



DAMNIEN

A MAFIA ROMANCE

ERIC STEELE

DAMIEN

A MAFIA ROMANCE

ERIC STEELE



CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty - One](#)

[Chapter Twenty - Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgment](#)

1. [Heiden](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[More Books by Eric Steele](#)

[About the Author](#)

© Copyright 2019 - All rights reserved.

It is not legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locations is purely coincidental.

Dear readers,

*After the release of Zayn, „**Damien**“ is now the second part of this exciting and sensual mafia series, the sequel will be published in short intervals.*

It is not an ordinary story, but one that touches your heart and makes your heart beat faster. I would also like to warn sensitive readers, this story has been written close to reality and partly shows dark abysses away from our society.

I wish you a special reading pleasure.

Eric Steele

Chapter One: Everly

I'm so tired. I can feel my body shutting down in a way that even this espresso can't fix, I thought, thumbing through the medical forms on my clipboard as I went over my notes during my break. I was working the night shift on the hospital floor, trying to finish my master's in nursing, and I could sense that the finish line was near. I couldn't wait to start working, to really indulge in my profession and make a difference in society. People have always asked me why I wanted to join the medical profession, trying to talk me out of it with cautions of long hours and insufficient pay for the unestablished. I didn't care though, because it was where my heart is. I couldn't imagine my life any differently, and no matter how hard it was on my body to juggle both work and school, I knew it would eventually pay off. I was putting away a few forms, sharing a few pleasantries with the other nurses cramming for exams near me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Looking over at the clock, I saw it was well after two in the morning and the hospital floors were quiet.

It was so strange to see it like that because of how busy it could get during the day. How many people needed assistance, how many lives we'd hopefully be able to save. I gazed around under the fluorescent lighting, sitting behind the front desk inputting data into the computer when I saw someone approach me in my periphery.

"You look rather busy for someone that rarely ever goes home," he said.

"There's too much to do to ever really leave, now isn't there?" I teased, looking up at Will and noticing that, like me, he probably hadn't slept in weeks. He handed me a cup of coffee and I shot him an appreciative grin as I let the warm liquid slide down my throat, filling me with the energy I desperately needed. I downed it faster than I would've liked. Will was my study buddy and coworker. We'd decided it was best to share notes for a while during the rare times things were this quiet.

"I can't believe we're going to be at a point soon when this is all over and we're thrown headfirst into work," said Will, and I nodded at him.

"It's never really going to be easy, but I believe it'll be better than cramming notes in the middle of the night between shifts and drinking endless amounts of coffee trying to do both," I said, and he smiled.

We'd both started working towards our master's degree at around the same time, and we quickly became friends because we were just in each other's hair too often. We quickly realized just how well we bounced information off one another, and even though we may have had a moment of uncertainty along the way, we always remained just friends. In this line of work, having friends, — having a social life at all is pretty much unheard of. *If you really want this, you have to eat, sleep, and breathe it,* I thought, thinking about all of the people who have doubted me over the years. I couldn't wait not only to prove them all wrong, I also wanted to see just how far I could push myself before I began questioning my profession. You have to have a strong stomach to work in this field, and mine is much stronger than everyone else's around me.

Unlike Will, I had a secret profession on the side that I desperately wished I could be rid of. It wasn't healthy and it was tearing me down faster than I could muster up the courage to build myself back up. But I was usually backed into a corner and I didn't dare let the people involved down.

I felt the exhaustion wash over me as I struggled to keep my eyes open, feeling them grow puffier by the minute. I took out my phone, feeling it buzz in my hand, as I realized I had a few too many missed calls. *Not again,* I thought, wondering whether it was a good idea to ignore it, to just let it be

and hope that wouldn't land me in too much trouble.

But I already knew that I'd never be able to do that because I had obligations, responsibilities to those closest to me. I couldn't back down when they were counting on me, and they always say that people come and go but family is forever. I hesitated, hitting the redial button, and I listened to it ring, feeling my heart sink into my stomach.

"You're needed, Everly," was all the voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Is my father requesting me?"

"You're needed for another job, and this time you're going to need a few extra tools," I heard one of my father's men say, his words cutting through me like a knife.

"I'm really caught up with work here; I haven't had a moment to myself all day. Surely, Father can find someone else to do—"

"Everly, you and I both know that when your father requests you, your duty is to heed that call. I will text you the address, but I am counting on you to be here so we can both keep our heads. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," I said, through my teeth, slamming the phone down on the desk so hard it scared Will.

"Whoa, are you okay?" he asked.

"It's nothing, just a little bit of family drama," I said, and that wasn't exactly a lie.

"Go ahead. Things are probably going to remain this quiet for the rest of the evening, and you're not going to be able to study if your mind is clouded with worry," he said, shooing me away. He promised he'd cover for me if necessary.

"Thank you, Will," I said, giving him a hug before I gathered my things.

I made my way through the empty corridors, pulling out my phone to read the text with my instructions. It detailed the kind of wound I'd be dealing with and all the medication I'd need to take care of it. At the very bottom was the address, and I knew there was a band of people counting on me to make sure whoever is hurt manages to pull through.

I sighed, sneaking my way into one of the stockrooms to gather a bit of medication, stuffing it into my bag, and checking behind me before I headed out. The evening air was cool on my skin, calming the fire that was burning inside of me. I hated having to make these 'house calls', I hated that my father used my passion for his own gain, especially seeing the kind of men he dealt with. It was undoubtedly disgusting, but there was nothing I could do to better the situation.

I had an obligation to my father, to my family, and I had to do my part. I didn't want to think about what would happen if I ever flat out ignored his call. Even though he told me that he loved me unconditionally, it didn't soften the blow of being used. I threw my bag into the passenger seat of my car, pulling out of the hospital parking lot and taking off down the highway to this unknown location.

I drove for what felt like forever until the GPS took me deep into an old, rundown neighborhood, and before I could get my bearings, I was already pulling up to the house. There were two men sitting outside and I did recognize them, but that didn't make me feel any better.

"It's about time you showed up," one of them said before they opened the door, and I was immediately hit by the scent of unwashed men and liquor. I never appreciated how my father paraded these men around; in his line of work, I was sure he was going to get us all killed one day. I wanted nothing to do with his Mafia lifestyle. I hated putting myself in the middle of danger, but I knew that if I were ever on my own, I would be far less safe than under his roof. A part of me wondered whether my father would actually ever let me out from under his watch, but I decided it was better not to think about it. These were things I couldn't worry about while I was trying to finish my master's degree and land a nursing job. I worried that the more time I spent pondering that thought, the more I'd be

inclined to disobey him and try desperately to break away.

I entered the living room of the old house, looking around at all the furniture covered with white sheets. Some were splattered with dry, crusting blood and the men sitting on them turned to acknowledge me. They all made me incredibly uncomfortable, but I knew they would never do anything to hurt me while they were working under my father. I moved through the house, making my way into the small kitchen, and saw my father standing by the sink with a glass in his hand.

“My dear, thank you for coming,” he said, but I could hear the disappointment in his voice. *Does he just expect me to drop everything and run to him whenever he wants? Surely he knows I have other responsibilities,* I thought, picking up on his tone.

“What are we dealing with today?” I asked.

“It’s a small gunshot wound. It shouldn’t take too long to patch up, but I need him back on the job first thing tomorrow,” he said, and I could only think about how my father used his men like animals, making them do his dirty work no matter how hurt they were, no matter how much they needed to rest and recover. The man sitting at the small, wooden kitchen table bleeding out didn’t seem to care. He threw back what looked like a glass of whiskey before I approached him.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, and I could smell the liquor on his breath. He was absolutely disgusting, and I could only imagine the kind of terrible things he must’ve done to get a shot like this one. I spent a little over two hours patching him up, feeling the sweat on his skin as I sewed up the wound, glancing up at the clock on the wall every few minutes. I wanted nothing more than to just be done with him, to go home and finally get some rest. My body was starting to give up when I finally finished, and I knew that if I didn’t get any rest soon, I would crash far harder than I could allow myself to. I had to keep my head held high and stay alert because exams were coming up soon.

“Thank you, Everly. If there’s anything you need, or if you need for me to write anything to excuse you from your day tomorrow, do let me know,” my father said, and to think I thought all of his parental instincts were dead.

“That won’t be necessary, Father. If there’s nothing else you need, I’ll be heading out now,” I told him, and he nodded.

“I love you, Everly,” he said as I gathered my things.

“I love you, too,” I replied, the words struggling to come out because of how much I hated that he made me do these things for him. The drive home was filled with loud radio music because I had to keep myself awake long enough to actually make it home. Once I got inside, I shut the door and knocked out right on the couch. I didn’t even have it in me to make it to the bed.

I slept for about four hours before I had to be up again, and it wasn’t long before I was right back at school, going through my coursework and classes as fast as I could so I might be able to manage a nap somewhere during the day. I was reviewing notes in the cafeteria when I must’ve drifted off because I felt a nudge on my shoulder.

“Hey, they’re closing up in here,” I heard a woman say as my eyelids struggled to flutter open.

“Oh my God, how long was I out?” I started, asking her as if she’d know.

“Well, when I got here you were sleeping and I’ve been here for about two hours,” she said with a chuckle.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I exclaimed, rushing to get myself together because I had to be at work soon.

“Late for something?” she asked.

“I have work at the hospital in a half hour. Thank you so much for waking me. My name is Everly,” I said, calming down long enough to stretch out my hand to shake hers.

“It’s not a problem. Trust me, around this time we’re all falling asleep whenever we can. My

name is Penelope.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, sharing a genuine smile with the girl, feeling like maybe we were hitting it off. Was it possible for a nursing student to have *two* friends? We bid each other goodbye, and I thought about how nice she was all the way to the hospital. *I wonder if she’s in any of my classes*, I mused, making a mental note to check my class list when I got home. My evening shift was routine, just like it always was, and when I managed to finally get home without a call from my father, it felt incredible.

I threw my stuff down in front of the coffee table, changing into some comfortable sweats before I settled down with something to eat and opened up my laptop. I had a few assignments I needed to submit, and right as I did that I remembered Penelope. I searched through my class list and found only one Penelope. When I caught sight of her last name, it shook me to my core.

“Penelope Ruiz? The daughter of a Mob boss. Just like me,” I said, knowing then that my life was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

Chapter Two: Damien

I was really not looking forward to getting off the plane and returning to work after the vacation I just had. It was much needed and gave just enough time to clear my head. I'd been so swamped with work lately I hadn't really had any time to myself and it was great to put myself first for a change. I knew that being home meant that there were going to be a lot of questions about my time away. I knew that my mother would want to know every little detail about my trip when I saw her, but I wasn't really in the mood to divulge the details. I sat in my first-class airplane seat, took out my pen, and filled out a few forms while I threw back another glass of hard liquor. My body wasn't ready to part with vacation mode, but I knew that the faster I got back into the swing of things, the better off I'd be.

I thought a lot about the circumstances that occurred over the last few months and was glad that I'd come back in time for my friend Zayn's wedding. After everything they've been through together and acting as a temporary bodyguard for my best friend, I learned a lot about the kind of relationships that stand the test of time. I looked over to the woman sitting in the seat next to me, eyes down on her magazine, legs toned and crossed one over the other as she studied her articles thoroughly. She smelled incredible and she was just the kind of distraction I was looking for, but I knew I had to snap out of it. *Vacation is over now, Damien*, I reminded myself as she looked up at me and smiled.

"You've been working the entire flight. So much to do, huh?" she asked, noticing my file and the stack of papers in the seat pocket in front of me.

"Unfortunately so. I may have been wrapped up in work for the last few hours, but you haven't put that magazine down yourself. That exciting, huh?" I teased, and she laughed.

"I hate to say it, but I'm just hoping to find a bit of distraction from work myself."

"Headed on vacation?" I asked her.

"Yes, I am. What about you?" she asked in return.

"Nah, I'm headed back home to see my family, get back to work for real. You know, as much as I'd like to prolong my vacation, I have way too much to do and my best friend's wedding to think about."

"That's exciting," she said, her eyes falling to my lips, and I could tell that she was thinking exactly what I was thinking. I couldn't allow myself to give in. I heard the flight attendant over the speaker, announcing that we were going to land soon. I gave her a quick smile, returning to work, and shelving the growing need to let loose one last time. But we both got off the plane and bid each other a polite goodbye. I hated to see her go. If I wasn't back home and needed back at work immediately, I would probably be asking her out to dinner right about now.

I turned on my cell phone as soon as I got out of the terminal, and the calls and texts began to flood in. *Looks like I'm not going to have any well-deserved rest after my flight. Straight to work it seems.* I looked down at my phone, seeing my father's name pop up on the screen, and I sighed. My father and I never saw eye-to-eye, and sometimes I'd even tell people that he was dead so I could avoid talking about him. I respected the man, but he never treated me like a son the way Zayn's father had. I truly felt like Zayn was the only family I had left, and when in the presence of my own blood, that sentiment never changed. I dialed my father's number, trying to slip my arms out of my suit jacket to stuff it into my carry-on. The heat washed over me as I made my way out to the parking lot.

"Damien," said my father.

"Hello, Father. I see that you already have quite a bit for me to do," I said, waiting for him to

come at me for even speaking about the subject.

“Is there something else that you’d rather be doing?” he asked snidely.

“Not at all, Father. Where are you going to have me go?” I asked, waiting for the details so I could put an end to the conversation. I’d rather just do the work; I dreaded having to face him and the rest of my family later. I would avoid it for as long as I could, but my father liked to band together for dinner every once in a while to pretend like we were a real family. The only person sharing the last name “Ruiz” that I cared about was my sister. I hated that my father was trying to keep her from following her dreams, and I’d told her many times over that there’s no life for her in the Mafia. She had to make her own path, and she was the only one out of the two of us that may manage to get out from under my father before it’s too late.

My father told me the location of the hit, reminding me to make it clean before he got back from work. The unnecessary timeline just angered me further because he was well aware of my capabilities, but I always wrote it off as him trying to make sure I was cut out for the work I’d been assigned. I hung up the phone and got into the car that pulled up, barely able to see through the blacked-out windows to make sure it was one of my men.

“How was vacation, boss?” Angelo asked as I got into the passenger seat, throwing my carry-on into the back.

“It was exactly what I needed, but I have to get back to work. As do we all,” I said, feeling the sadness of leaving my break behind overtake me, but I had to lead by example. These men simply wanted to acquire the same kind of wealth that has been filtering through my family for generations, and they didn’t care how many people they had to kill to get it. *That’s what makes them loyal.*

We drove down busy streets, pulling up to the revolving doors of one of the most prestigious hotels in the country. The valet opened up the front door, welcoming us into the hotel and taking our fake names down as I retrieved my carry-on. I had to appear as though I blended in and there was nothing more suspicious than a man checking into a hotel without any bags.

“Angelo, I need to make sure that we have access to the first-floor cameras before we do anything. I’m going to have to get into one of the backrooms, but we need to collect our hotel room keys first,” I whispered.

“Let me do that, Damien. You head up to the room and give me a call. I’ll make sure there are no immediate eyes on us so we can get this done and be out of here in no time.”

“Alright,” I agreed, letting him scoot off to start talking up one of the staff. Angelo was my right-hand man, always as good as his word. He never let me down and he grew smarter with every new assignment we received. I could always count on him to get the work done, and when it came to fulfilling my father’s wishes, we both knew we had no choice. I sauntered over to the check-in desk, talking up the beautiful receptionist as she handed me the keys and I was off to my room.

Once I exited the elevator, I made a mental note of how the floor was set up, giving Angelo a call so that we could figure out a way to slip into the room unnoticed.

“You have eyes?” I asked, wondering how he could’ve possibly gotten hold of the cameras in such a short amount of time.

“The lady I met decided to do me a favor as long as I promised to take her out to dinner,” he said, and I chuckled.

“Of course,” I scoffed.

“I’m going to cut the cameras in fifteen minutes. Gather what you need and head down to the room. Take care of business, stuff him in the closet, and we’ll have clean-up on the way in five minutes,” said Angelo, always on top of his game.

I made sure my gun was loaded and that I had a knife in my lower suit pocket before Angelo gave me the word that he'd cut the cameras and I was off. I hurried down to the first floor, sliding the key card I retrieved from the check-in desk after convincing the receptionist that my friend had simply lost his key, into the slot. Once I entered, the scent of hard liquor and sex hit my nostrils and I made my way over to the lavish king-sized bed where my target was fast asleep.

I moved through the room carefully, realizing that this was going to be a much easier job than I thought. But I must've hit something on the way in because he jolted up out of his sleep.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked, getting ready to call for help.

"Scream and I'll not only kill you, but I'll make sure to destroy that bustling business of yours while I'm at it," I said, thinking about how it would affect his children once I took him out.

He didn't say another word, and he seemed to be trying to reach into the night-table drawer to retrieve his gun. I was too quick on my feet for him, getting my blade under his neck faster than he could say *fire*. I slit his throat expertly, spilling as little blood on the carpet as possible before I wrapped him up in the bedsheets, took a photo for proof, and stuffed his body in the closet. I busted out my cell phone and dialed Angelo.

"Call for clean-up. We're done here," I said.

The last few weeks have been about the same, just taking care of business as usual. I didn't have much to look forward to at the end of every day because my father had everything planned for me. He never did take me seriously as a partner in the business the way Zayn's father had when he released his power onto him. I wished I could obtain that kind of power within my own family, but I thought it best not to dwell on what I couldn't have.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket, dreading another contract from my father. I almost didn't answer, but this time it wasn't him. "Why hello, Polizzi," I said, quite surprised that he'd be calling.

"How have things been since you got back from vacation?" asked Zayn, quite cheerful.

"It's been the same old business, nothing new to report. How are Mariana and the wedding planning going?" I asked, wishing he'd take my mind off of my work and call me away for another assignment.

"Everything has been pretty quiet around here and I'm so grateful for that. After everything we've been through, we could use a bit of calm. I just wanted to check in because I know how difficult it is for you to be around your father," he said, and I appreciated that.

"I'm seeing him this evening for the first time since I've been back, and I can't say I'm looking forward to it. But I am looking forward to checking up on my little sister; she's been doing great things, working to finish her degree," I said.

"Of course. Don't be afraid to call if you need anything, Damien. Give Penelope my best," he said.

"Will do, Zayn. Take care," I said, hanging up.

It was indeed refreshing to hear from him, and it made me feel a bit better about having to see my father later that evening. I knew he was going to pick me apart for everything I had done, and nothing I've done since I've been back could ever amount to congratulations from him. I always wondered what made him so hard, so cold and withdrawn from the world. He hasn't seen the kind of turmoil and loss that Zayn's father has, and that's the kind of thing that makes somebody go numb. I suppose he was always like that, even when I was a child. He always expected me to outdo all those excellent expectations of his, and I never seemed to be able to make him proud. There was a lot of resentment in our relationship, but to say I didn't care about him would be a lie. If I didn't care, I would've been

long gone and I never would've looked back.

I had to look out for my mother, for my sister, and without me they would probably be subject to just as bad a life as my father. It may be glamorous, but it is also incredibly dangerous. I made a mental note to make sure that one day, my mother and sister get the chance they deserve to leave that lifestyle behind without having to give anything up. I would work my ass off to make sure they had everything they need to succeed in life, but for right now that meant carrying out my father's wishes. I sat back in my car, driving myself to a local boutique to pick up my freshly pressed suit. I wanted to run my own errands for a change, because I hoped it would help distract me from the evening ahead.

I worried what my father would say once we got in the same room together, as he hadn't been too keen on me taking any time off in the first place. He didn't care much about when I was working alongside Zayn for those few weeks, but the moment I asked to just relax for a while he unsurprisingly called me weak. He said no man in this profession ever has to rest unless he's too weak to handle it. We had a pretty big fight the night I left, but I was running myself mad carrying out all this work for him with no end in sight. The tension was definitely still high, but I supposed that's to be expected given he's the one calling all the shots.

The drive back to my old home was surreal, especially after being away from it so long. It didn't seem so grand the last time I was in its presence, with its beautiful pillars, shrubbery lining the property, and impeccable marble flooring. I could even see the beautiful chandelier in the high windows at the very top of the mansion and it was lit, leaving a stunning shadow over the entire compound. I parked my car, straightened my tie, and slid my key into the slot, wondering if it still even worked. Surely after the stunt I pulled, my father had every right in his own mind to change the locks. Luckily, it did work and I went inside, taking in the expensive foyer as I set aside the flowers I'd brought for my mother.

"Oh, darling, is that you?" I heard her call out from the top of the stairs.

"It is," I said, watching her rush down, her Manolos carefully catching on the steps. Her youth was better preserved than anyone I've ever seen at her age. She'd donned a new diamond necklace around her décolletage and it occurred to me that Father had either been working too much or stepping out on her again. Either way, she looked incredibly happy, and for that I was grateful. I heard the sound of my sister rustling upstairs, and it dawned on me that she must've just come back from her shift at the hospital. I'd spoken to her a few times over the last few days, and it seemed as though the workload had begun to tire her out. When I eventually saw her saunter down the stairs, she looked brighter and happier than usual. I wondered what had gotten into her, because last time I checked, she was too stressed to breathe.

"Well, if it isn't my lovely sister," I teased, embracing her.

"Aha. Welcome home, Damien. Nice to see you back," she said, looking up at me as though I were a stranger. I felt as though I'd aged a lot since being gone: my beard has grown in, and to some extent I felt like a completely different person. I knew that would all change when my father eventually came rolling in, desperate to pick both Penelope and I apart to see what information he could get on us. My father had a knack for turning the things we were the most excited about into a lesson on why we should pay more attention to the family. *I am tired of him and he isn't even here yet. This is going to be a very long evening,* I thought as my mother led Penelope and me into the dining room while we had a bit of time to catch up before Father returned.

It wasn't long before I heard the car pull up to the front of the house, and we all rushed to go meet him, even though we'd much rather stay exactly where we were. He opened the door, tossing his

briefcase to the ground so that he could embrace Penelope. There was something about the way he interacted with her that gave me hope that there's a heart in that cold, old man, but the moment he saw me, his expression completely changed.

"Well, if it isn't my son. I'm glad that you're here to join us, Damien," he said, withdrawn.

"Thank you, Father, I'm sure we have a lot of catching up to do," I replied dutifully, even though I'd rather not speak about business at all.

"Now, why don't we all move this conversation into the dining room. I haven't seen you all in far too long, and it's time I had my family around the table again," said my mother. My father reached down to plant a light kiss on her lips, but she seemed to try to hide a frown afterwards. I knew that their relationship was rocky, but I didn't know the extent of how far they'd grown apart since I've been gone. Needless to say, it shocked me.

We all gathered around the dining table, starting with the first course, and just as we got to the bread basket my father began asking all of his questions.

"So, how was that little vacation of yours?" he asked, making it very clear that he didn't really care how it went.

"It was fine, Father. Though I'm sure there are other things more exciting that we could talk about," I said.

"Well, I have to ask, son, have you been seeing anyone since you've been gone?" asked my mother, quite hopeful.

"No, Mother, I haven't."

"Not even that Marissa? Weren't you two getting quite comfortable?" she pleaded, asking about my now ex-girlfriend.

"I'm afraid nothing new has been happening with me, but I can't say the same for Penelope. You've been glowing since I walked in here; what's gotten into you?" I asked, turning my attention towards her.

"Well, you know they always say that it's near impossible to make friends in the medical field, but I've been spending a lot of time with a new friend and she makes getting through the workload a lot easier."

"That's incredible!" I said, trying to sound more interested than I actually was.

"What's the name of this *friend* of yours?" asked my father.

"Oh, Father. Her name is Everly. Everly Greco," said Penelope, and my ears perked up when I heard her last name.

"Penelope, dear. I need you to be careful. Leo Greco runs in different waters than we do, and the man has a lot of enemies. I just want to make sure that you're being careful," said my father, and it was the first thing he'd said in a long time that I agreed with.

"Father, you can't be serious. You have a lot of enemies, too—you simply can't argue. Everly has been very nice to me and I'd appreciate if it you all just let it be," she said, and I had to recognize that I was rather intrigued.

I worried about her safety, so later that night, I called one of my men to run a background check on Everly just to be safe. After getting my response, I called up Angelo later so he could put me in touch with a guy to keep an eye on Penelope and her friend. *In this business, we can't be too safe. There are people waiting to take us down at every corner, and the last thing I want is for my sister to get involved in any of that.*

Chapter Three: Everly

I've been feeling a bit more refreshed as of late. It's been nice having someone around that understands the workload like I do. I'm so happy that she also understands the Mob life just as much as I do. In the beginning, I was worried about her true intentions, whether her family would have some kind of issue with mine, but she assured me that they had no bad blood. It was nice to feel like I had a bit of a social life again, because any time spent with my friends was always at the hospital during work shifts. I woke up early that morning, running my fingers through my long tresses as I pulled them back into a low bun. I slipped out from under the sheets, running a hot shower before getting dressed. I heard my phone buzz on the charger at the side of my bed and I rushed to answer it before it cut off.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey, Everly. I'm going to be a bit late to class today, but will you save me a seat?" Penelope asked, sounding rather tired but I brushed it off as we all were.

"Of course, Penelope. I have a bit of work to catch up on at lunch. Will you be on campus after class?" I asked her, hoping we could go over our notes together.

"Definitely!" she exclaimed, and I smiled before I hung up.

I stuffed my textbooks into my bag, making my way downstairs to hopefully avoid my father on the way out. Unfortunately, like always, he was sitting at the kitchen island sipping an espresso and waiting to see me off to school.

"Good morning, Everly," he said, with a bit more sincerity in his voice than usual.

"Hello, Father. I didn't expect to see you here; I know how hectic work is going to be today," I said snidely.

"Well, I just wanted to see my beautiful daughter off to school. Is there anything wrong with that?" he asked, reaching over to kiss me lightly on the forehead.

I closed my eyes, wishing I could just get out of his hair for a little while, because the more time I spent in his company, the more I wished he'd understand I wanted nothing to do with his business.

"If there's anything you need, don't be afraid to call. I have class, but I'll try my best to get back to you in a timely manner," I said, trying to be civil so he wouldn't catch my tone of voice.

"I will keep that in mind, dear. Have a lovely day at school," he said, letting me out of his embrace as I stumbled out of the front door. I hated the way he tried to make me feel included. While I knew he'd never really let anything happen to me, I had a hard time believing that he didn't enjoy using me. It was so easy for him to have me on call in exchange for paying for medical school, and I wished he saw that it wasn't good for me to be in the company of the men he did business with.

I got into my car, drove down to campus, and found a good spot to park before I headed to the lecture hall. It was as strenuous as always and I looked over at the clock, noticing that about a half hour of class had gone by and the seat next to me had not yet been filled. I texted Penelope to see where she was, but just as I did I heard the auditorium doors swing open and in she came.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, huffing and puffing as she settled down next to me.

"No, no, it's quite alright; we'll discuss what you missed over lunch," I said, and she smiled back at me.

