

PROLOGUE

Fall 1925, just outside New York City...

The brass key turned in the lock of room 412. He strode into the emptiness of the hotel room one final time, moving at a brisk pace, checking drawers that were already empty, scanning surfaces that held nothing of importance. The business conference had ended as anticipated. Just a bunch of tedious presentations on market trends and industry developments, dinners attended by men thinking too favorably of themselves, and enough professional glad-handing to satisfy his suppliers for another year.

His leather satchel snapped shut. Three days of pretending to care about quarterly projections and supply chain innovations, three days of nodding along to colleagues who believed they were building something meaningful when they all created temporary beauty that was intended to die soon. The irony wasn't lost on him.

The promise of four hours of driving on rutted country roads, leading away from the city's suffocating crowds and toward something far more satisfying, awaited him. But first, a stop at his luxurious apartment to grab a handful of books, some personal effects, and a change or two of clothes. Everything else could wait.

His cabin called to him with its isolation and its perfect distance from prying eyes and moral judgments.

He gripped the steering wheel of the black Ford while the urban sprawl gave way to farmland, then to the dense woods that would hide what he really was. The road narrowed with each passing mile, civilization falling away like shed skin. Wooden fences grew sparse, then disappeared entirely. The last farmhouse sat dark and abandoned, its windows staring blindly across overgrown fields. It was perfect. He'd counted on people fleeing to the cities, leaving behind only emptiness and decay. He always got what he wanted, one way or another.

The sedan climbed steadily into the hills, tires crunching over dirt and rocks that hadn't seen another vehicle in weeks. The forest pressed close on both sides, pine branches scraping the car's roof like gnarled fingers. Most people found these woods oppressive, even threatening. They just couldn't appreciate the honesty of a place where pretense held no value, a place where nature stripped away all the comfortable lies of polite society.

The cabin appeared among the pines like something from a fairy tale... at least, if fairy tales told the truth about what happened in remote places where no one could hear you scream.

He sat for a minute in the driver's seat, breathing in the forest's tranquility. No neighbors for miles. No telephones. No possibility of unexpected visitors or unwelcome interruptions. Just him, the woods, and the greatest solitude that money could buy. The previous owner had sold it eagerly, spooked by the isolation and what he'd called "bad energy."

Superstitious fool. Energy came from what you made of it.

Inside, the familiar scents of wood smoke and pine sap welcomed him. He hummed to himself while he moved around the rooms, checking windows, testing locks, ensuring everything remained secure. The basement door stood closed, its heavy oak frame fitted with hardware that would have suited a medieval castle.

Some investments required proper storage.

The kitchen held simple, but functional items: cast iron pans hanging from wooden pegs, shelves lined with preserved goods, a

wood-burning stove that heated the entire cabin. He filled the percolator with water from the pump, then measured coffee grounds with the same precision he applied to everything else in his life.

While the coffee brewed, he settled into the leather chair by the window and opened one of the novels he'd grabbed from his apartment. It had been pitched as a mystery, but was actually some romantic drivel about star-crossed lovers and noble sacrifices. The protagonist declared his undying devotion to a woman who'd apparently captured his affection with little more than batting her eyelashes and looking vulnerable. What a waste of perfectly good paper. Love consisted of nothing more than chemical reactions and evolutionary programming, dressed up in poetry by fools who couldn't accept the truth of human nature. The hero's grand gestures and flowery speeches amounted to elaborate mating displays, no different from a peacock's tail or a rooster's crow.

The percolator bubbled on the stove, filling the cabin with a rich coffee aroma. He closed the book with a disgusted shake of his head and poured himself a cup, savoring the bitter warmth. He heard a chain drag over stone. Ah. His investment had awakened. Good. Consciousness made the lessons more effective.

He poured a second cup of coffee, considering the economics of the situation. Every day increased the overhead, but some projects required patience and extended instruction, time for the subject to fully appreciate the generosity of their circumstances and the opportunities he so willingly offered. While most people lived such narrow, purposeless lives, trapped by convention, and limited by their own timidity, he provided them with structure, direction, and the chance to become something greater than they'd ever imagined possible.

He peeked out the window. The forest was darkening as evening approached. The nearest neighbor lived fifteen miles down the road, and the old logging road that led here had washed out during the spring rains. Perfect isolation for the sort of education that required privacy.

The basement stairs waited in the gathering dusk, and somewhere below, his investment learned the true value of the

guidance he so willingly offered.

Some lessons just took time to appreciate.

She looked up when he entered, though the movement seemed to cost her considerable effort. Lily had grown thin in the weeks since he'd brought her here, her once-full cheeks now hollow, her dress hanging loose on a frame that had shed too much weight. The iron shackle around her ankle had rubbed the skin raw despite the cloth padding he'd given her.

"Coffee," he said, setting one cup near her. "You ought to keep your strength up."

She followed his movements with the wariness of a trapped animal. "Are you going to let me go today?"

She asked without hope, as if it were a ritual they'd performed so many times it had lost all meaning. He settled into the wooden chair he'd positioned just out of her reach, sipping his coffee and studying her.

"Are you going to try to escape again?" he asked in return.

"No."

The lie came easily to her. They both knew it for what it was.

He nodded anyway. "I could have made your dreams come true, you know. Everything you said you wanted that night at the party, about travel, adventure, a life free from your father's expectations... I could have given you all of it."

"My dream now is just to go home." Her tone was barely above a murmur, all the fight drained out of it.

"Ah, but that's where things have gotten complicated." He took another sip of coffee, savoring both the bitter taste and the way her shoulders tensed. "The price has gone up."

"What price?"

"The price of your discretion. Your cooperation." He set down his cup and leaned forward. "The price of letting you live."

The basement fell quiet except for the drip of water somewhere in the gloom beyond the circle of lamplight. Above them, the cabin settled into its foundations with small creaks and sighs, a house promising to keep its secrets.

"You see, Lily," he continued, as though he were discussing something as mundane as the weather, "you've become quite an investment. And investments are required to pay dividends. You understand now, don't you? How this works? The mathematics of it?" He paused, seemingly curious about her answer. "When someone keeps refusing reasonable requests, in time those requests become... less reasonable."

Lily's lips moved soundlessly, her pallor paper-white.

"But don't worry. I've always been patient. I believe in taking my time with important projects." His grin returned, cold and calculating. "After all, the longer someone makes you wait, the longer you have to plan exactly how they'll pay."

CHAPTER 1

May 1927, New York City...

Blood seeped through the edges of the letter. Sarah's fingers trembled as she unfolded it, the paper crackling under her touch. The ink had smeared into jagged scrawls.

Outside, shadows gathered in the alley. Footsteps clattered against slick cobblestones, closing in like a predator's jaws. *Too close.* Her heart slammed against her ribs. Raw, guttural screams tore through the night, followed by the deafening crack of a warning shot that splintered the air. Sarah spun, her breath hitching, eyes darting to the alley's mouth.

A shadow loomed. Before she could scream, a calloused hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her voice into a choked whimper. His other arm wound around her torso, crushing her until her lungs burned. The killer's breath, rancid and scalding, slithered against her ear.

"You shouldn't have run," he hissed.

Her vision frayed. Her body tensed as terror sank its claws into her soul. The world tilted.

A violent thud shattered the scene.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway outside Serafina's cramped apartment, yanking her from the blood-soaked alley of her new story.

Her hands hovered over the typewriter. Serafina's pulse thundered in her ears, her breath ragged, as if she'd been the one running from the killer's grasp. The footsteps outside faded, swallowed by the hum of the city, but the chill of her own words refused to let go.

She couldn't shake it.

Reality settled over her. Outside, the city stirred to life. A trolley clattered by. A street vendor called out his wares. She rubbed her burning eyes, feeling the strain of another sleepless night. Her coffee sat beside her, long gone cold. She reached over and patted the growing stack of manuscript pages next to her typewriter. Three months of work, nearly finished. If only she could find the courage to send it somewhere.

Serafina moved through her morning routine on instinct: splashing water on her face, pulling on a faded blue dress, pulling her honey waves back with a matching ribbon. It was all as automatic as breathing, and every morning was the same.

By the time she stepped outside, New York buzzed with activity. The scent of fresh bread curled from Mrs. Moreau's bakery, mingling with the damp earthiness of rain on pavement. Newspaper boys barked headlines. Cars honked. Pedestrians bustled past. She moved within it all like a spectator in her own life, watching others live while she remained firmly on the outside.

