

THE DON'S

ENEMY WITHIN

AMBER ROW

The Don's Enemy Within

A Secret Baby Mafia Romance

Amber Row

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Epilogue

Chapter 1

Sophia

Yells of agony and pleading pierced through the air like a symphony of terror and desperation that sent shivers down my spine.

Each cry was a raw and gut-wrenching plea for mercy.

The yells were sharp and anguished, like daggers cutting through the hushed ambiance of the underground car park.

They reverberated off the polished walls, sending shivers down my spine. Each cry carries the weight of suffering and fear, charging the air with tension.

What the fuck was happening here?

I stood behind the concrete pillar, tightly clutching my purse in my hands while my heart beat like a drum.

Just a few seconds ago, I had run away from a scary situation, and now here I was, trapped in another nerve-wracking one.

Two men, cloaked in darkness, were attacking a defenseless figure on the ground. Their voices were laced with menace, their blows brutal and unrelenting.

The helpless man writhed in agony, his desperate pleas for mercy falling on deaf ears. I couldn't see the faces of any of them and wasn't sure whether that was fortunate.

"Please forgive me! I shouldn't have betrayed him!" He wailed as he used his arms as a shield to protect his head. "Give me another chance! I swear I won't do it again!" But his cries were met with cold indifference.

Fear paralyzed me as I watched the horrifying scene unfold before my eyes. I wanted to turn back, but my feet were rooted to the spot. I couldn't tear my

eyes away.

Then, as if fate had a cruel sense of irony, the dim light flickered, casting eerie shadows around the car park.

The men paused, and I quickly hid behind the pillar, holding my breath and praying they wouldn't notice me.

Scuffling sounds echoed off the concrete walls as I held my breath. Were those footsteps getting closer? Had they discovered me?

Fear gnawed at my insides as I tried to steady my breathing, not wanting to make a sound that could expose me.

I strained my ears, trying to make sense of the sounds around me. The cries had stopped, leaving an eerie silence in their wake.

I couldn't bear to think about what was happening just a few feet away.

Footsteps scuffled around on the ground, and I held my breath. Were they moving away? Were they coming closer? I couldn't tell.

The night was silent now; the only sound was my pulse, loudly pounding in my ears.

Slowly and cautiously, I hunched down and peered around the pillar to see if the coast was clear.

The attackers suddenly stepped back from their victim, and I slowly breathed, hoping they were finally done. Instead, a third man appeared, and my heart sank.

I adjusted my position slightly behind the pillar, trying to get a better view of the newcomer, even though I knew I should leave immediately.

I couldn't see his face clearly, but I could sense his power and authority over the other two attackers.

The dim overhead lamp cast faint shadows across his form, making it difficult to discern his features.

He stepped forward to the bloody victim, kneeling on the floor with his head lowered.

Though I couldn't see his face, I could see his expensive shoes as the light from the overhead lamp shone on them.

Suddenly, a low voice entered my ears. All this while, it had only been the victim's voice I had heard when he had been begging for mercy.

Hearing another voice made the situation seem even more surreal.

"Did you honestly think you could betray me and get away with it?" The latecomer said in a low voice.

My breath hitched. This voice...I knew this voice!

"I'm sorry!" The victim on the ground wailed. "I had no choice! They... forced me to do it! Yes! They threatened to kill my family!"

"What, do you think I'm stupid enough to believe that? Do you honestly think I don't know everything you did?"

The imposing figure slowly straightened up from his crouching position, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. "You shouldn't have done this."

As he moved, a stray light beam caught his features, revealing his face.

My breath caught in my throat, and I instinctively clamped my hand over my mouth to stifle a gasp.

It couldn't be... but there was no denying the truth now glaring at me.

The man before me, the one who had been involved in this unsettling scene, was none other than Matteo – the same Matteo I had shared an intense, passionate moment with not too long ago.

My mind raced, trying to process the shocking revelation unfolding before me. The circumstances were beyond comprehension, the timing too uncanny to be coincidental.

My heart pounded with a mix of disbelief and confusion. How had I managed

to get myself entangled in this fucked up web of events?

He reached into his black jacket and pulled out something I couldn't see until his arm was fully extended and aimed at the victim.

"Now, you have to pay for your actions."

Fuck!

In the dim light of the overhead lamp, the gun glinted with a cold, metallic sheen, its presence sending a shiver down my spine.

The metal seemed to gleam with an ominous aura as if it were a malevolent creature ready to unleash untold horrors.

As I caught sight of the weapon, my breath caught in my throat, and my heart seemed to freeze for a moment before resuming its frantic pounding.

I felt a sickening mixture of fear and revulsion, my mind struggling to comprehend the reality of the situation.

A gun! Were they seriously going to murder this guy? Sure, it seemed like he had betrayed his gang or whatever organization, but did he have to die?

My heart pounded in my chest, urging me to leave, to escape from this dangerous situation, but my fear kept me rooted in place.

I felt like a helpless bystander, unable to tear my eyes away from the scene.

I knew that I couldn't stay hidden forever, that eventually, I would have to make a decision – to stay and risk being discovered or to leave and escape the horrors that surrounded me.

But at that moment, all I could do was watch, my senses heightened, and my heart beating quickly in my chest as I hoped and prayed that these would-be murderers wouldn't discover me.

“Possa tu pentirti dei tuoi peccati nell'aldilà.” (May you repent of your sins in the hereafter.)

What language was that? My heart pounding in my ears wasn't leaving me

with enough rationality to calm down and guess what language it was, but did it matter either way?

The victim started trembling and shaking his head vigorously from side to side.

"Please forgive me! Don't kill me! You can't kill me! I beg-"

A single shot rang out! I gasped in shock as the loud sound reverberated through the air, leaving silence in its wake.

The victim, who had been upright on his knees begging for mercy, slumped over and fell to the ground-lifeless.

Fuck! I couldn't stay here anymore. I had to leave.

"Take care of the body," Matteo instructed the two men beside him, who nodded and got to work.

I kept shaking my head in denial at what I had just witnessed. I slowly started walking backward, never taking my eyes off Matteo.

My breathing was heavy as I continued taking slow steps.

Matteo then turned around and gave some commands to his men, which I didn't hear, before leaving in the same way he had arrived.

The other two men continued in their task of getting rid of the body. What they were doing exactly, I had no idea. Right now, I needed to get the hell out of here.

I jumped in shock as an audible crunch came from the plastic bottle I had just stepped on!

The empty plastic bottle I had just stepped on may have given my location away.

My heart stopped as the two men's heads snapped in my direction. Panic surged through me like a tidal wave.

I froze in terror, watching as the two men paused and stood up before one of

them took a few cautious steps toward me.

His eyes pierced through the darkness, searching for the source of the noise.

Luckily, a cat ran out from underneath a car far from me.

Though startled at the sudden presence of a cat, I sighed in relief as the man turned back to his companion.

At that moment, I turned and ran. Adrenaline fueled my body, my mind racing with thoughts of survival.

I weaved through the maze of parked cars, my heart pounding in my ears, the sound of my breath deafening.

My legs burned with exertion, but fear pushed me to continue running.

Finally, I burst out into the open air, gasping for breath. I kept running, not daring to stop until I was safe.

I stumbled onto a busy street, where the lights and noise of the city enveloped me.

Weaving through people still walking around at this time, I hailed a passing taxi, not looking back, too afraid to see if anyone was following.

I gave the driver a random address, not daring to reveal my destination. As the taxi sped away, I leaned back in the seat, my mind still reeling from the nightmarish encounter.



When I finally arrived at my apartment, I rushed inside and locked the door behind me. I collapsed on the floor, shaking with fear and disbelief.

I couldn't believe what just happened. Believing I was at death's doorstep just a while ago was disorienting.

I couldn't even start thinking about what could have happened to me if I hadn't escaped.

As I lay there, haunted by the memory of the violence, I couldn't help but remember the face of the third man. The man who had pulled the trigger that ended another person's life.

Matteo!

It couldn't be the Matteo I knew, right? I groaned out loud. What the fuck was I to do now?

I patted my body, looking for my purse, but sat up quickly when I couldn't feel anything. Where was my purse? It had my cards.

I didn't keep my money there in case of theft, but it was still important as it held my ID card and other cards.

My hands froze in their action when a terrifying realization dawned on me.

Did I drop my purse there?

Fuck!

Chapter 2

Matteo

I sat at my desk in my office, eyes fixed on the newspaper's headline that stared back at me with ominous words: "Brutal Murder Shocks City."

The image of the victim's lifeless body was splashed across the front page, a haunting reminder of the events that had unfolded just three days ago.

I couldn't believe what I was reading. The man who now lay dead on the pages before me was the same man my men had dealt with before I ended his life.

How had it escalated to this? How had a simple elimination made the front pages, sending shockwaves through the city?

My mind raced with questions, each one more perplexing than the last.

I had meticulously planned the operation, even getting rid of the CCTV in the hotel, leaving no room for error.

Yet here it was, a headline that threatened to unravel everything I had built.

I couldn't help but wonder if someone had tipped off the authorities. Was there a leak within my organization?

The thought sent a surge of anger and frustration through me.

I prided myself on running a tight ship and maintaining control over every aspect of my operations.

But now, it seemed like there was a crack in the foundation.

As I delved into the details of the newspaper article, a mix of anger and frustration consumed me.

The false narrative painted a grotesque and brutal scene, which I knew was far from the truth.

But here it was in black and white. The story told was a different tale.

It was already bad enough that the woman who had caught my attention that night had disappeared when I returned after dealing with the traitor and the situation he had caused.

Now, I had to deal with this.

Our encounter had been brief but impactful. I remembered how our conversation had flowed easily, a surprising connection amidst the formalities of the event.

The banter flowed easily, a spark of something intriguing that lingered in my thoughts long after the conversation had ended.

I had been unable to forget that night, the night that had brought us together in a way I hadn't anticipated but had looked forward to.

But then, sudden chaos erupted as gunfire sliced through the air like a thunderclap.

The shootout had shattered the fragile bubble around us, reality crashing back in with brutal force.

The rival mafia family, emboldened by the traitor's information, had seized the opportunity to strike.

During the chaos, the urgency of the situation had left me with no choice but to leave her behind.

As I searched for her, I couldn't shake the sinking feeling that I had let something slip through my fingers.

I retraced my steps, my gaze scanning the surroundings as I searched for any sign of her.

But the underground car park remained eerily empty, a stark contrast to the frenzied moments that had unfolded earlier.

Panic gnawed at the edges of my thoughts as I realized she was nowhere to be found.

The memory of our shared moments – the conversation, the laughter, the passionate encounter – weighed heavily on my mind.

And now, amid the chaos and uncertainty, I couldn't shake the concern that had taken hold of me.

She had disappeared without a trace, leaving me with a gnawing regret that I couldn't ignore.

In the end, as the minutes stretched into eternity, all I could do was vow to find her after I had dealt with all of this.

I scanned the article for any hints of who might be behind this manipulation, but there were no clear leads.

The reporter's source remained anonymous, and the language used was carefully crafted to incite fear and panic among the public.

Even though the culprit wasn't mentioned, I knew this had been aimed at me.

I knew I had enemies; it came with the territory of being a figure of influence in the underworld.

But to see such a blatant attack was both infuriating and alarming.

Whoever was responsible was playing a dangerous game, and I felt I already knew who it was.

"*Cos'è questo (What is this)?* What is going on?" I looked away from the newspaper and asked Leo, a detective who worked for my father when he was still alive, to provide information for us from the police.

Leo's full name was Leonardo. The man, who was like an uncle to me, was sitting opposite me with slightly furrowed brows. He, too, was reading the paper.

"I thought you said you ended him in one shot." He arched an eyebrow.

"Why are the papers saying he was stabbed multiple times and riddled with bullets?"

"*L'ho fatto (I did it)*. He was beaten up before I shot him in the head, but he wasn't stabbed." I scoffed and leaned back in my seat, throwing the paper on my table with disgust.

The man in the papers was a member of my organization, but I had discovered he was a traitor, selling information to a small rival family of ours, the Costa family.

Naturally, he had to face the consequences of his actions. Betrayal was not taken lightly, especially when done to me or what I cared about.

Leo hummed. Leo was a high-ranking detective in the police force. The bond between Leo and me went beyond that of a friend; he was like family.

From my earliest memories, I saw him as a constant presence in my life. He and my father, Dante De Luca, who had been the Don of the DeLuca mafia, had been the closest of friends, inseparable like brothers.

As a child, I would often see Leo around our home. He would visit frequently, and I remember being delighted when he would pick me up and carry me in his strong arms.

It felt like I had a second father who cared for and protected me like my dad.

Leo's friendship with my father was one of the cornerstones of our family.

They had known each other since their youth, and their bond had only grown stronger over the years.

They were there for each other in good times and bad, sharing laughter, tears, triumphs, and challenges.

They seem more like brothers than my father and uncle ever did. My uncle, who was now the Don of our family.

Leo took on a larger role in my life when my father passed away, and my birthright to become the next Don was stolen from me by my uncle.

He became not just a friend of the family but a protector, a mentor, and

someone I could always turn to for advice.

In the world of crime and power, where alliances could crumble with the slightest betrayal, I knew I could always rely on Leo's unwavering loyalty.

Even though I had been betrayed by my blood-related uncle, I knew Leo would never betray me.

"It is obvious that someone else did this and that they knew we were going to kill him." I tapped my fingers on the table. "This is a provocation aimed at me. What I don't understand is why they leaked it to the media. What are they trying to achieve?"

"Whatever the reason is for leaking it to the media, I don't know. All I know is that you need to be careful. Someone did this to send a message to you. Either that or they're trying to have all the attention directed towards you."

I clenched my fist in anger. "I didn't think he would go this far and risk our family."

"You have any idea who did this?" He asked with a side glance in my direction.

The question made me scoff out loud in disdain. "Who else would it be if not my uncle?"

"You suspect Francisco?" Leo raised his head. "Would he risk implicating the family for this? What would he even do this for? *Per quale ragione (For what reason)?*"

"To put me in my place. *È un avvertimento (It's a warning).*" I muttered darkly.

Francisco Cortigini. His mousy gray hair and a mustache like a hamster's whiskers make him look unassuming. But don't let that fool you.

His eyes and ears miss nothing, making him more dangerous than a rat.

I clenched my jaw at the thought of his name.

In the mafia, we believed in the close bonds of families, but that could not be said for Francisco.

He was my father's brother, and yet, at the news of my father's death, there was not a hint of sorrow on his face.

When I was younger, they had fought, and Francisco had left. He changed his surname, no longer wanting to be identified as my father's brother and taking his maternal grandmother's surname, Cortigini.

After a few years, he returned, asking for forgiveness, and my father took him back. The relationship between them never got better.