Class ended a half hour later and we were together in the cafeteria catching up over our trays of unhealthy lunch, quite ironic given our aspiring professions. I shared my notes with her, and she

started telling me how difficult it's been for her to make friends over the time she'd been at school.

"Trust me, I definitely understand that," I said.

"Everyone is either too tired to converse, or too withdrawn to care about anything other than how they do on their assignments," she said, and I agreed.

"I have a few friends I've maintained over the years, but I barely see them. Others I've drifted apart from, but I'm usually too busy myself to make new friends. I'm still grateful that you woke me up that day; it's been refreshing having someone to vent to," I said truthfully.

"It definitely is. Everly, I was wondering if you'd like to come over for dinner this evening. I know how hectic your schedule is, but if you don't have anything else going on, we'd love to have you," she said with a smile.

"I actually had someone cover my shift at the hospital because I felt like I needed a day to myself, so I suppose I really can't decline that lovely offer," I led on, about to accept but then I began to worry about what her Mafia family might be like. *If her father is anything like mine, it's probably best that I stay away*, I thought, but I just couldn't leave her hanging.

"Will you join me?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, grinning back at her, even though deep down I was worried about the kind of impression I was going to make on her family.

We went our separate ways and I headed home early to get ready for the evening ahead. I wasn't sure what to wear, how to do my hair, or what kind of makeup to put on, but I knew I had to figure it out sooner rather than later. Penelope insisted on picking me up, but I assured her I'd be alright if she just sent along the address. She persisted because she wanted me to truly take the evening off, and I eventually agreed because that was just very nice of her. I locked my bedroom door, enjoying the empty house below as I made my way over to my extensive closet.

I thumbed through dresses, blouses, and skirts before I pulled out a rather comfortable A-line skirt and chiffon blouse that captured the exact image I wanted to portray that evening. I decided to pull my hair back into a high ponytail, letting the hair cascade down my back as I painted my lips a simple nude shade. I heard Penelope's car pull up through the gate and gazed out of my balcony doors to see her headlights shining onto the grand front doors of my father's mansion. I hurried downstairs to meet her, watching as she came out of the back seat.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Oh, silly. I don't drive," she said, and I chuckled, getting into the back with her as we took off to her home. When we approached her mansion, the gates swung open to reveal incredibly beautiful architecture, quite similar to my own father's I noticed. I gazed out at their perfect lawns, their bodyguards surrounding the property, and it's almost as if I never left home. Once we got out of the car, I felt my heart sink into my stomach because I really didn't know what to expect.

"What?" Penelope asked.

"What?" I asked, right back at her.

"You look really nervous, Everly," she teased.

"Well, I haven't been over to anyone's house in a very long time apart from my family. Needless to say, I just hope I make a good first impression," I said.

"Oh, nonsense. They're going to love you," she replied, opening up the front door to the grand foyer. A woman, who I believed to be Penelope's mother, approached in her expensive tweed jacket and pearls. They shared quite a resemblance, and I noticed just how well she'd held onto her beauty even though she'd begun to age.

“Why hello, dear. You must be Everly,” she said, reaching in to give me a hug.

“Yes, that’s me. Hello, Mrs. Ruiz; you have a lovely home,” I said to her.

“Why thank you, dear. It seems Mr. Ruiz is a bit caught up with work at the moment, but he will be here very soon. In the meantime, why don’t you follow me into the living room?”

I nodded, following her with Penelope by my side, catching sight of the exquisite dinner laid out on the table that must’ve taken hours to prepare. I heard the front door open, but the voice that followed couldn’t have possibly been Mr. Ruiz.

“Mom?” I hear him call out.

“Damien, we’re in the dining room,” said Mrs. Ruiz.

I strolled a beautiful man, his suit perfectly pressed, his hair gelled back, and I was taken aback by just how handsome he was. His eyes gleaming, the stubble of his beard clean cut, and to be quite honest, he didn’t appear too happy to be there. I felt instantly attracted to him, but I did take notice of how cold and withdrawn he seemed.

“Hello, uh, Everly. My name is Damien,” he said, introducing himself and shaking my hand before taking his seat at the table, appearing as though he’d rather be anywhere else than here.

“Hello,” I got in, as Mrs. Ruiz motioned for us all to sit down. My seat was unfortunately across from Damien, and I wondered if making small talk with him was even a good idea.

“So, Damien, why so glum?” asked Penelope.

“Work as usual, Penelope,” he said, filling his glass with wine before he sipped on it lightly.

“Thank you very much for having me,” I said, turning my attention to Mrs. Ruiz who smiled back at me. “So, Damien, how does it feel to have your sister in the medical profession?” I asked, trying to make small talk but he wasn’t having any of it.

“Same as you, I suppose. It’s a good profession, and I know she likes it. I think,” he said, not even bothering to look up at me as he spoke.

I stopped trying to converse with him as Mrs. Ruiz started passing around the food. Everything looked so scrumptious and I heard my stomach rumble as the mashed potatoes came around to me. But I felt Damien’s eyes burn into me the entire evening, as we tried to eat slowly hoping that Mr. Ruiz would eventually show up. Hours had passed at this point and he was nowhere to be seen; I could tell that this left Mrs. Ruiz very embarrassed.

“My apologies, Everly. It seems that my husband has gotten a bit too caught up with work. I was hoping he’d have a chance to meet you,” she said.

“It’s quite alright. I’m sure he’s really busy; I know what that’s like,” I said, trying to stop the words as they came out of my mouth.

“Oh?” asked Penelope.

“I mean, my father is also gone quite often, so I know what that’s like,” I corrected myself, hoping they wouldn’t think anything strange of it.

“Ah, well, thank you, Mom, for the lovely dinner. I’m going to steal Everly away upstairs so we can go over a bit of work if that’s alright with you,” said Penelope.

“Of course, dear. Go along, and let me know if you girls need anything,” she said.

“Thank you again, Mrs. Ruiz,” I said.

“Not a problem, dear,” she replied.

I was so glad to be rescued from Damien’s beady stare. I wondered if anyone noticed. I wondered if anyone managed to see just how much Damien turned his attention to me even though he came off as so cold. I worried if that could somehow cause a kind of rift between Penelope and me, but it seemed

as though she didn't even notice. I took the opportunity to start digging a little about her brother because I was genuinely curious.

"Your brother didn't seem too happy to be in attendance this evening," I said, wondering if she'd find the conversation strange, but she didn't seem to mind.

"He's been a bit weird ever since he got back from his vacation. I don't know what's up with him. He and father didn't leave things too well when he left," she began to say.

"Why is that?"

"Father has very unrealistic expectations of what Damien should and shouldn't be doing. He does so much for him, but Father never really gives him any credit for it. He doesn't apply that same energy to me, and I'm surprised Damien doesn't resent me for it," she said, spilling her truth faster than I would've imagined.

"Have they always had such a rocky relationship?" I asked.

"I suppose so. There was always something different about the way they interacted, even when we were just kids," she said.

"I suppose I really can't understand because I don't have any siblings. My mother has been away on a resort trip for a while now, and I miss her. The house has been incredibly empty," I said, and Penelope looked at me as though she completely understood where I was coming from.

"Why don't we go over our notes, and then maybe we can sneak downstairs and get a snack in a few hours?" she offered, and I agreed. It felt so strange not to be at the hospital at this hour. We shared notes and finished our assignments until we eventually fell asleep curled up around our textbooks. I woke up around four in the morning, realizing that my father had absolutely no idea where I was.

"Shit, shit!" I muttered under my breath, shooting him a quick text to let him know that I was studying late and that I'm staying over with a friend. Luckily, he wasn't looking for me to conduct any work and I knew he wouldn't care where I was otherwise. I looked over at the dimly lit bedroom, feeling the dryness in my throat grow so I decided to head downstairs for a glass of water. I thought about waking Penelope up to ask, but I'm sure she wouldn't mind. I lifted myself from the bed, careful not to wake her, and opened the bedroom door trying to remember how to get to the kitchen.

The layout of the house felt so similar but so different all at the same time. I felt my way around the dark corridor until I finally found the kitchen and switched on the light to reveal a man sitting at the island.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I said, noticing that Damien was sitting there with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"You guys were up late studying, huh?" he asked.

"I have no idea how we fell asleep. I hope your parents aren't going to mind," I said worriedly.

"Trust me, they really don't care. They did seem to like you, though, which is good for Penelope. I can't remember the last time I saw her with a friend," he said, sounding a bit more genuine this time around.

"I'm glad. I, uh, just came to get a glass of water," I said, trying not to make too much eye contact with him.

"First cabinet on the left," he said, pointing to where the glasses were, and I smiled, muttering a little, "Thank you."

I reached for the glass, feeling his eyes burn into me. I could tell that they didn't leave me as I made my way over to the fridge to pour myself a glass of water from the dispenser.

"I'll be heading back up now. Penelope and I both have to get up for class in a couple hours," I said, making my way out of the room.

“Of course,” he said, finishing his glass before he got up as well. I assumed that he was going to head upstairs to bed, but he opened the front door and just left. I wondered where he could’ve possibly been going at this hour, and why he’d rather not spend time at home. Penelope did say that he had a rocky relationship with Mr. Ruiz, but I didn’t think it could be so bad that he’d take up residence somewhere else. I made a mental note to ask her about it before I headed back upstairs, shoving the books over and going back to sleep.

“Oh my God, what time is it?” I heard Penelope ask.

“We slept through the night,” I said, opting out of telling her about my little run-in with Damien earlier that morning.

“Oh my, I hope your parents are okay. Shit, I didn’t think that was going to happen,” she said apologetically.

“Trust me, it’s okay. I sent them a text saying I was studying late. It seems we both need more sleep after all,” I said with a chuckle.

“Well, if we don’t worry then we’re both going to be late for class. Here, borrow something of mine to wear and I’ll show you where the guest bathroom is,” she said.

“Thank you very much,” I replied, as she led me down the corridor to the bathroom, handing over a pile of clothes for me to wear.

It felt so strange, showering in her guest bathroom, but at least I could rest assured that Damien left earlier that morning and I didn’t have to worry about running into him on my way out. There was something about him that really intrigued me, something that made me question why he was the way he was. It was as if I had met two completely different men, one at the dining room table and one sipping whiskey in the wee hours of the morning. It surprised me to say the least, but I couldn’t ignore just how much time he spent looking at me. *I’m not sure how that makes me feel.*

Chapter Four: Damien

I can't remember the last time Penelope had a friend that remotely interested me in any way. Usually, it's because I'm worried about her wellbeing, not because I find anyone she spends time with attractive. I'm not sure what it is about this one that makes me feel so differently, that has caught my attention in such a way I'm wondering if it's going to be dangerous for me. I hated to get involved with women who were too close to my family circle, because there was always tragedy waiting to happen around every corner with the work we're involved in, as well as with how much money we amass at the end of every week. Some may call it insane, and many have tried to weasel their way into my life to drain me for every penny I've got.

Though something tells me that Everly isn't the type of girl to engage in that kind of behavior; she seems like she doesn't want anything to do with our lifestyle at all. We haven't run in the same circles before, nor have I spent much time engaging with her father, but I've heard stories that suggest he's a very dangerous man. I wondered if she was helping him in any way, or if she simply was oblivious to the inner workings of the lifestyle much like Penelope was at times. I thought a lot about our conversation in the kitchen that night, about how refreshing it was to talk to someone who didn't mention crime at every moment, that offered a different perspective on a world that I haven't heard in quite a while.

I went about my day as normal, hoping that I'd eventually be able to put Everly from my mind, but the more time I had to dwell, the longer she remained. I woke up early that morning, running a hot shower and reminding myself that I needed to focus on work if I ever wanted my father to take me seriously. The last thing I needed was to give him yet another complaint to use against me, especially seeing as I'm a bit over my head. I had to understand that no good could possibly come from pursuing Everly, especially seeing how close she is with Penelope. I didn't want to test the waters, but there would always be a part of me that believed she'd be a good fit, due to the fact she understood this lifestyle better than anyone I've been with before.

I could see it in her eyes, just how much she's seen, how far she must've gone to protect those around her—it's not the kind of thing anyone could ever ignore. There would always be the oblivious ones like my sister who truly believed we only spent our days acting tough instead of engaging in actual violence. *I'm doing everything I can to keep you away from that life, Penelope, but your friend only makes me more curious,* I thought, stepping out of the shower as I wrapped a towel around my waist and running my fingers through my wet hair as I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. I looked ghastly, like I hadn't had any sleep in far too long. Work had been incredibly stressful as of late because of how withdrawn my father has been, even though he expects things to carry on the same regardless.

There was a part of me that couldn't wait to take the business out from under him when he was too old to wield his gun any longer, so that I could start making my own decisions in life that benefited me and me alone. I got dressed quickly, knowing that I had to pass by the house before I went off to work to drop off some paperwork for my mother. I could already hear her now, pestering me to make a move on Everly because my mother was certainly not stupid. She knew exactly how I must've felt while looking at Everly, and I had to do everything in my power to make sure she understood that nothing could ever come of it.

I pulled out my cell phone as I got into the car, deciding I'd rather drive myself today. I dialed the

number of the man I'd asked to follow Everly and Penelope to hopefully arrange a meeting to discuss any findings he might have.

"Hello, Mr. Ruiz," he asked.

"Hello, Marco. I wanted to know if you were available for a meeting this evening. There are a few things I'd like to discuss," I said.

"Of course, where would you like to meet?" he asked, quite cooperatively and I made the mental note to thank Angelo for tracking him down.

"I'll send over the details."

"You got it, boss," he replied before I hung up.

I sighed, making my way to the mansion and feeling quite annoyed every time I entered those wrought iron gates. I hated the way the premises reminded me of a failed childhood, of trying to please the one man that only ever made my life difficult. I suppose I had to be grateful, though, because if it wasn't for him pushing me over the edge, I'm not sure I'd be in the same position I am today. Everything aligned perfectly the moment I decided to stand up for myself and take a break, only to return to a now new distraction. Once my mother lets my father know how much time I spent looking at Everly last night, there's no telling how disappointed he's going to be. I parked the car, turning the key into the lock of the front door, hoping that my mother was home as I'd forgotten to call beforehand.

"Hello? Mother?" I called out, clutching the stack of papers in my hand, reminding myself that I had business to attend to and I couldn't stay long.

"Oh, Damien, is that you?" I heard her call out before she came rushing to the door in her plush robe and nightgown as though she'd slept in way too late again. I decided not to ask questions this time, because she has been dealing with a lot lately and the last thing I wanted to do was ruffle her feathers.

"Hello, I can't stay too long but I needed to drop these papers off for you before I headed into work. I thought it'd be better to come by now than later this evening," I said, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

"Are you sure that's the reason you're here so early? If you ask me, it's probably because you don't want to run into your father. He did eventually come home, far later than I'd like, but at least he returned. I let him know how incredible our evening went, and speaking of which, that Everly girl has really caught your interest, hasn't she?"

Here we go. "What are you talking about, Mother?" I asked, trying to sound as uninterested as possible.

"I saw the way you were looking at her, Damien. No need to be shy—I suppose I can say that I'm glad you still have the ability to focus on something other than work. I was beginning to worry that you'd eventually turn out like your father," she said, caressing my cheek and turning my head so that I'd look her straight in the eyes.

"Mother, I really do have to get back to work now, but it was lovely seeing you," I said, embracing her quickly before I bolted, hoping I wouldn't have to answer anymore of her questions for a long time. My cell phone started ringing and I gazed down at the screen to see my father's number light up on the screen. Usually, he'd have one of his men reach out, and I wondered what this could possibly be about.

"Hello, Father," I said, waiting for him to tell me exactly what he wanted. I was growing tired of wasting time and beating around the bush, especially because I knew he always got a kick out of me suffering.

"Hello, Damien. I need you to come down to the office right away; there's some urgent business I

need you to attend to,” he said, and I wondered what it could possibly be now.

“Of course, Father. I stopped by the house to drop off some papers for Mom, but I’ll head down to the office to meet you right away,” I replied, waiting for his cold retort but there was none.

“Good,” was all he had to say before the call disconnected. I let out a sigh of frustration, wishing I could be holed up somewhere enjoying my day and not worrying myself with such insignificant matters. I got back into my car and made my way down to the tall office building in the middle of the city. Unlike many others like him, my father always managed to save face and put up a good front to the rest of the world so no one who wasn’t involved knew about his illegal activities. To everyone else, he appeared to be a wealthy businessman with a few extra hobbies—little did they know just how reckless and vengeful he could be.

I greeted the receptionist at the door and made my way up to his office in a packed elevator filled with people who were just trying to make ends meet. A few of them recognized me, but no one said anything for fear of upsetting the boss’s son. I commended them for their loyalty to my father, because it was something I felt I lacked in my day-to-day life. If he was just a tad bit nicer to me, maybe I wouldn’t hate him so much. Though if he was more pleasant, he might not be where he is today.

The walk down the corridor to the double doors of his office was quiet, and I peered into a few open doors to see his employees hard at work. I knew that the place was littered with his men bringing in real money, and it amazed me just how oblivious everyone else was to that fact. I knocked lightly on the door, letting myself in to see him perched behind his desk with an espresso in hand, reading over some papers and signing his next big business deal.

“Well, it took you long enough,” he said as I entered.

“It’s nice to see you, too, Father,” I said sarcastically, as I took a seat in one of his expensive armchairs.

“Listen, son, I know that you met with Leonardo’s daughter last night, ah, Everly I believe her name is.”

“Yes, I did,” I responded, furrowing my brow wondering what he could possibly be on about.

“Leonardo and I have been nothing but acquaintances over the years, always staying out of each other’s hair but never failing to answer each other’s call when needed. Listening to your mother drawl on about how interested you seemed to be in the Greco girl, it gave me a great idea,” he said.

“And what would that be?” I replied, through my teeth, knowing exactly what he was getting at.

“It would be good business for us to join forces. Since you already seem to be taken with the girl, there’s no harm in getting to know her further, maybe even date her.”

“Father, you’ve got to be kidding me,” I said, fed up with his behavior.

“Watch your mouth, son. I’m only trying to look out for what’s best for this family. You have to understand that when you sign up to be a part of this lifestyle, you have to make the sacrifices necessary to keep it afloat.”

“That is all fine and well, but I don’t use women for business, Father, and neither should you.”

“You know, I had a feeling you’d say something stupid like that. I know you don’t have what it takes to take over the family business, Damien. The more I see you in action, the more you blatantly disobey me, the clearer that is.”

“You may be a cold, hard businessman, Father, but I will always be the better man,” I said.

“And how could you possibly come up with something so foolish?” he asked.

“I have morals where you have ambition, and one of these days you’re going to realize that one certainly outweighs the other.”

“Morals mean nothing in this line of work, Damien. It’d be wise for you to remember that we fight

to get to where we are, and we have a target on our backs for the rest of our lives. Don't fight me on this. I need you to get close to Everly, and I need this alliance to happen," he said, and I didn't reply.

I simply got up and left because I couldn't handle any more talk of such preposterous ideas. *How does he expect me to get close to her just so I can use her for my own personal gain? It's that kind of behavior that reminds me that I don't want to be anything like him when the business eventually falls into my lap. I will do things differently to protect my family, and to keep me sane.*

Chapter Five: Everly

The past few days, I've been rather wrapped up thinking about someone I shouldn't. Every time I have a moment alone, whether I'm studying or hanging out with Penelope, I can't stop myself from thinking about her brother. I sat on my bed with my textbook in my lap, trying to put the thought from my mind because it was only distracting me.

I reached over to my nightstand to finish off the rest of the cold coffee I'd made a few hours earlier, as I managed to finish up my assignments well before the due date. I was supposed to be meeting Penelope at school, but I decided I needed a bit of time to study on my own and it was hard to be around her knowing just how attractive I found her brother. I knew avoiding her wasn't the answer, though, because she'd been nothing but nice and welcoming to me since we met and I couldn't believe how good it felt to have a friend to rely on.

I made a mental note to text her a bit later once I finished up a few chores around the house and completed my afternoon shift at the hospital. I already knew I didn't have to be there for very long, and the idea of leaving early always excites me. I had to enjoy it while I could because the moment I landed a job in the field, I wouldn't have any free time ever again. I threw my hair up into a bun, stuffing my things into my purse, and made my way out the door, noticing that my father's keys weren't on the hook in the foyer. *I could've sworn he said he was going to stay in today, but I guess like me, he changed his mind*, I thought, slamming the front door and heading out into the world. I texted Penelope to meet me at a local coffee shop before my shift so we could catch up, because as much as I wanted to avoid the inevitable, I knew it wasn't a good idea.

The aromatic smell of expensive espresso filled my senses as I entered the little coffee shop, known across the city for having some of the best lattes in town. I threw my bag over my shoulder, spotting Penelope sitting eagerly in the back as though she had something she couldn't wait to tell me.

"Hey!" she called out.

"Hey, Penelope. How are you?" I asked, sitting down with her before a waitress came over with a very small menu.

"I'm good, just a bit tired and fed up with the term. If I'm honest, I just want to get away for a night and do something that feels a little reckless," she said, batting her eyelashes at me and I knew what was coming.

"And what could you possibly have in mind?" I asked teasingly. We both ordered lattes and croissants, laughing at the possibility of actually having a bit of fun that didn't involve school.

"I was thinking that it'd be a great idea to go clubbing tonight—you know, to let off a little bit of steam. We've been so overworked lately, and you told me that you don't have to work through the night tonight. I thought it'd be fun, but if you're too tired I completely understand," she said, pouting because she knew I couldn't say no.

"I don't see a problem with that. What time should I be ready for?" I asked.

"Yay! Oh my God, it's going to be amazing. We're going to dress up, feel so hot for an evening, and not have to worry about classes for a little while. It's exactly what I need right now," said Penelope, and I really couldn't agree more.

"I suppose I can try to be back before sundown. If you wanted to come by my place, we can get ready together," I offered, waiting for her response.

"That sounds lovely, but I'm just warning you, I am going to come with a lot of baggage," she

teased, and I could tell that it must take an army for her to get ready in the morning because she always managed to look so put together.

I was a bit envious of just how perfect Penelope seemed all the time, as though she never really slacked off, even while the workload continued to get tougher. She handled her assignments like a pro, really taking charge of her life the way I wished I could, and she was adored by her father, which made me undoubtedly jealous. He wanted to protect her, while mine wanted to throw me directly into the fire and hope that I didn't go up in flames. The thought sickened me, and I wished my mother was around more so I could share these experiences with her. She always managed to listen to me and I knew she hated when my father asked me to do such work for him. He'd always wait until she wasn't around to do it in order to avoid a fight.

We finished up our coffee and headed our separate ways. As I got back into my car, I dialed my mother's number and listened to it ring over the bluetooth speaker in my car. The call connected and it dawned on me that I hadn't really spoken to my mother in a very long time.

"Oh my goodness, Everly, is that you? I was beginning to think you must've forgotten about me," she teased, sounding rather elated that I called.

"I can never forget about you, Mother, even with you being gone so much," I said, having trouble hiding the sadness in my voice.

"I know, sweetie. I wish I could be around more, but your father and I have very different jobs and I have to spend a lot more time doing the dirty work than he does," she said, and I could hear a bit of resentment in her voice.

"I understand that, I just wanted to check in to see how you were doing," I said.

"I'm doing alright—hoping that this assignment finishes up soon so I can come be with my family for a little while. I miss you so much, Everly."

"I miss you so much, too, Mom," I said, feeling the tears well up inside my eyes, and I quickly wiped them away because I had to be at work soon.

"Is everything okay, Everly?" she asked, and the question caught me off-guard. I assumed she must've picked up on my mood.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, Mom. There's just been a lot of stress at school trying to finish up my master's, but on the bright side, I made a new friend. Her name is Penelope and I do think you'll really like her if you have the chance to meet her."

"We'll be sure to organize something when I get back. I certainly look forward to it. I hate to do this, Everly, but I have to run. I love you, and give my best to your brother."

"I will. I love you, too."

The conversation ended and I was left there thinking about just how MIA my brother had been over the last few weeks. Unlike me, my father really didn't care what he did because he'd always be there to pick up the pieces for him whenever he fucked up. I wasn't awarded the same luxuries. My brother always seemed to make me uncomfortable, especially now that he was running with a very dangerous crowd. I decided not to think about it too much as I headed into the hospital to start my shift, looking forward to the activities that the night ahead was bound to bring.

"Well, it's nice of you to join us," I heard a voice say from behind me.

"Will! Oh my gosh, it's been too long. Things have been so hectic lately and I'm barely managing to stay afloat. How have you been?"

"I'm alright, just wondering where in the world you disappeared to. I swear you used to live here, now you're bolting out the minute you get off," he said with a laugh and a tinge of curiosity.

"I made a new friend, and she and I are going clubbing tonight," I said with a smile.

“You? Clubbing? Are you sure that’s a good idea?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I replied defensively.

“You just don’t seem like the type, but I have to commend you for getting out of your comfort zone for a little while. That new friend of yours must be a really good influence on you,” he said, but I could tell that there was something he was holding back.

I shot him a polite smile, thinking about the words that came out of his mouth, and wondering if there were really any truth to them. I suppose I’ve never really been the type to branch out before, but that’s why I was so grateful that Penelope found her way into my life. She’s brought about a new kind of excitement I want to explore, not to mention just how much we have in common. After that conversation with Will, I felt my heart sink into my stomach, but I tried my best to ignore it in order to really enjoy my night.

A few hours passed and Penelope and I were back at my house sharing makeup, doing our hair, and trying on a few outfit options in case there were any attractive men present.

“You’re not going to get laid in that,” said Penelope, and I laughed.

“Okay, now. That really isn’t the goal of tonight. Tonight we’re going to let loose, but we still have tomorrow to think about,” I said, trying to bring her back down to earth.

“Aw, come on. Buzz kill,” she teased, as I tossed her a dress I thought would complement her skin tone and match her shoes. “I love this one. Are you sure that it’s alright that I borrow it, Everly?”

“Of course. It’s going to look great on you,” I said, hearing a horn honk outside of my balcony window and I realized that the car Penelope ordered was outside and waiting.

“Come on, we better be going,” I said, and we both got into our stilettos and headed out for a night of wild, reckless fun. The waft of alcohol hit us both hard as we skipped the line and entered the club because the bouncer had a strange fascination with us both. I couldn’t say I had anything to complain about, but there was a part of me that really did feel like a fish out of water once we ventured inside. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but it felt like there was a strange set of eyes watching our every move, and in that moment I wished I was home curled up with a medical textbook.

“Why do you look so scared?” Penelope asked loudly over the music.

“First time in a while; just getting used to the scene,” I said, trying to convince myself that everything was going to be just fine and I needed to let loose for a change. We both made our way over to the bar and ordered ourselves two cosmos before we sat down trying to scope out the men that were funnelling in from behind the curtains, some with women on their arms, some without.

