In the next moment, she was being yanked out of the bed by her hair, causing her to cry out in pain.

She landed heavily on her side on the floor, clutching a bedsheets around her to try and cover herself as Madiana shrieked in her ears like a banshee. "—Acting the whore *in my house!* How dare you

—” She slapped Clara so hard, the young woman felt like she’d been hit with a ton of bricks.

She reached up, trying to yank away Madiana’s hand, wailing. “Stop, stop, I’m sorry—”

“—After *everything* I’ve given you, you try to sink your claws into *my son*—” Madiana pulled her hair even more harshly, and slapped every part of her she could reach. “I want you out, *OUT!*” Clara sobbed as the blows rained down, mortification stinging with each one.

“Madiana!” Suddenly, a familiar voice sounded from behind her, and then someone pushed themselves between her and the raging matriarch. “That’s enough,” the voice snapped firmly, and Clara, released from Madiana’s brutal hold, slipped to the ground with a whimper.

“Michele,” the woman hissed, her palms a painful red from the effort of the abuse. “Get her out of my sight, *now*.”

He didn’t respond, and instead turned and knelt down before Clara. As she stared at the ground, she watched the shadow of his hands reach out towards her, and flinched away, trying to scramble back from him. He took her gently by the shoulders and pulled her to stand up, her legs shaking. Unable to bring herself to look at him, she stared at his chest mutely as he took hold of the bedsheet and wrapped it more firmly around her.

“What are you doing?” Madiana said angrily, and Clara dared to glance over his shoulder to see that she was still seething.

Michele turned back to her, one of his arms behind his back, and instinctively, Clara knew to hold onto him, for she sensed he was the only thing stopping Madiana from killing her. She clutched his arm to her chest as he spoke. “She hasn’t done anything to warrant this.”

Madiana pointed a perfectly-manicured finger at her, almost frothing at the mouth. “This dirty whore seduced my son with no regard for me or my family. I give her money, protection, and she spits in my face. And you say she doesn’t deserve it?”

“She didn’t seduce Adriano,” he said plainly. “I’ve been sleeping with her.”

Clara squeezed his arm in surprise, and she felt him straighten, pulling her as close to him as he could.

“...what?” Madiana stared at him in disbelief.

“I’ve been sleeping with her.” He was so calm he might have been describing the weather. “For the past few weeks. Never in the house, except for today.”

“But...*here*? In Adriano’s room?” Madiana scowled at him. “Have you lost your mind?”

Michele glanced back over his shoulder to look Clara in the eye, and she stared up at him, mouth parted in shock. “Well,” he mused, “she was here,” and he turned back to face Madiana, a cool glint in his eye, “and you hired her to clean up, didn’t you?”

Clara flinched as Madiana’s palm struck Michele hard across the face. “You disgusting boy,” she snarled. “Is this why you let her have that gun? Because you’re fucking her?” The word, so crass and rude, was strange coming out of the older woman’s mouth.

"I'm the one who left her in here," Michele said, ignoring the question. "She was tired and I let her sleep. I never meant for you to see her."

"What's going on?" Clara shuddered at the voice coming from the door, and glanced over her shoulder to see the man himself at the door. Adriano took in the scene quietly, gaze scraping over Clara's body to the way she clung to Michele, before finally resting on his mother. "What are you all doing in my room?" he asked mildly, though his green eyes shined with amusement.

Madiana pointed at the strange couple before her. "These two," she said, breathing heavily from the effort to not attack them, "don't have an ounce of respect for this family. They— in *here*—" She shook her head and looked directly at Clara, making the young woman freeze. "You. You're fired."

Clara blinked. *What?* Was it really that easy? She pressed her face into Michele's back, hiding the threat of her relief. Could she leave this place? Well, Adriano would never *really* leave her alone, but she might see him less now, at least. Though the humiliation of being caught like this still stung in her eyes, and an almost laughable indignation at the man who shielded her with his lies burned in her gut, she was nearly thankful.

"Now, Mother, wait a minute. Don't be too hasty." Adriano stepped into the room now, staring at the two thoughtfully. "We still need her, don't we?" Clara felt the relief rush out of her, replaced with cold resignation.

"Someone else could do her work. Marlene—"

"I don't *want* Marlene. She's stupid and forgetful. Half the things you say she doesn't even hear. Do you think she could handle any more responsibilities?"

Madiana, who was typically the final say on all decisions made in the house, looked thunderstruck. Adriano looked at the pair coolly. "Michele? Anything to say for yourself?"

The other man only stared at him, a look of blatant contempt etched into his face. After a moment, Adriano just shrugged. "Well, that's settled, then. Ah, and Mick?"