When my father died, not once did he feel melancholic. Instead, he quickly took action and snatched the role of the Don of the family from me with the aid of men he had cultivated outside.

I was always filled with anger every time I remembered his betrayal. Did he even think of me as his nephew?

The two of us were at odds constantly, but we could do nothing to harm each other. At least not so blatantly.

We maintained a delicate strand of cordiality that constantly threatened to snap each time we were near each other.

"What will you do?" Leo's voice brought me out of my hate-filled thoughts toward Francisco.

"I don't have a choice but to lay low," I responded through gritted teeth, clenching my fingers into a tight fist."

As much as I hate giving in to him, I can't act out too blatantly; otherwise, the fallout will be massive, and I'm not ready to deal with it."

"Though you don't like giving in, it's a good decision." Leo slowly nodded his head in approval. "As for the murder of the traitor, leave it to me. I'll plant some fake evidence against some members of the Costa family."

"*Bene (Well)*. It'll teach them a lesson."

"I suggest you start planning how you'll deal with your uncle. He's becoming quite bold in his actions against you." Leo advised nonchalantly with a drawl in his voice.

Though he appeared careless against Francisco, I knew he was on guard against him.

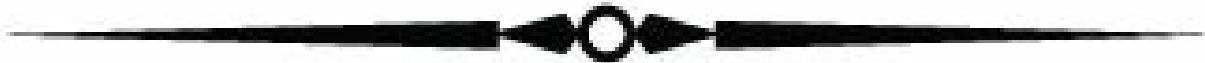
Though they knew each other, after learning that Francisco had taken over the family, Leo did his best to avoid interacting with him unless necessary.

Leo disliked Don Francisco Cortigini but still cared about the De Luca family. After all, my family's effort made the De Luca family reach its top position in the mafia underworld.

"I will."

With that, Leo stood up and took his leave. I, on the other hand, called my second-in-command, Antonio, to my office.

There were a lot of things we needed to discuss.



Antonio and I were in the middle of a heated discussion, trying to figure out our next move concerning Francisco.

He had become a thorn in our side, a constant source of trouble and unrest within the family.

"I spoke with Leo," pouring us both a bourbon, I continued, "He's going to plant evidence against the Costa family and make it seem like they're responsible for the attack."

Antonio nodded, his brow furrowed in thought. "That works, but he needs to be careful. If anyone finds out that Leo is involved, it could jeopardize his position in the police force, and we can't afford to lose that connection. *Abbiamo bisogno di lui (We need him).*"

"He knows," I replied.

Antonio leaned back in his chair, contemplating the plan. "What are we going to do with Francisco? If he was the one who did this, then it means he knew that we were going to deal with the traitor. How could he have known?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Check our men. There may be a mole. If that's the case, they must be weeded out." I said.

Building a force of loyal men was crucial for our survival in my line of work. With Francisco's betrayal and constant attempts to undermine me, I knew I needed a strong network of trusted allies who would stand by my side, no matter what.

I operated discreetly, carefully selecting individuals who had proven their loyalty and dedication to the family.

These men had served my father faithfully and earned their place in the inner circle of the De Luca family.

They were the ones I could trust with my life, and they knew they could trust me in return.

Our meetings and gatherings were shrouded in secrecy, hidden from prying eyes and ears.

We operated in the shadows, communicating in code and using secure channels to avoid detection.

While Francisco may have been aware of my efforts to find support within the family, he had no idea of the scale and depth of my network.

Each member of my inner circle had a specific skill set and expertise, making

them invaluable assets in our fight against Francisco.

Some were skilled in intelligence gathering, others in combat and strategy. Together, we formed a well-rounded and formidable team.

Building loyalty was about power and skill, mutual respect, and trust. I treated my men respectfully and fairly. In return, they gave me their unwavering loyalty.

"As for Francisco, there's nothing we can do but lay low until we screen our men." I continued.

Antonio nodded in agreement. "*Hai ragione (You are right)*. We have to be strategic about this. We can't let our emotions get the better of us."

I took a deep breath and leaned back in my seat. "I won't let him destroy everything my father worked so hard to build."

As Antonio and I continued our discussion, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of gratitude for having him by my side.

He was not just my right-hand man; he was like my brother. One of the few people I trusted implicitly in this dangerous world we navigated.

He was tall and muscular, with classic Italian features and a quiet demeanor. The snake tattoo that wrapped around his right arm peeks out every time he rolls up his sleeves. It looks like it is watching you and will strike you at any moment.

Over the years, Antonio had prove to be loyal, competent, and fiercely devoted to the family.

He had stood by my side through thick and thin, never wavering in his support.

Our bond went beyond the business; it was a bond of genuine friendship and mutual respect.

I trusted Antonio with my life, and he trusted me with his. We had each

other's backs, no matter the circumstances.

In a world where betrayal and deception lurked around every corner, our unwavering trust in each other was a rare and precious commodity.

Antonio's counsel was invaluable to me. He had an innate ability to see things from different perspectives and offer insights that I often found extremely useful.

Whenever I faced difficult decisions or uncertainties, Antonio was there to lend a listening ear and offer sage advice.

Looking at Antonio, I couldn't help but think of the many times we had faced challenges together.

We had weathered storms, overcome obstacles, and emerged stronger on the other side.

Antonio gets up to refill his glass. "You want some more?" he asked. I nodded my head, declining his offer.

Trust was a rare and precious currency, but trust came naturally and effortlessly with Antonio.

I knew that he would never betray me or the family. He was as committed to our cause as I was, and we were unstoppable.

I glanced at my phone as it buzzed with an incoming call and saw Leo's name flashing on the screen.

I immediately picked up the call, curious to know what he had to say.

"Give me some good news." I greeted him with a casual tone.

"Matteo, we might have a problem," Leo's voice sounded serious and concerned.

My heart skipped a beat at his words, my mind racing with possibilities of what could have gone wrong.

"What happened?" I asked, trying to keep the worry from seeping into my

voice.

My grip on the phone tightened, and I exchanged a glance with Antonio, who had picked up on the seriousness of the situation as Leo filled me in on what had happened.

"Are you sure about this?" I inquired urgently, hoping that it was just a false alarm.

"I can't say for certain yet, but the evidence points in that direction," he replied, his voice grave.

"*Continua a cercare informazioni (Keep looking for information)*. Find out everything you can and let me know immediately if there are any developments," I instructed him.

"*Lo farò (I will do it)*. I'll do my best to get to the bottom of this," Leo assured me.

"Good. And Leo, be careful," I cautioned, my concern for him evident in my voice.

"Don't worry about me, Matteo. I know what I'm doing," He replied confidently.

I knew Leo could handle himself, but I couldn't help but worry. He was not just an ally. He was like family to me, and the thought of anything happening to him weighed heavily on my mind.

"Alright, keep me posted," I said before ending the call and swearing under my breath. Numerous thoughts and scenarios were flashing through my head.

"*Cosa c'è che non va (What's wrong)?* What's the matter?" Antonio quickly asked.

"It was Leo," I spoke with dread.

"What did he say?"

"He said there's a possibility that there might have been a witness."

Chapter 3

Sophia

Every sound around me seemed amplified, each passing stranger a potential threat. My heart raced as paranoia consumed me after witnessing that brutal murder.

I couldn't get the images out of my mind – the two shadowy figures attacking the defenseless man, the yells of agony, the pleading for mercy, and Matteo shooting a bullet through the victim's head.

It replayed like a nightmare, haunting my every waking moment.

I knew I should have gone to the police and told them what I saw, but I couldn't trust them to keep me safe, and I certainly couldn't trust them to catch the killers.

My life was at stake, and I couldn't afford to take any chances.

At night, I tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep, the images of that gruesome scene haunting my dreams.

Not only that, I couldn't get the fact that I had left my purse there out of my mind! Sure, it didn't mean anything. It's not as if they suspected anyone had seen them, right?

Anyone could randomly lose their purse. Besides, it was a cat they had seen, so I was safe.

Regardless, I couldn't stop fearing different possibilities that led to my life being endangered.

I skipped work, avoiding any routine that might make me an easy target. Keisha, my best friend, worried about me, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth.

Unexpectedly, my phone rang, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw Matteo's name flashing on the screen.

It couldn't be a coincidence that he was calling now, just days after that horrifying night.

The fear and paranoia I had been trying to keep at bay rushed back, consuming me again.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my trembling hands as I answered the call.

"Hello?" I tried to sound casual, but my voice betrayed my unease.

"Hey, Sophia," his smooth voice filled the line. "I was wondering if you'd like to go out for dinner tonight. I know this amazing Italian restaurant, and I think you'd love it."

There was no sign that something was wrong with his voice. Could it have been another person with the face that had killed that man?

The invitation should have thrilled me, but all I felt was fear.

"I...I appreciate the offer," I stammered, desperately trying to devise a plausible excuse. "But I have a lot of work to do at my job, and I don't think I'll be able to make it tonight."

"Is everything alright?" His voice carried a tone of worry, and despite not being in the same room, I could picture his brows being pulled down in concern.

"I'm fine." I chuckled slightly. "Everything's alright, just that work has been a bit hectic lately, so I won't be able to go to dinner with you."

"I see..." His voice trailed off.

I could sense his disappointment on the other end of the line, but I couldn't risk my life. Matteo was a killer! A murderer! A hitman!

Whatever he was called, he was bad news, and it was better if I pretended as

if I didn't know him. I was still trying to process that I had slept with a killer.

"Sure, no problem," he replied, his voice tinged with understanding. "Just let me know when you're free, and we can plan something then."

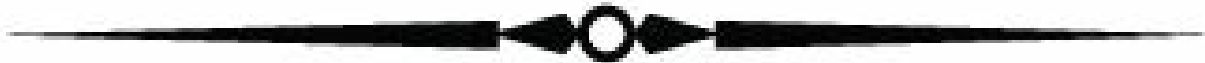
I felt relief. Relief that I had managed to avoid the date. I couldn't risk putting myself in another dangerous situation.

After ending the call, I sank into my chair, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

I knew I couldn't hide forever and would have to face the truth eventually, but I needed to focus on staying safe for now.

I sighed deeply and got up, making my way to the bathroom. I would settle for a long bubble bath if I couldn't go on a fancy dinner.

Maybe it would help ease the tension in my body and let me relax for once.



I sank into the warm, soothing water, slowly melting the tension. The soft scent of lavender filled the air, calming my nerves as I closed my eyes, trying to find peace amidst the chaos that had entered my life.

As the warm water enveloped me, memories of how I had met Matteo flooded my mind.

It seemed like a lifetime ago, a distant memory of a time when life was simpler and the future held endless possibilities, but I had met Matteo the same day I witnessed him killing someone.

On that day, I had been attending New York City's biggest charity gala event as a guest of one of the major sponsors.

The room had been filled with the city's elite, all dressed in their finest attire, and I had felt like an outsider among them.

But I had been determined to make the most of the evening and enjoy the glitz and glamour surrounding me.

That's when I first saw Matteo de Luca, who had changed my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

He had been standing by the bar, exuding an air of confidence and power that drew everyone's attention.

His dark, piercing eyes seemed to scan the room, taking in every detail with a sharpness that made me uneasy yet intrigued.

I had bumped into him accidentally, spilling my drink all over his immaculate suit.

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment as I stammered out an apology, expecting him to lash out at me for my clumsiness.

To my surprise, he had taken it in stride, a playful glint in his eyes as he engaged me in banter.

From that moment, something had shifted between us. There was a spark, a connection that I couldn't explain.

We spent the rest of the evening in each other's company, drawn to each other like magnets.

As the night progressed, our chemistry deepened, and the playful banter became more intense and passionate.

We found ourselves drawn to each other, unable to resist the pull that grew stronger with each passing moment.

At the end of the night, we ended up going to a hotel where we indulged ourselves in the feel of each other. That night was not a night I could ever forget.



FLASHBACK

I couldn't recall exactly how myself and Matteo ended up against his hotel bedroom wall, making out passionately.

His hands traveled up my shirt, brushing over my bra and cupping my breasts. I couldn't stop the soft whimper that escaped my mouth, which Matteo easily consumed, deepening the kiss.

He unbuttoned my blouse, briefly stopping our kiss to slip it over my head. After that, he wrapped his hand around my back, easily unclipping my bra.

I shivered slightly as I felt the cold air on my breasts, which were now fully exposed to him.

I shuddered when he bent down, taking a nipple into his mouth and softly sucking with his tongue.

Even with my back against the wall, keeping my knees from buckling took everything.

Matteo then unzipped my pants and slid them over my hips, pulling them down and dropping to his knees as I kicked the bundled-up pants off my feet and to the side.

I looked down at him and met with smoldering, lustful eyes. I couldn't stop appreciating how attractive he was.

With a cocky smirk, he brushed his hands up my thighs, leaving a trail of fire in their wake, and gently grabbed one of my legs, guiding it to hook over his shoulder.

He kissed up my inner thigh, sucking and leaving soft bites as he climbed closer and closer to where I needed it the most.

I could feel my clit, swollen and throbbing, desperate for stimulation, and the wetness seeping through my panties.

Eventually, Matteo made his way to my pussy, kissing my throbbing clit over the fabric of my panties.

He continued to lick and kiss me until I felt like I was going to lose my mind from all his teasing.

My lips parted as I was unable to stop myself from moaning uncontrollably. At the thought of people hearing my moans through the door, I was embarrassed and aroused.

Finally, when I felt like I couldn't take it anymore, I let out a breathless plea, but I wasn't able to finish my sentence before another whine escaped my mouth.

Matteo looked up at me and smiled. He was waiting for that because he didn't waste any more time removing my now-drenched panties, exposing my swollen lips.

He repositioned my leg over his shoulder, bringing my pussy only inches from his face.

Matteo stared for a few seconds, and I could feel his warm breath against my skin before he finally leaned forward and connected his tongue to my clit.

My mind went blank as Matteo continuously licked my pussy in a steady rhythm. His mouth felt so soft and warm that it was maddening.

I couldn't stop myself from tangling my hands in his dark, raven hair as my legs trembled.

When I thought I couldn't take anymore, Matteo put one finger inside, gently pumping it in and out of me in time with his soft licks.

That was all it took for me to come right there against the wall. I let out a high-pitched moan as my orgasm washed over me in waves of pleasure.

Matteo slowly rose to his feet, lifting a finger to my chin before drawing me in for a deep kiss.

I melted into it, tasting myself on his lips before lightly pulling away and grinning arrogantly as he slowly raked his eyes over my body.

Only then did I realize that while I was fully naked, Matteo was still completely clothed.

Feeling exposed, I yanked Matteo forward by his tie into a searing kiss, pushing my naked body against his clothed chest.

I quickly unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it to the floor, walking us backward until we hit the bed.