“Everly,” I heard a voice say from behind me, tapping my shoulder so I’d turn around to meet their eyes.

“Hello, Leo,” I said, rolling my eyes, noticing that my brother had come with his entire crew and they were certainly rubbing me the wrong way. Each and every one of them eyed us like we were prey, and I couldn’t help but want to get out of there as soon as possible. It really bothered me just how little my father cared about Leo’s disgusting friends. If he had it his way, he’d probably have me married off to one of them before I could argue. My father and Leo’s wants always aligned, and that’s why they were so close. If I had that kind of power, being in my father’s good graces like that, there’s no telling what I could do.

“You’re the last person I expected to see here,” he said, running his fingers through his gelled hair, eyeing Penelope in a way that made me feel very protective of my friend.

“And I haven’t seen you in weeks, but I suppose Father doesn’t care. You can waste away doing God knows what and he’ll still pick up the pieces for you, but God forbid I want to get a real job,” I

said angrily.

“Don’t be like that, sister. I just wanted to say hello,” he said, and his presence made me all the more frustrated. I just wanted to be rid of him for the evening so I could focus on having a bit of fun. He lingered for way too long, as Penelope and I were sipping our drinks, and I watched as he pulled her off to the side to try and flirt with her. The worst part was that she was somewhat receptive to it, and I knew I couldn’t let that happen. *I wonder if she’d tell me the same thing if I were to tell her that I’m interested in her brother*, I thought, holding myself back until my brother politely left her alone and she came running back to me.

“Your brother seems rather charming,” she said, and the words made me feel like I wanted to vomit.

“Does he now? Penelope, you have to know the kind of men he runs around with, and the last thing I want for you is to get hurt by my brother. Let’s just say he has a sort of track record, and I don’t want him treating you badly,” I said truthfully, but she seemed unfazed.

“Trust me, Everly, I’m not looking for anything serious. I just want to have a little fun. I’m sure I can handle myself just fine, but I really appreciate you looking out for me,” she said sincerely, and I smiled.

The rest of the evening was so much fun. We danced to our hearts’ content, making waves through the crowd, and entertaining a few attractive boys we came across on the dance floor. Everything seemed to be going fine, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching us. I tried to ignore it as best as I could, but there came a time when I felt like leaving was the best thing we could do at that point. I led Penelope out of the club, and just as we were about to exit the door, a group of hulking men approached us and my heart sank into my stomach.

“Excuse me,” I said politely, hoping that they would move out of the way.

We were separated from the rest of the crowd behind the velvet curtain, and I wanted nothing more than to just go home. I looked up at their menacing faces and I turned to Penelope, seeing that she was just as afraid as I was.

“Where do you think you’re going, Everly Greco?” said the man in the middle, his face gashed in, leaving a scar at his eyebrow. He was terrifying, and the fact that he knew my name only scared me more.

“I’m trying to go home if you’d just get out of my way,” I said, trying to sound stronger than I felt.

“I’m afraid that isn’t going to happen, darling. We’re here to deliver a message to your dear father. I wonder what the rest of his enemies would pay for you once we take you with us,” said another one, reaching out for me and wrapping his meaty hands around me as he proceeded to lift me out of the club. I screamed to the top of my lungs, but no one could hear me over the music. I looked at Penelope, eyeing her to run back for help and she certainly did try. Another man grabbed her, too. They had us right where they wanted us, and there’s no telling what they were going to do. They placed white terry cloth napkins over our faces and the world went dark.

Chapter Six: Damien

They look so incredibly happy together. After everything they've been through, I can imagine how happy they are to finally be getting married, I thought, sitting in the front row at Zayn and Mariana's wedding and thinking about all of the struggles they've had to endure over the course of their relationship. Mariana has really grown to be a strong woman since she's met Zayn, since her old life went up in flames, and they were really a good match. I felt slightly envious that I'd never had that kind of luck with women before. Every woman I'd ever met always wanted me for what I could give them, and none of them ever cared about getting to know me. I suppose I can't say I'm surprised—everyone I've met as of late has had some sort of motive, except Everly Greco.

She's the odd one out, the one that hasn't gotten caught up in the glamor of the crime world, and I found myself thinking about what would happen if I spent more time getting to know her, like my father requested. *Would we ever turn out like Zayn and Mariana?* I asked myself, watching as the ceremony came to a close. But just before the festivities were truly over, Mariana looked rather sickly. That's when Zayn went over the P.A. system to let us all know that their baby was on the way, and I had to smile. They've both been waiting for this moment for a very long time, and I remembered the fear in Mariana's eyes when Zayn was on death's door and she thought she'd have to raise the baby on her own. They were rushing out of the venue just as my phone rang, and I answered it as I basked in the beauty of the day.

"Hello?" I asked.

I heard muffled voices on the other end. I scowled, trying to make sense of what I was hearing, but when I did the sound made my heart sink into my stomach. I heard two muffled cries from what sounded like women, but I couldn't be sure until I heard my name.

"Damien..." I heard her say.

"Penelope? Penelope! What's going on? Are you okay?" I shouted into the phone until the voice shifted to someone else.

"She's okay for now, Ruiz. You know, this was much easier than I thought it'd be. Both the Ruiz girl and the Greco girl up for auction. I'm sure there will be a lot of people willing to pay a big sum to take them under their wings and run both of your families into the ground," said a voice condescendingly, and I felt my blood begin to boil.

"Who the fuck are you?" I asked through my teeth.

"That's for you to find out, Damien," he said before he hung up.

"Hello? Hello!" I shouted. I threw my phone to the ground, catching Zayn's notice on his way out.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked as his wife was being helped to the car.

"Someone's got my sister. She's been kidnapped, along with her friend, Everly Greco."

"Oh my God, Damien. Fuck, I'm so sorry. I have to take Mariana to the hospital, but the moment I get a chance I'll be there to help," he said, and I appreciated the sentiment.

"There's no need, Zayn. Stay with your wife and give her my best. I can handle this on my own," I said, not sounding too confident in myself.

"Just be careful, okay?" he asked.

"Of course," I said, watching as he got into the car with Mariana, and they were off.

I rushed out of the venue to my own car, driving all the way to my parents' house to see that the driveway was flooded with cars. There were guards swarming the property; it seemed that the

kidnappers got to them first. My heart broke for what my parents must be going through, and I understood just how furious they must be. Once I entered, the house was chock-full of every high-powered crime lord that has ever helped out, and we were all trying to figure out how this could've happened.

My mother came up to me, throwing her arms around me as she let out her tears, and I held her close, telling her that everything was going to be okay.

“Damien!” my father bellowed from the living room, and I rushed to join him.

“Father, how did this happen?” I asked him, sitting down with the rest of the men waiting to be filled in on the story.

“It seems that the guard we've put on your sister has been taken out, along with the man you hired to keep an eye on them both. I don't know how this happened nor do I know what these people want, but they've just received the biggest ticket to our undoing that has ever happened,” said my father, racked with guilt and frustration, and it was the first time I'd ever seen him so broken up.

I worked my way around the room, talking to everyone I could to find out more, and just as I turned my attention away from our men, I strolled an old friend of mine.

“Heiden!” I called out, watching as he approached me laptop in hand.

“I'm so sorry to hear about your sister, and I know that if Mr. Greco weren't already out looking for his little girl, he'd be present, too. I'm working on the surveillance footage as we speak, and as soon as we get a I.D. on the guys who took Penelope, we can move on it,” he said, and that made me feel the slightest bit better.

“Thank you so much, Heiden. I really appreciate it. Father is so broken up, so furious that Penelope has been taken. We have to do everything we can to get her back. I don't know what would happen to him if he ever lost her and I'm not going to wait around to find out,” I said, and Heiden nodded in response.

That night was a long one, leaving everyone incredibly distressed to the point that we felt like we were running around in circles. We didn't have a lead, and even though we were working with Mr. Greco, we were all left in the dark as to how this could've happened to the girls. The more time we wasted, the angrier I became because I just couldn't see how they could've been taken without any witnesses. During my time as a SEAL, I learned a lot about searches and rescues, and I knew that if we were going to get her back, I had to lead this investigation myself.

I charged up to my father. He ignored me and turned his attention to his high-profiled allies to find a solution. “Father, I'm going to lead the team to find Penelope and Everly. I can't just sit around hoping that evidence is going to fall into our laps. We're all running around aimlessly like chickens that just got their heads cut off. We need to do better, and I'm going to do everything I can to bring them home safely.”

I waited for him to fall into his old habits, tear me apart for only now paying attention, but all I saw in his eyes this time was fear and it seemed to me that he was somewhat grateful.

“Thank you, son,” was all he said, and I left it at that. I didn't want to push him further, but I knew that if we were going to find the girls alive, we were going to have to act fast. When this kind of thing happens, every crime boss in the country is on high alert and the girls usually go to the highest bidder. That alone is going to knock both of our families off our thrones and my father wasn't going to let that happen. I had to find them before it was too late. I had to find them before we lost everything we had.

I headed out the door, calling for Angelo and a few of the other men to meet me at the club where the girls were taken. It was no use sitting around hoping that we'd somehow be able to piece together

the story at the house. I needed to get involved with the scene, I needed to canvas the area to find something that would point me in the right direction. I felt the adrenaline begin to wear off as we approached, noticing that it was shut down for the night but that wasn't going to stop me. I waited for my men to arrive and we took a good look around the area, noticing that the ground appeared to show that a struggle must've taken place.

"Look at the ground; there are scuff marks everywhere and then they just stop. It looks like they may have been trying to fight their way out, only to be shoved into a vehicle," I explained to my men, and we all continued to look around for more clues. I noticed that it didn't seem like it would've taken them very long to get them out here, and surely there must've been people outside the club at that time. *It must've been inside when they were approached, and they must've convinced the girls that they had to cooperate if they wanted to remain alive,* I thought, trying the front door only to find that it was locked shut.

"Angelo, get the pliers from the car. We need to get in here," I said, as he obeyed, handing me the cold metal tool as I broke into the club.

It was so eerie to see it dead like this because it was a spot even I frequented from time to time. It was completely dark and I fumbled for some lights, only for the corridor to be lit with an uncomfortable neon red. We stood in front of the velvet curtain, searching the ground for clues and noticing that someone must've knocked over the vase and sign in the far corner of the entrance, indicating that they really did try to get away. I looked down to the floor much more closely, noticing something glimmering in the red light. I bent down to see what it was, taking the piece of metal into my hand.

"What is it, boss?" asked Angelo.

"It's a tennis bracelet. Penelope's tennis bracelet," I said, clutching it tight, realizing that there was a small drop of blood on it. I started fuming again, wanting nothing more than to tear the men who took them to shreds. I couldn't bear to think about what they must be going through right now. Someone had to know something about their whereabouts. I was going to have to do some serious digging if I was going to find them alive, and I knew that I couldn't overwhelm myself with the reality that the longer I was kept in the dark, the less of a chance I had at actually locating them, let alone in time.

We all went our separate ways that night, and I instructed my men to ask just about everyone whether they'd seen the girls. I decided that I was going to have to put myself in seriously hot water if I wanted to get them back, and that meant interviewing people who despised my family. I had to make it worth their while if I expected them to cooperate, and I could only hope that this wasn't a mistake. *Penelope and Everly need me, and I can't let them down.*

Chapter Seven: Everly

I'm so scared. This is the last thing I thought would happen, and leave it to me to try to have a little fun for a change. I should've listened to Will, I should've stayed home and studied, but I can't blame either of us for this. We're in this together, and I know that someone is going to get us out of this mess. I looked over at Penelope, both of us coming to as we tried to make out where these men had brought us. I could see the pure terror in her eyes as they finally fluttered open, and I shook my head at her, alerting her that I was also awake.

Her fear quickly turned to fury, as she felt she was entitled to better. I knew she was wondering how her security could've let this happen, and I believed that these men had to have been watching us for some time to be able to pull this off. I thought about all the time she and I've spent together over the last few days, how many conversations we had about making plans, and I wanted to know just how many of those plans these men were aware of.

We were both chained, our feet and hands bound, and gags placed neatly between our lips to keep us from calling for help, even though there was no one that'd be able to hear us for miles. The room was dark and the air was moist, as though it had been raining outside. I stared at the concrete floor beneath me, still in the scantily-clad dress I'd been wearing at the club. I feared for what these men were going to do to us now that they had two of the most coveted women in Italy from the leading crime families in the country. I braced myself for the struggle, trying to keep calm as the door at the far end of the room swung open, revealing a small stream of light. I listened to his heavy footsteps, as though he were wearing steel-toed shoes. He approached us, instructing his men to turn on a few lights so he could better see how terrible we both must've looked.

"Well, it took you both quite a long time to come to. I hope you like your new home—that is until someone comes and snatches you up, but not before they pay me a pretty penny," he said, and when he turned to face me, it dawned on me that I'd seen him somewhere before. I thought back to a time when my father was going through some financial trouble of his own and the men he then called allies had all turned against him because he wasn't doing his part to pool cash with them. This man was one of them, and I couldn't even imagine how angry he must be. *Angry enough to kidnap Penelope and me, making us pay for my father's mistakes. I wonder if this man knows Mr. Ruiz, because I'd like to know whether Penelope is a victim of circumstances or if something similar happened to her, too.*

He leaned down, staring deep into my eyes before removing my gag. I could tell that he was enjoying this entire ordeal and the entire situation made me sick to my stomach. I was so angry I wanted to do everything in my power to let out my rage, but angering him further would only make matters worse for the both of us. So, I held my tongue, waiting for him to speak again, before I could answer in a much more lighthearted tone.

"Well, Everly. Is there anything you have to say on the matter?" he asked, lifting my chin so I could get a good look at his face, and then I remembered his name. *Anthony Garcia*, I thought, staring back at him, making sure he didn't pick up on my fear.

"I hope you know that you aren't going to get away with this. My father is one of the most powerful men in the country, and so is Penelope's. Once they catch wind of this, they're going to track you down and make you pay for this," I said, making sure he understood the certainty that was clear in my tone.

"I'm afraid they aren't going to have enough time to reach you, my dear. We were very careful

while covering our tracks, and if they even manage to find this place, you both are going to be long gone by then, going your separate ways of course.”

Penelope was muffling something under her breath in an effort to get Anthony to remove her gag also, but he didn't. It was almost as if he were enjoying the game, so much so that he didn't care how angry we both were, or how dangerous his life was about to get if our fathers ever managed to find him. I thought it was best not to let Anthony know that I remembered him, because that could only make things more difficult for us in the long run. I had to think on my feet, and if what Anthony said was true and we were both going to be sold to the highest bidder soon enough, then we were just going to have to try to get out on our own.

“You could've played this much better, you know. You're going to sell us to the highest bidder, but what you should do, if you have any sense at all, is hold us for ransom. You say that our fathers are the richest men in the country, and yet you go to everyone else for money. Why is that? It's because you're afraid of them,” I said, challenging him, but he wasn't having any of it.

“Oh, Everly, you really do think you're smarter than us all, don't you? I have news for you, my dear. You're in a room full of hungry men, impatient and bored. If you want to return to your father so badly, then I just might take your advice and send you back, but this time I'm going to send you back broken. We're going to have a little fun with you both, you just wait,” he said with a laugh before he took off. I knew that he was bluffing because whoever took an interest in us would ultimately want us in pristine condition, otherwise it was just a waste of their time and money. I looked over at Penelope and she didn't seem too happy with me for the way I handled things, but we were both too tired to bicker and I wouldn't have been able to make out Penelope's muffles if I tried.

Hours passed and we were both getting rather hungry, but we were in and out of sleep to keep ourselves occupied. I looked over to see Penelope fiddling with her lips, lifting her chin to the sky in an effort to free the gag from her mouth, and before I knew it, she succeeded. I had to commend her for her ability to think outside of the box, because if we planned on getting out of here, we both needed to be on the same page. The last thing we needed was one of us acting without the other, because that would sign our death sentences, as we well knew.

“Hey,” I croaked, hearing my voice break as I then realized just how dry my throat was.

“You okay?” was the first thing she asked, and I guess she wasn't as upset as I thought she was.

“I think so. I don't know what we're going to do and we're running out of time. I heard him talk to a few of his men, saying that he had people lined up and waiting to see us. I'm worried that by the time our families find this location, it's going to be too late for us both,” I confessed, and Penelope shook her head.

“There's nothing we can do now, Everly. He has us locked up tight and this place is swarming with security. If we try anything that's unsuccessful, he's going to make things worse for us,” she said.

“But if we don't try anything at all then we can guarantee that we'll never see our families again. Can you live with that, Penelope?” I asked her, and she shook her head in disagreement.

“Then what are we going to do?” she asked.

“We're going to play along until we find our golden opportunity to get the fuck out of here,” I said, and she agreed.

We sat around for hours until Anthony eventually came strolling back in. As much as I wanted to stick to the plan, any time he was near me, I was overcome with rage. I couldn't blame myself for wanting to snap at him, especially after he's done so much to drive both of our families into the ground. I know my father very well, and he wasn't as good in a crisis as he might seem. I felt as though Penelope might be able to relate to that. I tried my very best to hold my tongue, but I knew

something was going to slip eventually.

“You’re both looking a little worse for wear, and we can’t have you presented looking like absolute shit.”

“Put a hand on either of us and you’re going to face the wrath of both of our fathers,” I said, trying to stop the words as they came funneling out of my mouth.

Anthony turned to me, holding my cheeks together as though he was about to discipline his child, and slapped me straight across the face. He didn’t even turn his attention to Penelope as she gasped; he didn’t even so much as notice that she was out of her gag. It was almost as if he didn’t care, as if his entire attention was fixated just on me.

“Your father is a weak man and I can’t wait for him to find out what I’ve done to you. He’s going to wish he gave me my money when he had the chance, and he’s going to spend the rest of his life carrying that guilt around with him,” said Anthony, as I felt the heat of his slap burn into my cheek, leaving a red mark that would remind me of this terrible time for days to come.

“We’re going to start the bidding soon, and I have a friend of mine here that’s going to get you ready to face the crowd of expecting gentlemen. Be ready, ladies. You’re going to look absolutely stunning,” he said, and his words only sickened me further. We waited around for what felt like another long stretch of hours before he came in with a woman on his arm. She was tall, beautiful, and appeared to be very cold. Her arms were tattooed, her hair pulled back in a low bun, and I could’ve sworn there was blood on her blouse. She was here to get us ready, and I watched as Anthony turned to her, planting a kiss on her full, red lips before taking off.

“I don’t understand how you can let him get away with this,” I said, trying to appeal to her womanhood.

“You better shut the fuck up before I get Anthony back in here to teach you a lesson,” she said, sitting down in front of me and opening up her makeup case. Penelope and I both said nothing more on the matter, because whoever this woman was, she didn’t have much of a heart and she certainly wasn’t going to listen to our pleas. It was no use struggling as we sat there in our chains. She stripped us, put us in new dresses, pulled our hair back, and painted our faces with light makeup. It was the strangest thing I’d ever experienced, but it only made me fear what was to come.

Penelope and I were alone again for a little while, and I assumed they were setting up to take us somewhere because I could hear the car engines revving outside and I felt my heart pound heavily in my chest.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, as I saw the fear return to her eyes. It was then I noticed how malnourished she looked, how her face had sunken in, and how those beautiful features of hers had begun to wear away. She was losing herself, and I could only imagine that I looked the very same.

“We’re going to do as they say and we’re going to stay alive long enough to make our escape. If we don’t get that chance, if we somehow get separated before we find our opportunity, I need you to promise me that you’re going to be safe,” I said to her, trying to be strong for the both of us.

“I promise. Please stay safe, Everly,” she said, and I nodded.

The warehouse doors swung open and in strolled Anthony and his crew, leading us in our chains to a big blacked-out sedan before stuffing us into the backseat and ordering us to be quiet. I looked over my shoulder at Penelope, and she was trying to calm her breathing. The drive was silent, no one making so much as a sound as we were led to a large mansion far outside of the city in a place I didn’t recognize. *How the hell are we going to get out of here? We’re basically in the middle of nowhere and there is no other sign of civilization in sight,* I thought, staring out across the acres of

empty land surrounding the premises.

The home was beautiful and it reminded both Penelope and me of the places where we were calmly studying, the place that felt like home right before we decided to go out one night and fuck everything up. Anthony held us both by our arms, and I felt the chains dig further into my wrist as we struggled to walk in the most uncomfortable heels possible. He looked at us to make sure we were ready before he led us to a stage in the middle of the ballroom and we looked out to the audience, noticing that there were quite a few faces we recognized.

Anyone that had ever had a problem with either of our families was waiting to have a piece of the puzzle, to finally be a part of our undoing and drive everything our families had built into the ground. They laughed, smiled, shared drinks, and light banter before the festivities began. I didn't know what to think or how to feel; all I knew was that I felt a great sense of defeat, realizing that this was actually going to be the end of the line for both of us as we knew it.

"Thank you all for joining us on this splendid occasion. I know you're all eager to start the bidding process, and I'm glad you've all heard the siren call to finally put our enemies in the ground," said Anthony, raising a glass to his comrades. The people there who couldn't wait to get their hands on us. The room smelled strongly of alcohol, dripping with men and women who had too much money to ever know what to do with, and I couldn't wait for this all to be over. I felt so faint looking out at all of them, as it reminded me just how easy things had been once upon a time when I was simply a guest at parties like this. Now, I was the collection being auctioned off at the highest price, probably to be mutilated and delivered in pieces to my father's doorstep.

I truly thought all was lost when the bidding process began, but just as things had finally started to settle down, the silence was broken by a single gunshot.

Chapter Eight: Damien

We finally found the answer we were looking for and it came from one of the most unexpected places possible. It seems as though the people who did this were enacting their revenge on Everly Greco specifically, but thought it couldn't hurt to take my sister along with them. They were the perfect package, and when we caught wind of the auction, we knew it was going to be a bloodbath getting them out alive. One of my men had been working small jobs for a man that my father never did like, but he always kept it on the down low so my father wouldn't find out, but after he heard what happened to my sister, he decided it'd be best to come forward if I was willing to pay for the information. At that point, there was nothing I wouldn't do to try to get Penelope back, and with my newfound mild infatuation with Everly, I couldn't let anything happen to either of them.

My men and I approached the mansion quietly, calling in the cavalry from both the Greco family and ours with the full knowledge that this was going to result in piles of bodies. We had to play it smart because one wrong move and the man behind all of this would surely kill one of the girls out of spite. We rushed in silently, taking out each and every one of the surrounding guards keeping watch over the gardens. Once we had a clear path inside, we moved forward, hearing the voices coming from the kitchen and the ballroom as we made our way through, and once we had a clear shot of all of the security guards lining the nearby rooms, I opened the battle with the first shot.

The uproar began and everyone started to panic as some of the biggest names in the business were left defenseless because, like many similar auctions in our world, we had to leave our weapons at the door to avoid any sudden conflict. *Too bad they didn't see this one coming. That man, Anthony Garcia, is going to pay for what he's done to my sister. I don't care if I have to tear him limb from limb.* When I found out he was the one behind all of this, I was absolutely consumed with rage. I couldn't believe he'd do something so rash, even after what Everly's father pulled. He should know better than to challenge us all, and I promised myself I'd get my revenge when this was all over.

We stormed into the ballroom amongst the shrieks and bloodcurdling screams, the women clutching their pearls and the men trying to shield their wives from getting caught in the crossfire. I couldn't help myself, as they were all there to take advantage of my family, and I didn't care much as I watched them all drop around me like flies. There was no sign of the girls, and I could only imagine that they were in a backroom somewhere having the worst done to them before they were given off to the highest bidder. I've heard a lot of stories about Anthony Garcia and none of them were good. He always did this to any high-profiled young woman he could get his hands on, and I left my men behind as I began searching the house for them.

I listened carefully, trying to make out my sister's or Everly's screams from the rest of the folks downstairs. I search the bedrooms that lined the corridor until I heard what I believed to be Penelope's scream coming from the end of the hall, and I didn't think twice before I kicked down the door to find Anthony on top of Everly while his men held my sister back. The sight made me fly into a blind rage and I shot the guards holding my sister before I carefully shot Anthony in the shoulder, making him fall right off the bed.

"You know, a little birdie did tell me that there was a chance you'd show up. I didn't think you'd care much about this one, but I understand your stupid slut of a sister," he said, clutching his shoulder, trying to keep from bleeding out.

"Garcia, you really did try to play us for a fool, but you had to know you'd never succeed. You

couldn't outsmart my father, and you damn well can't outsmart me," I said, standing over him as I shot him again in the leg, watching as he tried to hold back his scream.

"They were causing a commotion downstairs, I just brought them up here to shut them up in the way I know best so they'd comply with my rules. You Ruiz men always have to ruin everything, just like Greco. This isn't fucking over," he said, spitting in my face.

I shot Anthony again, taking out all of my anger on him as the blood splattered across my face, and he eventually laid there barely clinging on to life. I turned to Everly and she laid there, not moving, her face was starting to swell. I wondered how they could've interrupted the bidding process to bring the girls back here because I could've sworn things had been in full swing when we arrived, but I couldn't dwell on the fact. I had to help Everly, I had to make sure she had the help she so desperately needed to survive.

My men came rushing in behind me when they realized I'd found Anthony, and I turned to instruct them of what I had planned for Anthony.

"Get him out of here and hold him at the firm. I need to question him further, and I need intel on every person that was in attendance tonight. Is that clear?" I asked, very clear in my tone.

"Yes, boss," said Angelo, as he and another one of my men rushed to Anthony, lifting him up and carrying him out. I returned to Everly's side, taking her carefully up in my arms, but she didn't seem to be coming to anytime soon. I knew that Penelope must've noticed that I was more concerned with Everly than with her, but I just couldn't help myself. Penelope, from what I could tell, seemed absolutely fine, and that made me wonder what Anthony's fixation with Everly truly was. I held her close, and I didn't want anyone else to get ahold of her. She needed medical attention and fast, so I carried her out to the car, checking on Penelope behind me as we made it out alive.

"Thank you, brother," I heard Penelope say as one of my men helped her into the car.

"I'm so sorry that this happened to you, to the both of you," I replied, never taking my hands off of Everly. I rested her head carefully on my shoulder as we drove back to the firm, because I needed my doctor on hand to take a good look at her. She hadn't moved an inch since we got her out, and I could tell that Penelope was just as concerned as I was. There was no telling how much damage had been done to her until we got back to the firm, but I had to know what happened between the auction and that room, and I had to know now.

"Penelope, I know you've been through a great lot, but I have to ask what happened," I said, trying to see if the conversation would upset her or not.

"Everything seemed fine, until Anthony noticed that Everly was fidgeting and he began to worry that she might try to run once she was allowed out of her shackles."

"Then he took her into the back room?" I continued.