She sometimes considered being bolder like taking a different route to work, striking up conversations with strangers, or even saying yes to the florist's invitation to have coffee. But the idea of change, of anything that might tether her in place, made her hesitate. She craved adventure but feared what it might cost her.

As she neared the bookshop, Danny stood outside his flower shop, idly twisting a bit of twine. With his sandy hair catching the sun, his sharp jawline, rich brown eyes, and lazy grin, she could see why other women lingered near his shop, giggling over bouquets they didn't need.

She wished she could feel some sort of attraction to him too. It would be so simple.

He looked at her as she approached, straightening a little. "Good morning, Serafina." His pleasant voice carried the same careful hope it always did.

She offered a polite smile. "Good morning, Danny."

He hesitated, but she knew what was coming before he spoke.

"Would you like to get coffee with me sometime?"

Sometime. Never today. Never now. As though leaving it open-ended might make it easier.

Serafina took a breath. "I'm sorry, but I'm really not interested in anything romantic right now. I still don't know whether I ever will be."

The words came out firmer than usual, surprising them both.

Danny's fingers stilled on the twine.

"I see," he said in a low tone. "That's... direct."

"You deserve honesty." She felt a pang of guilt at the wounded look in his eyes.

Danny nodded, but his jaw tightened. "I appreciate that."

She bowed her head, then slipped inside the bookshop before the conversation could continue.

The scent of ink and paper greeted her the instant she crossed the threshold and the city's chaos dulled to a hush. Dust motes floated in slants of morning sunlight, and the quiet settled into her bones. Here, in this small world of shelves and stories, she could breathe. Here, she could hide.

Whiskers, the shop's resident tabby, slunk around her ankles. She crouched to scratch his head, his purring a low rumble, then dumped her bag behind the counter and started her day. As she dusted a shelf, she let herself imagine the stories housed within these walls. Did they whisper to each other in the dark? Did the tragedies bleed ink onto the wood? Stupid thoughts, but they were better than facing the emptiness of her own life.

She grabbed a novel from the display, fingers tracing the embossed cover. Inside those pages, someone's heart raced. Someone chased secrets through rain-soaked streets, fell in love, or fought for their life. Serafina cracked it open, letting the words pull her under, away from the monotony of her existence.

The bell above the door jangled, barely pulling her eyes from the page. Clara Randolph burst in, her bright red dress too bright for the shop's muted tones, her blonde curls pinned with precision. She

always looked like she belonged somewhere better and grander than this small corner of New York.

"Good morning, darling!" Clara's voice sliced through the peaceful shop like the first notes of a song. She collapsed onto the worn armchair facing Serafina, exhaling in exaggerated relief.

"Rough start?" Serafina asked, closing the book.

Clara's head lolled back. "Mom dragged me to breakfast with some insufferable woman who wouldn't shut up about her son. 'He owns land, Clara,'" she mocked, voice nasal before wiggling her fingers. "As if I care about his stupid horses or where they sleep. Or his mustache! It's like a scrub brush."

Serafina watched her friend for a moment. Clara's leg bounced, her casual sprawl too tense. "What's really going on?"

Clara bit her lip, hesitating. "There's a ball Saturday. I'm stuck going."

"Of course you are."

Clara leaned forward, hands clasped like she was pleading. "Come with me. Please."

Serafina stiffened. "You know I don't do that."

"Don't say no yet." Clara's voice turned urgent. "We'll go shopping, get you a dress—you'd look incredible, I swear. And... Richard Kensington from Kensington Publishing will be there. He's hunting for manuscripts. Mystery, intrigue—your novel's perfect. Meeting him in person could get your work noticed, not just lost in a slush pile."

Serafina's breath caught. Her dream, the one she barely let herself touch, dangled so close she could almost grab it. If she went, if she met him, if he read her work... it could change everything. But the thought of a ballroom, all those eyes, all that noise..."I don't belong in places like that."

Clara's face softened. "You belong with me."

Serafina's throat tightened. Clara had been dragging herself to these events for years, playing the part of the happy socialite despite the accident that stole her fiancé and her future. She smiled, danced, and hid her grief behind perfect curls and bright dresses. Serafina owed her this, didn't she?

"Fine," she said, voice barely above a whisper. "I'll go."

Clara's face lit up. "You won't regret it!"

"I already do."

"It'll be an experience," Clara said, grinning.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Clara laughed, settling back.

Serafina rolled her eyes. "If you're staying, make yourself useful and help me with this display."

"I hope you're not tossing out Gatsby again," Clara said, smirking.

They spent the morning sorting books. Clara stayed through the trickle of customers. Her chatter was a welcome distraction. She so loved pretending she had a paying job, though her father would never allow it. Poor dear, just wanting to feel useful somehow. By noon, she left for another social obligation, leaving Serafina alone with the silence.

The afternoon dragged, the shop empty until the bell jangled again. The air shifted. Serafina's skin prickled as she looked up.

Two men stood in the doorway. The first was handsome, tall and broad. His suit had been tailored so perfectly that it seemed to have been sewn onto a frame built for breaking things. His dark eyes scanned the shop with a predator's focus, like he was hunting. The second, older, with gray at his temples, lingered behind, his face unreadable but tense.

Her grip tightened on the book in her hands. Something about them felt... off. Too sharp for her sleepy bookshop wedged between a bakery and Danny's flowers.

The taller man's gaze locked onto hers. "I need a book," he said with a clipped Italian accent. "Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. Ricci translation."

Even as he spoke, his shoulders held a fraction too much stiffness. His fingers curled into his palm like he was keeping something in check.

"Of course." Serafina turned to the shelves, her pulse ticking faster. The obscure political memoir wasn't exactly a bestseller. It was more the kind of thing men of influence bought to sound more important.

As she searched, their low voices drifted to her in Italian.

"*Si, suo marito lo sa,*" the older man murmured. *Yes, her husband knows.*

The younger one, voice taut: "*Come? Ero attento.*"

"*Wrong. You weren't careful enough,*" the older man snapped. "*He'll kill whoever he thinks fucked his wife.*"

Serafina's hand froze on the book's spine. Her Italian was fluent. So she understood every word. An affair. A vengeful husband. A death threat. Her heart thudded, but she kept her face neutral as she pulled the book free.

The younger man's voice shifted, louder now, aimed at her. "Do you usually carry much poetry in Italian?"

She flinched, turning to meet his stare. "Not much," she said, steadying her voice. "Mostly just the classics, like Dante and Petrarch."

Disappointment flashed across his face.

A man who reads love poetry while someone wants to kill him. Fascinating.

"Thank you," he said, holding out exact payment as though he'd known the price in advance.

"You're welcome." Her voice was soft, but her skin burned where their fingers brushed. Not flirtation, not charm... just a fleeting, electric intensity that left her unsteady.

The older man cleared his throat, and they were gone, the door swinging shut with a dull thud. Serafina stared at the empty street, her pulse refusing to slow. He hadn't smiled, hadn't lingered, but something about him clung to her, sharp and unsettling, like the first line of a story she didn't know how to write.



That evening, Serafina sat at her typewriter, fingers poised over the keys, but the words refused to come. Every time she tried to focus on Sarah's escape, her thoughts wandered to the way a simple touch could make her blood race, to hushed conversations about death threats and Italian poetry.

She found herself typing fragments that had nothing to do with her new novel.

His fingers were warm against hers, calloused but gentle. She wondered what those hands might feel like.

She stopped, heat flooding her cheeks. This wasn't what she usually wrote.

She pushed away from her desk, frustration tightening her chest, and began to pace around her apartment. Worry about the ball disrupted her thoughts. *It's just one night*, she reminded herself. *One evening of polite conversation, suffocating fabrics, and trying not to trip over my own feet.*

And yet, her stomach churned.

What if she made a fool of herself? What if she fumbled her words in front of the publisher? What if Clara needed her, really needed her, and she failed?

Serafina let out a slow sigh and sat on the edge of her bed, running her hands down her skirt. An idea crept in...

She could cancel. Yes, cancel and stay home to sink into her writing. Or maybe go out, find a dimly lit speakeasy, and drink something that burn all the way down.

But then she saw Clara's face in her mind, that hopeful, earnest look when she had asked her to come.

Serafina sighed and flopped down onto the pillows.

What's the worst that could happen?

A disaster? Fine. At least it would be something to tell her characters, who seemed closer to being friends than most real people did. A complete humiliation? Nobody at that ball would remember her name. If she was doomed to misery, she might as well embrace the mess.