He placed his hand on the bodyguard's shoulder, and Clara thought he might lecture the man, but instead, he sent his fist straight into Michele's gut, causing him to choke and double over. Clara yelped in shock, taking an involuntary step back as he crumpled before her.

Michele clung to Adriano, seizing the fabric of his sleeve in his fist, but his boss only shoved him over, watching dispassionately as he slumped to his knees, clutching his stomach. He retched and spit up the meager contents of his stomach, the sound of his panting making Clara press her hands to her mouth. "I trust this won't happen again?" Adriano asked, his tone almost pleasant.

Michele sucked in a breath, staring at the puddle of sick on the floor. "It," he wheezed, "won't."

Adriano then looked up at Clara, who could only stare at him in horror. "It won't," she managed to whisper, digging her fingers deeply into the bedsheet and unable to look him in the eye.

"Good. Now get dressed, and clean this up." Adriano looked at Madiana, a plain smile on his face. "Mother? Anything to add?"

The woman blinked at her son, having watched his actions in silence, then sniffed dismissively and shoved past Clara towards the door. She stepped almost daintily over Michele, who remained

hunched over, his head bowed, and her lips curled with disgust. "Cut your hair," she snapped at Adriano as she left. "You look like a ruffian."

When it was just the three of them, Adriano looked back over at the two. "You'll both stay the night," he said plainly, no room for argument. "Some rest will do you good." His smile was suddenly conspiratorial. "In separate rooms, of course. Can't have something like this happening again, can we?"

With that, he spun on his heel and left, sparing not another glance for the ruin he left in his wake.

Michele was dimly aware of the sound of footsteps somewhere near, the soft rush of water from a tap. *It's been a while since he hit me that hard.* But Adriano had had that playful spark in his eye, when he found a way to entertain himself and made sure to take advantage. He held himself up with one hand, the other pressed tenderly against his stomach.

Had he planned this? Found a way to humiliate Clara and punish Michele for his arrogance? He wasn't supposed to interfere with Adriano's fun, after all. His boss had warned him, hadn't he? He should have left it alone, written the woman off and stayed in his place, instead of constantly preaching at the man.

Still, Adriano had entered the room looking as though someone had surprised him with the perfect present. If he hadn't meant for Madiana to be here, who did?

Suddenly, he felt a presence kneeling at his side, and turned his head slightly to see Clara next to him, her lips pressed tightly together. She'd put on her uniform at some point, he realized, although she'd done it hastily and left it rumpled around her hips. In her hands was a damp towel she'd fetched from the bathroom, held out towards him. He stared down at it, then back up at her, uncomprehending.

Slowly, she leaned forward, pressing her hand against his shoulder, and passed the cloth gently over his face. With soft, downward strokes, she wiped at his forehead, his cheeks, carefully cleaned his mouth. The towel was warm, and her touch was hesitant.

As she focused on this strange work, he stared at her. Her hair was a mess, and there was a red weal forming on her cheek, courtesy of the lady of the house. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying, but the irises were a soft, dove grey. His gaze fell further downwards, to the angry marks left behind by Madiana in her attack, bruises peeking out from her collarbone, her shoulders. Vicious, indeed.

Her husband would be furious.

Michele closed his eyes and accepted her ministrations without complaint, unwilling to look at her. He was pathetic, taking this help from a woman who most certainly hated him, who had suffered something far worse than he had. But there was nothing harsh or expectant in her hands, and it was a small gesture, but a welcome one, nonetheless.

Finally, she pulled the towel away, and her hand left his shoulder. "I'll clean this," she said quietly, unable or unwilling to raise her voice above a murmur. "You should go." *Before they come back,* she seemed to add silently.

At this, he opened his eyes and looked at her once more, only to find her staring at her lap, her expression pained. Wordlessly, he stood and stepped around her, towards the bathroom. He could feel her curious gaze on him as he wet another towel, then returned and mopped the mess from the floor.

At least he hadn't eaten much today. Small mercies.

When he was done, Michele tossed the towel into the hamper. He turned and saw Clara standing now, quietly surveying the mess of the room. With her back to him, he could see the red marks Madiana's rage had left on the back of her neck.

He wouldn't insult her with another word or even another look. Instead, he left the room silently.

Clara would have to iron her uniform again. It had laid crumpled next to the bed, and she had pulled it on slowly, her legs still weak and shaky.

Of all the places Madiana had hit her, her face stung the most. A dull ache pulsed through most of her body; her hips, her shoulders, her cheek. She lightly touched where the woman had slapped her, wincing at the twinge of pain, before setting to work.