I pushed Matteo down, laid him flat on his back, and undid his belt, fumbling slightly before yanking his pants and underwear down in one pull.

His dick was big, and my pussy throbbed when I thought about it being inside me.

I straddled him and leaned over to the nightstand to grab a condom the hotel had probably placed in every room.

Matteo rest his hands behind his head as I slid the condom down over his dick.

He looked smug and unaffected, even though his cock was rock-hard, and I could feel his breathing becoming slightly uneven.

I positioned myself over him, vowing to wipe that cocky look off his face, and then we both gasped as I slowly lowered myself.

Matteo moved his hands to my hips, guiding me in a way that felt pleasurable.

Having gotten used to his girth, I began lightly bouncing on his cock, and

fuck did that feel good.

I groaned loudly. Yes, this was better than being alone tonight. He watched as I threw my head back, my breasts bouncing with each movement.

He leaned forward and took one into his mouth. Suddenly, he grabbed me by my waist and flipped us over until I was on the bottom.

With a soft gasp, I was laid out on my back. Before I could fully register what was happening, Matteo pushed back into me, filling me completely.

I moaned as his cock moved in and out of me, making me feel every inch of him.

He set a brutal pace, placing a hand under my knee and pushing my leg up against my chest to keep my legs open, and I hooked my other leg around his hips.

Various sounds echoed through the room, and I could not believe they were coming out of my mouth.

I would feel embarrassed if I could think about anything else, but the harsh pounding I received didn't give me time to think.

Gosh, he felt amazing!

With each snap of his hips, the pressure inside of me continued to build and build until I was coming again, this time around his cock.

He continued to fuck me through it, not slowing down in the slightest, even when I started squirming from overstimulation.

I felt his thrusts become more erratic as he used my fucked out pussy to chase his orgasm.

I heard him swear under his breath, and his hips stuttered against mine as he came, letting out a low groan.

An abrupt disturbance shattered the fragile peace as we lay wrapped in each other's arms, enjoying the afterglow. Gunshots suddenly reverberated

through the air, ripping through the tranquility like a lightning bolt.

Startled, our bodies tensed in unison, our gazes locking in shared astonishment. Our breathing halted, replaced by a heavy, tense silence in the air.

Before we could fully process the gunshots that had shattered the quiet, the door crashed open, splintering the peace further.

Panic seized our hearts, and we instinctively clutched the sheets to cover ourselves from the intruder.

What's going on?

The abrupt entrance of a stranger shattered the tranquility that had enveloped us and tore through the serenity like a storm.

He burst into the room in a whirlwind of motion and unknown intentions, his presence starkly contrasting with the intimacy we had shared just moments ago.

Our eyes locked in shared surprise, the unspoken question hanging in the air like a suspended note in a melody.

What had prompted this intrusion, and what chaos was about to follow?

The room that had once been a haven of intimacy now buzzed with a palpable tension, an unspoken acknowledgment that the unexpected had taken hold.

The silence that followed was charged with uncertainty, the air heavy with the weight of the stranger's presence.

As if the scene couldn't become more surreal, the stranger's voice sliced through the tension, a burst of urgent words I couldn't comprehend.

The language sounded foreign yet vaguely familiar, tinged with urgency and a sense of authority.

“Dante! Dobbiamo andare ora! Hanno iniziato ad attaccare prima di quanto ci aspettassimo! Penso che si siano insospettiti e abbiamo iniziato a

sparare!”

(We have to go now! They started attacking earlier than we expected! I think they got suspicious and started shooting.)

I watched in bewilderment as Matteo reacted to the stranger's words, his features hardening as understanding dawned.

“Qualcuno è stato colpito?” (Has anyone been hit?)

“No. Siamo riusciti a reagire in tempo.” (No. We were able to react in time.)

"Andiamo!" (Let's go!)

Their conversation held an urgency that matched the stranger's abrupt entry. The realization that they shared a common language – one – that remained foreign to my ears – left me feeling like an outsider in my skin.

As the stranger's words continued to flow, Matteo's demeanor shifted. His movements became purposeful, a blend of urgency and calculation as he untangled himself from the sheets and scrambled into his clothes.

The room had transformed from a haven to a battlefield of unknown intentions, and I found myself frozen in place, caught between the desire to flee and the compulsion to understand.

Matteo's voice, firm and commanding, reached me over the chaos of my thoughts. "Stay here, Sophia. Don't leave the room, no matter what you hear or see."

The weight of his words held a gravity that rooted me to the spot, torn between the desire to obey and the instinct to flee the mounting uncertainty.

Before I could fully process his directive, he was gone, following the stranger out of the room and disappearing from my line of sight.

The room felt suffocating, the walls closing around me as panic tightened. With trembling hands, I quickly began to dress, the urgency of the situation propelling me into motion.

*The bed that had been a site of intimacy was now a battleground of emotions.
There was no way I was going to listen to Matteo's words and stay here!
End Flashback.*

I drained the bathtub and stood up. Even just thinking about that night was enough to make me aroused.

At first, I had thought that would be the last time we would meet, but to my surprise and horror, I saw him immediately in the car park when he appeared later to shoot that man.

As I dressed, I couldn't help but wonder. Was Matteo the man I thought he was?

Chapter 4

Matteo

The air was heavy with mixed emotions as the anniversary of my father's death approached. It was a big event, a day of remembrance and reflection.

For some, it was a time of mourning, a chance to honor the memory of a man who had been both feared and respected.

For others, it was an opportunity to pay their respects to the legacy he had left behind.

I had to put on a strong front to show the world I could carry on my father's legacy and maintain the De Luca family's position of power and influence.

The preparations for the event were elaborate, with the mansion adorned in black and white, the colors of mourning.

The corridors were filled with the hushed voices of family members and associates, all paying their respects in their own way as Francisco welcomed them into the building.

I turned my head away in disgust as he received their condolences.

Who was he to receive them when he didn't even care that his brother had died?

The mask he put on his face filled me with a lot of irritation, and I ended up walking away.

My aimless walk led me down a corridor, and my footsteps slowed when I approached one of my father's portraits.

I stood there, staring into his eyes as if seeking guidance from the man who had shaped my life in more ways than one.

Memories of our time together flooded my mind, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of loss, a longing for his presence that could never be fulfilled.

Standing there, I had no idea just how much time had passed until I received a message from Antonio telling me that the event had begun.

I looked up at my father's portrait and silently prayed for strength to keep my anger in check when I saw Francisco's face later.

Today should be about my father and nobody else.

I walked back to the room I had exited and saw that it was filled with familiar faces, some of whom I had known since childhood.

They all had stories about my father, his power, wit, and generosity.

The event progressed with speeches and toasts in his honor, each word a testament to the impact he had on the lives of those around him.

I listened intently, my mind drifting to memories of my own, the moments I had spent with him, learning the ropes of the family business and absorbing his wisdom.

But beneath the surface, I couldn't help but feel the weight of the responsibility thrust upon me. I had some big shoes to fill, and I often wondered if I could live up to his legacy.

Even though I wasn't the Don, I didn't plan to remain under my uncle's reign for long. If I succeeded...

No.

When I succeeded in my plans to take my rightful place back, would I be capable of leading the family to my father's expectations?

As the night wore on, the atmosphere shifted from somber to celebratory. It was a tradition to end the event with a grand feast.

This was a symbolic gesture to honor the abundance my father had provided for the family during his lifetime, but even as laughter and music filled the air, a sense of emptiness lingered in my heart.

Constantly seeing my uncle play the role of a grieving brother pissed me off

to no end, making me wish I could riddle his body with bullets.

When my father had died, he didn't care. Now, he was pretending in front of everyone. It was sickening to watch.

Disgustoso (Disgusting).

Finally reaching my limit of watching Francisco putting on a display, I excused myself from the festivities, signaling to Antonio and Leo that I was alright and just needed space before retreating to the solitude of my father's study.

Surrounded by the scent of leather-bound books and memories of our intimate conversations, I allowed myself a moment of vulnerability as I willingly drowned myself in our memories together.

I closed my eyes, and the memories of my father flooded my mind, as vivid as if they happened just yesterday.

He was a formidable figure of power and compassion, a leader who commanded respect and loyalty from all who knew him.

I was just a child when he would carry me on his shoulders, and in those moments, I felt invincible, as if nothing in the world could harm me.

My father was a man of principles and had a vision for our family's future.

He believed in the importance of loyalty and honor and instilled those values in me from a young age.

He would take me under his wing, teaching me the intricacies of our world and showing me that true strength came not from violence but wisdom and foresight.

I remember our late-night conversations in his study, surrounded by books and secrets that would shape my destiny. He taught me that the key to success was seizing and creating opportunities.

He would share stories of our family's history, challenges, and triumphs.

In those moments, I realized the weight of the legacy that had been passed down to me, and I felt both pride and trepidation at the thought of one day leading the family.

As I grew older, I began to immerse myself in the world of the family business, learning from my father's trusted advisors and earning the respect of those around me.

As I took on more responsibilities, my father was always there, watching from the sidelines, ready to offer advice or lend a helping hand.

He never pressured me to follow in his footsteps, but he knew that I had the potential to carry on his legacy, and I was determined not to let him down.

But then, tragedy struck, and my world was shattered. My father was taken from me, leaving a void that seemed impossible to fill.

I was thrust into a leadership position sooner than expected, and the family's expectations weighed heavily on my shoulders.

In the days and weeks that followed his passing, I had struggled to find my footing, to make decisions that I knew he would have approved of, especially since Francisco took over the role of the Don. I missed my father's guidance.

As the years passed, I began to find my path, blending my father's lessons with my instincts and insights.

I surrounded myself with loyal men, those who had stood by my father and were now willing to stand by me.

As I stood in his study on my father's death anniversary, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions.

The pain of his absence was still there, a constant ache in my heart, but I also felt a deep sense of commitment to honor his memory and protect the family he had built.

Power and influence constantly shifted in the mafia world, and I knew I had

to be vigilant.

Francisco may be the current head, but I was quietly building my force of loyal men, ready to support me when the time was right.

I would play the role of the dutiful nephew, biding my time and waiting for the perfect moment to make my move.

I looked up at the portrait of my father, his stern face staring back at me, and I made a silent promise to him:

I would not rest until the family was secure, his legacy was protected, and I had reclaimed the position that was rightfully mine.

With his guidance in my heart and the loyalty of my men, I knew I had the strength to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

My father may be gone, but his spirit lived on in me, and I would do everything I could to make him proud.

The legacy of Dante De Luca would endure, and I would ensure that our family's future was as bright as its past.

I was lost in thought when I heard the door open behind me. I turned to find Leo standing at the entrance with a solemn expression.

"Matteo," he said, his voice tinged with melancholy. "I knew I would find you here."

I gave him a smile, acknowledging his presence. "I needed some time alone. This place brings back memories."

He nodded in understanding, stepping further into the study. "Your father was a remarkable man. He was like a brother to me."

"He was more than a father to me," I replied, my voice filled with emotion.

"He was my mentor, my role model."

Leo placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I know it must be difficult for you, Matteo, especially with everything happening now. But I want you to

know that I'm here for you. Whatever you need, I'll do my best to help."

I appreciated his words, knowing Leo was among the few people I could trust. "Thank you. Your support means a lot to me."

We stood in silence for a moment, each lost in our thoughts.

After a moment, Leo spoke again. "I've been looking into the recent events surrounding your father's death and discovered something. *Qualcosa che dovresti sapere.*" (Something you should know.)

I turned to face him, my curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

He hesitated for a moment before speaking. "There's a possibility that someone within the police force might be leaking information to your uncle, Francisco. It could explain how he always seems one step ahead of us."

My heart sank at the revelation. "Do you have any leads on who it might be?"

Leo shook his head. "Not yet. But I'll keep digging. I won't rest until we find out who's responsible."

I nodded, grateful for his dedication. "*Grazie (Thanks).* I knew I could count on you."

He gave me a reassuring smile. "You can always count on me. We'll get through this together."

"What about the witness?" I suddenly remembered and asked. "Was there truly a witness?"

Leo sighed and looked disgruntled.

"We're still not sure. Some officers found a purse at the scene, but it doesn't mean someone had witnessed what happened. It could have been that the owner misplaced their purse earlier that day. I managed to get onto the case and will return it to the owner. Before that, I will bring it to you."

"Call me when you're coming over. I'll bring Antonio, and we can discuss what to do next."

Leo nodded.

With that, we left my father's study, the weight of our conversation lingering in the air.

Chapter 5

Sophia

The past week had been a living nightmare. The memory of that fateful night was etched into my mind, haunting me day and night.

I couldn't shake off the fear that gripped me of the constant feeling of being watched.

My paranoia had reached a point where I couldn't even step out of my apartment without looking over my shoulder, without feeling like danger was lurking around every corner.

I knew I should go to the police and report what I had witnessed, but I was afraid they would discover something from my past that could get me in trouble. It wasn't something I wanted to risk.

Wouldn't it be ironic if I reported to the police but ended up being arrested because they decided to investigate me?

The fear of retaliation from those responsible for the murder kept me silent, although that was not the only reason.

So, I stayed hidden in my apartment, avoiding the outside world as much as possible.

I spent my days in constant anxiety, my mind racing with all the "what-ifs" and worst-case scenarios.

I knew I couldn't hide forever. I needed to find a way to take control of my life again, but the fear was paralyzing, leaving me unable to move or make a decision.

I knew I had to face my fear eventually, and I couldn't let it control me forever, but until then, I was stuck as a victim of my paranoia.

“Are you sure you don’t want to report this to the police?” My best friend, Keisha, asked for the umpteenth time.

I shot her a blank stare in response. I had lost count of how many times she had asked me that question.

I opted for just giving her blank stares instead of a verbal response.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what you’re thinking in your head.” Keisha rolled her eyes, which made me feel slightly offended.

She was the one who kept asking the same questions over and over again, after all.

“You’re probably thinking, ‘*How many times are you going to ask this question?*’ aren’t you?” Keisha mimicked me with a small smile.

“If you know, then why do you keep asking?” I scoffed.

Both of us were seated on my couch beside each other. I sat with my legs folded underneath, holding a cushion to keep my hands busy.

“In case you change your mind.” Her voice was pitched high as she responded. Her countenance became serious, and she turned her body to face me.

“You’re isolating yourself. You’re so full of fear that you haven’t even come to work for a week. Aren’t you worried that you’ll be fired? How long do you think your boss will allow you to take a break?”

“If I give a good excuse, I might get two months.” I cracked a small joke.

Keisha was stuck between cracking a smile and giving me an unimpressed stare.

I sighed and shook my head. “No matter what, I can’t risk going to the police. What if they investigate me and find out what I did in the past? I could get arrested!” I exclaimed.

“There’s no need to be dramatic. You can’t get arrested?” Keisha scoffed in

amusement.