Two days later, Serafina stood in Clara's bedroom, staring at a stranger in the full-length mirror. The sapphire gown clung to her like a second skin, its beads glinting in the low lamplight. The neckline dipped too low, exposing the sharp line of her collarbone, and she tugged at it, willing it to cover more. Her curls had been pinned to frame her best features.

Behind her, Clara fussed with her own gown, pale champagne silk that shimmered like it belonged in this world. She caught Serafina's eye in the mirror and reached over, nudging a stray curl into place. "There. Perfect."

"I could still fake an illness."

Clara rolled her eyes. "If you were going to fake being sick, you should've done it before I spent a fortune on that gown."

Serafina forced a laugh, but her stomach churned. "Clara, something strange happened at the shop on Thursday."

"Oh?"

"This man came in. He was so sophisticated, and wearing a very expensive suit." Serafina kept her words casual, not mentioning the conversation she'd overheard about death threats. "He asked about Italian poetry. I wouldn't have expected that from someone who was so intimidating."

"Intimidating how? Handsomely intimidating?"

Heat crept up Serafina's neck. "He was striking. Dark hair, deep eyes."

"And Italian poetry? That's practically a love letter." Clara lit up. "He sounds like exactly the type who'd be at tonight's ball."

"You think so?"

"Oh, definitely. If he's there tonight, you'll have to introduce us!" Clara's expression became mischievous. "Unless you'd rather keep the mysterious poetry lover to yourself?"

Serafina's stomach fluttered at the notion. "It was nothing. Just a customer."

"The best stories start that way."

Serafina took one last breath, squared her shoulders, and moved away from the mirror. "I suppose there's no turning back now."

The halls of the Randolph estate were nearly empty when they made their way downstairs, only the quiet voices of the remaining staff. The rest of the Randolphs were already at the ball, leaving them to their own peaceful descent.

Then, far too soon, they arrived.

The ballroom's grand façade rose before them, light spilling from tall windows, jazz music floating into the night air. Everything smelled of fresh flowers and perfume.

The driver opened the door, and Clara stepped out with her usual flourish. Serafina followed, her legs leaden, fighting the urge to run. Clara hooked an arm through hers.

"You've got this, darling," Clara said.

Inside, chandeliers glared overhead, their light bouncing off polished floors and glittering gowns. Couples spun across the dance floor while clusters of guests sipped champagne, their laughter sharp and hollow. Serafina's grip tightened on her clutch, her pulse thudding. She didn't belong here in this sea of silk and wealth. Clara moved like she was born for it, her gown catching the light, her smile effortless despite the grief she carried. This was her world, even if she had never loved it.

Serafina stayed close, unsure where to place herself in the flurry of conversation and passing glances. Her grip tightened on her beaded clutch. Her heart drummed. She had to keep her wits about her. Somewhere in this room was Richard Kensington, the man who could change her life with a nod. And somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she wondered if she might see that tall Italian figure in an expensive suit, dark hair, and darker eyes.

Two young men approached, their attention split between her and Clara.

"May I have a dance?" one asked, addressing Serafina.

Panic coiled tight in her stomach.

"I'd rather not, but thank you," she said at once, offering a small, forced smile.

The man hesitated, then gave a polite nod.

She flushed, feeling foolish.

Clara hesitated, watching her.

"You go ahead," Serafina urged. "I'll just watch."

Clara searched her face for a long moment. "I'll return soon. Try to enjoy yourself, Sera."

She doubted she would, but she smiled anyway.

When the man swept Clara onto the dance floor, Serafina stood off to the side. She should have said no to coming. This wasn't an adventure at all. It was a mistake. The chandeliers burned too bright now. The music swelled too loud. The laughter of elegantly dressed guests grated on her.

She wasn't dancing, wasn't even speaking, yet she felt like she was on display, an outsider to be observed and judged. If the floor beneath her cracked open and swallowed her whole, she would consider it a mercy.

Clara returned, only to be swept into conversation by two women in sleek gowns. Their smiles were sharp, their eyes skimming Serafina before locking onto Clara.

"Miss Randolph, dear!" one of them, a brunette in ice-blue silk, said, sweeping Clara into a brief hug. "I was so hoping you'd be here tonight."

The other, a tall woman in deep burgundy, tilted her head. "We were just talking about the latest exhibition at the Met. Tell me you've seen it."

Clara exhaled, brushing a loose curl behind her ear. "Of course. The new Matisse pieces are absolutely stunning, and—"

"Oh, I knew you'd appreciate them," the brunette gushed. "Your eye for composition is unmatched."

Serafina stood beside Clara, unnoticed and unacknowledged. She might as well have been an extension of Clara's shadow.

Clara, however, turned slightly, her arm still looped around Serafina's. "This is my dearest friend, Serafina Silvano."

The brunette's polite look didn't waver. "Oh, how lovely."

The taller one offered the barest gesture of acknowledgment before her attention flicked once more to Clara. "So tell me, what did you think of that use of color? Quite bold, wasn't it?"

Clara shifted, cutting the conversation short. "Please excuse us." She didn't wait for a response before pulling Serafina aside.

"Sera-darling, are you okay? You don't seem well."

"Neither do you."

Clara let out a quiet huff of laughter. "Yes, well, the night will be over soon."

Serafina swallowed. "Not soon enough."

Then Clara raised her head a little higher. "I agree. But let's find Mr. Kensington. This night's about you and your book. That'll make being here worth it, and I believe in you."

Serafina let Clara lead her away from the group, weaving through the crowd of silk and polished shoes to the quieter end of the room.

"There he is," Clara whispered, gesturing at a distinguished-looking man engaged in conversation with two others who hung on to his every word.

"He looks... powerful," Serafina said, nerves twisting.

"He is. Come on."

Serafina inhaled slowly to calm her nerves and followed. Up close, Mr. Kensington's presence loomed larger. He carried himself with the confidence of a man who knew the value of his authority.

His smile when he turned to them was warm, yet somehow also cold.

"Good evening, Miss Randolph."

"Mr. Kensington, this is my dear friend Serafina Silvano. She's an incredibly talented writer."

Mr. Kensington extended his hand. His grip was firm, his palm smooth. "A pleasure, Miss Silvano. Miss Randolph's father has spoken highly of you."

"Thank you, Mr. Kensington," she said, breathless. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Tell me about your work," he said, shifting his stance ever so slightly, like granting her his full attention was a rare privilege. "What do you write?"

Serafina took a slow breath. This was her moment.

She described her novel, her voice gaining strength as she spoke

about her characters and the intricate letters woven throughout the story, her inspirations from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the layered power struggles, the way words could shape destinies, of manipulation and control, of the devastating consequences of temptation and ambition. She skirted calling it romance, knowing men like him often sneered at romance as frivolity.

Mr. Kensington listened, nodding occasionally, but his demeanor unsettled her. He was paying attention... perhaps too much. Then his gaze drifted in a slow, deliberate sweep downward, over her collarbones, the curve of her neck where her pulse hammered visibly, her chest, and down to her hips...

It was so smooth that she almost convinced herself she'd imagined it. But the way his gaze stayed just a fraction too long at the swell of her breasts visible above the gown's neckline made her skin crawl.

Instinct screamed otherwise. Determination kept her where she was.

"Intriguing, Miss Silvano," he said finally, sounding warmer than before. "If you bring it to my office next week... we can discuss it in detail. Privately."

The word "privately" made Serafina's stomach turn. But this was what she wanted, wasn't it? An opportunity? A real chance? But the way he said it, the way his gaze had traveled over her figure like he was pricing merchandise...

She shoved aside the unease coiling in her chest.

"Thank you, Mr. Kensington. I'll do that."

Mr. Kensington then moved off, already slipping into another conversation.

Serafina sighed.

Clara leaned in, speaking quietly, "If he passes on your book, we'll find a way to get you meetings with other publishers. He's interested, Sera. That's a start."

Serafina forced a smile, but her thoughts churned. Had Clara missed that look? Or was it just in her head, her nerves twisting nothing into something?

"Maybe," she said softly. "Thank you for introducing me."

A few other gentlemen approached, asking Clara and Serafina to dance. She declined once more, and again, sent Clara along to waltz.

Serafina wandered around the ballroom, letting the hum of conversation and the lilting notes of the jazz band fade into a blur. Alone, she drifted to the ballroom's edges, where grand paintings stretched high above gilded frames. The crystal and silk and gold leaf were suffocating in their excess. Nearby, two women leaned close, their voices low but sharp enough to carry.

"Did you hear about the Anderson girl?" one whispered.
"Disappeared after she turned down that derby horse-breeder. They say she's in Europe now, but no one's seen her."