"To teach her a lesson to make sure that she didn't try anything stupid. You got there right in time, Damien. I don't know what I would've done if something had happened to her, or to me," she said as tears filled her eyes, and I noticed that she was still shaken by the entire experience. I wanted to make things better for the both of them, but I couldn't do that until Everly woke up because that was where my primary concern was. I wasn't going to rest until she was okay again, and in that moment I realized that I had to be truly infatuated with her to care this much, especially since I was flat out ignoring my sister through all of this. She didn't say anything on the matter, but I could tell that she picked up on something being off, because she'd never really seen me care about anything or anyone besides her and our mother before.

We pulled up to the firm and Penelope managed to get out on her own, but I instructed her to go to a different doctor to look at her injuries, as well as get some food in her because she looked

incredibly malnourished. I lifted Everly up again, carrying her inside as one of my men brought out a stretcher. The whole time I watched her. Her skin was a sickly pale, her lips were so dry and cracked; I just prayed they wouldn't turn blue before we had a chance to help her. Once she was safe in the hospital bed in the firm, I brushed her hair out of her eyes as the doctor came over to begin assessing her injuries. *What's gotten into you, Damien? You've barely had one conversation with the girl and now you're sitting here worried that she isn't going to wake up? Sure, you care about Penelope and you care that Penelope would be very broken up about losing her friend, but that isn't the issue here. You care about her in some way, and you better not let that get in the way of your goals,* I thought, trying to snap out of the wave of compassion that came over me as I sat there patiently waiting for the doctor to tell me whether she was going to wake up.

It felt like an eternity before the tests were over, her vitals were checked, and her eye had begun to get very black and blue. It angered me that Anthony had the audacity to hit her, and while I was waiting for her to wake up, I didn't even think to alert Everly's father that they were now safe. I pulled out my cell phone, unable to take my eyes off her as I dialed, waiting patiently for the phone to connect. I hadn't spoken to her father directly yet, and there was something about him that was incredibly intimidating, but he had to know that we found this daughter.

"Hello, who is this?" he answered angrily, as though I was taking up the precious time he had reserved for trying to find his daughter.

"Hello, sir, this is Damien. Damien Ruiz, and I'd just like to inform you that we've found your daughter. I brought her back to the firm because she's still unconscious, and we're doing everything we can to treat her as we speak," I said, hoping that there would be some relief in that angry voice of his.

"Thank you very much, son. We'll be down to your location shortly. Words can't express how grateful I am that you found her safely. Is your sister also alright?" he asked, and the sudden compassion in his voice caught me off guard.

"Yes, she is also safe. Thank you for asking. I will see you soon," I said with a smile as he bid me goodbye and hung up.

I'd never seen her father in person before, and I was quite curious to see how he interacted with his daughter. *I suppose time will tell.*

Chapter Nine: Everly

I can barely remember what happened, but my eyes are struggling to open and I'm in a great deal of pain. I tried to lift my hand to my face, realizing that my eye had been swollen shut. Everything happened so fast that night and I couldn't believe that I made it out, that I was somehow alive. I still had no idea where I was, but I remembered hearing the gunshot go off when Anthony was on top of me, beating me for eyeing the door so much. Everything was so still right before the chaos ensued and I really didn't see it coming. I tried to turn my attention and my good eye to my left, noticing that someone was approaching me. *I don't know where I am, but from the little I can see, I'm not in Anthony's house anymore*, I thought, trying very hard to sit up, and eventually making it there to see that the man approaching me was in fact my father.

I don't think I've ever been so happy to see him in my entire life, but he came straight over to the bed, hugging me tightly, but being careful with my injuries. I was still trying to recall how we made it out, but just as I let my thoughts drift off again, I saw Damien walk in and then everything began to make sense. He came over to me, looking rather glad that I'd finally woken, and I wondered how long I'd been out for.

"Father," I said, embracing him again, and I could've sworn I saw an ounce of compassion in those eyes of his.

"Everly, oh my God. I'm so glad that you're okay, I don't know what I would've done if I lost you," he said, and this time it actually sounded sincere.

"Thank you, Father. I'm glad as well," I said, smiling at him even though it hurt my face to do so.

"Don't thank me, my dear. Thank Damien; he was the one that found you and brought you to safety," he said, and I tried to open my other eye to look at him, but I just smiled in his general direction. I felt a bit subconscious from the fact he was seeing me like this, but there was something in his expression that seemed like he didn't care. He just looked pleased that I was okay and that really intrigued me.

"Now, Everly, I know that you've been through a lot but I have to say—"

"Wait, wait, wait! Where is Penelope? Is she okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, strolling in to join us all.

She had a few light scratches on her face and the marks around her wrists from the chains we both sported for quite a long time. Though she seemed very happy and content that she was out, she was eyeing her brother in a very strange way, as though he was hiding something from her that she was undoubtedly picking up on anyway. They all gathered around me, hoping that they weren't disturbing my rest too much, but I assured them that I felt just fine.

"See, I told you we'd find an opportunity to get out," teased Penelope.

"I believe that was me," I said with a chuckle.

She hugged me lightly, and I felt so at ease now that I was back in the company of the people that cared about me.

"Now, as much as I know you need your independence, I wouldn't be doing my job as your father if I didn't give you as much protection as possible, especially after everything that's happened," my father began, and I was eager to hear what else he had to say.

"I know," I said.

"So, that's why I've hired Damien here to be your personal bodyguard," he said, and the words

shocked me to say the least, but I really didn't have a case to argue after what happened.

"What about Penelope?" I asked, turning my attention to her.

"I'm going to be fine, trust me. My father has plans to keep me just as safe, and on even stricter lockdown than you'll be," she said, and I smiled. It felt good to have people there whose job was to keep us safe, but I still didn't know how I felt about Damien watching over me so closely. Surely, there had to be someone else that could do the job, but I knew that once Father made up his mind, there really wasn't any changing it. So, I kept my mouth shut and let him proceed to tell me exactly how this was going to go down.

My father had an incredibly menacing look on his face, and I knew him well enough to know never to question him when he was like this. He kissed me lightly on the forehead before leaving me in Damien's care, and I felt my heartbeat thud heavily in my chest as he got closer to me, helping me out of the bed so he could take me home. *I hate that he has to see me like this, I wish I didn't look so terrible*, I thought, even though my appearance should have been the least of my worries.

I was sitting in the back of Damien's black sedan and it reminded me too much of the sedan I nearly rode to my death. He looked back in the rearview mirror to check whether I was okay, or at least that's what I thought. I had such trouble reading him and I wasn't sure why he was so adamant on sticking by me.

"What happened to Anthony?" I blurted out, as the thought filled my mind, the one little detail everyone managed to leave out.

"He's being taken care of, don't you worry," he said, and somehow that didn't make me feel too safe.

"He's alive?"

"Barely, but he's going to pay for what he's done to you and Penelope. He's been taken down good, and I guarantee that he will not be a problem for you anymore. You're going to be safe with me, Everly. That I can promise you," he said sincerely, and it brightened my mood.

"Your father is going to have to leave on urgent business. He put off his trip when you went missing, but I've assured him that everything is going to be fine in his absence," he continued.

"Trust me, I'm very used to that. He's never home for very long and I've gotten quite comfortable to being on my own," I said, and he smiled. There was no other reply and the rest of the drive back home was absolutely silent. It felt nice to just relax for a change, and I was grateful that I'd soon have a moment to rest and recuperate. The last few days had been so hard on me, on my body, and I could feel my muscles begging to be shelved for a little while. I was lost in thought when I heard my stomach grumble, and I looked up when I heard Damien chuckle ever so slightly.

"We'll make sure to get you something to eat when you're home," he said, and I nodded. *It's definitely needed*, I thought.

We entered my front door and it was so strange to be right back home again. I really wasn't sure what to do with myself at that point, because everything felt so different now. I turned to Damien, who had a bag of his own, and it didn't seem like he was going to be leaving anytime soon.

"What are you doing?"

"This is a full-time job, Everly. That means I'm going to be watching over you twenty-four-seven until we know that you're not going to be targeted by anyone else."

"Is my father okay with this?" I asked, stunned.

"He's the one who hired me, remember?" he asked, and I nodded.

Great, I thought, wondering how I'd ever be able to rest peacefully knowing the man I was slowly

becoming infatuated with would be around for good. *This is definitely going to be interesting.*

Chapter Ten: Damien

I didn't have to lie to her like that, but I didn't know what else to do. She's caught my attention in a way no one ever had before, and I was afraid that if I let her out of my sight for even one second, something terrible might happen to her. I was still trying to get to the bottom of why I cared so much for her, why she had such an effect on me, but I came up empty-handed. I could've very well hired someone else to watch over her in the evenings, maybe even hired a whole team to sit outside her house, but I just wanted to be close to her. She's been kidnapped, beaten, and it doesn't add up that Anthony would hunt her down on his own. I had to find out what his real motive was and why he sought out to take her against her will out of the blue like that.

Once I have her settled in, I can head back to the firm first thing in the morning and I can ask my questions then. I'm still very afraid to leave her alone, and I'm not sure she's really through with processing what happened, I thought, looking over at her while she unpacked her things, cleaning up a little before resting on the couch. She had a cup of tea in her hands. She offered me one, but I declined. I just wanted to see how she was doing, even though she told me she'd be okay. I couldn't leave her alone for a minute until I was sure she wouldn't break down.

"Have you eaten anything?" she asked me, realizing I had made sure she ate but I hadn't had anything myself.

"No, I believe I'm all right," I lied.

"Please, help yourself. You've been too kind to me and it's the least I can do to repay you," she said sincerely, retrieving a book from the shelf to catch up on her reading. It seemed as though she didn't want to check her phone. I thought about how she must be processing the time she's missed at school, because I could already imagine how much Penelope must be freaking out. Chasing after this career was all these girls had, and having that taken away from them just as they were nearing the finish line must hurt just as much as what happened. I promised myself in that moment that I'd provide as much help to them both as I could to get them back on track, even if I had to come up with an excuse that would suffice for a retest. The last thing Everly needed was for her life to go up any further in flames, and even though she appeared to be calm, I could tell that she was struggling on the inside.

I obeyed her instructions, heading straight to the fridge to fix myself a sandwich while she never moved from the couch. I'd catch her staring off into space from time to time, and I wondered if she was reliving the horrors that had occurred or if she was simply worrying about how things were going to progress from here. I knew there was a part of her that must be afraid that there's a possibility it could happen again, and I needed to reassure her that she was safe with me.

"I didn't get to say it much before, but I really appreciate everything you've done for me and for Penelope. If you hadn't shown up when you did, there's no telling what would've happened to us," she said, trailing into the kitchen to join me as I scarfed down my sandwich.

"Trust me, it's my pleasure. I'm just glad that you're alright and that you seem to be getting much better," I said, taking a sip of water to wash down my food.

"It'll take some time but I'll definitely get there. I just—I still feel scared that I'm not really safe anywhere, you know? I'm just permanently on edge, and I've been gone for a while, missing so much school, and I—" she continued, but I stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Everly, when the school learns of what happened I'm sure they're going to give you an extension.

I'll certainly make sure of it because you shouldn't have to worry about any of this. None of this is your fault, and I need you to remember that. As for your safety, as long as I'm around, I can assure you that no one will ever lay a hand on you again," I said, trying my best to make her feel better and she smiled back at me, placing her cup in the sink before sitting down next to me in the breakfast nook.

"What I don't understand is why it happened now. Why was I targeted now, out of all the times I've been out, out of all the times I've been in plain sight, waiting to be taken?" she asked inquisitively.

"That's what I plan to find out very soon. I can assure you, whatever the reason is, your family as well as mine will see to it that you never have to leave the house, scared for your life, again. I've dealt with this kind of thing before, in much more heightened situations than this, and I know how to see a bad thing coming from a mile away."

"Do you have military training?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do," I replied, smiling at how incredible her instincts were.

"I had a feeling. You were able to get in and out with both of us alive; that in itself takes training," she said, and I appreciated the compliment.

I could tell that she was still a little off-put by the fact that I was going to be around her at all times, because every time I looked directly at her, she looked to the floor. I couldn't tell why she was so shy, why she felt so uncomfortable, and it dawned on me that maybe she felt the same way I did. *If that's the case, then we both have a bit of soul-searching to do, because even I cannot understand my newfound infatuation with her or why I've suddenly become so protective of her in a way I've never even been towards my family,* I thought, turning to tell her that she should probably get some rest.

"I'm headed to bed now, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid to fall asleep. I don't want to remember the things that happened, what was said, what it felt like to be kept in captivity like that. I wish I could just forget it all," she said, and I saw just how much of a toll this entire experience had taken on her. I worried for her wellbeing, but I made a mental note to keep a close eye on her to make sure that everything was happening according to plan. *All she has to do now is focus on getting better, and all I have to do now is get to the bottom of why this happened in the first place,* I thought, giving her a warm nod before she sauntered on up the stairs to sleep. I could only hope that by my being here, she feels a bit comforted even if there was a part of her that was shy or nervous around me. I wanted to give her the kind of comfort that will allow her to understand that her life was not over just because she's been through something traumatic.

She had her whole life ahead of her, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't desperately want to be a part of it. I checked on her a few hours later and she was fast asleep. I pulled out my cell phone to dial the men that were holding Anthony, because I needed an update on how he was pulling through before I interrogated him myself come morning. The last I heard of him, he was too weak to even speak and he was losing too much blood. I just had to make sure he didn't die on me before I could get to the bottom of why this occurred in the first place.

"Hello, boss?" asked Angelo as the call connected.

"I need an update on Garcia. Make sure he doesn't die overnight because I will be questioning him first thing tomorrow morning and I need him alert. Shackle him, feed him only enough to keep him from passing out, but don't nurse his wounds because I don't want him to think we're being soft. Is that clear?"

"Yes, boss. He's in pretty bad shape, but I can assure you that he won't be dying any time soon," said Angelo pretty confidently, and I put my full trust in him. *I can just see it now, him writhing on*

the concrete floor in pain just like the girls had been. I hope he understands that he's going to pay for his actions for a long time to come. Every time I thought about what he did, about the extremes he went to in order to discipline the girls, I felt sick to my stomach and simultaneously angry. He didn't have to hit Everly, he didn't have to try to force himself on her, and it still bothered me that he didn't try to do the same to my sister. Even though I was glad that Penelope was okay, it still didn't make sense that Anthony wouldn't pay the same kind of attention to her. I didn't have to ask myself why, though. Everly was special, and the family she comes from rivals even my very own. *My father is a powerful man, but he's no Leonardo Greco.*

I thought again of the proposal my father had given me just a few days before everything happened, about how he wanted to get in with the Greco family through me courting Everly, and I now understood why. I couldn't conceptualize the kind of power and pull in society they had until I saw what happened to Everly, and I supposed now I'm doing exactly what my father had wanted all along. But I promised myself then and now that I would never use her for my family's gain, no matter how bad things might get. I scurried off to bed a few hours later to get some rest, but still managing to sleep lightly in case I needed to tend to Everly in anyway.

She slept rather soundly that night and there was no sign of any nightmares. I was just glad she was able to get a bit of rest, because she was going to need all the energy she could get in order to deal with what was to come. I knew how these things worked, and I remembered how full that ballroom had been of people trying to claim her. *One attack on her life doesn't mean that it's done. She might have to deal with this many times over, but I have to give her the opportunity to rely on me. I have to prepare her for the possibility that she may have to deal with such bloodshed yet again, and that losing the people you love is only part of this lifestyle.*

I wanted to make things as easy on her as possible, but I couldn't keep her from the truth. *She deserves better than that.*

I left Angelo taking care of Everly that morning, and I made sure to wait until she woke up so that she wouldn't be afraid by a stranger in her house. She assured me that she'd be okay and I noticed that her eye was beginning to heal. She still appeared a bit withdrawn, a bit fed up with her life, as though she believed that there was no helping her situation, but I knew I had to talk to her the minute I got back from interrogating Anthony. I told Angelo to keep a close eye on her in case she wasn't eating, in case she was just lying around wasting away. It reminded me of a case I handled for Zayn when I was his stand-in bodyguard for his now-wife and she appeared to look the same. I couldn't let it worry me too much because I knew Mariana managed to pull herself together and make the most of a bad situation. The only difference was that I didn't know how Everly processed pain.

My worst fear was for her to self-destruct, to lose everything she had been before she was kidnapped because she couldn't deal with the trauma. I knew I had to take care of her and I couldn't help but feel her pain to some extent, knowing all of the things I knew, having seen all the things I've seen. I got into my car and drove down to the firm, where I was greeted by the guards at the door. The air was heavy that morning and the overcast sky emulated exactly how I felt inside. I worried that Anthony wouldn't care enough about protecting his life to actually own up to what he'd done, but I knew I had to hit him where it hurt to get what I needed. I made sure to alert my men to find out as much as I could about him so I could use it to my advantage. *Apparently, he has a sister living on the outskirts of the city, one who he sends money to every month. She's sick and barely hanging onto life, and I know that little bit of information is definitely going to come in handy,* I thought, bursting through the warehouse doors of the firm. Everyone lifted their guns at the ready until they realized it

was me.

I really appreciated how cooperative everyone was being, and I truly believed that this place was simply impenetrable. My men were the best in the business, a few Navy SEALs that had worked alongside me, eagerly waiting for a cause to serve. Now Everly had become that cause, and I could tell that everyone had picked up on just how important she was to me. If they were ever to ask, I'm not sure I'd have an answer to give them, but if there's one thing I knew for sure, it was that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything happened to her.

She was so oblivious about the way the Mob world worked. I wondered if her father ever involved her at all. I knew that my father always tried to keep Penelope out of the loop for fear that she simply wouldn't be able to handle it. My mother puts up a strong front but I know she's scared the majority of the time he steps foot out the front door. I couldn't blame her because we were all living our lives on edge, and there's no telling what is going to happen to us if someone ever succeeds in taking him down. As heightened as my senses were, as much as the adrenaline was coursing through my veins, I couldn't piece together the puzzle that was this kidnapping. It happened so suddenly, as though it wasn't planned properly, and Anthony tried to pawn the girls off as fast as he could. *That doesn't read cold-blooded killer to me. That reads coward*, I thought, as I entered the holding cell where Anthony was being held.

He had slipped out of his bloody suit jacket and I watched his wounds begin to crust under his dress shirt. "You don't look too good, Garcia," I said to him, and I heard him murmur something under his breath before he tried to rise to his feet. He struggled for a while, and I watched him out of pure satisfaction. Once his glazed eyes caught sight of me, he tried to lunge forward but it was no use. He was too weak to actually make an impact, and that alone made me happy.

"You're going to fucking pay for this," he said, spitting out blood onto the concrete floor.

"I believe you've got it wrong, Garcia. I'm not the one crawling around like an infant. What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

"If it's information you want, Ruiz, I hope you know you won't get it. I'm as good as dead and I really don't care what you have to say about that," he said.

"You know, I thought about it for a while, wondering why you would pull something like this when you knew how much power we have over this country. You don't touch the Ruiz family or the Grecos. I pondered for a while, taking note of how much you favored Everly over Penelope, and I still don't understand why that is. But I know I'm going to find out."

"It seems that you have just as much of a fascination with her as I do," he said, and I wondered whether if it was that obvious I'd begun to care so much about her.

"And it seems that you've given up on yourself. That's all well and fine, but how is your sick sister going to get the money to pay her medical bills?" I asked, and he stopped in his tracks, reading my face. His was flushed with absolute rage.

"Don't you fucking touch my sister!" he screamed at me.

"I won't have a reason to if you cooperate, Garcia. Tell me why you targeted the girls and I won't lay a hand on her. If you fail to help me, I will see to it that your sister has a very *slow* death," I snarled at him.

"Fine. Fine! Don't touch her, you got it?" he asked, and I sat down next to him, waiting for him to talk.

"Tell me why you targeted the girls, Garcia," I commanded.

"Your dear sister Penelope was a victim of circumstance. @e were really after Everly. There's a pretty pricey bounty on her head, because Leonardo Greco has a lot of enemies who would love to

sink his business and legacy. Whoever set the bounty is targeting his children because they serve as the weakest links; they're the only things that would cause his entire world to crumble," he said, and my heart sank. *It's worse than I thought.*

"And how did you track her down?"

"It was pretty easy, seeing as her schedule has been the same for so long, but when she deviated from her ways to go to the club, I can safely say that I was shocked. She didn't seem like the type, but what do I know?"

"You knew enough to torture her, to make sure she behaved so you could prep her for your highest bidder. Why try to get rid of her so fast? Why not turn her in for the bounty yourself?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. He was scared that we would find him, that we would be his undoing the same way he wanted to undo the Grecos.

"The bounty paid good, but those people I invited paid more. I was simply looking out for myself," he said truthfully.

"Well, I hope you enjoy paying for what you've done, because while I have no intention hurting a sick girl, I have no problem tearing you apart for years to come," I said, and he didn't reply. I knew we were both at wit's end, trying to make sense of what was going to happen next, but I figured I would probably have to call in the cavalry to be present at Everly's house at all times because there were definitely a lot more people out to get her. I wondered if alerting her to this fact was the smartest idea because she already seemed to be so on edge; I didn't want to make her anxiety that much worse. She deserved a moment of calm, and until anything substantial happened, I wouldn't have to tell her that her life was on the line. I just had to make sure she remained safe.

I had heard everything I needed go into action, as I called my father to alert him to the situation before I called Mr. Greco to tell him the same thing. They were both as equally frustrated, but I assured them that no one would have access to her as long as I kept her in my sights. I requested security from both of them, and they called in their men to patrol the house and make sure that no one got in or out. When I returned to the house, I noticed that a strange car was parked in the driveway, and before I could say anything to the guards standing outside, Angelo came out to join me.

"Leo is back. He's upset that this has happened and he's looking to talk to you, boss," he said, and I rushed inside to see Leo and a few of his guys sitting comfortably on the couch.

Everly was in the far corner of the room and I could tell that they made her uncomfortable. I could certainly see why, as they looked like a bunch of druggies or ruffians waiting for their next exciting immature move. I walked over to Leo and he greeted me like he'd known me all my life.

"Hey, man. How are you? It's really cool of you to take care of my sister like this. Thanks, but your services aren't needed anymore 'cause I'm home," he said, and I watched as Everly's ears perked up, obviously afraid of what would happen if she was left alone with her brother and his friends.

"I'm afraid my position and my men's positions are permanent. Your father has requested that you join him on business, and I know your expertise would be of much better use there than babysitting," I said, trying to persuade him to leave.

"You're probably right. You did save her after all; you must know what's best. I'll pack up my things and be out of your hair in an hour or so. Thanks again, man," he said, as he turned his attention to Everly, who looked incredibly relieved.

"Thank you," she mouthed to me, and I decided to ask her about why she was so hesitant around them later.

“Sorry, Evie. I’ve gotta get goin’,” he said in her general direction, and it was only then that I realized he was heavily intoxicated. I was glad I would soon have him out of my hair, because I couldn’t watch over Everly and keep her out of trouble while also babysitting a bunch of drunks. *That is not in my job description*, I thought.

A few days passed and Everly was getting ready to head back to school. I followed her to and from campus for the entirety of that week, and she didn’t seem to mind, but I quickly became worried about her health. She wasn’t eating much, nor was she sleeping much, which worried me because for a while, I really had thought that she had put the kidnapping behind her. But if there was one thing about her that didn’t falter, it was her work ethic. She always managed to stay on top of things, and I respected her for that. I realized then that there wasn’t much about her I didn’t like. She had all the qualities of the kind of woman I enjoyed being around and I had to say, that was incredibly new for me.

Chapter Eleven: Everly

My life has been so different over the last few weeks. Damien has been around but he hasn't been in my hair, and my brother has been coming to and from even though my father was still away on business. *He really isn't capable of sticking to his word and I can't say I'm surprised.* After everything that happened, my life was finally returning to how it was before I was taken, and I was grateful that the people around me cared so much about my wellbeing. I even have my mom back because when she heard, there was no amount of work that could keep her away from me. It was nice to always have someone at home waiting for me, because I don't think I've ever felt this safe in my entire life. I'm just glad that Father hasn't called on me for my medical services, and I think there's a part of him that understands now that it's better to keep me out of the loop than directly in the crossfire.

I headed downstairs in my pajamas, tying my hair in a knot at the nape of my neck as I was greeted by my mother in the kitchen, fixing us all something to eat. It seemed that I had woken up much earlier than usual and Damien wasn't up yet. I breathed a sigh of relief because there was something about him that kept me on edge as well; I hated looking like a mess around him, and it was nice to have a bit of alone time with my mother after so long, too.

"Did you get some good rest?" she asked, flipping a few chocolate chip pancakes.

"I did, thank you, Mother. I just have to say that it's been really nice having you home," I said and she smiled. I could tell that she felt it, too. When she first returned, I couldn't believe it was real because she always tried to make me understand that her job required her to be on high alert at all times. I wondered if she was going to be returning to work any time soon, and the thought made my heart sink into my stomach. While the house was always full of people now, no one made me feel as safe as she did, not even Damien. There was a different kind of comfort that emanated from her at all times, and whenever I was around her, I felt like a kid again, like nothing bad would ever happen to me.

"I have to say, that new roommate of yours is quite the looker," she teased, pointing to the corridor with the bedroom in which Damien was fast asleep.

"Mom!" I frowned playfully at her as she fixed me a plate of pancakes and eggs. She was absolutely right, though, because I just couldn't ignore how gorgeous Damien really was. He had everything I'd ever looked for in a guy and he was the kind of attractive that made me nervous around him, which I certainly hated. I was walking around on eggshells around him, always making sure that I looked my best because there was a part of me that wanted him to notice me. I wasn't sure he ever truly would, but it didn't hurt to try.

"I'm just saying, he's quite the distraction," she teased yet again, and I scarfed down my breakfast as fast as I could so I didn't have to acknowledge her anymore. She laughed, realizing that there was a part of me that certainly took an interest in him, so she left the situation alone. I couldn't blame her, though, because men in the Mob were the only kind of men she had ever spent any time with and I was beginning to think I was going to follow in those same footsteps. So far, Damien was been the only man I'd ever been remotely taken with, and I worried that having him around at all times was going to start driving me crazy.

You can't go there, Everly. He was put here to protect you, not as a permanent part of your life. You have to let this go, put the possibility from your mind because it's only going to result in you

getting hurt. He's not interested in you, he's just doing his job, I thought, trying to convince myself that those times I'd caught him staring at me meant absolutely nothing.

I rushed off to the bathroom when I heard him waking up and jumped into the shower. I didn't want him to catch me looking like I'd just rolled out of bed, and I spent a bit of extra effort every day because I wanted to look nice for him. I knew I was kidding myself trying to ignore that he certainly did take notice of me, but he was too close to this Mob lifestyle for my comfort. I had to continue trying to get out of this lifestyle, and Damien was as Mob as it could possibly get.

It's going to hurt your parents when they realize you have no intention of carrying on the family legacy, but you have to do whatever it takes to protect yourself. Even if that means spending barely any time with Damien for fear that you'll get too close to him. If you get involved with him, Everly, you're going to be a part of the Mob for the rest of your days. Are you really prepared to deal with that? I asked myself, and I truly didn't have the answer.