“Excuse me?” I huffed in mock offense.

“You’re going there as a witness. Why would they investigate you?”

Okay, maybe it was my paranoia talking, but still, I refused to go to the police.

I exhaled loudly. “Looks like I’ll just have to stay cooped here for the rest of my life.”

I dramatically flopped backward on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

“If you’re so scared about being caught by the police, why did you even do it in the first place?” Keisha snickered as she hit me with a nearby cushion.

“I needed the money.” I groaned with my eyes closed.

“And so, you had to hack into companies and sell their secrets to their rivals?” Although Keisha was smiling, one of her eyebrows was raised high.

“I really needed the money,” I answered as an explanation.

As Keisha playfully hit me with a nearby cushion, her question echoed in my mind:

If you're so scared of getting caught by the police, why did you even do it in the first place?

I let out a small laugh, trying to hide my unease. The truth was, I had been desperate when I resorted to hacking into companies and selling their secrets. It was after my parents passed away, and I found myself alone, without any family willing to take me in.

I was barely eighteen, an adult on paper, but still so lost and vulnerable.

I needed the money to fend for myself and survive. As a teenager, I was always interested in technology, especially computers.

I would spend hours tinkering with gadgets and learning how to code.

However, when I reached the age of eighteen and my parents died, I realized

that my passion for technology could also be a means to earn some quick cash.

At first, it started innocently enough. I would hack into online games and sell virtual currency to other players.

It was a harmless way to make a few bucks, giving me a sense of thrill and satisfaction.

But as I got more skilled and my knowledge of computer systems deepened, the temptation to delve into more lucrative ventures grew stronger.

One day, I stumbled upon a forum on the dark web where hackers offered their services to the highest bidder.

They claimed to have access to confidential information from various companies, information that could be sold to their competitors for a handsome sum.

It was a dangerous game, but the lure of easy money was too enticing to resist.

I started hacking into a few small companies and selling their data to their rivals.

The money came in fast and easy, and I convinced myself I was not harming anyone. After all, it was just business, right?

But as I got deeper into the world of cybercrime, I began to realize the gravity of my actions.

My skills and reputation grew, and soon, I was approached by more dangerous and powerful individuals with sinister intentions.

They wanted me to hack into government databases, steal classified information, and commit cyber espionage.

The allure of even more money was there, but so was the risk of getting caught.

When this happened, I decided to stop. The only companies I had hacked were corrupt companies.

There was no way I would get involved in something major like that.

So, when I started receiving those offers, I decided to stop. I had made enough money to last me for a while, so I didn't have to struggle with my decision to quit.

"You're ridiculous. Don't you think if the police were aware, they would have caught you by now?" Keisha interrupted my thoughts.

"They didn't find anything. I was careful in covering my tracks." I tutted at Keisha's simplistic questions.

"Exactly, so why are you worried now? You haven't even hacked into any company since those days. So many years have passed. Besides, those companies must have thought their rivals did it. You're safe."

I rolled my head and stared at her for a few seconds without saying anything.

"I'm still not going," I said after a moment of silence, earning a groan of annoyance from my friend.

I laughed at her frustrated state. As I continued to banter with Keisha, I felt relaxed and grateful for her presence.

Keisha was 5'2 with shoulder length and curves in all the right places. Her coke-bottom shape made it impossible sometimes to go out with her because of the constant cat calls her way, which she handled with sass, loving the attention.

I was never worried about our safety because she knew how to handle herself. With her father being a former pro kickboxer and being the only child, I almost feel sorry for any guy thinking about crossing the line.

We met when we were younger. A few girls used to bully me until she transferred to our school. Catchy them one day in the act she defended me,

kicking one of the girls so hard, she was not able to walk straight for a week. Needless to say, we have been inseparable ever since. She was so kind and always had me back.

Other people would have gotten annoyed and left me at my refusal to see the police and my determination to hide in my room, but Keisha stayed.

She always checked up on me, and even though she was quite frustrated, she never left me.

Even now, just conversing with her was enough to free me from my cage of fear.

I was even tempted to go on a walk with her. The keyword was 'tempted.' I wasn't going outside.

I knew I was being ridiculous, but the truth was that I was slowly relaxing in my fear.

If they had truly discovered something, they would have made their moves by now.

Several days had passed, and nothing had happened. Maybe they didn't know my identity.

As for my purse, maybe it was a kind Samaritan who had found it and taken it to the police station.

Just because I had returned to the crime scene to look for my purse but didn't find it, it didn't mean those murderers had taken it. Right?

Keisha and I ended up talking about various topics. We mindlessly spoke about anything and everything.

Keisha and I sat on the couch in my living room, sipping our cups of tea.

The conversation had shifted to Matteo, and I could feel Keisha's curiosity building up, ready to burst with questions.

"So, what are you going to do about Matteo?" Keisha asked, her eyes fixed

on me.

I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. This was not a conversation I had planned to have, but I couldn't keep it all to myself. "I'm not sure, Keisha. It's complicated."

"Are you going to continue avoiding him?"

"Of course," I admitted, a hint of frustration in my voice. "I just don't know what to do, Keisha."

Part of me wants to confront him and ask what I saw that night, but another part fears what I might discover.

It was only a one-night stand. It's not as if anything will develop between us, so I'm tempted to forget about the whole night."

Keisha nodded sympathetically, understanding the dilemma I was facing. "It's a tough situation."

"Exactly," I replied. "And he seemed like a nice guy at the event? Charming, caring, and all that, and to make matters worse, I can't get him out of my head."

Keisha placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to figure this out alone, Sophia. I'm here for you, remember? We'll find a way to get to the bottom of this together."

I managed a small smile, grateful for her support. "Thanks, Keisha. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"We'll take it one step at a time," Keisha reassured me. "First, let's focus on getting you to leave your house. You can't hide forever; keeping busy will help take your mind off things for a while." She snorted, earning a grin from me.

As we continued to talk, I felt a sense of relief wash over me. It was good to have someone to confide in who understood and didn't judge me for my fears

and uncertainties.

As the evening wore on and Keisha bid me farewell, I was back on the couch, alone with my thoughts.

The house felt emptier without her, but there was also a sense of peace in the silence.

I took out my phone and mindlessly scrolled through social media to distract myself from the weight of my worries.

But just as I started to relax, my world was upended when the doorbell rang unexpectedly.

My heart skipped a beat, and my mind raced with possibilities of who it could be.

I wasn't expecting anyone, and the events of the past weeks had made me extra cautious about unexpected visitors.

With trepidation, I got up from the couch and approached the door, peeking through the peephole to see who it was.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw who was on the other side of the door. It was none other than Matteo.

What the fuck was he doing here?

Chapter 6

Matteo

As we sat in my office, the weight of the impending discussion settled heavily on my shoulders. The atmosphere was tense, and I could feel the gravity of the situation.

In front of me were two of the most trusted men in my life – Leo, the detective who had been like an uncle to me, and Antonio, my loyal confidant. "Let's get straight to the point," Leo began, his expression serious. "There's a possibility that someone witnessed Matteo killing the traitor."

Antonio was as pissed off as I was when I heard the confession of my two men. I punished them for their foolish neglect and jeopardizing our entire organization.

I leaned forward, my mind racing with possibilities. "Who is the owner of the purse?"

My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt a knot forming in my stomach. The thought of a witness sent chills down my spine, knowing it could bring down everything I had worked so hard to build.

"Who is she?" I repeated the question.

Leo opened the purse, and my heart sank when I saw the contents – it was Sophia's ID card. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

Sophia, the woman I had met recently and was getting to know, was the possible witness.

However, was it possible that she had run away before we had captured the traitor?

I felt a rush of emotions – disbelief, fear, and a strange sense of sadness.

Sophia was innocent in all of this, and I couldn't bear the thought of her getting caught up in the dangerous world I inhabited.

"I can't believe it," I whispered, my mind racing with thoughts of what this meant for Sophia and me.

Leo and Antonio exchanged concerned glances as they noticed my reaction.

"Do you know her?" Leo asked cautiously.

I nodded, my mind still reeling from the revelation. "Yes, I met her recently."

Antonio leaned over to look at the ID and furrowed his brow in recognition as he had seen her that night.

"Could she have approached you deliberately? Maybe she knew who you were and wanted to get close for some reason."

The thought made my jaw clench. "I don't know," I replied honestly. "I never got the sense that she knew anything about my background. But now, I can't help but wonder if there was more to her interest in me."

Leo leaned back in his chair, deep in thought. "We need to find and talk to her," he said. "We need to find out what she knows and if she poses a threat."

I agreed, but a part of me was reluctant to believe that Sophia could be involved in any nefarious activities.

She seemed genuine, and I enjoyed our time together, but now, doubts clouded my judgment, and I couldn't afford to take any chances.

"We have to be careful," I warned. "If she truly saw what happened, we can't let her compromise us. But at the same time, I don't want any harm to come to her."

Leo and Antonio nodded in agreement, and we devised a plan to approach her.

As we discussed the details, my mind was torn between my feelings for her and the harsh reality of my world.

I couldn't help but feel suspicious, wondering if Sophia had approached me with a hidden agenda.

Had she known about my family's business all along? Or was it all merely a coincidence?

Could she have been sent by Francisco? The thought made me furious.

It wasn't the first time my uncle had tried this tactic with me. He knew how much the family company meant to me and had made numerous attempts to get his hands on it.

Our family company was more than just a business; it was the backbone of our entire organization.

It provided us with a major source of funding that allowed us to maintain our influence and power in the criminal underworld.

Losing control of the company would be a devastating blow, not just to me but to the entire family.

Before he passed away, my father entrusted the company to me in his will, and as a result, I could keep the company out of Francisco's hands.

While he had the mafia, I had the company. Francisco couldn't get rid of me entirely or push me too hard for fear that I might decide not to fund the mafia family anymore.

In the same way, I could not make any obvious moves against Francisco because he had the mafia in his hands.

We could only resort to underhand tricks instead while pretending to be cordial on the outside.

It was a delicate balance that I had been walking on for months as if on thin ice.

However, that didn't stop him from trying other tactics. Sending women to get close to me, hoping to drug or manipulate me into signing over the

company, was just one of the many schemes he had attempted.

The worst part was that some of these women had seemed genuine, making it even harder to trust anyone who came into my life.

The memory of one particular incident haunted me. Francisco sent a woman named Isabeau a few years ago to seduce me.

She had been charming and beautiful, and I had fallen for her, but I discovered her true intentions just as we got close.

She had been sent to drug and seduce me into signing the papers that would transfer the company to Francisco.

Fortunately, I had discovered her true intentions before it was too late. I had confronted her, and she had confessed everything.

I had let her go, warning her never to show her face again, but the experience had left me wary and distrusting.

And now, with Sophia, the fear of history repeating itself was ever-present.

I didn't know if she had been sent by Francisco, but I couldn't afford to take any chances.

I wanted to trust her, to believe that she was innocent and had no knowledge of the dangerous game I was a part of.

But I couldn't ignore the evidence before me – her ID card, the possible witness to a crime that could bring down my entire world.

“I’ll go and hand over her purse. We managed to track her location in the police database. I’ll inform you on how it goes. *Devo andare ora.*” (*I have to go now.*)

I nodded, still stuck in my thoughts.

“What do you want me to do?” Antonio asked me after Leo left.

I exhaled and leaned back in my seat.

"Antonio, I need you to dig up everything you can on Sophia," I said, my

voice firm and determined.

"I want to know every detail of her past, every connection she has, and if there's any link to my uncle Francisco."

Antonio nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "Consider it done, Matteo. I'll leave no stone unturned."

I watched as he left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As I waited for Antonio's findings, I couldn't help but replay every moment I had spent with Sophia in my mind.

She had seemed genuine, and I had found myself drawn to her in a way I hadn't expected.

But the fear of being deceived again, of falling into my uncle's trap, was ever-present.

If I confronted Sophia and she was innocent, I risked pushing her away and losing our connection.

But suppose I ignored the evidence and allowed myself to be vulnerable. In that case, I could be putting my entire family at risk.

As the days passed, I struggled to find a balance between my heart and my mind.

The investigation into Sophia's background continued, and the weight of uncertainty hung heavily on my shoulders.

Leo had informed me that she had misplaced her purse for quite a while, but with how nervous she appeared, he didn't believe her story, and to be honest, neither did I.

With that information, I decided to wait for Antonio to finish his investigation.

When Antonio finally returned with his findings, I braced for the truth.

He had unearthed every detail of Sophia's life – her family, friends, work

history, and past relationships.

There was no evidence to suggest any connection to my uncle or any criminal activity.

I felt a mix of relief and confusion. The evidence pointed to Sophia being an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of a dangerous situation, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to the story, something hidden beneath the surface.

As I delved deeper into the information Antonio had gathered, I discovered something that made my blood run cold.

Sophia had a history of hacking into companies and selling their secrets to their rivals.

It was a skill that could explain why there was no evidence linking her to Francisco or any criminal activity.

Had she used her hacking abilities to cover her tracks and erase any traces of her involvement?

My doubts resurfaced, and I couldn't help but wonder if I had been too quick to trust her.

Conflicting thoughts tore at me – the desire to believe in her innocence and the need to protect myself and my family's legacy.

I confronted Antonio about this discovery, and he confirmed that Sophia's hacking past was well-known in certain circles.

She seemed to have managed to stay under the radar and avoid any major trouble with the law, but her skills were undeniable.

I couldn't ignore the possibility that she might have been sent by my uncle or someone else with malicious intent.

Her hacking abilities could make her a valuable asset to anyone with ill intentions, and the fact that she had been at the scene of the murder made her

a potential witness who could jeopardize everything.

As the days passed, I again became torn between my heart and mind.

My feelings for Sophia were undeniable, and I couldn't shake the connection we had formed. The risks were too high, and the consequences of being deceived again were too great.

The days turned into weeks, and Sophia's avoidance only fueled my doubts.

She hadn't replied to my text messages, and every attempt to reach her went unanswered.

It was as if she was intentionally keeping her distance, which only made me more suspicious.

I wanted to confront her, to demand answers, and to know the truth. But a part of me hesitated.

What if she was innocent, and my suspicion was unfounded?

Confronting could risk pushing her away and revealing more about myself than I wanted to.

I had to be careful and avoid making any hasty decisions.

During my turmoil, I sought solace in the familiar routine of my daily life – the meetings with my men, the business deals, and the endless strategizing to stay one step ahead of my uncle.

But even in the midst of it all, the thoughts of Sophia plagued my mind.

I replayed every moment we had spent together, trying to decipher any hidden clues or signs of deception.

It was a maddening process, leaving me feeling more confused and conflicted.

With my mind and heart in turmoil, I knew I couldn't let this confusion and conflict consume me any longer.