The other woman's laugh was brittle. "How convenient."

But as Serafina stood there, admiring the peaceful landscape, her thoughts drifted back to the stranger from the bookshop. Kensington's stare had made her skin crawl, but the Italian? His intensity had sparked something else, something reckless. What would it be like to see him here, in this glittering trap, his dark eyes cutting through the crowd?

The thought sent a flush of heat through her that had nothing to do with the warm ballroom air.

As she made her way to the terrace doors, needing air, her heel slipped. Looking down, she saw a dark droplet on the marble floor. Wine, surely, though in the dim light it looked disturbingly like blood.

CHAPTER 2

Their polished shoes struck the stone steps in sharp, relentless rhythms. Francesco Romano's men trailed him, their voices low, thick with cruel amusement as they swapped tales of their latest conquests. They boasted about which senator's wife had begged for mercy, which judge's daughter had screamed until her voice broke.

Francesco tuned out their vile chatter. His focus was a razor, fixed on the task ahead as he led them through the shadows like a wolf hunting in a dying forest. The scent of expensive cologne and cigarettes trailed behind them, marking their territory in the refined air. These gilded rooms, heavy with wealth and lies, were his battlefield. Power here wasn't in titles but in debts that chained men, favors that broke them, lives snuffed out with a whispered order. He wasn't here for the sour champagne or the hollow smiles of high society. He was here to settle a score, one that had festered for years, its weight clawing at his chest like a living thing.

But tonight, his thoughts snagged on a darker thread. Elena Brambilia, beautiful, reckless, and fatally married. The wife of Antonio Brambilia, a rival whose influence matched Francesco's, a man who saw every betrayal before it landed. Elena had called him days ago, her voice cracking over the telephone. *"We need to talk. I think he knows. Please, Francesco. I need to see you."*

Of course Antonio knew. Men like him didn't rule by being blind.

Touching what was his came with a price, a bullet in the dark, a body in the river. Francesco had cut her off, no room for her panic or her pleas. He didn't waste time on women who mistook good sex for something more meaningful, who turned clingy, who thought a few nights meant he owned them something.

Vito nudged him as they neared the entrance, his voice a low hiss in Italian. "*Capo, they're waiting.*"

Francesco gave a curt nod, his jaw tight as iron. He knew how this would go. The moment he crossed the threshold, the room would choke, conversations would die, eyes would turn. Some would be terrified, some hungry, all scrambling to gauge what his presence meant for their survival. He fed on the way fear bent the air around him, the way power knelt without a word.

"*Remember,*" he said, his voice cold, carrying the heaviness of a death sentence. "*We're here to make an impression. And to remind certain people what happens when they forget their place.*"

His men straightened, their crude banter swallowed by the silence of soldiers bracing for blood. Francesco pushed through the grand double doors, and the reaction was instant.



A hush fell over the ballroom.

"Is that Francesco Romano?" someone near Serafina whispered, the name spoken with dread, as if it might summon a curse. Serafina's curiosity betrayed her. She turned toward the grand staircase, and her breath caught in her throat. It was him, the man from the bookshop, dark hair, darker eyes, but now in a tuxedo. Francesco Romano. The name fit him. She watched him descend the stairs with a predator's calm, the crowd parting like prey before a hunter. Even those pretending not to care stole glances, their eyes pulled to him, unable to resist.

She swallowed hard, the memory of his voice slicing through her. "*He'll kill whoever he thinks fucked his wife.*" A man marked for death, yet here he was, moving through the room like he owned

every soul in it, untouched by fear. The contradiction gnawed at her, her writer's mind clawing to pin him into a story she could control.

"Isn't he something?" someone else beside her said, her voice tinged with unease.

Serafina managed a faint nod, though the question hadn't been directed at her. She needed to breathe. Her thoughts moved too fast.

A drink. She needed a drink. Spotting the bar across the room, she pushed through the crush of silk and polished shoes, her gown snagging on her legs, the beads catching the chandeliers' sickly light. She stole another glance at him, unable to stop. He was speaking to the host now, his face a mask of stone, every gesture precise, no trace of weakness. The men around him, powerful in their own right, leaned in, hanging on his words like condemned men awaiting judgment.

The whispers about him swelled, tales of blood, debts, and bodies left in alleys, feeding her dread, deepening the enigma. At the bar, she ordered a merlot, the glass cold against her trembling fingers. She took a slow sip, willing the wine's burn to dull the panic rising in her chest. But her eyes drifted back to the man who read poetry while death stalked him. Who was he, beneath the suit and the menace?



A heavysset man in a tuxedo, looking like a stuffed bird despite the tailoring, scurried toward Francesco, his forehead slick with sweat under the chandeliers' glare. "Ah, Mr. Romano, welcome!" Lorenzo Mancini's voice dripped with forced cheer, his smile too wide, too desperate, the kind of terror you'd expect from a man who'd felt Francesco's gun against his temple and survived.

Francesco fixed him with a stare that could cut glass, his jaw twitching. "Mancini. I trust everything is in order."

"Absolutely," Mancini stammered, his hand shaking as he gestured for Francesco to follow. "Everything is perfect. Come, let me introduce you to some of our esteemed guests."

Francesco followed, his men fanning out like shadows around the room. He paid little attention to the introductions, his attention instead on the fear he stirred. Conversations choked as he passed, laughter died, eyes darted away. Some respected him. Others feared him. He didn't care, as long as they obeyed him.

As he moved through the crowd, Francesco's gaze caught on a man near the bar, middle-aged, nervous, with a nose once broken so badly that it had healed crooked. The man's eyes widened when he saw Francesco, and he turned away, hunching as if he could disappear. Francesco knew him, a thief who'd tried to skim from his shipments six months ago. He'd let him live, but not before breaking his face to ensure he'd never forget. The crooked nose was a warning.

By the windows, two society matrons whispered behind their fans, their voices sharp as knives. "Found him in an alley last week, throat cut ear to ear," one hissed. "Romano's work, they say." The other added, "Crossed him over a shipment. Never stood a chance." They froze when they noticed Francesco's glance, their faces draining of color. He offered a cold smile and moved on. Let them talk. Fear was power, just another form of respect.

"Mr. Romano, this is Governor Harrington," Mancini introduced.

The governor, a balding man in his late sixties with soft, pampered hands, extended a clammy palm. "Mr. Romano, it's an honor to meet you."

Francesco gripped his hand, hard enough to make the man wince. "The pleasure is mine, Governor. I hope the things you've heard have been favorable."

Harrington's smile wavered, his laugh forced. "Oh yes, yes, of course. Your name carries a certain weight, shall we say."

Francesco smiled ever so slightly, relishing the fear behind the politician's words. They moved on, more introductions, more empty words. But he wasn't here for chatter. Mancini's debt demanded repayment, and Francesco had no patience for his groveling longer than necessary.

When they were alone, Francesco turned, his presence a wall of menace. "Mancini. Our arrangement is still secure?"

The banker swallowed, his eyes darting like a trapped animal. "Yes, absolutely. You have my full support."

Francesco held his gaze just long enough to let the man know that, if he was lying, it would be his last.

"Good." He brushed at a nonexistent wrinkle in his cuff. "Then let's enjoy the evening."

He walked away without another word. He despised weak men who begged for mercy, especially for a wife as treacherous as Mancini's. As he scanned the crowd, his gaze caught on a slight figure. The light blue cotton dress from the bookshop was gone, replaced by sapphire silk that clung to her frame, her blonde hair pinned up. For a moment, he thought his eyes were deceiving him. But then she pressed her elbows to her sides, a nervous tic he'd noticed before.

The bookshop girl. What would she be doing at Mancini's ball?

Francesco paused, studying her. What was she doing in this pit of vipers? She moved through the crowd like a ghost, polished but out of place, as if she'd rather be anywhere else. It was her, the one who'd apologized for not having Italian poetry, who'd wrapped his book with trembling hands. The working class didn't belong here, where a gown could cost a month's wages. And yet, there she was.

He pushed the thought aside, turning to business associates who owed him blood and politicians whose careers hung by his strings. Everything proceeded as planned until a woman in emerald approached, her movements bold, her confidence a weapon. Her copper hair spilled over one shoulder, her dress clinging to her curves in defiance of the room's muted elegance. She stepped into his space without hesitation.

He didn't mind.

"Mr. Romano," she purred. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Francesco allowed his gaze to rake over her, unhurried, appraising. "Have you now, Miss...?"