She stripped the sheets from the bed, piling them in the corner of the room. She had changed them earlier that day, but she would have to go and get another set. Thankfully, there was no mess left on the floor from when Adriano had taken her mouth, and Michele seemed to have cleared away the aftermath of his punishment.

His punishment. Her shock at what had happened seemed so stupid now. But she had thought they were friends. She recalled the pained gasps leaking from Michele's mouth, as he knelt with his gaze downwards. A strange sense of familiarity had tugged her to fetch the towel for him, to help in the only way she knew how to; by wiping it clean.

Another twinge of pain in her hips made her hiss. She knew how strong Adriano was; the sound of his fist making impact with Michele's flesh made her wince in remembrance.

Why? Why had he hit the man? Why had Michele lied to Madiana? Why had Madiana even been there?

I hope Michele doesn't come back to you too soon for this.

Clara froze, terror creeping up her spine. Had Adriano told his bodyguard to hurt her, too? Was that why he was always around her?

Was that why he'd been headed towards the bedroom in the first place?

Her nails began to scrape down her arms of their own accord. *No, no, no....* Maybe he hadn't touched her yet, but now he'd taken a beating because of her. She doubted he would have any hesitation towards taking her from now on.

He would make it hurt, too. She was sure of it.

Quietly, she sank to the floor, holding herself as she shook. And he'd been in her home. He'd brought her husband back to her.

She'd fed him.

A small sob escaped her. She was so stupid, so so so stupid. What little respect Madiana might have had for her was gone. Giovanni almost definitely hated her, now. She'd thought she might have been able to grin and bear it all, but Adriano simply wouldn't let her.

I won't last until the wedding. I'll die before then.

Clara pulled nervously at the sleeve of her nightgown. She had tried to call home to let James know she had to stay the night, but he hadn't answered.

Mrs. Christopher had led her to the room prepared for her while the family had dinner. "Whenever you need to, this is where you'll stay." She'd shown Clara the wardrobe, which contained a couple of simple nightgowns for her convenience, and also given her a simple dinner, then left without bidding her good night.

Now, Clara sat at the tea table, numbly picking at the small plate of carbonara. In truth, she was famished, but she felt uneasy, her eyes drifting to the door every now and then. The few noodles she ate seemed to turn to glue in her mouth, and she could hardly bring herself to swallow.

She gritted her teeth, her fist clenching around the fork. If she ate, she could sleep. If she slept, she could go home. She brought another forkful to her mouth, but when the smell of the guanciale hit her, she gagged and hurriedly set the fork down, her stomach turning. "Ugh...." She stumbled to the bathroom and leaned over the toilet, spitting up bile.

Clara flushed the toilet and sat back, leaning against the door. The hunger that had gnawed at her stomach had disappeared, replaced with a roiling that threatened to knock her flat.

She pushed herself to her feet and washed out her mouth at the sink, before staring at herself in the mirror. *I look like I've been run over.*

A knock at the bedroom door made her wince. "H-Hello?"

"*Clarina?* Have you gone to bed already?"

She blinked. She had not seen Milena all day, and now the woman came visiting her before bed? She shuddered, suddenly fearful. Still, she knew she had to open the door.

Milena fluttered past her easily, and she noted that the other woman was dressed for bed as well. "It is good to have you back in the house," she said almost genially. "I so rarely have anyone to talk to."

Clara raised an eyebrow. Milena certainly seemed entertained by her, but it was not as though she went out of her way to spend time with the maid. She stayed silent, unsure of how to reply.

Milena hummed to herself, casting her gaze about the room, before spying the uneaten carbonara on the table. "Oh dear, you've hardly eaten. I could have Mrs. Christopher make you something else."

"No, thank you," Clara mumbled, feeling her stomach turn again. "I'm just not very hungry."

"I see." Something strange had entered Milena's voice, and Clara frowned at her back, fisting her hands in her skirt. "But you should eat. You have to keep your strength up, what with both my brother and Michele visiting you."

Clara's eyes widened, and when Milena turned to her, she could see the venom in the other woman's eyes. "I thought you were a delicate little thing," she murmured, a horrible smirk twisting her face, "but you must be stronger than I thought, to handle both of them."

Clara bit the inside of her cheek, resisting the urge to step back. "Giovanni told me about the scene you and Mick caused," Milena continued, crossing her arms. "I wouldn't have expected him to be so sloppy." She sat on the bed, tilting her head slightly. "Him and Adriano, they always fuck whores, you know? I was surprised, really. Well, more surprised about Adriano. I really thought he'd be bored of you by now. What is it about *you* that keeps their attention?"