I had to take action, face the truth head-on, and confront the demons that

haunted my thoughts.

As I sat in my father's study, the room filled with memories of his wisdom, I remembered his words, "Best to nip things in the bud."

He had always preached the importance of dealing with issues before they spiraled out of control. And that's exactly what I needed to do now.

I picked up my phone, my fingers hovering over the screen for a moment before I dialed Sophia's number. It rang once, twice, and then her voicemail picked up.

I hesitated momentarily, unsure what to say, but then I took a deep breath and decided.

If she didn't want to come to me, then I could only go to her. Since I couldn't find a way to detect her true purpose, there was only one thing I could do.

I followed the saying: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.



Here I was, standing at Sophia's doorstep. After discussing with Leo and Antonio, we devised a plan, which was why I was here.

Though I knew I was here for business, a part of me looked forward to seeing her again after so many days.

I also wondered how she would react to seeing me again.

When she opened the door and saw me standing there, surprise flashed across her face before it was replaced by a nervous smile. "Matteo, what are you doing here?"

I was struck with two different emotions. Happiness on seeing her again and suspicious at seeing how wary she seemed.

I tried to appear casual, even though my heart was pounding. "I just wanted to check on you, make sure you're okay. It's been so long since I've heard from you."

She nodded, her eyes darting around as if searching for an escape route. "Oh, um, yeah, I'm fine. Just been busy with work and stuff."

I raised an eyebrow, noting her evasive answer. "You seem to have been avoiding me lately. You don't answer my texts or pick up my calls. Is there a reason for that? Did I do something to offend you?"

My eyes narrowed slightly as I observed her.

She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "I... I've just been busy, that's all. It's not personal."

I wanted to believe her, but my instincts told me there was more to the story. "Is something bothering you? You can talk to me, you know."

Sophia bit her lip, seemingly torn between opening up and keeping her distance. "Em-mm...It's just that I've been dealing with some personal stuff."

I gently touched her arm, hoping to offer some comfort. "You don't have to go through it alone. I'm here for you if you want to talk."

She gave me a small, appreciative smile, but her unease remained evident. "Thank you, Matteo. I appreciate it."

As we stood there in awkward silence, she suddenly asked, "How did you know where I live?"

I quickly thought of a believable answer. "Oh, I asked around. I wanted to surprise you, but I guess I surprised myself more."

Her smile seemed forced, and I could see the wariness in her eyes. "Well, it's certainly a surprise."

I tried to keep the conversation light, not wanting to push her too much. "I hope it's a good surprise. Maybe we could grab a coffee or something

sometime?"

She seemed taken aback by the invitation, and I could sense her hesitancy.

"I... I'm not sure, Matteo. I've been really busy and don't know if I have the time."

I didn't come here to ask her out, so I nodded. "That's okay. Just let me know whenever you're free, okay?"

Sophia nodded. "Sure, I'll do that."

I saw the relief in Sophia's eyes after she agreed to let me know when she was free. I smirked inwardly.

Seeing how eager she was for me to leave made me eager to stay. Unfortunately for her, she was not going to get her wish yet.

"There's something I wanted to discuss with you," I finally said in a more serious tone.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and I could sense her nervousness as she replied, "What is it?"

"Could I come inside? I think it'll be better if we discuss it inside."

I watched as she bit her lip, unsure of what to do.

"Is there a problem?" I raised an eyebrow. I was slightly losing my patience. What did she know about me that made her this wary of me?

Her behavior also made me feel a sense of loss, which I didn't want to dwell on.

"No. My house is just a bit messy." She chuckled awkwardly. "Come in."

I gave her a slight smile as I entered her house. However, I didn't check her house out as I turned to face her after entering what looked like the living room.

From the little I observed when entering, I could tell she liked classy furniture.

“What did you want to talk about?” She asked. I noticed she no longer looked nervous and couldn’t help quirking an eyebrow. Was it that she felt more comfortable in her house?

I stared at her for a while before a large grin appeared. Sophia’s eyes narrowed as she took in my expression, waiting for me to reveal what I wanted to say.

I decided not to disappoint her. “I have a proposition for you.”

Chapter 7

Sophia

"I have a proposition for you," Matteo said, his voice steady and his gaze locked onto mine.

I felt a mixture of curiosity and apprehension as I looked at him. A proposition?

The word held weight, and I couldn't help but wonder what he had in mind.

I wasn't entirely sure of his intentions, and a part of me couldn't help but feel wary.

"What kind of proposition?" I asked cautiously, my eyebrows furrowing.

He took a moment before responding as if choosing his words carefully.

"I've been thinking about your situation, and I believe I might have a solution that could benefit both of us."

My curiosity peaked, and I leaned forward slightly, urging him to continue.

"Go on."

Matteo's lips curled into a faint smirk as if he anticipated my reaction.

"I run a company that deals in cybersecurity and other areas, and I've been looking for someone skilled in your field to join my team. Someone with your hacking abilities could be a valuable asset."

I blinked in surprise, taken aback by his unexpected proposition. I had never imagined that he would suggest something like this.

The idea of working for him, especially given my recent experiences, seemed too good to be true.

"But why would you want to offer me a job?" I asked, my skepticism evident in my tone.

He leaned against the doorframe, his gaze steady on mine.

"I've been scouting for a new employee with a specific skill set who could bring a unique perspective to my technology company. And your name came up quite a few times during my search."

I blinked, taken aback by his words. "My name?"

He nodded. "Yes, Sophia. Your reputation in technology has been making waves, and I was intrigued."

I felt a mixture of surprise and skepticism well up within me. Sure, I had a job, but I was nowhere near as high-profile as he seemed to imply.

"But... how did you even hear about me?" I asked, my skepticism showing.

Matteo's lips curved into a faint smile. "I have my sources."

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at his cryptic response. It was hard to believe that my name had been making rounds in any significant way, especially in the tech industry.

"I find it hard to believe that my name would be recommended to you," I admitted, my voice tinged with skepticism.

Matteo's smile deepened. "You underestimate yourself, Sophia. Your skills are well-regarded among those in the know."

I glanced at him, my mind racing with thoughts. The offer was unexpected, and my skepticism was fighting a battle against the flattery he was directing my way.

A job at his technology company was appealing, but I needed more answers.

"I appreciate the offer, Matteo," I said cautiously, "but I'm not sure how my skills could be that renowned. I already have a job and am quite content with it."

He nodded slowly, seeming to understand my reservations.

"I understand your skepticism. However, I believe that you could contribute a lot to my company. I suggest you take your time to think about what I just

said.”

Despite how earnest he appeared, my memories of that night were vivid and haunting.

I had seen him pull the trigger, ending another man's life.

The image was seared into my mind, and I couldn't ignore that he was directly involved in the murder I had witnessed.

The unease grew as I tried to reconcile the man standing before me with the one who had committed such a brutal act.

It was a conflicting and bewildering situation, and I couldn't help but wonder what his intentions were.

As he spoke, explaining his interest in my skills and expertise, I couldn't help but let my mind wander.

Was this job offer a way to keep an eye on me? Was he trying to bring me closer into his world for some ulterior motive?

The possibility that he might know about my witnessing the murder and that this offer was somehow connected sent shivers down my spine.

My heart raced as I considered the implications. Could he be offering me this job to ensure my silence? Or worse, was he trying to lure me into a trap?

I couldn't believe my luck had taken such a twisted turn – meeting a man I was undeniably drawn to, only to discover the potential threat surrounding him.

My conflicting emotions churned, torn between my attraction to him and the fear that he might be involved in something far more sinister.

I wanted to believe that he was genuine, that this job offer was a legitimate opportunity, but the nagging doubt remained.

Was a killer genuine about anything?

My thoughts raced, and I found myself shaking with nerves. Whether his

intentions were genuine or not, it was better to refuse.

The thought of working for him, of being drawn deeper into his world, was a risk I couldn't afford to take.

The image of him committing that act of violence kept flashing in my mind.

Taking a deep breath, I mustered the courage to respond. "Thank you, Matteo, for the offer," I began, my voice quivering slightly.

"But I've decided that I should decline. I have a job and responsibilities that I need to focus on."

His smile faded, his gaze locking onto mine as if searching for something.

"Are you sure about this, Sophia?"

I nodded, trying to maintain a semblance of composure. "Yes, I am."

A heavy silence hung in the air, and I could sense an unspoken tension between us.

Matteo's expression was unreadable as his eyes searched mine.

Just as I thought the conversation was ending, his lips curved into a slight smirk, catching me off guard.

"You know, Sophia, I did a little digging. Your hacking skills are quite impressive."

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt a sudden cold sweat on my brow. How had he found out about that?

Panic surged within me, and I struggled to maintain my composure.

He chuckled softly as if amused by my reaction. "Don't worry. I'm not here to report you to the police or anything like that."

I blinked, my mind racing as I tried to process his words. Was he trying to use this information against me?

He leaned against the doorway, his expression relaxed. "I've been searching for someone with your unique abilities for a while now. Your reputation as a

skilled hacker led me to seek you out."

I stared at him, shock and disbelief swirling within me. How could he have possibly known about my hacking past? What else had he uncovered?

"I won't pretend to know all the details of your past, Sophia," Matteo continued, his gaze steady.

"But I do know that your skills are remarkable. That's why I'm extending this offer to you – a chance to put your talents to use legitimately."

My heart raced between the fear of exposure and the allure of a new opportunity.

Despite my reservations, a part of me was intrigued by his proposal.

I hesitated, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Leaving my current job and delving into the unknown was both exhilarating and terrifying.

As I stood there, considering Matteo's offer, I couldn't help but reflect on my current job. It wasn't anything special – just another run-of-the-mill position in the corporate world.

On the other hand, I knew how renowned Matteo's technology company was. It was a well-known player in the industry, pushing the boundaries of innovation and technology.

You see, my skills lie in the realm of technology, particularly in hacking and cybersecurity.

I had always been drawn to the intricacies of computers and networks, and my ability to navigate complex systems had garnered me a reputation among those in the know.

Working in a company aligned with my skills and passion was undeniably appealing.

The thought of contributing to groundbreaking projects and being surrounded

by like-minded individuals sent a thrill through me.

I had heard that Matteo's company specializes in developing cutting-edge software solutions for businesses across various sectors.

Their focus on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and data analytics was right up my alley.

And then there was the matter of compensation. I had heard rumors about how generous Matteo's company was regarding employee benefits and pay.

It was an offer that could provide financial stability and open doors to opportunities I hadn't even dreamed of.

Throwing my fear and wariness aside, I realized that I would be a fool to pass up such an opportunity.

The chance to work alongside professionals who were experts in their field, to learn and grow, and to make a meaningful impact was too enticing to ignore.

"I appreciate that," I replied, my voice wavering slightly. "I will take some time to consider it."

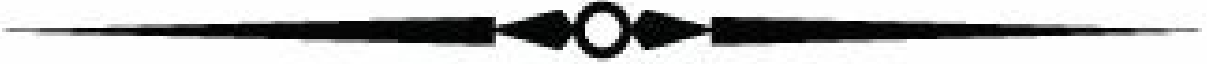
A subtle smirk curved on Matteo's lips, his gaze holding mine with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine.

He knew he had piqued my interest, and it was clear that he had anticipated my hesitation.

"Good," he said, a hint of amusement in his tone. "I'll give you three days to think it over. Remember, the door is always open whenever you're ready."

With those words, he turned to leave, leaving me standing there with a mixture of curiosity and unease.

As the door closed behind him, I couldn't shake the feeling that my life was about to take a turn I hadn't expected and that Matteo was at the center of it all.



Two days had passed since Matteo had offered me that unexpected proposition.

The weight of my decision still pressed heavily on my shoulders, and I found myself in constant contemplation.

After Matteo had left my house that day, I mulled over his offer for a while and then called Keisha to inform her of everything that had happened.

One evening, as I sat in my living room, wrestling with my thoughts, I heard a knock on my door.

Frowning, I rose from the couch and went to the entrance. As I swung the door open, my eyes widened in surprise.

"Keisha?" I exclaimed, disbelief coloring my voice. "What are you doing here?"

My best friend flashed me a mischievous grin. "Surprise visit, my dear. I figured you could use some company and moral support."

I stepped aside to let her in, still trying to process her unexpected appearance. "You didn't have to come all this way."

Keisha waved a hand dismissively. "Nonsense. Besides, I wanted to make sure you're not drowning in your thoughts."

As we settled onto the couch, I couldn't help but feel grateful for her presence.

Keisha had a way of cutting through the noise and getting straight to the heart of the matter.

"So," she began, her eyes locking onto mine, "have you decided on Matteo's offer?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Not yet. I've been researching his company, trying to gather as much information as possible, but the more I dig, the more conflicted I feel."

Keisha leaned forward, her gaze steady. "And what's your gut telling you?"

I hesitated, contemplating her question.

"Part of me is tempted by the opportunity. His company is renowned in the tech industry, and the work aligns perfectly with my skills. The pay is generous, and it's a chance to break free from my current job, which has become monotonous."

Keisha nodded, encouraging me to continue.

"But," I added, a note of hesitation creeping into my voice, "there's this nagging doubt in the back of my mind. What if Matteo has ulterior motives? What if I'm walking into something I can't escape?"

Keisha looked at me intently, her gaze unwavering. "Is it because you saw him... you know, kill someone?"

I sighed, the weight of that memory pressing down on me. "I don't know, Keisha. I still can't even wrap my head around that part."

We sat silently for a moment, the gravity of the situation sinking in. Finally, Keisha spoke.

"Let's put that aside for a moment. Let's focus on the job offer itself. From what you've said, it sounds like an amazing opportunity, right?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes, it does. I can't deny that."

Keisha leaned in, her eyes earnest.

"Then maybe you should consider taking it. If Matteo wanted to harm or kill you, Sophia, he probably wouldn't need to go through all this trouble. He's

got connections, right? He could have easily made you disappear without offering you a job. He would have done it already if he knew you had witnessed the murder."

Her words hit me with a dose of logic that I hadn't fully considered. She was right.

If Matteo had malicious intentions, there were easier ways for him to achieve them, but there was still a nagging doubt, a fear of the unknown that held me back.

"But what if this is all part of some elaborate plan?" I countered, my voice laced with uncertainty. "What if he's trying to get me killed."

Keisha leaned back, giving me a thoughtful look.

"Sophia, I know you're cautious, and that's a good thing, but don't let fear hold you back from potentially seizing an incredible opportunity. You've got skills, girl, skills that this guy seems to value, and even if you decide to give it a shot, you don't have to go in blindly. Do some research and learn more about his company and reputation. Knowledge is power, remember?"

I blinked, surprised by the sudden shift in perspective. Keisha was right. I had the power to gather information and make an informed decision.

Maybe it was time to set aside my apprehensions and take a chance.