"Isabella Davies, and I've heard much about you," Isabella continued, stepping closer in an understated invitation.

He smirked. "And what have you heard?"

"That you're a man of secrets." Her voice lowered, teasing. "A man like you must have many secrets, Mr. Romano."

"And a woman like you wouldn't be here if she didn't want to know them."

She tilted her head, her smile widening. "Curiosity is a dangerous thing, don't you think?"

He stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat of her breath. "Only if you don't know how to handle the dark."

Her lashes lowered. Her fingers danced up his arm. "And I suppose... you do?"

He brushed a stray curl from her shoulder, letting the strands slip between his fingers before tucking it behind her ear. She didn't pull away. "I live in it." His voice was a low growl. "And what brings you to me, Miss Davies? Are you drawn to the danger?"

Her lips parted, amusement flickering in her gaze. "Perhaps. I find myself drawn to the unknown, to the thrill of discovering what lies beneath the surface."

He leaned in. "Be careful. You may not like what you find. But...would you like to explore it together, *bella*?"

Her gaze locked onto his. "That depends."

Francesco chuckled. "On what?"

"On whether or not you're proposing an alliance," she said quietly, lifting her chin like she was answering a challenge he'd issued.

He smirked. Clever to turn the tables so smoothly. He let a beat of silence stretch before leaning close, his mouth near her ear. "The Waterford Hotel, the grand suite on floor three." His gaze flicked to her lips, then her eyes. "Meet me there at ten."

He left her before she could respond, suddenly far more interested in other matters.



"Just one more, please," Serafina muttered under her breath, signaling the bartender. "Another glass of merlot."

Her nerves had barely settled, dulled by the wine's burn, but her

mind churned like a storm. She tried to focus on her breathing, on the weight of the glass in her hand, but her pulse pounded, her fingers drumming restlessly on the bar. She kept catching herself biting her lower lip. She searched for Clara, finding her still deep in conversation with a cluster of young gentlemen. Clara caught her eye and, with an almost imperceptible nod and slow blink, gave Serafina wordless encouragement.

Seize the moment. Do something more than stand there.

The bartender slid the new glass to her. She nodded in thanks, took it carefully, and turned, only to crash into something solid. No, someone solid. The glass slipped from her fingers, and time slowed as a deep red stain bloomed on an impossibly expensive tuxedo.

A tuxedo worn by none other than Francesco Romano.

Serafina's heart plummeted.

"Oh my! Oh no! I'm so sorry!" Her voice rose in panic as she grabbed a napkin, dabbing frantically at the stain. Of all the men in this room, why did it have to be him?

Mr. Romano barely moved, his broad frame utterly unmoved by the collision.

"Please, stop," he said with an unmistakable edge of impatience. "It's just a tuxedo."

But Serafina was too flustered to stop. "I—I didn't see you there! I wasn't paying attention, and I—"

"I said *stop*."

His tone sharpened, a blade slipping between words, and Serafina's hands froze.

"I really didn't mean to..."

"*Stop!*"

The word cracked like a whip.

Serafina gasped. Conversations around them hadn't ceased, but the tension had changed. Guests stared openly, their eyes glinting with cruel amusement. Others listened without looking, their careful detachment a mask of high society. A few tittered behind their hands, their laughter sharp enough to slice through her. One woman whispered to her companion, "Clumsy girl, spilling on *him*," and their giggles cut like shards of glass.

She had never felt so exposed, so utterly alone in this pit of vipers. Her cheeks burned with shame, her skin crawling under their gazes. She wanted to sink through the polished floor, to escape the weight of their judgment. Then, a colder sensation prickled her neck, a gaze that felt different, predatory and unseen. She glanced toward the shadows near the terrace doors, but saw nothing, only the lingering chill of being watched. The feeling vanished, leaving her unsteady, her heart racing.

"I..." she stammered, voice barely a whisper.

He exhaled. "Do you ever stop apologizing?"

Serafina's spine straightened. She stepped back, squaring her shoulders. "Excuse me?"

He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. "You apologize like it's a reflex."

"And you insult strangers like it's a hobby!"

Before he could respond, Clara rushed to her side, slipping an arm around her shoulders. "Serafina, darling," she said with a smile so poised it was nearly lethal, "there you are. I must speak with you for a second. There's another publisher I want you to meet."

He scoffed, his voice dripping with disdain. "A publisher? What do you write? Romance?"

Serafina lifted her chin, defiance flaring. "Why, yes, actually. I do."

He exhaled a short, humorless chuckle and muttered, "*Che perdita di tempo.*"

A waste of time.

Her blood boiled. She glared at him, her voice steady.

"*Non è una perdita di tempo!*"

He stilled. It was the smallest change, but she saw the flicker of surprise and how his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Do you work at a bookshop?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"And you speak Italian?" Mr. Romano continued. "You never mentioned that."

"I'm not generally in the habit of disclosing my languages to strangers, especially ones who call romance pointless." She turned to Clara and repeated, "He called romance pointless."

Clara blinked with a haughty air. "Did he, now?"

"I did," he confirmed. "And it is."

"Then clearly he hasn't read any good ones," Clara said to Serafina.

"No, he hasn't, and I'm not sorry anymore. I hope that stain never comes out."

"Neither do I," he said with an amused grin.

"Come, Clara. Let's find someone who is actually important."

As they walked off, Serafina's pulse thundered in her ears. She wanted to turn back, to storm up to him, to wipe that smug grin off his face, and...



Francesco watched them go, his mind racing. So the bookshop girl spoke fluent Italian, moved in these viperous circles, and had fire beneath that fragile exterior.

Interesting...



The rest of the evening passed in a haze of forced pleasantries and stolen moments where Serafina tried to douse the fire still burning in her chest. She should have let it go. He wasn't worth the energy, and yet, how dare he mock her?

By the time Serafina and Clara went outside, the night air had turned cool. Clara's driver opened the car door, and Serafina sank into the seat with a quiet exhale of relief.

Clara glanced at her. "You're still thinking about him, aren't you?"

Serafina huffed. "No."

Clara arched a perfectly sculpted brow.

"...Maybe a little."

"I thought so. It was a very dramatic exchange."

Serafina pursed her lips. "It was not dramatic. It was—"

"The most dramatic thing I've seen in weeks," Clara supplied.

Serafina huffed. "I just don't like being mocked."

"And yet, you had him off guard for a second." Clara said smugly. "He didn't expect you to snap at him like that."

"Good."

Clara laughed lightly as the car pulled up to Serafina's apartment. "Do try to get some sleep, darling. We'll talk more tomorrow."

The stress of the evening melted once Serafina was in her cramped living room, locking the door against the world. At least she hadn't fallen, though that might have been less humiliating than spilling wine. She caught her reflection in the hallway mirror, her cheeks still flushed, her eyes still sharp with anger.

She changed out of her gown, slipping into a worn cotton nightgown. Her fingers shook as she undid the buttons, her skin prickling with restless energy. She paused before the mirror, trying to mimic the sultry, confident looks she'd seen other women wield. The attempt was clumsy, her reflection mocking her with its awkwardness. She tried again, lowering her eyelids, tilting her chin.

Who was she kidding? She moved to the window and opened it, the distant jazz horns jagged tonight, no longer a lullaby. Her thighs ached with a yearning that pulsed with her heartbeat. She could still feel his gaze raking her neck, the way his eyes had narrowed when she'd snapped at him in Italian. It was as if he could unravel her with a single word in the dark. He'd been a bastard, but bastard or not, she couldn't shake the pull dragging her toward him, awakening a desire she didn't want.

She shut the window and walked over to her bed, determined to handle her needs.

This is madness.

She'd touched herself before, but never with someone specific in mind, not like this, with her body thrumming for a man who'd insulted her. But she needed to imagine it, just once, to banish him from her thoughts.

She climbed into bed, pulling the covers to her waist, the cotton nightgown clinging to her skin. Her nipples hardened, brushing against the fabric, sending a shiver through her. Her hands slid to the hem. She hesitated, then slipped beneath.

The cotton parted easily, and her palm pressed on the soft skin of her belly, lower, lower still, until she found the fine triangle of hair between her thighs.

She was already soaked. She'd never been this aroused, this ready, from nothing other than an argument. She exhaled, her breath unsteady.

Sliding two fingers between her folds, she drew them over the slick heat, biting back a gasp. The pressure was intense, but not enough. She pictured him at the foot of her bed, tuxedo jacket gone, shirt open, watching her with those cold, predatory eyes. Would he mock her still? Or would his voice be darker and commanding?