Clara clenched her fists. *Giovanni*? Had he sent Madiana to the room? God, everyone in this house probably thought she was a slut by now. She forced down the nausea pulsing in her stomach, and looked Milena in the eyes. "I clean up afterwards," she said plainly.

Milena's mouth fell open in surprise, before she threw her head back and laughed. Clara watched her, her jaw clenched. Denying it would not work, not with this woman. She couldn't tell her that Michele had lied, after all.

If Adriano had made everyone think she was a whore, then she had no choice but to play along.

Milena sighed, smiling. "Hm, yes, I suppose you are convenient. Adriano doesn't have to hide anything from his fiancée's family in his own home, after all. But Michele?" She smirked, gaze seeming to dig into Clara's chest. "Well, he'll fuck anything."

It was then that Clara understood why Milena had come to her, and it was so incredible, so stupid, that she had to bite down the amazed laughter that threatened to spill from her lips. "Then why," she asked slowly, eyes flashing, "hasn't he fucked *you*?"

Milena blinked, her expression turning stony. "Is that what you came to ask me?" Clara questioned, her eyes narrowed. "I don't know why. I can't help you."

"*Help* me?" Milena stood, a mocking lilt in her voice. "You think just because my brother's stuck his cock in you that you can speak like that to me?" She placed a hand on her chest. "Haven't I been kind to you, *Clarina*?"

Clara's lips curled in disgust. "You talk about your brother so much, are you sure it's Michele you want?"

Milena laughed. "Oh, but you talk about your husband so much, and you don't want him, either." Clara bit her lip, wishing dearly to slap the smile off her face.

Milena's laughter died, and she leveled a cool gaze at the maid. "And it isn't as silly as 'wanting,' you stupid girl. He's mine." It was such a simple statement, said with an almost childlike certainty, that Clara was dumbfounded.

The woman took in her expression, smiling. "No," she said quietly, shaking her head, "no, he hasn't slept with you. He'd never be so foolish as to let my mother find out. But she wouldn't be able to

stand it if it was her *darling* boy.” She approached Clara slowly, lips quirked. “I’m sure she knows it was Adriano you were with.”

“Then she should fire me,” Clara said, voice now trembling with fear and anger. “And none of you will ever have to see me again.”

“She really should,” Milena said thoughtfully. “You cause us so much trouble, after all. But this is a simple way to keep an eye on you. And if she didn’t want you gone before, she certainly can’t get rid of you now.”

The two women stared at each other, and as Clara thought of how Madiana had conceded so easily to her son’s demands, another wave of nausea hit her, and she shoved past Milena to spit up in the toilet again.

“Oh, dear. You really aren’t well,” she said from behind the maid, although there wasn’t a hint of concern in her tone.

“...please...” Clara hissed between gritted teeth, clutching her stomach. “...leave.”

“Hmm. No, this won’t do.” Milena smiled at her, and Clara grimaced at the playful light in her eyes. “You should be at home, resting. I’ll have someone take you.”

Clara’s head snapped up at this, not daring to hope. “What?”

“I’ll call my driver. You need to get better, after all.” Milena looked her over, tapping her chin. “Mrs. Christopher will get your things for you.”

Clara’s eyes narrowed. “...why?”

The young woman now let a sneer shine through her benevolent expression. “My brother will come looking for you here, and I want to see him throw a fit when he finds you gone.”

Milena’s driver was silent the whole ride home. Sometimes, Clara thought she saw him glance at her in the rearview, a thinly-veiled expression of annoyance on his face. She wasn’t sure if he was mad at having to drive late, or at something else.

She fumbled with the keys to the apartment, trying to pull together an apology — *I’m so sorry, mon ange, I tried calling* — but then the door was yanked open from inside.

She blinked at the sight of her husband, who looked terrified. “James?” She registered the sound of music coming from the living room, but before she could say anything further, he grabbed her arm and pulled her inside, nearly slamming the door shut.

He crushed her in his embrace, and she squeezed him back, confused. In the corner of her eye, she saw a suitcase next to the couch. “Are you okay?” He whispered into her ear, voice shaky.

“Yes, I’m fine. What-?” He let her go, and her gaze drifted aimlessly across the apartment, before she caught sight of the two figures in the kitchen. She froze, her mouth going dry immediately.

“Maman? Papà?”

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a Michele-focused chapter today, hehe. Fun fact, I was gonna have him smoke clove cigarettes (because he gives me that vibe) but they didn't really become a thing in the US until the seventies.

Hope you all enjoyed! Love you!

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