Chapter Twelve: Damien

I was dreaming about her, and my infatuation was slowly taking over every inch of my sanity. I was thinking about her in a way I just couldn't allow myself, because getting involved with her might result in my head if her father ever caught wind of it. But I couldn't help myself because every time I laid eyes on her, I instantly became incredibly protective. I worried about her wellbeing more every day, and I hoped that her father wouldn't be able to tell that I'm not in it just because he hired me, but because I've taken an interest in his daughter. *You have to play this right, Damien. One wrong move and you'll be out of a job, shunned by your parents, and Everly's father will want nothing to do with you or the Ruiz syndicate,* I thought, hoping that if he ever did find out that he wouldn't be too hard on me because I did save her life after all.

I met with him very early this morning. I sat down in the armchair across from him and sipped on the whiskey he handed to me before we delved into the details of the case at hand. "So, you're telling me that this wasn't a one-off? That I now have to worry about a band of my enemies trying to get to my daughter in order to take me out?" he asked, and I could hear the frustration in his voice. If I were in his shoes, I'd probably have Everly on lockdown, completely shut away from the world just like Mariana was in the last case I helped out with.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Greco. I've called in as much security as humanly possible to make sure that Everly has protection around her at all times, and she seems to be doing just fine. She's been spending time with Penelope back at the house, enjoying time with your wife, and to her it seems like her life has gone back to normal. I didn't tell her I don't want her to fear what's happening; I'm afraid that will only result in things getting worse," I confessed, and he nodded in my direction.

"I believe that's the best course of action to take, and while I hate to ask this of you, I need to know who else is looking for my daughter's head. I know that you've protected her as much as possible, saved her from a terrible fate, but you're the only person I trust with this kind of information. Will you help me?" he asked, and I could pick up on the fear in his voice.

"Yes, sir. Of course I will," I replied, as if there was any question about my compliance at all.

"Thank you, son. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated," he said, and I nodded. I knew that my father was getting a kick out of me working for Mr. Greco, because while Mr. Greco and I began to develop a lasting bond, so did they. Before I could get my bearings and get down to work, in strolled in my father who promptly sat down next to me.

"Father, a pleasure," I said, greeting him and wondering why he was even present to begin with. The entire situation confused me, and I knew that Mr. Greco was adamant on me staying in Everly's life to protect her, but I just couldn't have prepared myself for what followed.

"You know, son, you and I have discussed this once before, but you shot it down far too quickly, before you could allow yourself to see the benefits," said my father, and that's when I realized what this meeting was about.

"Father, I've told you before that I have no intention of using women for the sake of business," I said, sounding much angrier than I wanted to in front of Mr. Greco.

"Please, Damien. Hear us out. Everly has been trying to distance herself from the Mob life for as long as I can remember, and if she marries outside of the Mob, she's not going to see the importance of sticking around. Her mother and I just can't allow for that to happen, because it'll only result in her downfall," pleaded Mr. Greco, but I just couldn't see the benefit of trying to get close to Everly just

for the sake of keeping our family businesses alive.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Greco, and I’m sorry, Father, but I just can’t see myself being used as a pawn. I will continue to protect Everly, but she deserves to get to choose who she falls in love with, as do I,” I said.

“Damien, if you do this for us, I can ensure you that your name will go down in history. In this line of work, that’s all any of us can ask for,” he said, but I wasn’t having any of it.

“I’m sorry, it’s just not something I can do,” I said firmly, and he didn’t press me any further. I believe he realized that by pushing me there was the chance I’d quit helping him watch over Everly, so he decided not to ask any further of me. I was grateful for that at the very least because I couldn’t imagine the betrayal Everly would feel if I were ever to engage in something so disgusting. *She’s been through so much already, and I couldn’t do that to her knowing that it would just be the sake of reputation. She deserves better, and I can’t get involved with her knowing how fragile she is right now. She needs to heal, she needs to find solace in her life again, and I refuse to be a puppet in my father and Mr. Greco’s game.*

I pulled up to the house, parked my car, and realized from the empty driveway that Everly was the only one at home. She was fast asleep on the couch when I entered, and I could already tell that she must’ve been exhausted from dealing with her trauma and trying to readjust to her lifestyle. I dropped my things, picked her up, and carried her to bed, looking down at that beautiful face of hers, not moving at all.

She was out cold, and I noticed that the floor was littered with medical textbooks. She was always so hard at work, and I truly believed that dedication would have to count for something. I could understand why she wanted to get out of the Mob lifestyle, and if I’d had a choice in the matter, maybe I would’ve, too. I laid her down on her bed, pulled the covers up over her legs, and she didn’t budge. I was overcome with the urge to kiss those full lips of hers, but I had to fight it. I couldn’t get involved, because if it was out she wanted, being a part of my life would ensure she never got that.

You have to ignore the attraction, Damien, because you have to do what’s right for Everly and you have to abide by what she wants. This life is not something she wants; she is studying so hard because she wants to make it on her own in her own lane, just as you do. You can’t take that away from her, not now, not ever, I thought. I stared at her as she slept so beautifully, so calm that you could never even be able to guess the kind of things she’d seen in her lifetime. She always seemed to make the best of a bad situation. I had to do my part by watching over her, but I knew it was becoming increasingly difficult to put the attraction from my mind. The more time I spent with her, the more I realized that she wanted the kind of things out of life no one in her position ever did. She amazed me by how capable she was at standing up to those who fixed her future for her, and I wanted to do everything in my power to make sure she had everything she could ever want.

“Sleep well, Everly,” I said, closing her bedroom door behind me as I tended to my work, trying to distract myself from her as I did what was asked of me by Mr. Greco, to find the other men who were trying to take him and my father down. *It’s going to be a long night.*

Chapter Thirteen: Everly

I haven't been called on a job since the kidnapping and I'm so glad that my father finally sees how dangerous it is for me to be in the field. But I still worry that he's going to return to his old ways the minute things finally settle. I haven't spent any time with Penelope since the kidnapping, but I know that she probably misses the hospital just as much as I do. The house was quiet that morning; I had fallen asleep studying again, and I tossed all my books onto the floor when I tried to get out from under the covers. I made my way over to the balcony, opening up the curtains to let in a stream of sunlight that warmed my skin, filling me with the sense of calm I so desperately needed. I couldn't ignore the pit in my stomach that eventually surfaced and me feel like something bad was going to happen. When my cell phone eventually rang, it started me and I rushed over to answer it when I saw that it was Penelope on the caller I.D.

"Hello, stranger. How are you?" I asked, and she sounded more distressed than I could've imagined.

"Everly."

"What's wrong?" I asked, noticing the tone of her voice.

"It's Damien. He caught someone trying to sneak into your house this morning and he's been hurt trying to apprehend the guy. One of his men rushed him back to the firm, but his on-call doctor isn't here and he needs medical attention fast!" she said, and the thought of him hurt broke my heart.

"I'll be right there," I said, and Penelope gave me the address. I got into my car; it felt so strange to be tending to yet another Mob hit, but this time it was because of me. *The least I can do is fix this, and I have a feeling this isn't the last time this is going to happen*, I thought, realizing that the chain of events had begun to seem rather strange. I worried that I had a permanent target on my back and that everyone was keeping far too much from me. The drive to the firm brought up a bunch of unresolved feelings inside of me that reminded me of the day I'd been here myself, unconscious, broken, and clinging to consciousness after everything happened.

Penelope assured me that I'd have everything I needed at the site and there was no reason to stop by the hospital first. When I was greeted by the guards at the door, they let me inside and everything looked exactly the same as it was when I was last there. It even smelled the same, and I wondered what kind of illegal activity was happening behind these walls.

Penelope had alerted me to the situation and I'm not sure why I thought she'd be present when I got there. *Of course, she's still on lockdown*, I thought. I found the room with all the medical supplies and I collected what I'd need before finding my way to the room where Damien was resting. I entered, closing the door softly behind me, trying not to alert him to my being there, but he quickly took notice. I leaned over him, spreading out all of my supplies on the nearby table, and got to work removing the bullet lodged inside of him. I put him on some medication and it made him much woozier than I thought he'd be.

He turned to me when it was all said and done, and he looked at me in a way nobody had ever looked at me before. "You're so beautiful," he said, and those few words caught me completely off-guard. I looked back at him, confused and unsure of what to say, remembering that he was still on medication.

"Thank you, Damien," I said, furrowing my brow, wondering where this conversation was going to go next.

“I really want to kiss you,” he said, as his eyes struggled to stay open and he grinned from ear to ear.

I couldn't lie, I was enjoying every minute of this. He was so out of it, but I wondered if there was any truth to what he was saying. He was able to still formulate complete thoughts, and he reached for my hand, even though the pain shot through him when he moved, and I held it comfortably.

“You're so independent, and you really don't care what people think about you. It's so admirable that you've made your own path, and that's exactly the kind of life I want. If I had the chance to date you, I'm sure it'd be incredible, but I can't do it, you see. I know you don't want to be a part of this life and I refuse to drag you further into it,” he said, before knocking out completely.

I was so taken aback by his words I really didn't know how to reply. That last sentiment really warmed my heart, and it dawned on me then that he was in fact also interested in me. But he was right; I didn't want to get further involved in the lifestyle we both shared, but I couldn't help but think about what it'd be like to be a part of it *with* him. He was so incredibly caring, so attractive, and he seemed to care about me a great deal. There's not much else a girl can ask for, and I was starting to think I was just as infatuated with him as he was with me. *I'm not even sure what that means*, I thought. I tried to make sense of how we'd ever be able to work out, because I was so sure there would come a time where he'd have to move on to bigger and better things.

I decided not to question it for now; I just had to leave him to rest so he could recover. I thought about telling Penelope about her brother's revelation, but I decided against it because I really didn't want to hear her opinion on the matter. I worried that it would cause an even bigger rift in our friendship than was already present. I wanted nothing more than to reach a state of normality in my life again, because that hope was the only thing keeping me going. However, I couldn't ignore the possibility that this was simply my new reality, and if I really was in enough danger to have a permanent bodyguard, things were definitely worse than I thought.

“Get some rest, Damien,” I said sincerely as I shut the door behind me, leaving him to knock out again. I pulled out my cell phone to call Penelope and provide her with an update on her brother so she could let her father know. I knew they had a rocky relationship and I didn't want to make things worse for them, but he needed to know if his son was going to pull through alright.

“Hello, Everly? Is everything alright?”

“Yes, I managed to get the bullet out, and he's resting now. It didn't hit anything vital, so he's going to be just fine,” I said, calmly.

“Thank God. We've all been so worried. My father is heading down to the firm as we speak to check on him,” she said.

“He's going to pull through, not to worry. I hope your father doesn't come down too hard on him for this,” I said, hoping I didn't overstep by saying so.

“He's lately been seeing Damien in a very different light, and I think they're going to come to some understanding sometime soon,” she said encouragingly.

“That's good. Hey, I know we haven't spoken much since everything happen, but call me sometime, okay?” I told her.

“Of course, Everly. Trust me, I'm going to need to borrow your notes real soon,” she teased.

“Aha, can't wait,” I said before hanging up.

I thought about going back to the house. Damien's men assured me that he was going to return as soon as he felt better, but I decided against it. *If, God forbid, anything goes wrong, I'm the only one that's going to be able to help him*, I thought, pulling up a chair next to his hospital bed. I stayed by his side for the rest of the night. I thought about Damien's words, how he had spilled his feelings to

me, and I wondered how much of it he would remember when he came to.

Does he really feel that way about me? Or is this simply because we've spent so much time together recently? I thought, settling on the fact that what he said was very specific, especially for someone drugged up on pain meds. He wanted me in a way we both feared, and I wanted him right back. I could only imagine the kind of rift it might cause between our families if things ever went south, and I realized I cared about him too much to ever let that happen. I couldn't ignore the growing urges that crept up on me when I least expected it. The more I glanced over at him, watching as he slept soundly, the more I wanted to be right there next to him. We had a developing bond, one that I still didn't quite understand. *If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that I can't let anything bad happen to him. He's done so much for me, and I have to look out for him as well.*

Chapter Fourteen: Damien

Where the hell am I? I asked myself, as my eyes fluttered open and I realized I was back at the firm in one of the hospital beds. I vaguely remembered what I said to Everly when she was here, and I immediately felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me as I realized she was sitting next to me.

“Good, you’re awake,” she said with a smile. I waited for her to call me out on what I’d said, but she didn’t mention anything about the matter. I decided to leave it alone, because bringing it back up could only make things more complicated for us.

“You had some pretty bad wounds, Damien. You’ve got to be more careful,” she said to me, even though she understood that everything I did was to protect her.

“I’ll try my best,” I croaked, realizing that my throat was sandpaper-dry.

“I’ve dealt with quite a few gunshot wounds in my day, but yours is one of the worst I’ve ever tended to,” she admitted.

“Is that so?” I asked, leading her on to elaborate.

“My father has using my medical expertise to patch up his men ever since I started nursing school. I never enjoyed it and it’s always made me wildly uncomfortable, but it was good practice. If not for that, I don’t think I would’ve been successful dealing with your wounds,” she said.

“You really don’t want to be a part of this life, do you, Everly?” I asked, getting rather serious for a moment.

“I’ve hated it all my life, because I never felt like I knew how to protect myself. But there’s so much that has happened that has made me wonder whether I’ll ever be able to be rid of it for good.”

“I understand that. I was just a boy when my father put a gun in my hand and told me to shoot it. I didn’t understand at the time just how important those lessons were going to be,” I said, relating to her.

“Yes, well, maybe you should watch how many guns you’re around. We don’t want you to have a whole collection of gun wounds,” she said.

“I’d rather have a collection of wounds than be dead,” I confessed, and I watched as her expression changed.

“I don’t like the sound of you being dead,” she said, and her sentiment surprised me.

“I feel the same about you, Everly,” I replied, and I felt my stomach turn at the very thought of losing her like that.

Something changed between us after our confessions, and I just couldn’t put my finger on it. When we returned home, I didn’t want to stay out of her way anymore. I wanted to be near her, I wanted to learn more about her, and so I did. She seemed to enjoy my company, and the more time I spent around her, the more I realized that she wasn’t that shy anymore. Our bond began to grow, and I decided that I wanted to do something nice for her.

A couple of days after I returned, she was spending the afternoon napping and I headed into the kitchen to fix her something I’d think she’d like. When she woke, she strolled into the room still rubbing her eyes and she was rather surprised by the spread I put together.

“You really had a lot of time on your hands while I was sleeping, huh?” she asked, teasing as she approached me, planting a soft kiss on my cheek to thank me for the hard work.

“I thought I’d do something nice, give you some comfort food; you probably haven’t had any in a

while,” I said, and she nodded.

“I couldn’t have asked for anything better,” she said, sitting down next to me.

“Can I fix you a plate?” I asked.

“Yes, please!” We quickly got down to eating, stuffing ourselves full as we engaged in some of the most delightful conversation we’d ever had.

“So, how long have you been working for your father, uh, in this line of work?” she asked, and I could tell that she really didn’t know how to approach the subject.

“From the time I was sixteen, he’s been having me do jobs for him. Though I can safely say I didn’t actually kill anyone until I was at least nineteen. He and I never really did see eye to eye, and we’ve been butting heads for the majority of my life. He’s never really appreciated what I’ve done for the family, nor does he care to hear me out on anything that doesn’t involve work. It made me want to work harder in order to pave my own path in my life. I didn’t want to grow up just being in his shadow, because I truly believe that my expertise can get me much farther than that. He seems to disagree,” I said, and she looked at me, rather concerned.

“I believe you. After everything I’ve seen you do, since you’ve come into my life, I don’t think there’s anyone more fit for a job like that,” she said, and her warmth made me smile.

“How long has your father had you doing work for him? How does your mother feel about it?”

“The minute I could wield a scalpel, he had me working on his men. My mother always tried to keep me away from dealing with his thugs, but she’s gone so much and my father takes advantage of the situation,” she said. Her expression softened, turning into pure sadness as we continued.

“Does it scare you?” I asked.

“Does what scare me?”

“Does it scare you to feel like everything could end at any moment?” I asked, feeling as though I may have overstepped with that one.

“More than I’ll ever be able to tell you,” she replied, and that’s when I began to understand that everything she’s been dealing with from the very beginning has stemmed from fear. We spent a lot of evenings like this, caught up in conversation with each other. I was starting to realize that I was much more taken with her than I’d ever admit, even to myself. *You’re going to get yourself in a lot of trouble if anyone realizes what’s happening here, Damien. Whatever you do, don’t put her in harm’s way just because you’ve let your guard down,* I thought, giving myself the pep talk I so desperately needed. *Things are getting real very fast because there’s a real part of me that sees a future with her, and that would mean sticking around for a very long time. I’m not sure she’ll feel as good as I do about that.*

Chapter Fifteen: Everly

I really can't make sense of what's happening between Damien and me. I also have no idea how I plan on telling Penelope that we've gotten close in a way that can cause a lot of trouble in our lives. I was starting to see him as much more than a bodyguard, as someone I could see myself pursuing as we continued on. I definitely liked him, and I knew that it wasn't something I was proud of. He was exactly the kind of man I've always told myself I should stay away from, the Mob prince, the man that commanded the illegal activity that made me sick. Yet there was something about him that drew me to him, something I couldn't ignore no matter how hard I tried. *If I ever pursued him, that would mean that I would have to be a part of the Mafia for the rest of my life, but if I don't, I may lose the only man that has ever understood me.*

I didn't expect to feel so torn. Things had been so quiet, I'd almost forgotten why he was brought into my life in the first place. I was catching up on some exam prep when he came in to say that he was heading out for a meeting and that Angelo was going to be watching over me for the day. I couldn't hide how disappointed I was, but I understood. I decided it would be a good idea to check in on Penelope and see how she was doing after everything. I wondered what else I could do to pass the time because I couldn't find it in me to focus on what I had to do.

So, I picked up the phone and dialed Penelope, waiting for it to connect. She seemed a bit withdrawn when she answered, but I wrote it off as we were both under exam stress.

"How are you?" I asked her.

"I'm alright, dealing with a lot but trying to hang in there," she said, and that alone made me worried.

"What's the matter?"

"I've been having a lot of nightmares lately, and I just can't seem to put those few days from my mind. It's taking over my life, Everly. I know that must sound selfish coming from me because I didn't have to deal with half of it. If it weren't for you, I don't know what would've happened. That day, when the auction happened, it reminded me just how much strength you have and that I lack so much of it," she said.

"That's not true, Penelope. You're much stronger than you give yourself credit for, and it's time you start acknowledging it. We both went through a lot, we're both trying to readjust to our old lives, and I know it's been difficult. We owe it to ourselves to try to make things better, and trust me, I've been having trouble doing that as well," I confessed, leaving out the part where falling for her brother had become the bigger issue.

"How are we going to get through exams feeling like this?" she asked honestly.

"We're going to do our best. If that experience has taught me anything, it's that we're capable of so much more than we realize. We set our mind to something, and it always gets done. I promise that once the lockdown lessens up a bit, we'll definitely go out again," I said. I knew this would scare the both of us when it happened, but it had to be done.

"I look forward to that," she said, forcing the words to leave her lips, because it was the last time we went out that our entire lives went up in flames.

"Please, just take care of yourself. I miss having you around, and soon this will all be over. I promise," I said, and it felt incredibly empty.

I felt like a fraud, talking to her like that while falling for her brother. I feared what would happen

if I was honest with her about it, because I had a feeling she wouldn't quite like it. She didn't seem to be too keen on us spending time together in the first place, but I could only hope that when it did come to light, we could keep our friendship intact.

I held the disconnected phone in my hands for a long time, trying to process all of the changes that had occurred in my life over the last few weeks. Damien came in a few minutes later, and I quickly suggested that we watch a movie so I could take my mind off of everything.

"Chick flick, huh?" he teased.

"I don't mind a little cheesiness in the movies I watch. They make me feel better," I confessed, and he smiled.

The movie was long, but it felt good to curl up on the couch with him and watch it. There was a particular scene in the movie that caught my eye. The two main characters were left out in the rain, and they quickly embraced and kissed. I turned to Damien, trying to read his expression, but came up with nothing. I decided my best bet was to be honest with him.

"That is something I've always wanted to do," I said, pointing at the screen.

"I hope you get what you want, Everly. You definitely deserve it," he said, lowering his eyes to my lips. I felt like he wanted to kiss me, but he was holding himself back. I inched closer to him, and we both managed to keep our guards up long enough to finish the movie. When the night came to a close and I bid him sweet dreams, I scurried off to bed where I curled up beneath the sheets, dreaming of what it would be like to kiss Damien in the rain like that.

I imagined that he'd hold me close, kiss me hard, and make all of my fears disappear. He had a knack for not only making me feel safe, but making me feel like he understood me, maybe better than anyone else ever had. *Every man I've ever met has been a colossal disappointment, especially those in the crime world. All they ever want is to sleep with me; never do they actually care about getting to know me the way Damien does. He doesn't have that sense of entitlement that the others do, and that makes me like him even more,* I thought, drifting off to sleep, wondering what the next day was going to bring.

I fell asleep thinking about Damien, but the deeper into sleep I got, the more my dreams began to shift into nightmares. I dreamt of being shackled to the wall again, having Anthony hover over me, jolting me out of my sleep, slapping me across the face for talking back to him, and degrading me with every word to leave his lips. It scared me so much, I could feel my body slick down with sweat but I just couldn't wake up. I remembered how meaty his hands were, how angry he had been, and how he truly wanted to hurt me further. My biggest fear was what could've happened if Damien hadn't shown up when he did, what he would have done to me if he had me alone, with Penelope watching from a distance. The thought made me shudder, and soon I was right back there inside my head, reliving that very worry.

I felt him on top of me, crushing me with the weight of his body, and I tried to fight him off but it was no use. He was trying to quiet me down, but I tried my best to keep screaming until he got off, but he never did. Right before anything happened, I woke suddenly with a scream and Damien came rushing into my room, taking a seat on the edge of my bed. He comforted me for a while, brushing the hair out of my eyes so I could eventually fall back asleep. I didn't have it in me to talk about it, nor did I want him to know how much I was subconsciously worrying about such things. *If it happened once, it definitely can happen again,* I thought, and that brought my heart up into my throat because it was not speculation but a fact.

Everyone was keeping the truth from me, everyone rather I be kept out of the loop instead of being

honest with me. I turned to Damien, noticing just how concerned he really was, and I wanted to make things better, but I couldn't shake the thought that eventually surfaced.

"Damien?" I asked.

"Yes, Everly?"

"How much danger am I really in?" I asked, and he couldn't answer me. He stared back at me for what felt like forever, as though he had hoped this day would never come. I knew he didn't want to bring it up, I knew he didn't want to scare me, but I was tired of being kept in the dark.

"I need to know what I'm getting myself into before I can make any real decisions about my future, Damien," I offered, and he met me with a sigh.

"Alright," he said, and he began to tell me exactly what has been happening since I've been put under protection.

I had no idea so many people cared about taking my father out, nor did I know he had that many enemies. I suppose my life is and always has been much more complicated than I ever could've imagined, I thought, listening to every word that came from his mouth, and I couldn't believe that I had gone this long without demanding the truth.

Everything he said was met with hesitation because he was waiting for the moment when I would tell him that I couldn't take anymore. The truth was I was already beyond that point, but I wouldn't be able to move on if I didn't understand the importance of his job description. He was given a position by my father because they all feared that someone was going to try another attempt on my life. *It did happen. I was so consumed with trying to tend to Damien's wounds that I completely forgot that person was trying to sneak into my house,* I thought, realizing that everything was coming full circle.

"Everyone's out for me, aren't they?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, Everly, that is correct," he replied, and I gulped.

I was in more danger than anyone bothered to let me know, and they tried to keep it from me instead of teaching me to defend myself. I refused to feel this afraid anymore, and I knew I'd have to take matters into my own hands if I planned on making a difference now.

"I need you to promise me that you won't keep things from me anymore," I said, trying to get Damien to understand that the only thing I needed right now was honesty.

"Everly..."

"Promise me," I commanded, and he sighed, giving in.

"I promise," he said, and for the first time ever, I could've sworn I saw fear in his eyes.

Chapter Sixteen: Damien

I didn't want to leave Everly behind, but I had a job that needed my urgent attention. I could only hope that she's going to be okay even though I was going to have my men watching over her. *Since the kidnapping, I haven't left her alone for quite so long, and the mere thought of it scared me,* I thought, stepping out of the shower and wrapping a towel around the lower half of my body as I powered up my cell phone to call Heiden. I was rushing to get out on time because the job was certainly time-sensitive, and I had to be on my game if I wanted to continue to show my father that I was capable of so much more. I wondered how Mr. Greco would feel if he knew that I was stepping away from Everly for a little while, but I had to tend to my own responsibilities as well. I brushed the thought off, waiting for the phone to connect so I could check on where Heiden was.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I'll be there in a few minutes!" he shouted over his bluetooth speaker, and I could tell that he was already in a rush.

"Not a problem. I'm getting ready to leave now, but I'll wait here for you to make sure that the house is on lockdown and that all of my men have the instructions necessary to keep her safe," I said, and Heiden muttered some words of agreement.

When I headed out into the hall, I looked over at Everly, who was trying to get her breakfast down but she seemed a bit off. I turned to her, searching her expression for answers, and I realized she was afraid to see me leave.

"Promise me that you're going to stay safe, and that I won't have to patch up anymore bullet wounds," she said, pouting.

"Everly, I ca—"

"Promise me!" she commanded.

"You've really got a thing for getting promises out of me, huh?" I teased her, and she furrowed her brow at me.

"Yes, I do."

"I promise that I will stay safe and I will come back to you in one piece," I said, trying to reassure her.

We were alone at that moment and the tension was sky-high. She inched closer to me and I rested my hand on her face, caressing it as I brought her in and kissed her. It all happened so fast and she kissed me back fiercely, having me repeat my promise one last time. That kiss solidified my feelings for her, how I would gladly put my life on the line for her, and I couldn't believe the way she consumed me. I knew I'd be thinking about that kiss for a very long time, and I knew it would make me want to rush back to her.

I had to let go when I heard the door. Heiden came in to make sure that the place was secure and that we had eyes on every door to make sure no one could get inside. I waited for him to check every security camera, run his tech magic to make sure the security system was ready to go, and he assured me that no one would ever be able to get past it without disarming it.

"Thank you so much, Heiden," I said, appreciating his expertise as he packed up his laptop, getting ready to leave.

"If you have any issues, please don't hesitate to call. But I won't keep an ear out because there's nothing than can disarm this thing, except your own men, of course," he said, and I smiled. The heightened security made me feel the slightest bit better because I knew I was leaving Everly in the

right hands. I didn't want to think about how I would feel if something happened to her, but stepping outside without her for a few days immediately brought it to mind. I felt quite anxious leaving, and the entire trip up into the mountains made me realize just how different I'd become.