"Slower," she whispered, imagining his voice instead of her own. "Show me how you like it."

She circled her clit with her fingertips, drawing soft spirals as her hips shifted into the rhythm. The pleasure bloomed and tightened, molten and immediate. She pressed her other hand to her breast, fingers tugging lightly at her nipple through the nightgown, then slipped beneath the fabric to touch her nipple, rolling and squeezing. The ache shot down her spine, connecting directly to the pulsing between her legs.

"Say please," she murmured, picturing him leaning over her, his mouth close to her ear, his hand replacing hers.

Her knees spread wider, thighs trembling as her pace quickened. She slid one finger inside, then a second, her muscles clenching, desperate for more. He'd be bigger. Much bigger, she knew. The stretch would be overwhelming, and his gaze would be intense during the agonizing push inside.

She pumped her fingers deeper, curling them forward, to the spot that made her legs jerk. Her clit throbbed under the pressure of her thumb, and she rubbed harder, panting, her torso flushing with heat. The image of him...towering over her, pushing her over her writing desk, his hands rough and demanding as he lifted her onto it.

"Oh— Oh, God—" she gasped, hips bucking.

She came hard, her palm flying to cover her mouth to muffle the cry that tore from her throat. Her entire body shook with the force, spine arching, her fingers working her through the waves. When the storm finally subsided, she collapsed against the pillow, chest heaving, her skin damp and flushed.

The room was silent, save for her ragged breaths and the city's distant hum. She stared at the ceiling, spent. Francesco Romano had humiliated her, insulted her work, and dismissed her. And now she'd just come harder than she ever had before, thinking about his skin against her body, his whispers in her ear.

She groaned, flinging an arm over her eyes, and muttered, "I hate you."

But her thighs were still slick, and she knew deep down that she didn't hate him at all. What she felt was darker, a hunger that scared her.



Isabella Davies had been what he'd expected. Beautiful. Willing. Utterly forgettable. She'd played her part with sultry glances and breathless moans, but in the black of night, Francesco was already pulling on his clothes. She'd sufficiently satisfied him in the basest sense, but left him cold and empty. She wasn't what he needed.

The sun had nearly begun to rise when Francesco made it home, loosened his tie, and poured himself a glass of bourbon.

His silk tie resisted him, twisting tight around his throat like the evening's restraints. Sometimes he grew tired of the posturing and the proximity to men who feared him while pretending not to, even tired of the women who smiled with their teeth, but watched his every move, calculating what his attention might be worth.

He preferred enemies. At least they were honest.

He dropped into the leather armchair and downed the drink in a single swallow. It burned just enough to cut through the noise in his head, but doing nothing to quiet the thoughts of Serafina Silvano.

He hadn't meant to notice her. Not at all. She'd been almost as

forgettable as Miss Davies at first, just a timid little thing. Too pale. Eyes too large. Fingers too fidgety. He'd presumed she was the type of woman who kept her head down and apologized before she'd even made a mistake.

Her trembling hands touched him, not to seduce but in panic. Her lips parted, breaths quick, not to please him. Her eyes flashed with anger, not fear. And then she'd snapped back in Italian, fluent and sharp, spitting the words as easily as if they'd been English to her.

For once, his assumptions were wrong.

He leaned forward, setting the empty glass aside, elbows on his knees. He couldn't shake the way she'd glared up at him with a mix of shame and defiance. Her mouth had been close enough that he could have kissed her right there in front of everyone, and part of him had wanted to. Women like Miss Davies, who threw themselves at his feet for a chance to bed him, were a dime a dozen. He even encountered women like Miss Randolph, the little princess who scoffed, on occasion, but he knew he could coax socialites into submission. But he couldn't recall the last time a woman had stood up to him and made him think he might not win her.

He adjusted in his seat. His slacks had gone uncomfortably tight somewhere between her yelling and her storming off. He should've been insulted. Instead, he was half-hard, frustrated, and aroused by this nobody of a woman. She'd managed to stay at the forefront of his mind.

Not Isabella Davies, with her lipstick games and designer perfume.

Not Elena Brambilia, whose husband might very well try to kill him.

Her.

The bookshop girl. The writer.

Romance, she'd said. As though that word alone was adequate to justify her entire existence.

Goddamn, that spirit in her gave him ideas he knew he shouldn't have.

He shifted again. His cock pressed hard along his thigh.

He looked down.

No.

This was a mistake.

She was no one. She wasn't polished the way his usual women were. But she had backbone and fire and the guts to bite back at him in a room full of people who held their tongues around him.

And now her voice was lodged in his skull. Her beautiful, angry, radiant face kept flickering behind his eyelids every time he closed them.

He let out a long sigh.

Fine. *Fine*. Just this once.

He stood, unbuttoned his stained shirt, and made for the bedroom.

The effect of the one glass of bourbon was already fading, but the fire she'd lit raged on.

He pushed his slacks down, sat at the edge of the mattress, legs spread, already rock-hard.

He could still feel the heat of her palm on his chest, trying to pat his shirt dry, still hear the little gasp she'd made when he'd told her to stop apologizing, still see the way she hadn't averted her gaze when he'd moved closer...

She'd flushed, but not just with shame. Part of her had liked the confrontation, liked him towering over her.

He groaned under his breath. He could imagine what she'd look like with that same passion in her expression, but naked beneath him.

He curled his fingers around himself and stroked, slow and firm. The first stroke made his ass and abdomen tense. The control it took not to lose himself immediately demanded all he had left in him.

He closed his eyes and pictured her in the bookshop, bent over her typewriter, skirt hiked up, looking back at him with that same defiance, daring him to touch her.

He'd push her forward, palms on her back holding her down while he kicked her legs apart. She'd gasp, try to twist around to look at him, but he'd keep her pinned.

"Stay still," he'd rasp close to her ear, and she'd shiver.

He pumped harder, faster. His jaw clenched.

She'd be drenched already. He was certain she was the kind of woman who got wet from being ordered around and being overpowered in matters of sex. He'd slide his fingers between her legs first, testing her, making her squirm while he decided whether she deserved what was coming.

She'd moan when he touched her. She'd push against his hand, whimpering for more of him.

God, he could feel it.

His strokes grew rougher, the sound of his palm loud, matched by his ragged breaths. She'd be tight when he thrust into her, maybe untouched, the thought of being her first, of teaching her what her body was made for, sent heat racing down his spine.

He'd grip her hips and drive into her, hard and deep, without mercy. She'd cry out, hands scrabbling to steady herself on the desk while he set a brutal pace. But she'd take it. She'd take everything he gave her and beg for him to go faster, for more.

He groaned, the sound guttural, his fingers tightening.

She'd be the sort of woman who couldn't keep quiet when she was being fucked properly. She'd curse him in Italian when she clenched around his cock.

She'd come apart beneath him, still mad at him, still defiant, her body shuddering from the force of her orgasm while he kept taking more of what he wanted.

He was close, too close now.

He leaned back on one elbow, hips thrusting up into his fist. The image of her gasping his name... breathless... wrecked... completely his... driving him to the edge.

"Cazzo... *porca puttana*... sì..." he hissed.

The climax ripped through him, forcing thick seed to spill from him in hard, pulsing spurts, slicking his fingers, flooding his palm, dripping from his grip, onto his stomach and thighs. For a moment, the fantasy felt so real he could almost smell the floral scent that had clung to her hair, and could almost hear her crying out beneath him.

He rested, catching his breath. Romance, she'd said. The biggest fantasy of all. A lie he wanted to believe. He wiped himself with his undershirt, but the release didn't clear his head. She'd gotten under

his skin, and that was a problem. The last time a woman haunted him, he'd ended up with Elena and a death threat.

This one was different, a writer who saw through his mask, who didn't flinch when he closed in, who matched his fire with her own. She had no care what he thought of her and no desire to impress him.

And that made her dangerous in a whole new way.

CHAPTER 3

Serafina stared at the empty page. A curl had slipped loose and hung by her cheek. She didn't touch it.

She'd written five different opening sentences in the past hour. Each one died on the page. The words came out hollow, trying to sound clever or literary when they were neither.

She closed her eyes and saw him. That hard stare, the expensive suit, the way he'd looked at her like she was nothing. Or worse, like noticing her at all had been a mistake on his part. But he had noticed. He wouldn't have held her gaze so long otherwise. He wouldn't have let her hand stay pressed to his chest, wouldn't have turned when she spoke Italian, and wouldn't have given her that cold, infuriating grin when she refused to apologize.