"But what if things go wrong?" I asked softly, my uncertainty still lingering.

Keisha smiled, her expression reassuring. "Then you'll figure it out."

I nodded and inhaled deeply. Maybe she was right.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled out my phone and dialed Matteo's number.

The phone rang, each second feeling like an eternity as I waited for him to answer.

When he finally picked up, his voice was calm and composed.

"Hello, Sophia."

"Hi, Matteo," I began, my voice steady despite lingering nervousness. "I've thought about your proposition, and I accept."

Chapter 8

Matteo

As I heard Sophia's voice on the other end of the line saying she had accepted my proposition, a sense of satisfaction washed over me.

I couldn't help but smile, leaning back in my chair with a contented hum. It seemed my intuition had been right.

Despite her initial hesitation, I felt she would ultimately accept.

“I’ll send you the details of your job later in the day, along with your start date.” My lips rose in a wide smile.

“I look forward to working with you,” I said as I ended the call.

Her acceptance had multiple layers of significance. Firstly, it meant that I would indeed have the opportunity to harness her impressive skills and expertise in my technology company.

Her abilities aligned perfectly with our work, and I knew she could contribute greatly to our projects.

This was a professional advantage that I couldn't ignore.

But beyond that, her acceptance also allowed me to keep a watchful eye on her.

With her within the walls of my company, I would be able to observe her closely and learn more about her intentions and background.

The lingering question of whether she had been sent by my uncle remained, and having her on my team was a way to find answers.

It was killing two birds with one stone.

“I can see she agreed then.” I raised my head at Antonio’s voice. He was seated on the couch beside me, flipping through some documents.

We were currently in the living room of my house.

“Yes,” I confirmed, leaning back on my sofa and letting out a sigh of relief. My phone landed on the small coffee table with a soft thud.

Antonio looked up from the documents he was reviewing, his expression expectant.

"*Bene, questa è una buona notizia. (Well, that's good news.)* Looks like your offer was too good to resist." He joked.

I nodded, a satisfied smile playing on my lips. "It worked just as we planned."

He chuckled, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Of course it did. Almost everybody in our line of business knows you have a way with words."

I waved off the compliment, my mind already shifting gears. "Any progress on her background check?"

Antonio's smile faded, and he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"I've been going through her records again, but I haven't come across anything that suggests she was employed by your uncle or has any direct connection to his operations."

I tapped my fingers on the table, a flicker of frustration passing through me.

"Keep digging. There has to be something. I can't shake off this feeling that there's more to her than meets the eye."

Antonio raised an eyebrow, studying me carefully. "You think she could be involved with your uncle?"

I met his gaze, my eyes unwavering. "I don't know, but I won't take any chances. *Non con tutto in gioco. (Not with everything at stake.)* However, I hope she's not."

He nodded in understanding, his expression serious. "I'll keep looking."

I leaned back in my chair, my thoughts swirling with uncertainty. The situation was becoming complicated.

If she turned out to be my uncle's spy, I would have to deal with her carefully, either extracting information without revealing my secrets or getting rid of her.

The thought of having her so close yet potentially working against me was unnerving.

On the other hand, if Sophia weren't tied to my uncle's operations, it would be a relief. But that brought another set of challenges.

The fact that she could potentially be a witness to the murder I had committed weighed heavily on my mind.

Her behavior around me was telling – the nervousness, the unease – all pointed to the possibility that she had indeed witnessed something that night.

It was a double-edged sword. If she were innocent, I would have to navigate the awkwardness of our shared history.

How could I build any connection with her while the knowledge of my dark deeds lingered between us?

Yet, the prospect of her not being involved in criminal activities and not being sent by my uncle offered a glimmer of hope.

It meant that perhaps, just perhaps, I could have a genuine connection with her without the weight of suspicion.

Just then, the door to the living room swung open, and one of my men entered, his expression tense.

"*Capo*, your uncle has arrived. He said he wants to speak to you."

I exchanged a glance with Antonio. Francisco's unexpected visit was a cause for concern.

We had meticulously kept our dealings separate from my personal life, and his presence here was an anomaly.

"Why would he come here?" Antonio mused softly, his brow furrowed.

I leaned back in my seat, my mind racing with possibilities. "It could be about the recent developments in the organization," I replied, my voice low. "Or he could have heard about Sophia."

Antonio nodded, his gaze thoughtful. The implications of either scenario were significant.

Something urgent had arisen if my uncle was here to discuss the organization's matters.

But if his visit was linked to Sophia, it raised questions about how much he knew and his intentions.

"Let him in." I gestured to my subordinate, who bowed his head and left to fetch my uncle.

As we waited, Antonio swiftly gathered the documents he had spread out, ready to maintain a professional demeanor in front of Francisco.

Soon enough, the door swung open again, and Francisco strolled into the living room with a cheery smile.

His presence alone was enough to cast a shadow over the room, a reminder of the power he held within our family.

"Matteo, *mio nipote (my nephew)!*" he greeted me jovially as if his arrival was a casual social call rather than a calculated move.

I rose from my seat, acknowledging him with a small bow of my head.

"Uncle Francisco, *Benvenuto (Welcome)*. What brings you here?"

Outwardly, there was a welcoming smile on my face, but inwardly, I was seething.

No matter how often I convinced myself that I had to be patient and not blow our cover of false politeness, it still grated on my nerves whenever I had to lower my head for this man and act humble.

Antonio stood up as well, clutching the files in his hands. Despite his clear

distaste for my uncle, he lowered his head slightly as a sign of respect.

The protocols of our family's hierarchy demanded such formalities, regardless of personal feelings.

"Oh? I didn't know you had company," Francisco remarked, glancing at Antonio before returning his attention to me.

His smile seemed to carry an undercurrent of curiosity that raised my guard even higher.

I gestured toward Antonio. "This is Antonio, *mio fra il mio intimo confidentetello* (my most trusted confidant). He assists me in various matters."

Antonio inclined his head respectfully, his face a mask of professionalism. "A pleasure to meet you, Don Francisco."

Francisco nodded in acknowledgment before turning back to me. "I was actually in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by to discuss a few matters."

Francisco's words were coated with false pleasantries, but I knew his visit was far from a casual drop-in.

As the two of us settled into a conversation with Antonio standing beside me, I couldn't help but analyze every word he said, searching for hidden motives and veiled intentions.

"So, Matteo," my uncle began, leaning back in his chair, his smile never faltering. "I've been hearing some interesting things lately. Rumors, you know how they spread."

I kept my expression neutral, though my guard was up. "Rumors about what, Uncle?"

His eyes flickered with something I couldn't quite decipher.

"About a certain... witness. A potential loose end that might pose a threat to

our operations." He casually looked around the room as if admiring the decorations.

I exchanged a swift glance with Antonio, his eyes narrowing slightly. It was clear that my uncle wasn't here for a friendly chat.

He was fishing for information, trying to gauge how much I knew and what I might be involved in.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to, Uncle Francisco," I replied calmly. "I've been focused on my affairs."

He chuckled softly, a sound that held a hint of amusement. "Of course, but you know how it is in our line of work. Sometimes, we stumble upon things that weren't meant to be stumbled upon."

I remained composed, refusing to give away any hint of nervousness. "I suppose that can happen."

He leaned in slightly, his smile widening. "So, tell me, *mio nipote*, have you found anything... interesting lately? *Qualcosa che potrebbe richiedere la nostra attenzione (Something that may need our attention)?*"

I weighed my words carefully, fully aware of the implications of what I said next.

"As you said, rumors spread. But I assure you, I've been preoccupied with legitimate matters. If there's something specific you'd like to discuss, I'm all ears."

Francisco's gaze bore into mine, and for a fleeting moment, I felt like he was trying to peer into my thoughts.

But I held his gaze without flinching, my resolve unwavering.

After what felt like an eternity, he leaned back again, his smile returning to its cheery façade.

"No need to be so serious," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "Just wanted

to catch up and make sure everything is running smoothly."

I nodded, though I knew there was more beneath his words. Looking up, I found Francisco's eyes narrowing as they landed on the file of documents Antonio was holding.

The file was thick, containing data and information we had discussed earlier. Antonio's grip on it tightened almost imperceptibly.

Curiosity masked by feigned nonchalance, Francisco tilted his head toward the file. "Working on something interesting, are we?"

I leaned back in my chair, my expression mild but guarded with a smirk.

"It's company-related matters, Uncle. Matters that wouldn't concern you. Your expertise lies in running the family business, after all." I replied, throwing a subtle jab at his failure to steal the business away from me.

A subtle smile tugged at the corner of his lips, but his eyes gleamed with a hint of something sharper.

"Ah, of course. I wouldn't want to step on any toes when it comes to your... technological endeavors."

The unspoken tension hung in the air, a silent exchange of veiled challenges. Francisco's attempt at light banter was laced with an undercurrent of suspicion.

He wasn't one to miss details, and the fact that we were discussing matters he wasn't privy to seemed to be gnawing at him. It was to be expected.

After all, if he had access to the company....well, that wasn't something I wanted to think about.

I met his gaze evenly, refusing to be the one to back down.

"You've always had a different field of expertise, Uncle. It's what makes us such a balanced family."

His smile remained intact, but his gaze didn't waver. "Balance is crucial,

Matteo, but remember, unity is equally important. *Siamo più forti insieme (We are stronger together).*"

I nodded, acknowledging his words without giving an inch. "Unity is a goal we both share."

Just as the tension seemed poised to escalate, I saw an opportunity to deflect.

"Antonio, there's something I need your expertise on, something that needs immediate attention."

Antonio caught on and quickly stood, his fingers sliding the file onto the table. "Certainly, Matteo. If you'll excuse me, Don."

Francisco's eyes flickered between us, his suspicion only deepening. "Of course, Antonio. *Prosequire (Continue).*"

As Antonio left the room, the atmosphere shifted once more, and I met Francisco's gaze with a subtle challenge of my own.

His smile remained, but a glint in his eyes suggested he was far from fooled.

"Matteo," he began, his tone casual but probing, "I can't help but notice that things have been rather eventful lately. Anything you'd care to share?"

"Nothing at all." I smiled.

I leaned forward, my smile matching his. "Events tend to unfold, Uncle. You know how it is. As for sharing, rest assured, if you need to know something, I won't hesitate to let you in on it. *Ti farò sapere (I will let you know).*"

His smile widened, a gleam of annoyance lurking in his gaze. "That's all I ask, Matteo. Transparency among family members is essential."

"Of course. Then I'm sure you won't mind telling me what prompted your unexpected...visit." I drawled, raising an eyebrow.

Uncle Francisco's smile never wavered, but a calculated glint in his eyes set off alarm bells in my mind.

"Matteo, you know how important it is to keep our operations well-funded.

The recent developments require a bit more financial backing, and I thought you might be willing to contribute."

I arched an eyebrow, my skepticism growing. "Contributing funds? Uncle, I haven't asked for any additional funds recently. What could require more money so soon?"

Francisco's expression remained congenial, but his tone took on a subtle edge.

"Matteo, things change quickly in our line of work. New opportunities arise, and we need to seize them swiftly. You wouldn't want our organization to miss out on potential gains, would you?"

I leaned back in my chair, my arms crossed over my chest.

"I understand the need for funds, but transparency is crucial. I'd like to know exactly what these 'opportunities' are and why they require additional resources."

He chuckled softly, a condescending note underlying his amusement. "You always were the cautious one, Matteo. Perhaps that's why you've managed to survive this long."

I met his gaze head-on, my smile thinning. "Survival comes from making informed decisions. Now, if you have a valid reason for needing more funds, I'm all ears, but if this is about lining your pockets without accountability, you won't find me compliant."

The tension in the room escalated, our words becoming weapons in an unspoken battle. Francisco leaned forward, his fingers tapping on the table rhythmically.

"Matteo, you underestimate the complexity of the situation. There are matters at play that you're not privy to."

I held his gaze, unyielding. "Then enlighten me. Transparency. It's not too

much to ask."

He leaned back, a mocking smile playing on his lips.

"Very well, Matteo. You've made your stance clear, but don't forget who leads this family, who holds the power. Your defiance might not serve you as well as you think."

Our exchange ended there, but the weight of his unspoken threat hung heavily in the air.

I watched the door for a moment after Francisco's departure. My jaw clenched, and I resisted the urge to slam my fist onto the table in frustration. His subtle threats and veiled warnings reminded us of our family's intricate power dynamics.

Sighing, I pulled out my phone and dialed Antonio's number. He picked up after a couple of rings, his voice calm and composed. "Matteo."

"Antonio," I began, my voice tense, "I need you to do some digging. Find out what Francisco is up to that requires significant money. I want to know the details."

A brief pause was on the other end of the line before Antonio responded.

"Understood."

Chapter 9

Sophia

As I settled into my designated workspace on my first day, I couldn't help but feel a surge of resentment coursing through me.

The sleek, modern office felt like a gilded cage, and I was acutely aware of every step I took within its confines.

The chair was comfortable, the desk spacious, and the latest technology at my fingertips – all the trappings of a coveted position and yet, the bitter taste of compromise lingered on my tongue.

Matteo's proposition had come with strings attached, and as I glanced around the lavish office space, I couldn't help but wonder if it was a part of his calculated plan.

The pay was generous, the hours reasonable, and the promise of free reign to pursue my projects tantalizing, but the small details chafed at my sense of independence – like the fact that I was assigned to work in his office.

It was a subtle reminder of his presence, hovering just a little too near.

Why did I have to work so close to him out of all the departments to be assigned to?

My fingers danced over the keyboard as I delved into the intricate lines of code, my mind focused on the task at hand.

I was determined to prove my worth to showcase my expertise in a realm where talent was recognized and rewarded.

And yet, now and then, I would catch a glimpse of him, his eyes fixed on his work but undoubtedly aware of my every move.

"Is there a reason I can't have my workspace?" I finally asked, unable to contain my frustration any longer.

Matteo's gaze lifted from his screen, his lips curling into a wry smile. "A Chief Cybersecurity Analyst gets to enjoy certain privileges, including the luxury of proximity to valuable resources."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Or is it a convenient way for you to keep an eye on me?"

He leaned back in his chair, his expression remaining enigmatic. "Perhaps it's a bit of both. After all, I wouldn't want my investment to go to waste."

Investment! That's how he saw me – as a calculated investment in whatever grand scheme he was planning.

I clenched my jaw, my fingers tightening around the mouse as I tried to rein in my rising temper.

This was the compromise I had accepted, even if he didn't see it as a compromise, and I couldn't afford to lose my cool so soon.

As I worked, my thoughts inevitably wandered to that night we had shared.

The memory of his touch, his whispers, and the vulnerability we had both shown – did he forget about that?

Or was it all just a calculated move, a part of his elaborate plan to bring me into his orbit?