I thought about her the whole way there, and was glad that all the job asked was for me to secure a client's position. It felt increasingly difficult to stay focused, and when I finally pulled up to the lodge, I was greeted by a few guards I didn't recognize.

"Who were you sent by?" I asked, verifying their legitimacy.

"Marco, sir. You must be Damien. We're glad to have you here," said one of the men, outstretching his arm to shake my hand.

"Glad to be here. Where is he?" I asked, looking for my client.

"He's inside. Go on in," said the other man, opening up the door for me.

I entered the cozy lodge, quickly reminded of how incredible it was to be on vacation here all those years ago when I was a kid. But I knew I was just here on official business, and the quicker I canvassed the area and made sure my client was secure, the quicker I could return home to Everly.

"Well, it's about time you showed up," said a voice from behind me.

"It's good to see you, too, Charles," I said, and smiled.

"I was beginning to think that you died or something," he said, and I thought about how that very well could've been the case.

"Not yet, Charles. Not yet," I said. I assured him that the entire process wouldn't take too long; I just had to call in a few favors, make sure that I checked out the entire perimeter, and I'd be on my way.

I went about the assignment with my head held high, but I just couldn't shake the residual feelings from the kiss I shared with Everly. It consumed my every spare thought. It was an unfamiliar feeling, to be so caught up on a woman, and this level of distraction certainly wasn't something I was used to dealing with. She was such a breath of fresh air, someone I felt understood my world much better than I did, even if she did want out of it.

Hours and days passed me by, and soon I was wrapping up the job and back in the driver's seat of my car heading back to Everly's home. I couldn't put her from my mind and I kept thinking of how good it would feel if I were to kiss her again. When I pulled up to the house, everything was quiet, but the guards were perched in their positions outside and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I breathed a sigh of relief, as it had been a few days since I'd left, and I knew once I got through the door, there really wouldn't be any going back. *After that kiss there really isn't any denying my feelings for her anymore. They've become way too strong to ignore, and as much as I don't want to drag her further into the Mafia, I can't deny that I felt her passion when she kissed me,* I thought, thinking of how good those full lips of hers had felt on mine, solidifying everything I'd been dreaming of since the feelings had begun to develop. I dropped my bags at the front door, checked the time, and realized that she must still be at work. I turned right back around and my men all wondered why I was in such a hurry.

"Sir, is everything alright?" asked one of my men.

"Yes, not to worry," I said, trying to brush it off as I got back into my car. I picked up dinner for her and drove off in the direction of the hospital. I had no idea what floor she worked on, who would know where she was located, or if she could even eat on her shift, but I parked in the visitor parking lot, deciding it was a good idea to try. I could smell the delicious takeaway in the passenger seat, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything substantial all day; I'd been in such a rush to get back that I hadn't thought about it once. Once the double automatic doors opened and the fluorescent light overhead

began to wash everything out, I made my way down the hall, trying to find reception. As I neared the desk, I realized I recognized the face that was sitting behind it.

“Hello, stranger,” she said, as I approached, shaking the bag of food lightly to let her know it was for her.

“Hello, Everly,” I said, resting it down on the desk.

“You didn’t have to,” she said as I handed her the food, and I could tell that the smell hit her right away.

“I didn’t think I’d find you this quickly,” I confessed.

“I didn’t realize you’d be back so early. I really appreciate the food; I haven’t eaten anything yet and I’m losing my mind trying to finish up my assignments as well,” she said, and I smiled.

Seeing her in her element just heightened the feeling of attraction that bloomed within me, as well as something I couldn’t quite name. I began to worry again that the closer we got together, the more dangerous both of our lives would become. I knew what the stakes were, I knew what would happen if I let myself get too close, but seeing her, *feeling* her, made me understand that I’d just have to deal with the trouble when it came.

“I don’t want to bother you, but I can stick around until your shift is done,” I offered.

“Oh my goodness, that’s not necessary at all. What are you going to do for that many hours?” she asked with a laugh.

“I’m sure I can find something to pass the time,” I said.

“No, please, you must get some rest after your trip,” she pleaded.

“Alright, well, I’ll see back at home then. Did you drive?”

“Not today, but I’m getting a ride,” she said.

“Alright, see you back at the house,” I lied, finding a seat a bit out of the way so I could wait until the end of her shift to take her home myself.

I handled a few emails, made a few calls, and did as much as I could to pass the time. Eventually, she came out with her bag, about to take a seat on the same bench as me, supposedly to wait for a friend until she saw me.

“You really waited here the entire time?” she said, smiling gratefully.

“Yes, I did,” I replied. I brought her in close and I kissed her. She was taken aback, but we had a moment that was going to last a lifetime. I could feel the tension emanating from the both of us as she got into the passenger seat of my car. She rested her head on the window, drifting off to sleep, and I brushed the hair out of her eyes. She was fast asleep when we eventually got back to the house, and I shut the car off before carrying her upstairs and tucking her into bed. She appeared so exhausted. Her skin was so pale and there were bags under her eyes because she probably hadn’t slept properly in ages. I let her sleep, knowing that she’d eventually have to wake up and study again but glad she would have this time. It amazed me how content I felt just being in her presence, and that was not something I’d ever felt before. She brought so much joy to my life, so much substance that I was no longer looking for the right answers in the wrong places. *Things are changing for us, and that can either be an incredible or very detrimental thing.*

I didn’t know what came over me, but I acknowledged that we needed to define what was going on between us. As much as I was enjoying the ride, she and I both had to think really hard about what we were about to get ourselves into, because there were so many people in our lives that would be affected by our relationship, even though our parents were definitely for it. I hated to think that they didn’t care about throwing Everly’s wishes under the bus, leaving her to fend for herself even though they were incredibly aware of how dangerous this lifestyle can be. As much as I wanted to do the

right thing and step away before things got too hot and heavy, I couldn't ignore the incredible woman that I've come to know over the last few weeks, the woman I was undoubtedly falling in love with. I left her sleeping and I curled up in my own bed, taking out my cell phone and dialing her father to check in. I thought of what it would be like if he ever found out that we were involved, but at this point I knew he would do anything to keep his daughter in the game.

This was much broader than simply trying to keep up the family legacy; it held connotations that even I didn't have growing up. It was almost as if he saw what happened to Everly as a loss for him instead of truly being concerned with his daughter's safety. If what she said was true, then he cannot afford to lose the only medical professional in his life—one he at least didn't have to pay. It sickened me to think of all the work Everly had to do against her will, but I was still employed by her father and if I didn't call to check in, he might surely storm the walls of his own house.

"Hello, Damien," he said, recognizing my number as I called.

"Hello, sir. I just wanted to check in and let you know that all is well with Everly. She's been going to and from school periodically, and we have eyes on her at all times."

"Have you given any more thought to my offer?" he asked, completely disregarding what I said.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I will not play any part in robbing Everly of her dreams. If you really want her to stick around, you're just going to have to convince her yourself. You are her father after all, and she needs to see why you need her so badly," I said, waiting for him to blow up at me for talking so rashly, but he only listened.

"I know that she wants out, but she doesn't realize the kind of life she'd live if she gave up all our protection, Damien. She may think that she can just drop everything and become a doctor, but that just isn't possible for her. There will always be people out to get her, always have a target on her back. I'm the one paying for her schooling, and I wish I could just let her have the future she wants, but her safety comes first," he said, opening up to me in a way I certainly hadn't expected. *So he isn't using her as much as Everly might think. He's just trying to protect her,* I thought, hanging onto every word he said.

"I understand, sir. My apologies for speaking on something I obviously do not know much about," I said.

"No, it's quite alright. I know that from an outsider's perspective, or even Everly's perspective, it could appear that I just enjoy using her, but I was just trying to get her more accustomed to a job more fitting for this line of work. She's never truly going to make it out, and if she does, it's only going to be for a short while until the end of her days. I cannot let that happen. I cannot sacrifice my daughter like that," he said, and I could hear the worry in his voice.

"Not to worry, sir. I will continue to keep a close eye on your daughter. I will also hold up my other end of the bargain and make sure that every single one of your enemies is found and brought to the light. We will put an end to this as best we can, because Everly deserves a choice in the matter, don't you agree?" I asked.

"I suppose you're right. I appreciate everything you've done, Damien, I really do," he said sincerely, agreeing with me for the moment, but I knew he held onto his opinions harder than the love he had for his fortune.

"Just take care of my little girl," he said finally.

"I promise not to let you down," I replied, and I could feel the relief filling him on the other end of the line. We were both tired of hearing that Everly's life was in danger and we just wanted to start solving the puzzle. I'd had my men canvas the area around Anthony's house, gathering as much evidence and dirt on the people that were in attendance that night as possible. I'd put together a pretty

hefty list that needed fact-checking, but once verified, could hold the answers we were all looking for. It's just a matter of time before someone else tried something, and we had to get ahead of them if we wanted to keep Everly out of harm's way. I didn't know what I would do if I lost her, if I failed at the one job I had, *which is to keep her safe*.

Chapter Seventeen: Everly

I've been so anxious since Damien left that I really don't know what to do with myself. I hate this feeling. I don't know what's come over me; every time he steps out of the front door, I worry that he's not going to come back. What's gotten into me? I asked myself as I tried to pack up my medical textbooks and head straight to campus. Penelope and I haven't run into each other much, and we certainly haven't been out since everything happened but I still sent her my notes every once in a while. It was hard for us to be in each other's company because we just reminded each other of that terrible experience. I also didn't know how to approach the subject of her brother, because as he's only done right by me, I was sure she might have an opinion on us actually becoming an item. I got into my car that morning and stopped for a coffee along the way to school, feeling quite unsettled. It was raining out, and I was probably just being paranoid, but I could've sworn someone was watching me. The last time I felt like that I was kidnapped, and I had to be careful. Every few moments, I looked over my shoulders to make sure no one was getting too close, and it really made it hard for me to focus on anything else.

Damien had been so busy with work lately that he would go away for days at a time, and while I trusted his team, I felt much more worried about what might happen to him than my own safety. I wondered if telling him that I felt I was being watched was a good idea, and I even selfishly thought that it might make him want to stick around. I smiled to myself, thinking about how much time we'd been spending together, at how many incredible conversations we'd been having at the end of the nights he's with me. Though I wished he didn't have to go away quite so often, I understood that he had a job to do. Honestly, if I wasn't so worried about him, I'd probably try to convince myself that I didn't even have real feelings for him in the first place.

We'd been operating like a real couple, having dinner together at the hospital while he waits around for me, and we chatted about the trips he takes to secure the locations of his clients. His life was so much more interesting than mine, but it still scared me to think that I might ever have to share in it. I always believed that I would one day have enough under my belt to get out of this life once and for all, but the closer I got to Damien, the more I realized that simply may not be possible anymore. I was falling for him harder than I wanted to, and I knew that he felt the same way about me. Living off of each other like that could be incredibly dangerous, because it's only a matter of time before one of us gets hurt again. I didn't know how to process that fact, but what I did know was that I was planning on enjoying what we had one day at a time.

It wasn't productive to constantly worry about the future, but even though I made him promise to keep me in the loop at all times, he struggled to tell me what was actually going on. He worried that it would break me, and to some extent I understood why he expertly avoided the subject unless I directly asked for information. Lately, when he was around, we felt like a normal couple, like he didn't go out every few days to protect his clients and secure Mob money, probably by killing other people for it. The thought made me sick, but I couldn't separate how I felt about him from how I felt about his profession. He was a package deal, and I'd already decided that I wanted nothing more than to be with him for as long as I lived.

It scared me to give in and leave my hopes at a normal existence behind, but every time he brought me in close for a kiss, it reminded me that I was fighting for something substantial. We were both in the kitchen and he was fixing me a cup of tea while I was lost in my textbooks, studying. He sat down

next to me and I smiled at him, bringing him in close for a kiss. He had that look on his face that he gets right before he tells me that he has to leave, and while I was always disappointed, I never asked him to stay for me.

“Are you going to be okay if I head out for a few days?” he asked, just as he always asked.

“As okay as I can be, Damien. If I’m honest, I haven’t been feeling the safest over the last few days. I feel like someone has had their eye on me, someone other than your security detail,” I confessed, and he looked at me, incredibly concerned.

“Did you see something, Everly?” he asked.

“No, it’s just a feeling. But it certainly isn’t a good one.”

“Well, I promise that you’re in good hands here. When I’m back, I hope I can give you the kind of security you need to feel safe. I know that it’s been hard for you to readjust to this life, especially seeing as you now need protection every second of your day, but know that I care about you. I will never let anything happen to you, do you understand?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Thank you, Damien,” I said, leaning in to kiss him hard.

“When I get back, I’m going to take you out somewhere special. I know you haven’t been out much since the kidnapping, and I know you’ll feel much safer with me. I know you don’t want to date anyone in this lifestyle or line of work, but I’m hoping that you can give me a chance,” he said, and I looked up at him with pleading eyes.

“We both know that there are a lot of things between us that we still have to figure out, and as scared as all of this makes me, I’d be delighted to go out with you. You’ve really changed my life for the better since you’ve come into it, and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said, and he held me close. Then he gently tucked my hair behind my ear before he lifted my chin, pressing my lips to his in one of the most passionate kisses we’d ever shared before. It was the highlight of my night and it certainly softened the blow of his leaving. I worried for his safety yet again, worried that he was about to make a grave mistake by walking through those doors, but I had to trust him. He was the strongest man I knew and one of the smartest as well. If he needed to go, I had to believe that he knew what he was doing. It was the only way I could cope with any of this.

We were both by the front door and I hated to see him bags in hand, ready to go. He kissed me on the forehead, and it filled me with the kind of love neither of us could really understand, and he turned to leave.

“I need to check in with my team at the firm, and I may not be home tonight, but I will see you in a few days for our date. I promise that you’re going to have an incredible time once I’m back,” he said, and I embraced him, kissing him one last time before he got into his car and pulled out of the driveway.

“Be safe,” I whispered aloud as the car rolled off into the distance, and I was left alone with his bodyguards, all men that had been with him since the very beginning. I spotted Angelo doing some work on his laptop in the study and I made my way over to him, wondering if he could shine some light on what this lifestyle really was like out in the field.

“Hello, Everly. Is there something I can help you with?” he asked as I approached him, sitting across from him and eagerly waiting for the first word to surface.

“I don’t really know what I want to ask, but lately I’ve been a bit worried as to what’s happening out there, because I know things are more dangerous than they seem. I guess I just wanted a bit of insight into what it’s actually like, what the reality is because if I have to deal with it for the rest of my life, I’d at least like to know how,” I said.

“For a lot of us, we just live day-to-day and we refuse to plan for a future because we don’t know

if we're ever actually going to get to that point. I used to be rather naive in the beginning, when my wife and I moved into a small house just outside of the city when I first started working for Damien. Everything was fine, the money was great, until someone used me to try to get to him. They snuck into my house when my wife was asleep, breaking through the window, and killing her on the spot, leaving her body for me to find when I came home from my mission. While Damien might think it's best for you to stay out of the loop, I guess I just don't agree. The only way that you're going to be able to deal with any of this, is if you begin to truly understand it," he said.

"And how do I do that?"

"You do that by expecting that things aren't always going to go as planned. I know that really doesn't help the worry you must feel every single day, but you have to rest assured knowing that you have the best of the best at your service. If I had half of what you have right now, my wife still might be alive today," he said somberly.

"I'm so sorry about your wife, Angelo. I'm sure she must've been an incredible woman," I said.

"She definitely was, and my biggest regret was not sharing what she needed to know in order to protect herself if the situation ever arose. Damien hasn't gotten to that step because he just can't seem to conceptualize the possibility of you having to protect yourself, but if you promise not to mention anything to him, I can show you what you need to know. It might make you feel a little better," he offered and I nodded.

"That's all I need," I replied, and we opened up a lesson I never thought I'd ever experience. He taught me the ins and outs of human behavior, of why these Mafia men act the way they do, and what to do if I was ever caught in a situation where I had to defend myself. He gave me the kind of information I've been looking for, something other than having to rely on everyone else to keep me safe. I needed substantial instructions, which Angelo provided to me, and I knew there would come a day where I had to use them. *I just don't want to feel scared anymore. Everything that has happened is because I was seen as a weak link in my family, as someone these people could use to tear my family apart. I don't want to be that anymore, I want to be better, and if I ever truly plan on giving my all to Damien, I had to learn to protect myself.*

That night I slept a bit easier, and all of the things I thought would scare me simply didn't anymore. It was a revelation, a few simple ways to make myself feel like I had a fighting chance. I could only hope the time would never come for me to have to use it, but I knew better than to dream so blindly.

Chapter Eighteen: Damien

I had a moment of clarity when Heiden and I were heading up to go visit Zayn and his new baby boy. I hadn't spent much time with him since everything happened with Everly, and I knew he was the right man to offer advice on such matters. He's been through something very similar with his wife, and I had a lot of questions to ask him. When we pulled up to his house, he greeted us at the front door looking nothing like himself. He appeared not to have slept in days, his sweats were torn to shreds, and I could've sworn he had baby vomit on his shirt.

"Wow, a hard knock life, huh?" I asked with a laugh.

"We work in a profession where things are very difficult and high stress all the time, but even that couldn't have prepared me for raising a baby," he said, opening the door wide so we could come inside.

"So, where's the little guy?" I asked, eager to see little Zayden.

"He's in the living room. I'm watching over him today as Mariana is out, but I'm glad that you guys are here because I'd really like to talk about anything other than baby diapers and blankets. Please," he begged, and Hayden and I both laughed. It was so strange to see him so fatherly, to see him pick up and hold his child so carefully, as though he was afraid to break him at any moment. Zayn brought him over to me and I tried to decline, but he insisted. I held the baby in my arms and the feeling that washed over me was incredible. I really started to imagine what my life would be like if I ever became a father one day, and what Zayn had to say next shocked me and simultaneously warmed my heart.

"Look, Heiden. He's a natural," he said, and Heiden laughed.

"I don't think I've ever held a baby this young in my entire life," I said, truthfully and Zayn could definitely pick up on the fact that I was certainly scared I was going to drop him.

"Well, Damien after everything you've done for me I had one very important question to ask you," he started.

"Ask away."

"Would you be Zayden's Godfather?" he asked, and the question took me aback for a moment before I realized he was serious. I couldn't believe that he would trust me with such responsibility, but it made me happy that he would think of me that way.

"I would be honored," I said, and Zayn smiled. We've built up quite the friendship over the years, and a part of me always wondered how we managed to get out of even the toughest situations alive. There have been so many situations where we were both sure the other wouldn't pull through, but somehow we always managed to stay kicking even when times got tough. Heiden was hard to work on updating the Polizzi family security system, and I had a few moments alone with Zayn where I really wanted to ask him for advice on the entire situation with Everly.

"How's that been going?" he asked, referring to the job, and I hesitated for a moment if telling him the truth was the right idea, but I decided for it because he was the only one that could possibly understand.

"The truth is, everything was fine until we both started getting closer together. It's become so much more than a job, and while I wish I could just step away from it all, I care about her far too much to ever do that. I know that the same thing happened to you when you were hired to protect Mariana, and I thought by coming to you, you could provide some insight into how to deal with this," I

said and he shook his head, checking on Zayden as he just put him down for a nap.

“Trust me, Damien I understand completely. I was very cold to Mariana in the beginning, doing everything I can to not get involved but it couldn’t have prevented the inevitable. We were meant for each other, and we started to develop feelings pretty early on, but I have to warn you that it isn’t easy. I worry about her safety more than I worry about anything else, and that is something that is going to stick with you for the rest of your life. Though, I of course have to say that it was very much worth it to pursue the love of my life, as I do believe you feel the same way,” he said, and I shook my head in agreement.

“We’re both walking around on eggshells around each other, worried that we’re going to fire off some terrible chain of events. She’s already been through so much after the kidnapping, and I’m not sure just how much of it she can really take. You learned pretty early on that Mariana was capable of handling herself, but I’m scared to take that step with Everly. What if she’s not cut out for it? What if she can’t handle it?” I asked.

“That’s a risk you’re just going to have to be willing to take, my friend. I didn’t know how strong Mariana truly was until she had to be, and if I left it up to me, I would’ve had her locked away protected instead of fighting alongside me for as long as she did. Sometimes, they’re just going to make the decisions and we’re going to have to go along with it. That’s just how it has to be,” he confessed, and I thanked him for the great advice.

I sat there for a while trying to piece together what Everly and I’s future would really look like. I wanted nothing more than for it to mimic Zayn and Mariana’s because they simply seemed to have it all. Everything came much easier to them now, but that didn’t mean that they didn’t have to fight tooth and nail to get there. A lot of blood was spilled, a lot of near-deaths occurred, but they pulled through for each other, and that’s all I can hope for me and Everly.

The trip felt like it ended too soon when we were heading back into the city, and I decided to drop Heiden off at his home before spinning by mine for a while. I hadn’t been back to my apartment since I moved in with Everly to better attend to my job, and when I approached my front door, I realized that it was left open. *That doesn’t make any sense*, I thought, retrieving my gun from its holster, holding it up firmly as I was ready to shoot whomever was trespassing on my property. When I entered, the last person I wanted to see was perched on my couch with a magazine in her hands.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I asked.

“Well, hello to you, too, Damien,” she said, placing the magazine in her lap, looking up at me the way she did whenever she wanted something.

“Marissa, how did you get in here?”

“I have an extra key, remember? I came by to see what you were doing, or if the rumors were true that you were shacking up with the Greco girl. It seems that you’ve been so busy, too busy it seems. You look like you haven’t been laid in a while. What’s the matter, Greco girl not giving it up?” she asked, and she always knew how to make my blood boil.

“Marissa, get the fuck out of my house,” I said firmly, but she didn’t seem to budge.

“Does little Everly know how you used to treat women before you got involved with her?” she asked, insinuating that she wasn’t the problem in our relationship.

“Get. Out,” I said, growing angrier by the minute and she could tell that she was stepping on my last nerve.

“Oh Damien, you really like this one, don’t you?” she asked, lifting my chin so I could get a good look at her.

“You stay the fuck away from Everly. Disobey me and I will put a bullet in your skull myself,” I said, pressing the gun to her forehead to send the message, and she pulled back rather scared.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? I’ve never seen you act this way about anyone. Let alone some random you were hired to retake care of.”

“Don’t ask any more questions, Marissa. Leave. If you don’t, I’ll make sure that the rest of your life is a living hell,” I said, and she finally took the blatant hint. She turned to leave, and I could see the fiery jealousy in her eyes. She wasn’t having any of it, and I began to worry that she’d eventually cause trouble for Everly and I. I had to remain on high alert, because those were two people I really didn’t want to meet. I didn’t know what Everly would think of me if she ever got to know the woman I dated before her.

At the time, Marissa threw me for a loop, she was the most captivating woman I’d ever met. Soon after, I learned that she was just after my money, and the sex was a bonus for her. She never really cared for me, my family, or anyone else besides herself for that matter. I learned a valuable lesson about the kind of women that ran in this line of work, and I made a promise to myself never to pursue anyone like her ever again, even if it was just physical. Marissa had a tendency of popping back up in my life when I least expected it, making everything all the more difficult for me. She enjoyed angering me, but she never did see me get quite so violent. I could tell that it scared her, that it made her question the man she thought she knew. *Good because the more I scare her, the more likely it’ll be that she stays away*, I thought, hoping that she wouldn’t weasel her way into my newfound relationship to turn it on its head the way she’s done countless times before.

We had good moments, moments that were unfortunately not real, but she always had a hold over me that I couldn’t explain, until now. Now, all of her power was gone, because I no longer cared about her the way I do for Everly. Everly taught me the true meaning of compassion, of love, of what it means to sacrifice one’s wants for another, and I wasn’t going to give that up anytime soon. She was the light in my life, and I could only hope that this life didn’t put it out. My greatest fear is that she’ll turn into a cold, hard killer like a lot of them have to do in order to survive. Her compassion and kindness makes her who she is, and I’m afraid that if she loses that, we won’t have much going for us anymore.

Stop thinking like that, Damien. You see? Marissa was back for five minutes and she’s already undoing everything you’ve worked so hard to build. Give it a rest, you’re doing what you can because you’re falling in love with Everly and nothing is ever going to take that away from you if you don’t let it. You get to decide how things go from here.

Chapter Nineteen: Everly

I can't put into words how good it feels to be with him right now. The whole world and all of my worries seemed to melt away when he held me close, and I didn't want this night to end. He came back just like he said he would, took me out for a night on the town, and we were closer than ever. My heart was fluttering at the thought of forever with him, and in that moment I'd completely forgotten just how dangerous that life could actually become.

"You look so beautiful," he said to me, holding the door open as I stepped out, hearing my heels on the cobblestone walkway as he held me close, leading me to the restaurant.

"Thank you," I said, kissing him lightly as he led me in, getting us a table in the very back where we ate, talked, and laughed the night away. Everything about that night felt normal, and all of my worries washed away with every smile he shot back at me, and every glass of wine I had. It was an incredible feeling not fearing for my life every second of the day, and just being myself around him for a change. I wanted him to get to know the real me, to hear my dreams loud and clear, and truly understand that I was in it for the long haul. He's taught me quite a lot about what it means to find myself, about what it mean to really give into the person I so desperately want to be. He held my hand over the dinner table, and I felt like we've been seeing each other for years.

The bond we've created has taken on a life of its own, and I know that this kind of love would be the very kind that would stand the test of time if the need every arose. When dinner concluded that night, he was leading me back to the car when I felt the single raindrop fall to my cheek and I looked up at the night sky right before the downpour began. He brought me in close, holding me at the waist, as the rain doused us both. He lifted my chin, and I felt his soft lips press into mine, making the fantasy I've always wanted come true. It was everything I dreamed of and then some. The kiss began to escalate, and by the time we were entering the front door, we were tossing things to the floor, moving past everything in our way to get to the bedroom.

He shut the door behind him, as soaked as we both were, he helped me out of my dress, and I unbuckled his suit pants, feeling his length press into my thigh as he laid me down. I wanted all of him in that moment and I couldn't wait any longer. He kissed every inch of my body, and I couldn't believe how incredible it felt to have him tend to me like that. He scooted down between my legs, lifting my legs apart so he could peel my wet underwear off, as his tongue played with my pussy lightly. He teased me for a while, before diving straight and making me throw my head back in pleasure. It was perfect, everything about it was perfect and I wouldn't have changed a thing if I had the chance. I lifted his head, as his kisses reached upwards to my neck, and I looked at him anticipating what was to come next.

"I want you inside of me," I said, and he lowered his gaze to my lips, kissing me softly as he positioned his dick at my opening, sliding it in slow as I felt his warmth. He thrust softly, fucking me nice and slow, making the most of this wonderful time together. We had so much sexual tension built up, we both didn't realize it could ever feel this good. I felt my eyes roll to the back of my head, feeling every inch of him as he began to pick up speed. It was everything I could've asked for, and I never imagined I'd ever feel this kind of pleasure. We both came down from the high about an hour after, cuddling up next to each other as I leaned into the warmth of his chest, filling me with the comfort of truly feeling safe with him. He looked down at me, and I knew he was about to say something that would change our lives forever.