She pressed her thighs together. Her nightgown was still crumpled at the foot of the bed. The sheets carried the smell of what she'd done to herself the night before, thinking of him.

Now she was trying to write a short story about a governess falling in love with a French baron to submit to Love Story Magazine.

Serafina leaned back and sighed, staring at the one pathetic line she'd managed.

Miss Catherine smoothed her skirts as she entered the library, where Baron Montclair waited with a leather-bound volume of poetry.

Lifeless.

She ripped the page from the typewriter and crumpled it, hurling it toward the wastepaper basket. It landed on the floor.

What if she wrote something else? Something pulled from real life?

Before she could second-guess herself, her fingers moved again.

He cornered her against the stone wall, his body a cage of heat and menace. She should have been afraid. She should have screamed. Instead, she lifted her chin and met his dark gaze with defiance burning in her own.

"You think you can frighten me," she whispered.

His smile was razor-sharp. "I think you're already frightened. The question is whether you're frightened of me...or of what you want me to do to you."

His hand braced against the wall beside her head, and she could smell his cologne, could feel the warmth radiating from his body. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but not entirely from fear.

"I want nothing from you," she lied.

"Liar." The word was barely a breath against her ear as he leaned closer. "Your pulse is racing. Your lips are parted. Your body knows what it wants, even if your mind won't admit it."

won't admit it."

"Tell me to stop," he murmured. "Tell me to walk away, and I will."

She opened her mouth to say the words, but what came out instead was a breathless whisper: "Don't you dare."

His answering smile was wicked as sin. "That's what I thought."

His mouth crashed down on hers, claiming and demanding. She should have pushed him away. Instead, her hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer, drowning in the taste of danger and desire.

Serafina's breath came faster as she typed. Heat pooled low in her belly. She could so clearly see Francesco's broad shoulders, and his hands...quite large.

in the taste of danger and desire.

He pushed her against his desk, scattering papers to the floor. "Is this what you wanted?" he growled against her throat. "Is this the danger you've been craving?"

Serafina jerked away from the typewriter as if it had burned her. Her cheeks were flushed. What was she doing? This wasn't what she set out to write. This was... this was pure fantasy. It was raw and shameless and utterly unpublishable.

She stared at the words, her heart still racing. The little she had written dripped with the kind of passion she'd never dared write before, the kind of desire she'd never let herself acknowledge.

With shaking hands, she reached for the paper, intending to crumple it like the others. But she couldn't bring herself to destroy it. Instead, she read it once more.

She rolled the page back into her typewriter:

She sighed loudly, yanking it free and crumpling it.

She tried one last time to type about Miss Catherine and her baron. But the words wouldn't come. She could hardly even think of them.

With a frustrated sigh, she stormed away from the typewriter. She needed air. She needed to think about anything other than that awful man.

She needed Clara.



An hour later, Serafina stood outside the Randolph estate. The butler showed her to the sun room, where Clara sat in a silk robe, sipping tea and reading the society pages.

"Serafina, darling!" Clara set down her cup and gestured to the butler for another. "What a lovely surprise so early. Though you look rather flustered. Don't tell me you've been up all night writing again."

"Well, I..." Serafina bit her lip.

"Oh, no. What's happening now?"

Serafina hesitated, then shut the parlor doors.

"I must talk to you about last night." She barely paused before lowering her voice. "About Francesco Romano."

At the mention of his name, the teasing light faded from Clara's eyes. "I was hoping you'd have no interest after that exchange."

"I can't stop thinking about him."

"Well. That's troubling." Clara picked up her teacup to sip.

"There's something about him, though. The way people reacted when he walked in, the way the entire room changed. The way he—"

"Mocked you publicly?" Clara's eyebrow arched.

Heat crept up Serafina's neck. "It wasn't just that. It was the way he looked at me. Like he could see right through me, but also like..." She struggled for words. "Like he wanted to...oh, I can't explain it."

Clara was quiet for a moment, studying Serafina's face and waiting for the butler to leave again after bringing a second cup of tea. Then she sighed and moved to the window, her silk robe flowing behind her.

"Sera, do you know he kills people?"

"What?" Serafina shook her head. "How would you know that?"

Clara turned back around, looking grave. "Well, Carlo Romano's

death was awfully convenient.”

The blood drained from Serafina’s face. “Carlo Romano? But he was...” Her mind scrambled to catch up. “Are you saying Francesco—”

“I’m saying the head of the Romano crime family died last month under mysterious circumstances, and Francesco Romano—no relation, *supposedly*—moved up to fill the void with remarkable efficiency.” Clara’s voice was matter-of-fact. “Some would call that suspicious timing. And the rumors... they say rivals end up with their fingers mailed in envelopes to their families, or poisoned in speakeasies with bad gin.”

Serafina sank into the nearest chair, her legs suddenly unsteady. “He’s... he’s actually...”

“A mob boss. Yes.” Clara moved closer, and patted Serafina’s shoulder with concern. “He’s one of the most dangerous men in the city, if the rumors are true. No one in the mob hasn’t killed before. It’s what they do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me last night?”

“Because it was just a brief encounter, and I assumed you’d never see him again.” Clara sat facing her, leaning forward. “I certainly didn’t expect you to develop an infatuation.”

Serafina’s hands shook in her lap. “I wouldn’t quite call it an infatuation.”

“What would you call it then?”

She fell quiet, thinking of the heat in his dark eyes, and the way her own body had responded to his nearness. “It’s more like fascination.”

Clara groaned. “Oh, God, that’s somehow worse.”

“Tell me more about him. What kind of man is he, really?”

Clara hesitated, then seemed to make a decision. “Men like him are calculating. He’s consolidated power faster than anyone believed could be possible, which means he’s either extraordinarily lucky or extraordinarily dangerous.”

“Or both.”

“Or both,” Clara agreed grimly. “The point is, Sera, men like Francesco Romano don’t have casual encounters. They don’t meet sweet booksellers and develop tender feelings. They use people, and

they break them. And when they're done, those people have a tendency to disappear for good."

Serafina's mind turned over every word. So here was a man who lived in the darkness she'd only written about, who embodied the danger she'd only imagined.

"Oh, no you don't," Clara said. "You look far too intrigued by all of this. You need to let it go."

"But I'm intrigued."

"Oh, Sera, Sera, Sera. I adore you, but I do question your survival instincts sometimes, especially in a city that is cruel to dreamers."

A smile tugged at Serafina's lips. "Just promise me something."

Clara exhaled, already looking tired. "Oh, Lord. Here we go."

"If I end up dead, make sure my obituary says I died in the pursuit of knowledge."

Clara squeezed her temples. "Darling, if you end up dead, I'll be too busy grieving to write anything but your name."

Serafina bit her lip. So Francesco Romano wasn't just an enigmatic man with a cruel mouth and an unreadable gaze. He was truly dangerous.

And yet, something about him pulled at her, even when she knew it could destroy her.



Serafina sang to herself as she restocked romance books, but stopped when the bell rang. She took a step back to greet the customer. Instead, Danny entered, looking unusually serious.

"Good afternoon, Serafina," he called, approaching the counter with concern.

"Hello, Danny." She set down the books and headed toward him. "Is everything okay?"

He shook his head, running his fingers through his hair. "I came by because I heard something that troubled me. I was at the Whitmore estate this morning, and I overheard a guest talking about an incident at a ball over the weekend. Something about a young

woman who had words with Francesco Romano. Came back as soon as I heard"

Serafina's blood went cold. "Oh?"

"Mentioned it was quite the scene, with wine spilled, harsh words exchanged..." Danny searched her face with growing alarm. "Serafina, please tell me it wasn't you."

She opened her mouth to deny it, but the words wouldn't come.

"It was you, wasn't it? Good God, Serafina, do you have any idea how dangerous that man is?"

"It was just a misunderstanding," she managed, though her voice sounded weak even to her own ears. "I accidentally spilled a glass of wine on him."

Danny stepped closer, gripping the edge of the counter. "You spilled on *Francesco Romano*?" He shook his head. "Serafina, you have to understand that men like him don't forget slights. They hold grudges. You could be in real danger."

His fear made her chest tighten. "I'm sure it's nothing, Danny. It was just a little embarrassment at a party."

"Nothing?" His voice cracked with disbelief. "Listen to me! The most dangerous men are often the ones who seem charming at first. They watch women, and learn their routines and weaknesses. They wait for the right time to strike. You can't tell who's truly dangerous just by looking at them."

"Please calm down. I promise, I have no plans to see him again."