The lines between reality and façade were becoming increasingly blurred, and I struggled to grasp the true nature of our dynamic.

I couldn't deny the undeniable chemistry that had simmered beneath the surface, the electric current that sparked between us with every exchange when we met at the charity ball that night. Was the chemistry still there?

I had many questions, but the answers seemed to run away.

Could I trust anything he said? And what of the part of me that still held onto the memory of that night despite what I had witnessed?

"Fine," I muttered, my voice laced with resignation. "But don't expect me to

entertain you while you work."

His chuckle sent a shiver down my spine, a mixture of amusement and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

"You'll find that I have more than enough entertainment, Sophia."

As the hours passed, I immersed myself in my work, the lines of code becoming a refuge from the complicated dance I had unwittingly become a part of.

My project, a revolutionary algorithm designed to enhance data encryption, absorbed my focus, providing a temporary respite from the underlying tension in the room.

And yet, despite my best efforts to keep my distance, I couldn't help but be drawn into his orbit.

Matteo's intellect was undeniable, his insights and suggestions enhancing my work in ways I hadn't anticipated.

It was a paradox. The very person I had come to despise was becoming an integral part of my professional journey.

Despite my underlying attraction for him, I despised him because he had killed someone. I didn't know which one came first.

Did my attraction for him overshadow the negativity? Or was it my fear of him? Perhaps my dislike for him came first. Who knew?

I had been meticulously working on my project, the lines of code becoming a refuge from the complexities of our dynamic.

The office hummed with the usual activity as Matteo remained seated, his presence announced only by the intensity of his gaze.

"Progress report, Sophia," he demanded, his voice cutting through the air.

I suppressed an eye roll, meeting his gaze head-on. "Considering the number of lines of code I've written, I'm making significant progress."

He smirked, a gesture that made my guts twist into knots. "Ah, but lines of code can be deceiving, can't they? Quality over quantity, Sophia."

My fingers clenched around the mouse, my patience wearing thin. "Trust me, Matteo, I'm well aware of the importance of quality. I don't need a lecture from you."

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze unwavering.

"You know, I've been thinking. I don't understand where all this animosity is coming from. Did I do something to offend you?"

I replied with a touch of sarcasm, "Oh, I don't know, Matteo. Maybe it's your winning smile or a knack for making friends wherever you go."

He arched an eyebrow, his smirk still firmly in place. "Ah, so that's what this is about. You're not a fan of my charming personality."

My jaw tightened, my fingers gripping the mouse as if it were the only thing keeping me grounded. "Charming? That's one word for it."

He leaned back further, his expression turning thoughtful. "I thought we had a pretty good time that night. Or was I mistaken?"

I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks, a mix of embarrassment and frustration. "Oh, please. Don't act like that night meant anything more than it did."

His laughter danced in the air, a low and strangely intimate sound that only fueled my irritation. "And what did it mean to you, Sophia?"

I averted my gaze, my fingers tapping impatiently on the mousepad. "It was a momentary lapse in judgment, that's all. Let's not dwell on it."

He chuckled, the sound like a soft caress against my defenses. "Lapse in judgment? Is that what you're calling it now?"

My irritation flared, and I shot him a pointed glare. "You know exactly what I mean."

He leaned forward, his gaze locking onto mine. "I do, but it's fun watching you squirm."

I clenched my jaw, refusing to let him see how much his teasing affected me. "You're insufferable."

"Ah, but you seem to find me quite memorable," he replied, his tone a mixture of amusement and something else I couldn't quite place.

I rolled my eyes, my irritation warring with the flutter of nerves in my stomach. "Don't flatter yourself, Matteo. You're not that unforgettable."

He leaned back in his chair, his smirk never wavering. "We'll see about that, won't we?" I shot him a sharp glare, unamused by his attempt at banter.

"Save your mind games for someone interested, Matteo."

He chuckled, the sound reverberating through the tense air. "But you are interested, Sophia. I can see it in your eyes."

I scoffed, trying to ignore how my pulse quickened under his scrutiny. "You're delusional if you think I'm interested in anything beyond finishing this project."

His gaze held mine, the intensity of it almost unnerving. "You're a terrible liar, you know. I can practically feel the tension radiating between us."

My jaw clenched as I forced myself to maintain eye contact. "You're mistaken. There's nothing between us but a working relationship."

He leaned forward, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. "We'll see about that, Sophia."

With that infuriating comment, he remained seated, leaving me seething in his presence.

The tension lingered in the air, a reminder of the tangled web we were both caught in.

As I turned back to my work, my fingers dancing across the keyboard, I

couldn't shake the feeling that Matteo De Luca was determined to play a game I wasn't entirely sure I was ready to play.

His gaze shifted from our banter to my computer, and I followed his line of sight. "So, what project have you got brewing there?"

I hesitated, momentarily caught off guard by his genuine interest. I explained my idea for a revolutionary algorithm designed to enhance data encryption.

It would utilize cutting-edge AI techniques to strengthen cybersecurity protocols, offering higher protection against cyber threats.

As I spoke, I noticed how he leaned forward, focusing solely on my shared details.

There were no taunts, no smirks—just a thoughtful exchange of ideas.

He nodded as I finished outlining my vision. "That sounds promising, Sophia. Ambitious, even."

I blinked in surprise, his response far more positive than anticipated. "You think so?"

He nodded again, his expression serious. "Absolutely. I can see its potential in this field."

I leaned back in my chair, the initial tension in my shoulders easing. It was strange to have a civil conversation with Matteo, discussing ideas and exchanging viewpoints without the usual undercurrent of snark.

His demeanor had shifted entirely, and I was secretly surprised by how engaged and knowledgeable he was when genuinely interested.

"Do you have any suggestions?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

He leaned back, tapping his fingers thoughtfully against the armrest.

"Well, considering the rapid advancements in AI and data analytics, you might want to explore integrating more advanced networks. And have you

thought about potential partnerships with research institutions?"

I nodded, absorbing his input. We continued to bounce ideas off each other, diving deeper into the possibilities and challenges of the project.

For the first time since I had started working under Matteo's employment, I saw a different side of him—a side that was driven, insightful, and genuinely invested in the conversation.

As the discussion unfolded, I began to see a different side of Matteo – one that went beyond the smirks and arrogance.

Beneath that exterior was a shrewd and perceptive individual who knew how to navigate the intricate world of technology and business.

This revelation intrigued and unsettled me, challenging my simplistic perception of him.

At that moment, I couldn't help but recall the evening of the charity ball when I had been drawn to his charisma and presence.

There had been a magnetic quality to him that night, and now, as I witnessed his insights and genuine engagement, I could see a glimmer of that same allure.

Eventually, our conversation tapered off, leaving an air of camaraderie in its wake. Matteo leaned back in his chair, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips.

"You've got a solid foundation to build upon, Sophia. Keep refining your ideas, which might become something groundbreaking."

I nodded, feeling my insides soften at how genuine he sounded. "Thank you, Matteo."

His gaze held mine for a moment, and in that fleeting connection, I saw a glimpse of the person he could be when he shed his facade.

It was a momentary truce, a shared understanding that there was more

beneath the surface.

And as I turned back to my computer screen, I couldn't help but wonder what other surprises Matteo had hidden beneath his enigmatic exterior.

Chapter 10

Matteo

I leaned back in my leather chair, studying Antonio's face with a contemplative gaze. The soft hum of the air conditioning was the only sound in the room as we engaged in our hushed conversation.

"So, what did you manage to uncover?"

Antonio's demeanor was serious, his eyes steady as he met my gaze. "I delved into the matter you asked about. Your uncle, Francisco, appears to have plans that could disrupt the delicate balance we've achieved."

A frown tugged at my brow. "What plans are we talking about? *Cosa intendi (What do you mean)?* "

His words were measured as he continued. "It's about Vitalin, that miracle drug that's been turning heads in both the underworld and legitimate circles. The families have found a new avenue of power and reputation through it. The distribution of Vitalin has led to a period of relative peace and prosperity, a departure from the conventional illegal activities we engaged in in the past." I absorbed the implications of his words, feeling the weight of his revelations.

"And my uncle?"

Antonio's gaze didn't waver. "He seems dissatisfied with the current trajectory. He's eyeing a more drastic change, a return to the old ways of doing things."

My jaw clenched as I processed the information. "*I vecchi modi (The old ways)?*"

"Yes," Antonio confirmed. "The more ruthless approach. It seems he wants to monopolize the Vitalin market, reverting to the methods that brought us power in the past."

My mind raced, the cogs turning as I considered the ramifications. "So, he's plotting a power move and seeking funds to fuel it."

Antonio nodded. "It appears so."

The gravity of the situation settled over me. If my uncle's ambitions were realized, the newfound stability we had achieved and the unity we had cultivated would crumble, leading us back into the chaos we had worked so hard to escape.

Antonio's voice drew me back. "He's been gaining support from those who share his vision, the traditionalists who believe in the old ways."

I leaned forward, my fingers intertwined as I pondered the puzzle before us. "This is a dangerous game he's playing."

"Yes," Antonio agreed. "And it's a game that could have far-reaching consequences."

Antonio's presence lingered in the room, a silent acknowledgment of the gravity of the situation.

We shared a tense moment, both aware of the impending storm that my uncle's ambitions could unleash.

"We can't let his power play disrupt our progress," I finally spoke, breaking the silence.

Antonio's gaze met mine; his expression was resolute. "*Concordato (Agreed)*, but how do we counteract his move?"

I leaned back in my chair, my mind working furiously to devise a strategy.

"We might need to expedite our plans. If Francisco is becoming more ambitious, we can't afford to wait. We have to be proactive."

Antonio's brow furrowed, considering the implications. "Speeding up could mean risks.

I nodded, fully aware of the potential consequences. "*SÌ*, but calculated risks.

We'll have to assess the situation carefully, gather information, and make our moves strategically."

As I contemplated the situation, frustration and bitterness washed over me.

My thoughts drifted to my father, who had once led our family with a different set of principles.

These principles were now being disregarded and discarded by my uncle's insatiable thirst for power.

Francisco's ambitions were steering the mafia onto a path my father would vehemently reject.

My father believed in balancing the fine line between power and responsibility.

He had aimed to uphold a sense of honor, a code of conduct that ensured our actions didn't spiral into sheer anarchy.

But my uncle's actions were straying far from that vision. He was morphing the family business into something my father would have condemned.

The calculated moves, the blatant power plays. They were becoming reminiscent of the old ways, the ways my father had fought so hard to distance us from.

There was no way that I was about to let my uncle unravel everything my father had worked for.

I couldn't let his reckless ambition tarnish the legacy my father had left behind.

With renewed purpose, I turned to Antonio. "We must do whatever it takes to protect what my father built. *Non possiamo lasciare che la sete di potere di Francisco faccia a pezzi tutto ciò che rappresentava* (We can't let Francisco's lust for power tear apart everything he stood for)."

Antonio's resolute nod mirrored my sentiment. "We'll do whatever it takes,

Matteo. Your father's legacy won't be compromised."

"Appoint men to keep an eye on Francisco and take note of where he goes and who he meets," I ordered.

Antonio stood up, his expression determined. "I'll get on it right away. We'll keep a close watch on Francisco's movements and connections. If he's making any significant moves, we'll know."

"*Bene (Well)*," I replied, my tone firm. "And make sure those men are trustworthy, Antonio. *Non possiamo permetterci perdite (We cannot afford losses)*."

He nodded, his gaze resolute.

As Antonio left my office, a heaviness settled over me. The revelation of my uncle's ambitions lingered in my thoughts.

I couldn't believe the audacity of his plans and the blatant disregard for the newfound stability and respectability our family had achieved.

My father's teachings echoed in my mind about the importance of principles, honor, and unity.

It was painful to witness my uncle veering away from those values, embracing a path that threatened to plunge us back into the darkness we had fought so hard to escape.

My thoughts drifted back to my childhood, to the days when my father was still alive.

He had been a strong, principled man who had guided me with unwavering morals.

He had kept our family out of the more sinister aspects of the mafia, focusing on business ventures that aligned with his values, but with his passing, everything had changed.

Two distinct phases impacted my childhood, leaving an indelible mark on

who I would become.

The early years were filled with warmth and affection, centered around the love of my parents.

My mother, a woman with a heart as vast as the sea, had been the anchor of our family.

Her eyes held gentleness; she had a smile that could chase away any worries and a voice that sang lullabies that had always made me feel safe. In those days, our home was a haven of laughter and joy.

My father, a man of principle and honor, worked tirelessly to provide for us. He was a figure of strength, his presence reassuring and unwavering.

Despite his busy schedule, he always made time for my mother and me, often regaling us with stories of his childhood and teaching me the values that would shape my life.

But life has a way of taking unexpected turns, and just as I was beginning to comprehend the world around me, my mother fell gravely ill.

The vibrant woman who had filled our home with laughter and love was now confined to a bed, her energy waning with each passing day.

Her illness cast a shadow over our lives, leaving my father and me grappling with a sense of helplessness that was almost suffocating.

As her condition deteriorated, my father became increasingly withdrawn, his once-sparkling eyes clouded with worry and sorrow.

He devoted himself to her care, doing everything within his power to alleviate her pain.

But despite his efforts, her health continued to decline, and it was as if a piece of our family's heart was slowly being chipped away.

When she passed away, our world shattered. My father's grief was palpable, his shoulders slumped and his spirit broken.

Yet, even in the depths of his sorrow, he clung to his principles, refusing to let go of the values that had defined him.

He channeled his pain into ensuring that her memory would live on through us, teaching me to be a man of integrity and strength, just as he believed she would have wanted.

But as time went on, I witnessed a change in my father. The loss had transformed him, making him more resolute and distant.

He became stricter, his expectations higher, as if he believed that by instilling discipline and responsibility in me, he could shield me from the harsh realities of life.

I understood that his actions were driven by the fear of losing another loved one, of facing another void that could never be filled.

And so, he became my mentor, guiding me with a firm hand and imparting lessons that often felt like trials.

His words carried weight, and his gaze held expectations that sometimes felt impossible.

Despite the challenges, I knew he was doing his best to preserve the legacy of my mother's love and the principles they had both held dear.

So, I embraced his teachings, striving to live up to the standards he had set for me.

As I sat in my office, memories of those formative years played through my mind like scenes from a long-forgotten movie.

I was drawn out of my musings by the persistent ringing of my phone on the desk.

Sighing softly, I picked it up, glancing at the caller ID before answering. It was my secretary, Emily.

"Yes, Emily?" I spoke with a touch of formality.

"Mr. De Luca, I hope I'm not disturbing you," Emily's polite voice came through.

"Not at all, Emily. What can I do for you?"

I leaned back in my chair, my thoughts shifting from the past's complexities to the present's practicalities.

"I just wanted to remind you about the upcoming business event," she said.