“I’m falling in love with you, Everly,” he said.

I couldn’t believe that it was true, that we were actually opening up communication about something that scared us both so much. I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my days with him, feeling just like how I felt right now. It was inevitable that we’d get to this point, and we did everything we could to try and stop it, but we were meant to be.

“I’m falling in love with you too, Damien,” I replied, and he smiled at me before kissing me hard. It was the defining moment in our relationship that we’ve been waiting for. I held him close, never wanting to let go, afraid that this fantasy would soon come to an end and we’d have to return to our old mundane lives. I knew that my life would always be interesting with him around, but that also meant that we’d forever be in danger because if my name carried the kind of weight that made people want to tear me down, I couldn’t imagine what they’d say once they realize the Ruiz and Greco families have joined forces. I didn’t want to think about any of that right now, because all I knew was that I was falling in love with the man who put his life on the line for me, and I owed him absolutely everything.

Chapter Twenty: Damien

I finally have everything I could've ever asked for. Everly has changed my life in ways I still can't comprehend, but all I know is that the love I have for her is real, I thought, waking up the next morning realizing that it hadn't all been a dream. She felt so incredible, the warmth of her skin on mine was something I wanted to feel for the rest of my days, and in that moment I really didn't care about what the stakes were. I just knew that I owed my life to Everly, that I had to do everything in my power to make sure nothing bad ever happened to her, and that was going to be all the more difficult now that I had admitted to my feelings for her. It was much easier when she was just a job, when I managed to stay away long enough to focus on the task at hand. Now, every decision had to be made with her wellbeing in mind, and I didn't know what that would mean for our future, if things ever really did get tough again. I knew what we were getting ourselves into, but I promptly ignored it as much as I possibly could, until I knew more about how to care for her in a way that didn't require her to get involved with everything that was going on.

It was the most difficult balance, something I had to learn a great deal about if I was ever going to make it work, and when I rose from the bed that morning every part of me just wanted to crawl back in with her. I didn't want to leave her side anymore, I didn't want to step away from her in any regard because I was afraid that something bad might happen the moment I allowed myself to do that. She was much stronger than she gave herself credit for, and I had to trust that she was going to be okay in the same arrangement we've had for so long, but there was something off about the air that morning. When I got an unexpected call from my father a few hours later, I knew that whatever he had to say would only anger me more. He had a knack of taking away all of the good things in my life to remind me that I was always under his control, and I wasn't going to let that happen with Everly.

I woke her slightly to let her know that I was heading out so she didn't wake up in a panic and I was off, sipping on my espresso as I headed down to the firm where my father was waiting for me. The office felt different for some reason, as though it's been tainted with a presence I didn't quite like, and when I entered through the double doors, getting a good look at my father behind his desk, I knew that he had something up his sleeve.

"Thank you for coming, Damien. Please, have a seat," he instructed and I obeyed, wishing he would just get to the point already.

"What's this about, Father?" I asked eagerly.

It seemed like it was just business as usual until he told me something so unsettling it made me incredibly worried about what was to come.

"I ran into Marissa this morning," he said.

"Okay, and what does that have to do with me?" I asked, wondering how he could've gone from wanting me to get involved with Everly to now bringing up my ex-girlfriend.

"Well, it seems that she's felt quite remorseful for letting you go, and she wants nothing more than to have you back, Damien. As now that Mr. Greco and I have become great allies, there's no need for you to chase after his daughter anymore. I'd like to remind you that Marissa's father is good for business, and I know that the reason you were so hesitant on pursuing Everly is because you still have feelings for Marissa. Well, son today is your lucky day. I'd like you to start pulling your weight around here and get back with Marissa. It'll make her father and I both very happy," he said, and I couldn't believe the audacity. *He really never listens to what I have to say. He just gets off on*

infuriating me further, no matter how many times I tell him that I won't abide by his stupid rules, I thought, getting ready to lay it on thick so he realizes that his hold over me was slowly deteriorating.

"I'm sorry, Father, but I'm afraid I cannot help you in that department now, because I am in fact with Everly. Nothing you say is going to change my mind on the matter, and I'd really appreciate if you stopped using my personal affairs for your gain," I said.

"I suggest you rethink those words and watch your mouth, son. Don't forget who is in charge here," he said.

"You don't forget that there's going to come a time where you're too old to even wield your gun anymore, Father. If you don't want me to walk away from this lifestyle and cut all ties with the Mob, then I suggest you stop pushing me so much. I'm tired of everyone around me feeling like they know what's best for my life, for my family, and for my wellbeing. I am the only person that's going to make decisions for me, and I know that you need me much more than you'd ever like to admit. So please, stay out of it," I said, incredibly fed up with his behavior.

"I believe we're done here," was all he had to say and I took off. I didn't want to spend another moment in his presence knowing that he really didn't care about this family or my wellbeing at all. All he ever cared about was his precious business, and if that were to ever crumble he truly would feel like he had nothing left. *It was absolutely disgusting.*

Chapter Twenty-One: Everly

I finally had the conversation with Penelope. I finally told her that I have feelings for her brother and that those feelings were reciprocated. She took it much better than I thought she would, and to my surprise she was very supportive. We've both had quite a bit of time to reflect on everything that's happened, and I convinced Penelope to go out with me for a dinner and a movie to take our minds off of things because we hadn't been out since the kidnapping. I missed spending time with her, I missed not having to worry about looking over my shoulder every two seconds, and it would be a nice change to feel like things were actually back to normal. She told me that she'd meet me outside the restaurant, that she was feeling quite anxious all day because we were supposed to get our exam marks back that very day. I decide not to check mine because I didn't want it to get in the way of my evening. I couldn't help but feel quite anxious myself, and I wrote it off as being a bit of cold feet at going out without Damien for the first time since everything happened.

Damien had Angelo trail us of course to make sure that nothing bad happened when we were out trying to have a little fun. When I saw her approach me outside of the restaurant, she instantly came in for a hug. I could tell that she missed me too, and we've been lacking in the friendship department since we've both been on lockdown. The restaurant she chose was a lovely one, and it was just the kind of cuisine I was craving. I wanted nothing more than to just settle in, talk about anything other than the crime world, and eat a shit ton of good food.

The hostess led us to our table, and we both folded our napkins lightly on our laps, before ordering very expensive wine to tide us over for the evening.

"Have you taken a look at your results?" she asked, taking a sip of her red wine.

"I decided it was probably best I left it alone for the evening. I've been dealing with so much anxiety as it is, I just wanted to get away for the evening, you know?"

"Trust me, I understand that. I, however, couldn't wait and I didn't do as well as I wanted to. I still passed of course, but I'm not sure it's good enough. We've both been dealing with so much lately, and by trying to get my life back in order, I've been suppressing all of the bad memories so much I stopped caring much about anything. Though, the same can't be said for you now that you and my brother are an item," she teased, and it warmed my hear that she took it so lightly in the first place.

"I'm just glad that it doesn't upset you that I'm with him now," I confessed.

"Why would it?" she asked, confused.

"I know how iffy people can get when you get involved with their family, and I just didn't want me seeing your brother to jeopardize our friendship in any way," I said.

"Trust me, Everly. After what we've been through together, I don't think there's anything that could jeopardize our friendship," she replied, and to that I smiled. We finished up dinner around eight o'clock, making our way to the little old-school movie theatre on a corner street not too far from home. Penelope offered to buy tickets and I tried to talk her out of it so I could foot the bill but she insisted, so while she was up grabbing those I had someone tap me lightly on the shoulder.

"Yes?" I asked, not recognizing the girl in front of me.

"You must be Everly. Hi, I'm Marissa."

Penelope must've overheard us because she rushed over, not looking too pleased to see Damien's ex trying to come up on her friend like that. I couldn't help but taken in how beautiful she was, and I could see why Damien would take an interest in her. Though, her personality wasn't the type I'd

imagine he'd go for, and I realized quite quickly that she had it out for me, and she wasn't going to leave until she tried to ruin things.

"God, why are you here, Marissa?" asked Penelope, not amused in the slightest.

"I just wanted to stop by to see what Everly was like in person now that she's fucking your brother," she said, and the woman really had a knack for making my blood boil, and we just met a few moments ago.

"Is there something that you want?" I asked, trying to sound as calm as possible.

"I just wanted to check out the competition, dear. How does it feel to know that I had him first? I gave him the ride of his life, and it seems that he hasn't quite forgotten that. I paid him a visit to his apartment a few days ago while he was supposed to be returning to you, and we've been talking about getting back together," she said, and as much as I didn't want to believe her, the words coming out of her mouth undoubtedly hurt me.

"What's wrong, Everly? Oh, have I overstepped?" she asked again, poking fun at my misery and I waited for Penelope to step in and defend me, but she just continued.

"It must be really hard to pursue a man when his own father has given me his approval and not you, isn't that right, Penelope?" she asked, turning her attention to Penelope who just couldn't correct her.

"Is that true?" I asked, feeling the tears begin to well up in my eyes but I wasn't going to let them out if it was the last thing I did.

"I overheard my father trying to convince Damien that dating Marissa is a good idea, but I don't think Damien would ever be stupid enough to do it. He isn't that kind person and I truly believe that the feelings he has for you are real," she said, but it still didn't make me feel any better.

I wanted to put Marissa from my mind for the rest of the evening, but everything she said began to feel like a weight on my shoulders and Penelope could tell that I was upset. I was beginning to think that there had to be some truth to what she was saying, that she wouldn't have sought me out like that if she didn't think I was a threat. I worried that by giving my heart to Damien, I also gave him the opportunity to see to it that I'm going to end up brokenhearted. I tried to keep my emotions to myself for the rest of the night because the moment I thought about, *I just wanted to break down all over again.*

Chapter Twenty-Two: Damien

It was an incredibly long day and all I wanted to do was go home to Everly. I know she went out with Penelope and I was glad that she was finally readjusting to her old life. I knew she must've missed spending time with my sister, and convincing my parents to let them go after what happened the last time wasn't easy, but at least I got it done. I pulled up to the house and it was a torrential downpour outside as I unlocked the door, stepping inside calling out to Everly, but all I heard were muffled cries coming from the living room. She was curled up on the couch with her head in the pillow, and when I went to her, she didn't budge.

"Everly, what's wrong?" I asked, trying to get her to lift her head from the pillow, noticing that her face was swollen and red from crying. I wondered what could have possibly happened that would cause her to cry so much, as she simply had to be at it for hours for her mascara to be running this badly, and she was still all dressed up.

"I ran into your ex-girlfriend while Penelope and I were at the movies. It seems that everyone wants you to get back together with her, including your parents. I never thought this was going to be an issue, and she's probably right when she says she has much more of a hold over you than I do," she said, and her pain broke my heart. I didn't know how to tell her that she was the only girl for me. I didn't want her to feel that kind of pain, not because of Marissa.

"Listen to me, Everly. There is nothing left between Marissa and me. The only reason that my father wants me to get back with her is because having her father as an ally again would be good for business. He said the same thing about you, and the moment he got close with your father, that didn't matter to him anymore. I made it very clear to him that I wanted no part in using you for anything, because at the time I knew I was developing real feelings for you. I never let him use me, nor did I ever allow myself to break your trust. I'm so sorry that she got to you, and I know that she can be really convincing sometimes, but you have to believe me when I say that there's nothing to worry about," I said, holding her by the cheek, wiping her tears as they flowed down her face.

"Okay, so why was she at your apartment then?"

"Is that what she said? I stopped by to get a few things and the door was open when I got there. I haven't been back there in so long, I completely forgot that she had a spare key. She made it very clear that she was adamant on making things difficult for me, and she couldn't wait to step between us. I'm telling you, Everly. She planned this, and she got to my father so it would seem like it was something I wanted," I told her, but she didn't seem like she wanted to hear any more of it.

She was so withdrawn, like she couldn't put Marissa's words from her mind and I understood completely. I remember how she'd do that to me, how she always had a knack for making whatever that came out of her mouth believable. I was tired of her fucking up my life, and I wasn't going to let her take away the one good thing in my life.

"Everly, look at me. I love you. I love you so much, and you're the only person I want. I would never jeopardize what we have, not now, and not ever, okay?"

"I know, I love you too. I just need some time to think. I need time to reassess what we're really doing here. I have to make sure that I'm okay with this life, the kind of life where people lie and scheme to get what they want. I'd really appreciate it if you left me alone tonight, but I just want you to know that this doesn't mean I'm giving up, I'm just trying to process," she said, and her words left me so defeated. I didn't want to leave her hurting like this, but I had to respect her wishes.

“Alright, Everly. I’ll head out but I need you to know that I love you and I’m not giving up on us,” I said, even though it hurt me to leave her, I had no choice. She was adamant on having a bit of time to herself, and I didn’t bother to pack any of my things because I knew I’d be back. I had to get out, take a drive, and clear my head. I didn’t think Marissa was going to be this much of a problem and I had to figure out a way to deal with her before she tore my happiness to shreds just for the sake of it. I know that she loves me, and that she’s never had to deal with this kind of thing before. I just hope that she doesn’t find herself wanting to get out of it because she’s afraid of how things are going to go between us.

The streets were winding that night as I could barely see in the rain, but I didn’t care. I was so frustrated, so angry that Marissa managed to do this. I was so angry I could put a bullet in her skull right then, but I knew that would only make things worse between Everly and I. The last thing I needed was for her to be afraid of me. She deserved the world, and she was left confused. I couldn’t blame her, because if I was in her shoes I’d probably have quite a lot of questions myself. I wondered what Marissa really thought she was going to get out of all of this, or if it was just her way for getting back at me for leaving.

She had to know that she wasn’t going to get away with playing me forever, and I hated that she was the reason I couldn’t sleep beside the woman I love tonight. I know Everly just needed time to process everything and when she calmed down, she’d soon see how much I love her. I put my life on the line for her so many times, she can’t ignore that I would do it again in a heartbeat. I picked up my cell phone dialing Angelo to make sure that he was able to check on Everly because I hated leaving her alone when she was this upset.

“Hello?”

“Angelo, I need you to check on Everly for me. She and I got into a bit of an argument and I probably won’t be back until the morning. I just wanted to make sure that she’s alright,” I said, knowing that this would leave him rather confused.

“Hold on one second,” he said, going off to check on her, coming back to reassure me that she’s locked up in her room still crying but she’s safe.

“Thank you, Angelo,” I said.

“Anytime, boss. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?”

“Apparently someone from my past has scared her a little, but when she calms down, everything is going to be fine,” I said, trying not to give away too many details.

“I see, well I’ll keep a watchful eye on her tonight and I’ll alert you in case she tries to do anything rash, but I highly doubt she will,” he said, and I believed him.

“Thanks again, I’ll see you in the morning,” I said before I hung up.

I pulled up into a grocery parking lot, putting my driver’s seat back all the way so I could catch a bit of shut-eye. I didn’t dare want to go back to my apartment and risk Marissa showing up there, because when I kicked her out I didn’t exactly take the key back from her. I knew she was lurking, waiting to pounce at any moment, and I wasn’t about to give her that kind of satisfaction. She wasn’t deserving of any kindness, not after what she’s done. I knew she was going to try to play the sympathy card if I gave her the opportunity, and I had to make sure she was dealt with if I ever planned on having a real future with Everly.

I called up one of my men, one I never called unless I needed something incredibly rash taken

care of.

“Hello, Damien?”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you. I have a bit of work you might be interested in, Diego. It seems I have a woman from my past that has been causing a lot of trouble for me, and I need to have her dealt with. Please, no violence. I just need her to be scared enough to leave the country and never come back.”

“That’s a tough one, Damien. You know it’s much easier to kill people than convince them to leave on their own.”

“I need you to do this for me, Diego. Don’t make me remind you that you still owe me one after what I did for you four years ago.”

“Alright, alright. We both promised never to speak of it again. Give me a photo, and her last known location and I’ll make sure that she stays out of your hair.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“And, Damien?”

“Yeah?”

“No more favors after this. When this is all said and done, we’re even. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” I said, before I hung up, resting my head on the window and drifting off to sleep.

I thought about Everly, about how sad she must be and will be for the rest of the night. I wanted nothing more than to console her, to hold her close and never let go, but I had to give her space. She was being incredibly irrational, but it dawned on me that she must not have ever dealt with this kind of thing before. I didn’t even really know how to process it, because we knew that there’d be obstacles along the way. *I guess it’s much easier to put things into perspective before they happened but it’s a much different ballgame to actually deal with it when it comes around.*

I fell asleep wishing I could be next to her, but I knew that from then on I was going to do everything in my power to make sure she understood that I loved her and that I wasn’t going anywhere.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Everly

Everly, you're being so incredibly irrational. You have to know that Damien had a past before you and you can't get upset with him for his ex-girlfriend's comments. The only reason she presented herself like that in the first place is because she's jealous. You're the one that Damien has fallen in love with, and you have to trust him, I thought, giving myself a pep talk even though I was still crying. I couldn't help myself. It was hard enough getting used to this new lifestyle, but I was just so afraid that it was going to go up in flames faster than I could catch myself.

I just couldn't believe that he would date someone like Marissa, someone so cold and withdrawn, exactly the kind of woman one would expect to run in this line of work. The more I thought about her, the more I realized I may not be as cut out for this lifestyle as I think I am. I was just so afraid that I was going to let myself fall so head over heels in love with Damien that he might eventually end up hurting me like the horror stories I've heard from my mother regarding my father. There are a certain kind of men that run crime in this city, and they all have taken quite a few mistresses in their time, and I worried that Damien was going to be no different. I worried that one day someone better was going to come along and everything we've built together would eventually just go down the drain. He never gave me a reason to doubt him, but I was concerned that maybe I didn't know him as well as I thought I did. *There are a lot of people out here that are going to deceive you, but you just have to be able to push past the pain and remember who you are. That's what mom always said, and I have to remember that the next time it comes up in conversation with Damien.*

I always wanted to see the best in people but I just couldn't shake how disgusted and angry I felt after meeting Marissa. I knew in my heart that he wasn't that kind of person, that he'd never truly hurt me that way, but I knew that there was always a surprise waiting around every corner. There's no telling how things are going to develop for us as time progresses, but I had to make sure that I was looking out for myself in all of this, no matter how much I loved Damien.

I tried to curl up in bed and get some rest but I just couldn't clear my head. I wasn't thinking clearly, and I was blinded by rage and frustration in a way I'd never experienced before. None of my ex-boyfriend's exes ever brought out that kind of response in me before, and I suppose it was because I never truly loved any of them. Damien is my first love the same way that Marissa was his first, and I was scared that he'd always have some sort of connection with her. I had to write it off as a jealous ex and give Damien the benefit of the doubt, because up until this point all he's ever done was made my life better.

I tried to convince myself that it just wasn't worth worrying about anymore, and I tucked myself up under the covers just about to drift off into a deep sleep when I heard a noise coming from the living room. The place was crawling with security so I didn't think much of it, and Damien very well could've come back early. I was secretly happy for a moment that he didn't listen long enough to stay away, until the alarms started going off. Damien knew how to disarm all of the alarms, and he's never done anything like that before. My heart sank into my stomach at the thought that I was in danger, and I knew that whomever set off the alarm certainly wasn't Damien.

I heard gunshots coming from the living room, and in that moment I was kicking myself for ever telling Damien to go. He was the only one that would be able to keep me safe, and I felt my heartbeat in my throat when I heard some men approach my room. I tried to run into the bathroom but they kicked down my bedroom door faster than I could get my bearings. I screamed, hearing shots being

fired from every corner, and a man approached me, dragging me out of the room, and I tried to claw my way free. It was no use, he was far too strong for me, and he lifted me out of the house, as I continued to try to fight for my life. Just as he was about to stuff me into the back of a truck, I noticed that Angelo was lying dead, face down on the lawn. I gasped, fighting back a cry, as I tried to bust my way out from this man's grasp. It was no use, and I felt a syringe dig into the skin of my neck, knocking me out cold. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone were to try something like this again, I just thought that I'd always be safe knowing that Damien would never leave my side. *I did this. I told him to leave*, I thought, subconsciously uttering the words to myself as I drifted off to sleep. I didn't know where we were going nor did I know what was in store for me, but I knew whomever did this had a vengeance that required a great deal of evil. *I just wasn't safe anymore.*

I woke up and it was like I was right back in Anthony's warehouse again, feeling the concrete beneath my feet as I tried to make sense of where I was or who had taken me. Once my eyelids fluttered open, I noticed that I was tied to a chair, and I saw a young woman sitting across from me whom I didn't recognize until I fully came to.

"Marissa," I said, under my breath so angry that she would pull this kind of stunt.

"Well, hello, dear. It's lovely to see you again. I believe we didn't get a chance to finish our chat, and I didn't know how else to reach you," she said, condescendingly.

"What the fuck do you want with me?" I screamed at her, noticing that she was sitting down next to a man that could very well pass as her twin.

"I simply wanted to have a chance to get to know you better before my brother, Marcello and I get rid of you for good. The one little detail that my dear Damien left out was that I tend to kill my competition and he always comes running back. I'll bet he didn't tell you about that one, though," she said, retrieving her compact and lipstick from her purse as she painted a light nude shade over lips. *She's really enjoying this. Stay strong, Everly. Don't let her get under your skin*, I thought, trying to convince myself that she wasn't going to have the same hold over me that she had over everyone else. I wasn't going to allow her to take my life, my love, or anything that I held dear just because she was bored and needed attention. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified, that I wasn't worried that she'd just up and kill me when she didn't get what she wanted. In that moment, I really wanted to know what purpose taking me would serve, and then I realized that she was probably trying to draw Damien out, and I could only hope that he'd find me before it's too late.

"It seems that you've posed a threat to my sister, and she's asked me to get you out of the picture for her," said Marcello.

"Oh, brother. There's no rush. I'm sure after that little fight they had, it's going to take some time for Damien to even realize she's missing," said Marissa with a cackle.

"I'm going to have quite a bit of fun with you, Everly Greco. That's before we start sending your body parts to Damien. I wonder which part I'm going to start with first," he said, licking his lips and I was absolutely terrified. *Please, Damien, please find me*, I thought, wishing I could apologize for the way I acted, wishing I never asked him to leave my side. I felt the tears well up in my eyes but I wouldn't dare cry in front of Marissa, even if she did have her brother start cutting off my body parts. I had to be strong, for myself, and for Damien.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Damien

I got the alert as soon as the alarm sounded but by the time I made it back to the house, Everly was already gone. I called her relentlessly on the way home but no one answered, and I called Heiden next trying to understand how something like this could've happened.

"It seems that someone was trying to override the system and failed. That's why they bust in with the alarms sounding, but I have security footage from the attack and there was someone sitting in the car with her as she was being hauled out. I'll have it sent over to you ASAP. Don't worry, Damien. We're going to get her back," he said, but I just couldn't hear any of it at the moment.

When I arrived back at the house there had been a great sign of struggle, my men laid dead around the entire perimeter of the property, and I caught sight of Angelo laying dead on the lawn which left a very bad taste in my mouth. Once I got inside, I realized that they must've been long gone by now, and I took out my phone to call my father and Leo and let them know that Everly had been taken for a second time. I rushed over to their location with the camera footage to see if either of them would be able to identify the man that took Everly, and they both looked at each other like they had seen a ghost.

"What is it?" I asked, angrily.

"That man works for Marissa's father," said my father.

"I should've known that Marissa would be behind this. She's had it out for me since she learned that I had been taking care of Everly. Is this what you wanted father? You wanted me to have a second chance with Marissa, and look what she's done. She's taken away the woman I've fallen in love with, and if this goes south, consider everything we've had here broken. Once I get Everly back, I'm done. I no longer have to answer to you, is that clear?" I said firmly, and he nodded.

I knew he wasn't going to argue with me after something like this happened. I had to figure out a clever way to get Marissa to give up the location of Everly, and I knew that I had to play directly into her hands. This wasn't the first time she's tried to pull something like this, and I knew it wouldn't be her last. So, I had to play her game for a little while if I was going to be a part of her undoing. I had to act fast because the clock was ticking and I knew they wouldn't keep Everly alive and breathing for very long.

I knew that she would be waiting for my call, so I made my way over to my apartment convincing her to meet me there. She knew that I didn't want anything to happen to Everly, so I was going to put on quite the show to make her believe that everything she thought was true actually was. If she wanted to see me acting a fool, I would do it as long as it led to getting the woman I truly loved back. I refused to let her undo everything I've worked so hard for, and I threw back a few glasses of whiskey to aid in my appearance. If it was broken-hearted she wanted, it was broken-hearted she was going to get.

"You know I thought you were going to call in the big guns this time," she said, entering in, lips painted a light shade of nude and wearing a very suggestive trench coat.

"What good is that going to do, Marissa? You've got me right where you wanted me all along. I really did try to do what was right, and Everly was only a means to an end for my father until he created a lasting friendship with Leo Greco. You had to know that once that was over I'd come back to you, *I always come back to you*. I couldn't give in while I was on the job but it was destroying me inside. I wanted nothing more than to be reminded of how good things used to be, you get that don't you?" I asked her, acting as drunk and off my rocker as I possibly could, buying for time.

“Oh, sweetie, I know. Come here,” she said, inching closer to me and I brought her in close for a kiss. From the moment our lips touched, I could already tell that she was swooning. She finally had everything she wanted, and in that moment I felt her soften in a way that reminded me of who she used to be. Once I had her right where I wanted her, I turned her around, kissing her neck, so I could reach into my pocket and retrieve the knife. I held it to her throat and she was taken aback when she felt the cold metal brush against her.

“You fucking asshole,” she said.

“You’re so fucking easy, you know that?” I told her, and she scoffed.

“Tell me where she is, bitch.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going to weasel my way into that little business deal of yours. I know you’ve been trying to buy us out and that’s why you went to my father in the first place. Needless to say, I don’t work from him anymore, and I’m the only one that can take your precious money from you,” I said, and that hit a nerve. She was sweating now, and she realized that I was serious.

“Okay, okay, Damien. Please, I’ll tell you where she is,” she said, giving up.

I didn’t care about her money, about the deals she’s made with my father or anyone else. I just wanted to find Everly, and make sure that she was alright.

“You better watch your fucking back, Marissa. If I see you back in town I will make sure to unleash the cavalry and you’re going to be praying you stayed home crying to Daddy,” I told her, and I could see the tears well up inside of her eyes. For the time being, I’d won, but I still had to make it to Everly in time because the men Marissa hired, along with her brother didn’t receive that memo. I didn’t know what I would do if they hurt her, yet another traumatic experience that she had to deal with. I was afraid for her, worried that she wasn’t going to be able to pull through this one like the last. She was a strong girl, but she’s had the worst possible hands dealt to her over the course of our relationship. I wanted nothing more than to make her world okay again, but I quickly realized that I was the only thing standing between her and her safety.