"But I'm still worried about you," Danny said, gentler now. "You're too trusting and too willing to see the best in people. But men like Romano? They prey on intelligent, independent women who think they can handle themselves, like you."

"I appreciate your concern, I really do, but there's no reason for me and Mr. Romano to see each—"

"Let me help you," he interrupted, leaning forward earnestly. "I have connections, people who keep an eye on things and who know how to spot trouble before it finds you. I can make sure you're safe."

"That's generous, but I don't think—"

"Have coffee with me," he said quickly. "Tomorrow morning. We can talk about this properly, somewhere private where we don't have

to worry about being overheard."

"I..." She fumbled for an excuse, her mind racing. "I can't. I have to prepare for that publisher meeting I mentioned."

"Kensington?" Danny's expression darkened. "Be careful with him too. Publishers like him... they're not always what they seem either. Trust your instincts, okay? If something feels wrong, it probably is."

Danny glanced over his shoulder at another customer walking in.

"I should let you get back to work. But promise me you'll be careful. The most dangerous predators are the ones who seem harmless until it's too late." He paused at the door. "And if you see Romano again, don't try to handle it alone. Send word to me immediately. Sometimes the people who seem like they're trying to protect you are the ones you need protection from most."



Francesco had been in a foul mood for three days, ever since that clumsy little writer had the audacity to speak to him like he was nothing more than an arrogant bastard at a party.

He'd dealt with far less disrespect and buried the offenders six feet under without losing sleep. Yet he couldn't stop thinking about her, and the way her anger had flashed when she'd snapped at him in Italian, the curve of her mouth when she'd refused to apologize, and how her body had felt pressed against his for those few seconds when she'd steadied herself against his chest.

Christ, he was losing his mind.

He'd tried to solve the problem the way he always did: with other women. But every time he closed his eyes, even with some willing socialite's mouth around his cock, all he could see was Serafina Silvano's defiant stare and that maddening little chin she'd lifted at him.

It was pathetic. He was Francesco Romano, for Christ's sake! He could have any woman in the city with a snap of his fingers, women who knew their place, who wanted the obvious things—his money,

his protection, and his body. They were simple, predictable, and controllable.

So why could he not stop thinking about the one woman who clearly wanted none of those things? Why did he give a damn about making her want him?

A soft knock interrupted his brooding. "Come in," he called, not bothering to look up from his glass.

The door opened, and Giulia Moretti slipped inside, her lace robe barely covering her body.

"I thought you might want some company," Giulia purred, slinking toward him.

Francesco's gaze barely lifted from his whiskey. "I'm busy."

She paused, confusion flickering over her face, but she pressed on. "You seemed tense earlier. Let me help you relax." The robe slipped from her shoulders, pooling at her feet.

Francesco finally glanced at her, his gaze raking over her naked form. She was just as stunning as she'd always been, but she felt empty to him now.

"Get dressed," he said flatly, returning to his drink.

Giulia froze mid-step, her confidence cracking. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. Get dressed and get out."

Her mouth fell open in shock. "But last night you said—"

"Last night is over. Don't make me repeat myself."

Giulia's face crumpled, anger replacing confusion. "What the hell is wrong with you lately?" She grabbed her robe, clutching it to her chest. "You've been different ever since that stupid ball."

Francesco's jaw tightened. The ball. Of course she'd noticed.

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "I just have more important things on my mind than entertaining you."

Giulia flinched. "Fine. Don't expect me to come running the next time you want someone to warm your bed."

She fled without another word. The door slammed behind her.

Francesco stared into his glass, disgusted with himself. Giulia had done nothing wrong except be what she'd always been. The problem was that what he wanted had changed, and he hated that it had.

He now wanted fire. He wanted a woman who would stare him in the eye and tell him he was wrong in perfect Italian, then stomp off without a backward glance, who would make him work for her attention instead of offering it freely.

God, he wanted Miss Silvano spread beneath him, to break through her composure and find the passion underneath to prove to himself that she was just like every other woman once you stripped off the pretense.

Francesco drained his glass and set it down. This mild obsession was unacceptable. She was disrupting his ordered world.

When a sharp knock rattled his door, his jaw tightened. Only one person would dare disturb him at this hour without an invitation.

"Come in," he called out in Italian.

Ricci burst through, his usually composed demeanor cracked with tension. "We've got a problem."

Francesco didn't look up. "It's past midnight."

"Cazzo, Frankie. Elená's pregnant."

Francesco's head snapped up. "Pregnant? How do you know?"

"Word gets around. Brambilia's asking questions. Dangerous ones. He knows it's not his."

"Conceived when?"

"Who the hell knows? Could be yours. The point is, he's looking for someone to kill, and your name's at the top of his list."

Cazzo indeed. Francesco's expression remained controlled, but his fingers drummed once against the chair arm. He couldn't afford to let this bother him. "So?"

"So? Jesus Christ, you need to disappear off his list. Quick, private wedding to Giulia to look settled and domestic, like a man who wouldn't risk everything for another man's wife."

Francesco's laugh was sharp and humorless. "Absolutely not."

"Frankie—"

"No." He stood, pacing to the window. "I don't hide. I don't pretend. And I sure as hell won't marry for anyone's benefit. I swore off the idea of marriage after Ginevra, or did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget, but you'd rather die?"

"I'd rather Brambilia try." The words came out cold. "Let him

come. I'm not some coward who needs to parade a woman around like a shield."

"This isn't about courage. It's about strategy. You're no good to any of us dead."

"Then I'll handle *Brambilia* the way I handle every other problem." Francesco's fingers curled into a fist against the window frame. "That's not with theater."

"And when he comes for you in a restaurant? At the opera? In front of witnesses you can't afford to have asking questions?" Ricci stepped closer. "You think this is beneath you, but it's just another weapon. Use it."

"I don't need—"

"So, find a woman to play house and take on some dates for a few weeks," Ricci pressed. "One of the *Ziegfeld* girls, or—"

"No." The very thought of even pretending domesticity made Francesco's skin crawl. But then he stopped looked down as a face flashed through his mind.

"Frankie?"

"The bookshop girl," he heard himself say.

"Hell no!" Ricci snapped. "There are plenty of women already in our circle. *Sophia Dellucci's* been angling for attention for months. Or that singer from the *Velvet Room*. She knows the score, knows how to play the part. Not some innocent girl who—"

"She's perfect," Francesco interrupted.

His mind was already working, but not in the cold, strategic way he'd intended. A different calculation entirely. A month, maybe two of this charade. If he could convince her to play the part, then she would be close enough to touch, close enough to corrupt.

He could take his time with her, and learn what made her blush, and what made her breath catch. Find out if that prim, scholarly composure would crack under his hands, or if she'd bore him within a week and he could move on with the fantasy of her dispelled.

Either way, he'd win. Either she'd end up in his bed for as long as he wanted her, or he'd discover she was as tedious as every other respectable woman and the attraction would die a quick death. No more distracting thoughts. No more wondering.

"She's not wise to what we do," Ricci said, his voice hard. "She doesn't know the rules. The women I mentioned—they understand this world. This girl? She's too innocent. She'll be a liability."

"That's why she's perfect," Francesco said.

For once, someone else's crisis aligned perfectly with his own dark appetites. And Francesco Romano never wasted an opportunity.

her breathing shallow. The strip stopped moving. Whoever stood there must have gone motionless on the other side of the thin wood.

A narrow beam of light slid along the threshold, careful and steady, beneath the seam where floor met frame. It traveled from one side to the other and returned, as if the watcher were testing for light or motion inside.

She covered her mouth with her palm to trap the sound rising in her throat. The light held, then blinked out, but the shape outside did not withdraw. Metal touched the lock and lifted away with a faint click. The knob turned a fraction and settled back.

A soft scrape came from outside, of leather on wood, perhaps a shoe shifting. Then nothing again. The tension built until her nerves screamed for release. She wanted to pound on the door, to shout for them to leave, but that would confirm she was awake, alone, and vulnerable.

Instead, she slid down the wall slowly, sitting on the cold floor, her back against the wood. The position brought her eyes closer to the gap under the door. She held her breath and peered through, seeing leather soles and shoes that shone. Suddenly the figure dropped. She sat back upright just in time for the beam of light to return.

She stayed pinned in places. Her pulse hammered hard enough to carry through the panel. Minutes lengthened until she could no longer guess at how long they waited. The strip under the door never moved.

Whoever waited in the hall was not leaving.

They were watching.

Waiting.

And they had all night.