I got into my car, shaking off any inhibitions that crept up inside of me, speeding down the highway to the old abandoned coat factory where Everly was being held. I busted in there, guns blazing, and I knew that no one would be expecting me of all people. I saw Everly tied to a chair at the far end of the room, and it seemed like she was out cold. I fought off all of Marissa’s men, worried that I wouldn’t get to Everly in time. I fired shot after shot, watching as the bodies dropped like flies around me.

“Everly!” I called out, but there was no answer.

I had to get to her, and I had to get to her now.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Everly

I was so disgusted by her, words couldn't describe the feeling that rested in the pit of my stomach. I didn't know what to think when Marissa left saying that Damien needed her, and I began to believe that this was all some sick, sadistic plot to further my undoing from the inside. I wanted to believe that Damien had my best interest at heart, but here I was right back in the kind of danger he was supposed to be protecting me from, and I was within an inch of my life yet again. I was so hurt by the entire ordeal that Marcello came up to me, brushing the hair out of my face the way Damien had done, reminding me of all that I've lost.

"Oh, someone's sad, huh? I know something that's going to help take your pain away," he said, as he started to undo my bindings to lay me down on the floor and try to force himself on me. I bit my lip when he tried to kiss me, but he backhanded me.

"You're going to fucking regret that," I said, angrily but he only laughed. He was about to hit me again, and get me out of my clothes when he heard a noise that distracted him. He turned his attention to the door, frustrated that someone must've gotten in, and in came Damien with his gun firing off faster than I'd ever seen it before. I've never seen him quite so angry in my entire life, and it was then I realized that he was there to save me. He shot Marcello dead between the eyes before he undid the rest of my bindings, taking me into his arms and apologizing for everything that has happened.

"I love you so much, Everly Greco. I'm so sorry that I've caused you so much pain. I'm so sorry that my past is the reason you constantly have to deal with this kind of trauma. I want nothing more than to give you the life you deserve, but I hate to keep hurting you like this," he said, and he was really beating himself up about it.

"I love you, too, Damien. I'm so sorry that I acted so irrationally, that I asked you to leave even though you did absolutely nothing wrong. I should've known better, I shouldn't have been so quick to judge, but I'm just so glad that you're here. Please, take me home," I said, and he obliged.

He kissed me hard, reminding me of the kind of love I nearly lost when everything was about to go to shit. He helped me into the passenger seat of his car, driving me back to what I assumed was his apartment before he carried me into the elevator up to his floor. He took me inside, helping me get out of my sweaty clothes and into something more comfortable before he put me to bed. There was a look on his face that I hadn't quite seen before, a look of utter contentment as though there was nothing else in the world he needed besides us.

"Everly, I have to be honest with you about something," he began.

"Yes, please anything," I said, letting him continue.

"These past few months I've learned a valuable lesson about where my loyalty lies, and I know that being involved in this business has only brought utter harm to the both of us. I wanted to let you know that I'm getting out of the business, that I see where you were coming from when you wanted to put it all behind you. I want you to have the life you've always dreamed of, a life that doesn't require you to feel scared all the time."

"Are you serious?" I asked, wanting to know if this was just a spur of the moment decision.

"Yes, Everly I'm serious. After you graduate, we can go wherever you want. I just want you to be safe and happy, doing what you love without the worry that something bad is going to happen at any second."

I didn't know what to say, I couldn't believe that he would do this for me, and I felt myself start to

cry. I knew that even though I was born into the Mafia lifestyle, that it truly wasn't for me, and I'd never really be cut out to succeed at it. It was selfish of me to accept an offer like that, and that Damien would somehow manage to find work that isn't so dangerous. I suppose I was just grateful that in all the time he's spent in the crime world, he's amassed other businesses that could give us the kind of livelihood we needed without having to sacrifice our lives.

"Listen, Everly. I can move my business anywhere. Wherever you want to go, we'll start a new life there. I just want to be with you, I just want to show you how much I love you, because I've quickly realized that this isn't the life I want either. We'll be much better off building a life together that doesn't keep us on edge for the rest of it, and I couldn't think of a better place to start than right here," he said.

"I love you, Damien," I said, smiling up at him.

"I love you so much, Everly. So much more than you'll ever know," he said, bringing me in close and kissing me hard. He held me by the chin, as I felt his soft lips press into mine, feeling like the very first time all over again. I finally got everything I could've ever wanted, everything that has made my life worth living was now a possibility. Damien was willing to sacrifice his life for me, give me everything I could've ever dreamed of, and I didn't know how to thank him.

After all the hardship we've both been through together it's no wonder that we'd want to separate ourselves from this world, but I've learned a lot from the short time I had to be in it. I know that it's going to take some convincing on my parents part, and that conversation probably won't go down very well but none of that mattered anymore. What mattered was that I had a man by my side that loved me unconditionally, a man that was willing to give up everything he's ever known for me just so I could have everything I've ever wanted. I don't know where you find that kind of love, and if I were to have told myself a few months ago that this was where I was going to end up, I wouldn't have believed it. I held Damien close, kissing him hard, and reminding myself that this was just the beginning of the rest of our lives. We had so much left to live for and it warmed my heart that he was giving me the chance to do so.

EPILOGUE

Six months later.

It's finally the day we've all been waiting for and the love of my life is finally graduating. I am so proud of her and I can tell that her family is just as proud even though they're still quite sad that we've decided to start our new lives elsewhere. It wasn't easy to convince Leo Greco that this was the best decision for his daughter, but after everything that happened, he really didn't have it in him to argue any further. He was given the opportunity to make sure that his little girl would be able to flourish, have a life that she's undoubtedly proud of, and that's the best gift of all. As for my father, the conversation about leaving for good didn't go down quite as well. It seemed that my father wanted no part in hearing about how much of a failure I've become, and he hasn't called since. I knew I didn't need his approval to start my new life, but it just solidified the fact that I've wasted so much time honoring that man.

I had a security business of my own now, one that I could run on my own terms, legitimately. I wanted to get out of the Mob life and I was adamant on making sure that things stayed that way. With the exception of my friend, Zayn Polizzi there will be no other connections to the Mafia that I'm going to stand for. I was just so happy that I could finally give Everly the life she so greatly deserves. She's worked so hard for this, and even though she was worried about figuring out the rest of her life, she could rest assured knowing that none of that would occur on crime lines. I watched as she walked up to the state to receive her diploma, looking as beautiful as ever in her cap and gown. I don't think I've ever seen her quite this happy, and I was so grateful that everything worked out the way it did.

Later that evening, we all gathered around at the Greco household for our goodbye dinner. It was the most emotional night of my life because I was saying goodbye to the people who have stuck by me through thick and thin. There were lives lost during this assignment that I had to acknowledge, that deserves to be remembered for the great service they've done over the years. Everly was beaming for the entire evening, talking up my father and mother, truly enjoying her last few hours on crime soil. I raised a glass to us all, so that we could commemorate this glorious occasion, and dinner finally commenced. I sat across from Heiden who while looking up at him appeared as though he'd seen a ghost. I followed his line of sight to a rather beautiful woman who sat on the other end of the table nursing her belly. I remembered that Heiden had spoken so highly about this woman before, and that she was the one that had ghosted him a few months back.

"Yours?" I mouthed to him over the table, and he just nodded in my direction.

I chuckled, realizing that I was going to miss this so much, but I had to do what was best for Everly and I. She and I were about to embark on the rest of our lives, giving ourselves the opportunity to start a family of our own in a way that wouldn't cause any more trouble. I knew that there was a part of her that was still scared for what was to come, but I assured her that it was going to be as great as she could possibly dream. We had all the support we needed from friends, family, and all those that have served us over the years. I wondered where the travels would take us, where Everly would eventually end up working as a doctor in the hospital of her choice.

I knew that she wasn't in any rush to settle down because she wanted to enjoy her freedom, and I couldn't have agreed more. I remembered how good it felt to get away from the Mob life all those months ago simply for vacation, and now I was starting the rest of my life with the woman I loved unconditionally. She's really changed over the course of our time together, becoming the woman she's always wanted to be, and I can't wait to see what's left for us.

Even though we were about to embark on quite the journey, and leaving the Mafia world behind may seem like a good thing at the time, I knew that there was always the possibility that an enemy might pop out of the woodworks especially seeing as that I was on the outs with my father. Though, it was not something I'd allow myself to worry about right now. I reached over to hold Everly's hand on the table, squeezing it lightly to let her know that she had all of my support.

She was vibrant, ready for whatever life has to throw at her. I knew that together, we'd make an incredible team, and it reminded me of how good Zayn and Mariana found that they could work together once the opportunity arose. I couldn't wait to share the rest of my life with her, starting a business that felt right, one that wasn't hounded by my father's thirst for power. Power was the last thing on my mind, as all I wanted was to find the kind of fulfillment the crime world never did give me. I found it in the woman that changed me, the woman that made understand that there was more to life than wealth. She taught me a valuable lesson about resilience, one that would stick with me for the rest of my days.

Everly Greco is a woman to be reckoned with, a force that has undeniably shaken the world as I know it. I can't wait to see how much more she's going to be able to command when she fully comes into her own. She finally has the opportunity to unleash everything about herself that she's been hiding all these years. Her passion has become her future, and for some of us, that's all we can ever ask for.

Our lives were just beginning, but I'm so eager to see what adventure life has in store for us next.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank so much to all my fans for reading my books. Your support means the world to me. And thank you for all the People helping me spread the word about this book.

Thank you to my editor, for fixing my broken English and making sure my book is not a complete mess.

You guys rock my world...

HEIDEN**Chapter One: Natasha**

I snuck in a quick yawn at my desk, comforting myself with the fact that another work week had come to an end and I'll finally be able to relax. I sat at my desk, running through the stack of freshly graded papers, sipping on the cold, curdled coffee that's been there since this morning. The classroom around me was completely dark and the only light guiding my way was the fluorescent desk lamp that cast a large shadow on the doorway. I hated staying late, but I knew that if I didn't, none of the work would get done. I kept telling myself that I just needed to finish my work so I could get some rest and start getting excited about the upcoming weekend. The last thing I wanted was to have to grade papers on my one-year anniversary with my boyfriend.

Our relationship has been a wild ride from the moment I met him, and while we may have our problems, I'm convinced that he's going to have something special planned for this evening. He's incredibly good at romancing me, and he never fails to make me feel special when the opportunity presents itself. *I know that tonight will be no different. Surely he's been thinking about this for weeks*, I thought, packing up what was left of my stuff before I tucked away the chairs behind my students' desks, getting ready for a lovely night ahead. The ride home was quiet, and I could feel my eyes grow heavier as I pulled up into my driveway.

My heartbeat quickened at the thought of what my surprise might be once I entered, and I hadn't checked in with Seth yet to see if he was even at home. *That shouldn't make a difference. I did text him earlier saying I was going to be a little late this evening*, I thought, shutting my car door as I listened for the light *clicking* sound to make sure I locked it. I opened up the front door and made my way into the living room. There was no sign of a surprise, no sign of Seth, and my heart sank into my stomach. I tried to convince myself that he was probably hiding it somewhere, and when he realized I came through the door, he'd pop out and make everything better.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. I took a quick walk around the entire house looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found. *Did he forget our one-year anniversary?* I asked myself, wondering how that could've been possible, seeing as we've been talking about it for days. I felt my heart sink further into my stomach, and I couldn't ignore the bad feeling I got when I was quickly jolted out of my stance by the ringing of my cell phone. I rushed over to it to answer and looked down at the caller ID, leaving me disappointed that it wasn't Seth.

“Gianna?” I answered, wondering why she’d be calling so late. She and I have been in contact all day, and she told me that she was going to be spending the night at the club, an activity I wasn’t too fond of myself.

“Hey, Natasha, I think you need to come to the club.”

“Gianna, I already told you that tonight Seth and I are celebrating our one-year anniversary. I don’t think clubbing really fits the bill,” I said, confused.

“No, Nat. I hate to do this to you right now, and I hate that I can’t be there to tell you in person, but Seth is here.”

“There? Why would he be at the club?” I asked, angrily.

“He’s with another woman,” she replied, and I knew there had to be some sort of mistake.

“That’s not possible, Gianna. You have to have the wrong guy. Seth wouldn’t do that to me, especially not on our one-year anniversary,” I said, fully in denial, but at the same time I knew that I wasn’t going to get any answers sitting around waiting for them to come to me.

“I’m so sorry, Nat. You need to see this,” she said, and that was all I needed to convince me to go.

“I’ll be there,” I said, hanging up.

I felt my eyes well up with tears; I didn’t know how to process the betrayal I felt. I knew Seth and I didn’t always have the best relationship, but I never thought he’d pull something like this. He’s always been so adamant on making me feel like I was the only girl for him, and up until this moment, I honestly thought he was the one. I wanted Gianna to be mistaken, but I knew that she would never have called unless she was absolutely sure. I felt the tears spill from my eyes as I got into my car, struggling to blink them away so I could drive myself to the club.

I stormed inside, shoving people out of the way looking for Seth. I saw him in the corner, curled up in a booth with his lips pressed against another woman’s. He had his hands all over her, traveling up and down her body expectantly, as though he was looking to get lucky with another woman on our anniversary. I was absolutely disgusted, and I couldn’t move. Gianna found me because I stuck out like a sore thumb, and I wanted to cry to her but I knew I couldn’t let Seth get away with this.

“Nat, oh my God. I’m so sorry,” she said, putting her hand on my shoulder, and I jumped into action. I bolted down to the booth they were in, and waited for him to look up and catch me staring back at him.

“Well, I didn’t know this was on the itinerary for the evening, Seth. What a perfect way to spend our one-year anniversary, you pig,” I spat.

“Oh my God, Nat. What are you doing here? It’s not what it looks like, Nat. I was just stressed, I needed to blow off some steam and I got a little too drunk,” he said, lying through his teeth.

“How many drinks has he had tonight?” I asked, addressing the woman with the smudged lipstick and flushed skin.

“Babe, you only had one drink,” she said, calling him out.

“No, what the fuck?” He tried to deny it, but the evidence was clear.

“Don’t come home tonight, you lying, cheating asshole,” I said, feeling my heart shatter in my chest. I needed to get out of there. I turned around to leave, but Seth wasn’t about to let me go without a fight.

“Please, Nat. You have to understand. I didn’t mean for this to happen this way,” he said, grabbing onto my arm forcefully, and I was shocked.

“Let me go,” I said firmly.

“You’re not leaving me,” he said, and his grip tightened, pressing into my skin until it turned white.

He had me right where he wanted me, and there was nothing I could do to force him to let go. I didn’t know what he was going to try to pull next, but the moment I began to worry for my safety, a man stepped in and stopped him for me. I didn’t know who he was or where he came from, but I was just glad that there were genuine people still left in this world.

Chapter Two: Heiden

Things have been so hectic for us lately, I knew that bringing Damien out tonight would be a good idea. *We both need to blow off steam, and the less I think about the stress of work right now the better*, I thought, as we both entered the club that night. It's been a while since we were both in a setting that didn't involve underhanded work, and we could let loose and be ourselves for a little while. Damien and I made our way over to the bar, throwing back a few drinks, and I began taking a good look around. The music was so loud that I could feel it in my chest, and the low-lit room had a light show of neon blues and purple hues. I held my drink firmly in my hands, feeling the alcohol beginning to hit me as I turned to Damien, who must've already been on his third drink.

"It was a great idea to come out tonight," said Damien.

"I couldn't agree more," I replied, and for the first time all week I had a moment to relax. I've been dealing with computers for as long as I can remember; from the first time I hacked into the school website and redesigned the front page, my head has always been behind a screen. I never get out much anymore, and it takes a toll on a person when they begin to forget what the outside world looks and feels like.

"After the week we've had, I think it's safe to assume that we need this more than we'd like to admit," said Damien.

"I know what you mean. As much as I enjoy helping out you and the Polizzi family, it feels good to leave the laptop at home every once in a while."

"You deserve it, man. Without you, we'd be lacking a great deal of security on the forefront. Your work is probably the most underrated in the business, but it's still the most valuable," said Damien, and I knew that there was truth to that.

I nodded my head in agreement as I gulped another shot, then heard some commotion coming from behind me. I turned around to see a man standing in front of a woman near one of the rear booths, and I lock eyes with a woman who looks visibly upset. She's trembling, fighting back tears, and I could only imagine what the man must've done to her to get her so worked up. I wondered for a while until the man turned around and I got a good look at his face. He was no stranger, and I recognized him straight away.

"Hey, Damien, look," I said, tapping him on his shoulder as he turned to see what I was looking

at.

“Seth. That man never ceases to amaze me with how many women he can toy with and fuck over,” he said.

“He loves for everyone around him to assume that he’s top shit, but we all know that he is all talk and no action,” I responded, watching the altercation take a turn. Seth grabbed ahold of this woman’s arm, and I saw her try to fight her way free. She struggled for a while, and he looked like he was about to hit her. I slammed my glass down on the bar and rushed over to her, stepping in before things got ugly.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” he asked, as I stood between him and the woman, hearing her muffled cries behind me.

“He’s with me,” said Damien as he approached.

Seth knew very well what kind of business we dealt in, and he knew that messing with Damien would be a bad idea. He backed down, scoffing as he raised up his hands as though he’d done absolutely nothing wrong. His behavior always disgusted me, but I’d never seen him in action. The way he was treating this woman angered me in a way I hadn’t felt before, and it made me see things differently. *This is why I do what I do. So I can help put men like him down,* I thought, as I turned to the woman and placed my hand lightly on her upper back to lead her out of the club. Her friend came trailing after her, and the minute the door opened the woman began to cry. The fresh air made her feel better, and I could imagine that she felt trapped and surrounded back there, but I wanted her to know that she was safe now.

“It’s going to be okay,” I heard her friend say.

It was the first time I’d managed to get a good look at her, and I tried to piece together where I might have seen her before. When she looked up at me through glassy eyes and smudged mascara, it all clicked. She was a Bianchi, and I realized that I’d done work for her father. I’d never seen her up close before, always at a distance, but she was so incredibly beautiful. It boggled my mind that any man would throw away the chance to make her feel loved, but I knew that men like Seth didn’t care who they hurt.

“Hey, thank you for stepping in for me. I really appreciate it,” she said softly.

“No problem,” was all I could say. I smiled at her as she turned to leave. Her friend wrapped an arm around her, holding her tight as they began to walk off. I stared after her as they both got into a cab and headed home. Damien must’ve noticed I took an interest in her, because he came out moments after to see what happened.

“Hey, man, is she okay?”

“I believe she’ll be alright. She’s a bit shaken up, but I’m glad that Seth knows not to mess with her now,” I said, sounding more angry than I’d like to.

“I know that look. As much as I want to condone this hero behavior, and even though Seth is a dick, it’s probably best if you don’t go there, Heiden. Seth doesn’t take lightly to people who stand in his way, and I know there’s going to come a day where he just snaps. I don’t want you to be caught in the crossfire of that,” said Damien honestly.

“It’s okay, Damien. She’d never look at me twice anyway,” I said, feeling rather frustrated, but that was simply the truth. *I’ve never had much luck with women in the past, and I know I’m not good enough to be with a woman of that caliber.*

“Don’t say that, Heiden. You’ve got to stop putting yourself down, man. You’re a great guy, and when the right woman comes along she’s going to see that. In the line of work we’re in, it’s hard to find love, but I know you’ve seen that it can happen in the most unconventional ways. Like with Zayn

and Mariana, or Everly and me. When it does happen, trust me, it's going to hit you like a truck," he said with a chuckle.

"I suppose. Look, it's been one hell of a night. I think I'm going to head home," I said.

"Of course. I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

"See you then," I said, thinking about what he said. As much as I wanted to believe him, I just couldn't.

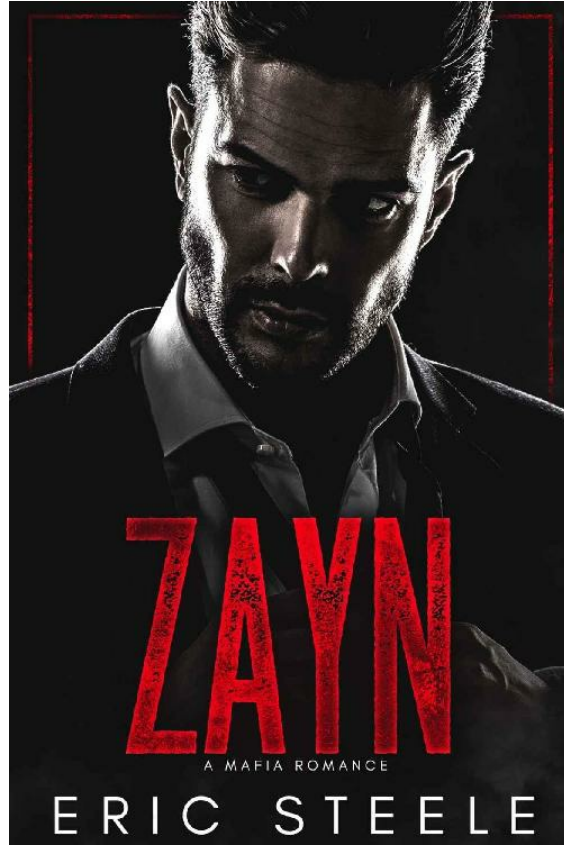
I went home that night feeling pretty terrible, but it wasn't the first time. I hated coming home to an empty apartment with all the lights off, just so I could curl up on the couch by myself and wallow for a little while. *Damien's right. In this line of work, everything is unpredictable, even how we may end up finding the right women. I just can't seem to get her out of my mind and I know it isn't good to keep thinking about her like this,* I thought, opening up my fridge and watching as it lit up my kitchen and living room. I searched for something to eat, but there was only day-old Chinese food and a bottle of water.

I decided to head to bed because I knew I had a lot of work to catch up on in the morning, and I could only hope that I wouldn't fall asleep thinking about her again, but I just couldn't help myself.

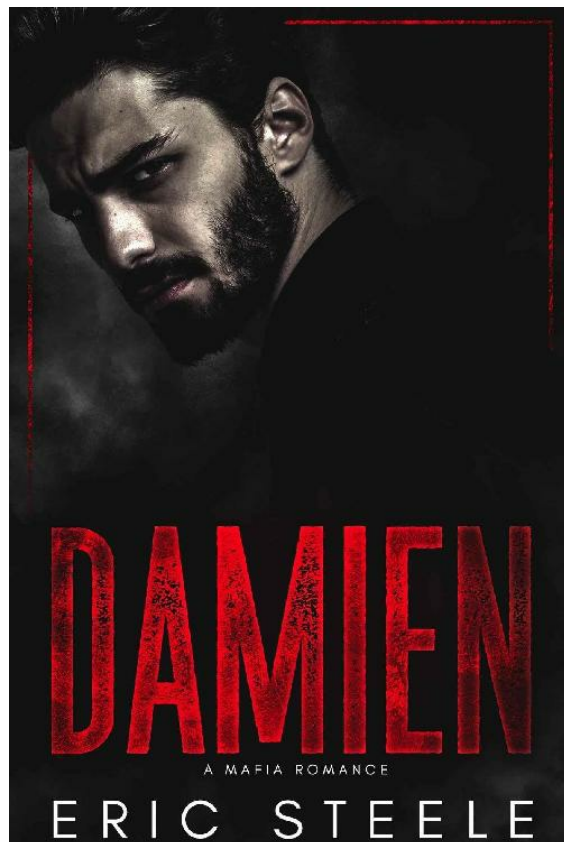
I didn't know much about her, only that her name was Natasha and that her father was a very powerful man. I worried that I was contemplating getting involved with her and what that would mean for the working relationship I had with her father. I quickly put the thought from my mind, because I knew that a woman like her just wouldn't be interested in a man like me. I was a behind-the-scenes kind of guy, and I didn't have the kind of substance that Damien or Zayn did when they met the loves of their lives. The cards were dealt differently for me, and it was just something I had to live with. I didn't grow up in the crime world, I found my way in, and I was taken under the wing of Zayn's father at a very young age. Damien and Zayn have been friends of mine for as long as I can remember, and they're the reason I've been able to maintain such a job in the first place.

I knew that as much as I worked alongside them, I wasn't a hands-on man and no woman would find what I do attractive. I curled up under the cotton sheets, trying to fall asleep, hoping I'd get some quality rest for a change. It would be nice not to have to chug three cups of coffee as soon as I wake up in order to be able to function for the rest of the day. I tried to get comfortable, tried to drift off into a deep sleep, but my mind wouldn't rest. The thought of Natasha clouded my subconscious, and I wondered where she was right now.

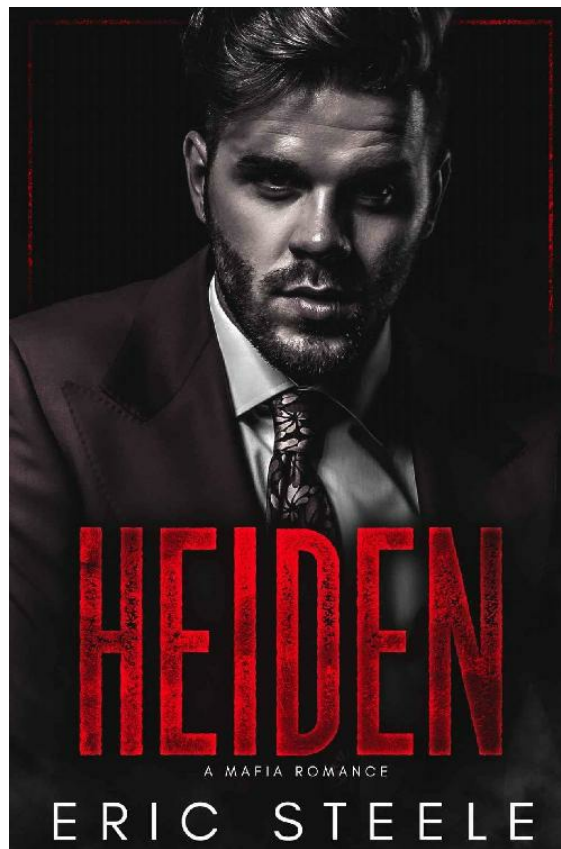
MORE BOOKS BY ERIC STEELE



Zayn 1#



Damien 2#



Heiden 3# coming soon...

You can sign up for my newsletter, with giveaways and the latest releases, here:

<https://BookHip.com/WGSMWZ>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Steele is the author of a Mafia romance series. He currently lives with his family in Porto, a small coastal town near Portugal. He loves to write stories about dangerous men and vibrant women.

He can be his most creative when he is alone with his dog, driving to a remote lake for the weekend. Away from people, he finds new ideas and can dedicate himself to writing new novels.

In his free time, he likes to do something in nature, preferably with his family. He is a fan of motorcycles and loves to cook for family and friends.