"The annual tech gala is in two days. Your presence has been confirmed."

Ah, the tech gala. This event would undoubtedly be filled with genuine innovators and those seeking to use the occasion to further their agendas.

It was a necessary part of the game, one I had learned to navigate easily.

"Of course, Emily. Thank you for the reminder. Please make sure everything is set for the event," I replied.

"Mr. De Luca. I've already taken care of the arrangements. The venue, guest list, and your speaking slot – everything is set."

"Good job, Emily. I appreciate your thoroughness," I commended her.

"Thank you, Mr. De Luca. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

I considered for a moment before responding. "Emily, could you send me the latest financial reports? I want to review them before the gala."

"Of course, Mr. De Luca. I'll have them sent to your email shortly."

"Thank you, Emily. That will be all for now."

As I ended the call, I leaned forward and steeped my fingers, my thoughts once again drifting back to the conversation I had with Antonio and the troubling information he had uncovered about my uncle's ambitions.

The tech gala would allow me to gather information, observe the dynamics among the attendees, and ensure that my interests remained safeguarded amidst the business networking and public speeches.

With a determined exhale, I refocused my attention on the tasks at hand. The

tech gala awaited, and I had a role in the intricate web of business and power. The thought of attending the event with Sophia crossed my mind briefly. It would be a strategic move and a chance to observe the dynamics between influential figures and gauge their reactions.

Plus, it would allow me to understand Sophia's interactions in a different context.

As I contemplated the idea, memories of our recent interactions surfaced. The fiery discussions, the clash of opinions, and even the unexpected moments of mutual understanding painted a more complex picture of Sophia. The fact that she had witnessed my actions added another layer of complexity to our dynamic.

I leaned back in my chair, my fingers tapping rhythmically on the polished surface of the desk.

The decision was made. I would attend the gala with Sophia by my side. It would serve my purpose and allow me to examine her and decipher her true intentions closely.

But as I contemplated this plan, a nagging thought tugged at the edges of my mind.

Had I underestimated her? Was there more to Sophia than met the eye? How she held her ground and the determination in her eyes –hinted at a resilience beyond her initial reluctance.

It was almost as if she had accepted her position and was ready to face whatever challenges came her way.

With a thoughtful expression, I reached for my phone and dialed Sophia's extension.

As the line connected, I leaned back in my chair, my gaze fixed on the ceiling.

"Matteo," her voice came through, a hint of surprise in her tone.

"I've been thinking," I began, my words measured with a relaxed smirk on my face. "The tech gala is approaching, and I believe it would be beneficial for us to attend together."

Chapter 11

Sophia

Working with Matteo had thrust me into a world I had never imagined. The intricate web of technology, power plays, and high-stakes decisions was far from the mundane routine I had grown accustomed to.

As much as I despised his methods and motives, I couldn't deny the exhilarating rush that came with being a part of something bigger, something that had the potential to shape industries and influence markets.

The dynamics between Matteo and me were nothing short of complex. Our interactions were a constant dance of wit and sarcasm; each conversation laced with an underlying tension.

There were moments when I found myself getting caught up in his arguments, my frustration fueling the fire.

Yet, there were other times when I caught myself studying how his expressions shifted, the play of emotions in his eyes.

It was maddening how much he could rile me up. His arrogance grated on my nerves, and his smirks drove me to the brink of irritation, yet an undeniable magnetism drew me to him.

It was as if his very presence was a challenge I couldn't resist, and the more I tried to distance myself from him, the closer I seemed to be pulled.

As the days turned into weeks, our banter became a strange rhythm. Our arguments became a form of communication, our disagreements an unspoken understanding.

It was a constant push and pull, a tug-of-war between attraction and annoyance.

There were times when our exchanges would escalate into heated debates, our voices clashing in the confined space of his office.

Then, there were moments of unexpected camaraderie when a shared joke or a mutual understanding would bridge the gap between us, if only momentarily.

I had to admit, something was captivating about the way Matteo's mind worked. He had an uncanny ability to see through the complexities of a situation, to analyze it from angles I had never considered.

Even though I did not want to admit it, I respected his intellect, begrudgingly acknowledging that there was more to him than met the eye.

But it wasn't just his intellect that drew me in. There were moments when his mask slipped, revealing a vulnerability that contradicted the facade of a ruthless leader.

In those fleeting instances, I caught a glimpse of the person he might have been before the weight of his responsibilities took hold.

That contrast and duality intrigued me in ways I couldn't fully comprehend.

Yet, I remained wary even as the lines between us blurred, and the tension simmered beneath the surface.

I couldn't forget the truth between us, the fact that I had seen him commit an act that could shatter his carefully constructed image.

It was a dangerous secret that kept me on guard even as my emotions waged their battle.

Working for Matteo had its advantages, even if they were shrouded in a cloud of complexity. One such advantage was the exposure to new circles within the territory.

The tech industry was a realm of innovation and influence, and being under Matteo's wing meant being thrust into a world that was as exhilarating as it

was daunting.

As much as I detested the man, I couldn't deny the doors his name and reputation could open.

The connections he held and the alliances he had forged were all part of a network that extended far beyond the confines of our office walls.

Through business events, galas, and gatherings, I mingled with individuals who were titans in their own right, shaping industries and setting trends.

I couldn't deny that exposure to these new circles was a chance to broaden my horizons.

It was an opportunity to learn from the best and witness the power and influence dynamics firsthand.

Then, there were the moments when our interactions took a different turn, such as when we discussed projects, analyzed market trends, and shared insights devoid of snark and sarcasm.

During these moments, I saw glimpses of the potential beneath his veneer of arrogance.

He was shrewd, strategic, and surprisingly well-versed in technology.

Despite my complex mix of disdain and attraction for him, I had to admit that there was a reason why Matteo had risen to the position he held.

He had a sharp, analytical mind and was driven by a hunger for success. It was this side of him that I found myself respecting, even if I couldn't overlook the darker aspects of his character.



In the quiet moments between the hustle and bustle of life, my thoughts often drifted back to when the world was a different place for me.

As I sat by the window, my gaze fixed on the distant horizon, the memories came flooding back like a wave of emotions crashing against the shores of my consciousness. I saw the faces of my parents.

Their smiles were vivid in my mind, and their laughter was a melody that continued to echo in my heart.

My parents existed as hazy figures in my memories. I wished I could say I remembered their voices clearly, how they sounded when they called my name or whispered words of comfort.

But time had a way of erasing even the most cherished details, leaving behind a few scattered images that I clung to desperately.

I could piece together their appearances from the faded photographs I held. My mother had eyes that glimmered with kindness, a warmth I imagined could rival the sun's rays on a summer morning.

In my mind's eye, I saw her as a source of comfort.

My father, a towering figure in my limited recollections, had a presence that demanded respect.

His features were strong, and the lines on his face spoke of the things he had experienced.

I wished I could recall the sound of his laughter, but so much time had passed.

As years passed, my connection to them felt like a fragile thread that threatened to unravel.

The scent of my mother's favorite flowers, the timbre of my father's voice.

I wished I could preserve these treasures, but the only things I had left that could remind me of them were the pictures I still had of them.

I had often wished I could ask them about their journey, the dreams they had for me, their hopes and fears.

But life had a way of testing even the strongest of foundations, and fate had dealt a harsh blow that shattered the tranquility of our lives.

The circumstances surrounding their passing had remained shrouded in confusion.

It was a mystery that time had failed to solve, a source of questions that had lingered unanswered in the recesses of my thoughts.

After my parents passed away, I was all alone. The family safety net was gone, and even those who used to be warm relatives turned away.

Luckily, I had just turned eighteen, so I didn't need to go to an orphanage.

Education was like a lifeline for me amidst all the challenges. School gave me structure and a purpose.

It was where I discovered my interest in technology, which fascinated me and seemed full of promise. I got more and more into coding and computer systems.

As I got better at these skills, I started to dream bigger. Technology seemed like a world of endless opportunities where I could turn my passion into a real career.

So, I focused on improving my abilities, spending a lot of time learning programming languages and systems. And with knowledge came more confidence.

But becoming self-reliant was a journey filled with obstacles. I had to find unconventional ways to survive.

This led me to the digital world, where anonymity allowed me to explore hacking – a way to navigate the virtual world discreetly. It helped me make ends meet in a tough situation.

However, as I delved deeper into hacking, the risks began to loom larger. Relying solely on anonymity wasn't a foolproof shield against the potential dangers.

I gradually became aware of the serious consequences that could arise, and that realization pushed me to make a choice.

I knew it was time to step away before the situation spiraled out of control. Shifting my focus, I directed my skills towards more legitimate and lawful pursuits.

In the middle of my thoughts, my phone buzzed with an incoming call from Keisha.

Her familiar voice brought comfort as I answered, bringing the device to my ear.

"Hey, how's everything going at Matteo's company?" she asked, her curiosity evident even through the phone.

I let out a small sigh, contemplating how best to describe my experience.

"Well, it's been quite an adventure, to say the least."

Keisha chuckled. "Adventure, huh? Tell me more."

I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "It's... interesting, Keisha. The work itself is challenging, and the resources available are top-notch. I've been given a fair amount of autonomy, which is a definite plus. But..." I paused, reflecting on the complex dynamics at play. "Let's just say that working with Matteo comes with challenges.

Keisha's laughter tinkled through the phone. "I can imagine."

"You can say that again," I replied, a wry note in my voice. "We have our fair share of disagreements, to put it mildly."

Her curiosity was palpable. "Are you two constantly at odds?"

I hesitated, thinking about the constant push and pull, the banter bordering on

outright arguments.

"It's a bit complicated. We seem to have this... dynamic where we clash quite often. Yet, there's also a strange sense of understanding beneath it all."

Keisha let out an amused sigh. "Sounds like quite the rollercoaster, but hey, at least you're getting a front-row seat to Matteo's world."

"That's one way to look at it," I agreed with a chuckle.

"In a way, it's like stepping into a completely different realm – one that's filled with power plays, hidden agendas, and an undercurrent of tension, but amidst all that, there's also an undeniable attraction to the work itself."

As I continued talking with Keisha, my mind couldn't help but wander to the enigma that was Matteo.

It was baffling how I found myself immersed in a world that was so alien to my past experiences.

The fact that I had accepted the knowledge of his involvement in a murder, of all things, seemed almost surreal.

Had I lost my sense of right and wrong, or had my circumstances' desperation led me to this point?

I couldn't deny the unsettling truth. Matteo's actions should have repelled me. They should have cast a shadow of fear and disgust over everything I did in his presence.

Yet, as I engaged with him daily, the image of him as a cold-blooded killer became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the person I interacted with.

The sarcastic banter and the heated arguments painted a picture far from that of a murderer.

I mulled over my conflicted feelings. Perhaps the fact that he remained oblivious to my witnessing his crime offered a sense of safety.

Ignorance, after all, had a way of shielding us from danger, but there was

more to it than that.

My interactions with him, as baffling as they were, had revealed facets of his personality that I couldn't easily dismiss.

Keisha's voice brought me back to the conversation. "You seem pretty engaged with your work, Sophia. Are you sure this attraction isn't clouding your judgment?"

I paused, reflecting on her words. "It's not about being blinded by attraction, Keisha. It's more like... his actions and demeanor don't align with my picture of him. It's almost as if two distinct personalities reside in the same person."

Keisha chuckled. "Well, people are complex creatures. Who knows what goes on in someone's mind?"

"That's true," I replied, my thoughts swirling with confusion and intrigue. "But what if the person you think you know is just a facade? What if there's more to them that you can't see?"

"Sounds like you're digging deep into a mystery," Keisha teased.

I couldn't help but let out a sigh. "Maybe I am. Or maybe I'm just trying to make sense of a situation that defies any logical explanation."

Keisha's tone softened. "Whatever it is, just remember to keep your guard up. You might be diving into uncharted waters."

Her advice hit home, a reminder that despite the tangled web of emotions, I needed to remain vigilant.

Keisha's tone turned thoughtful. "So, despite the clashes, you're finding value in the experience?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "Exactly. It's not just about the challenges; it's about the opportunities that come with being part of a renowned tech company, and honestly, there's a certain satisfaction in proving myself in such an environment."

"That's the spirit," Keisha cheered. "You've always had the tenacity to tackle whatever comes your way."

A warmth spread through me at her words. "Thanks, Keisha. Your support means a lot."

She chuckled. "Always here for you, girl. Remember, you can always vent to me if things get too intense."

I grinned, imagining the relief that venting sessions with Keisha could bring. "Believe me, I'll keep that in mind."

As I was about to continue our conversation, my phone buzzed insistently. Glancing at the screen, I saw an incoming call from Matteo.

I felt curious and uneasy as I excused myself to answer the call.

"Hey, Keisha, I've got to hang up now," I said quickly.

"Of course, go ahead. Talk to you later," Keisha replied.

I ended the call and took a deep breath before accepting Matteo's call.

"Matteo." What did Matteo call me for? I wondered as I took his call.

"I've been thinking," he began, his words coming out measured. "The tech gala is approaching, and I believe it would be beneficial for us to attend together."

Chapter 12

Matteo

The tension in the room was stifling, a heavy cloud of discord that hung between Francisco and me. Our eyes locked in a silent battle of wills, his ambition clashing with my father's principles.

The old wooden table that had witnessed countless family discussions now seemed like a battlefield, the lines drawn in our opposing stances.

I had just learned about Francisco's decision to cut the orphanage funds through Antonio.

Information was gotten from the men I had ordered him to dispatch to watch Francisco's every move.

The news hit me like a sucker punch to the gut, igniting a fiery rage. Without hesitation, I stormed over to Francisco's imposing abode, my footsteps echoing with a purpose that matched the intensity of my emotions.

The mansion's grand entrance seemed to sneer at me as I approached, the imposing facade reflecting the man who resided within.

The ornate double doors, polished to a gleaming shine, swung open to reveal the elegant interior.

Francisco stood there, his posture exuding a false air of calm authority, but his eyes, those calculating eyes, betrayed the tension that simmered beneath the surface.

I wasted no time with pleasantries, the anger that fueled my steps now propelling my words.

"I can't believe you cut the funding for the orphanages," I stated, my voice a mix of disbelief and anger.

"Those were the ideals my father held close to his heart, a way to give back to the community. *Ha iniziato quando era ancora vivo (It started when he was still alive.)*"

Francisco's lips curled into a cold smile, reflecting his indifference. " *I tempi cambiano (Times change)*, Matteo. We can't afford sentimentality when it comes to the family business. Your father's ways are a relic of the past."

I felt my fists clench involuntarily at his callous words. The orphanages had been my father's way of making a positive impact, ensuring that the family's influence extended beyond the realm of power and wealth.

He believed in providing a haven for those who needed it most.

"Those 'ways' were built on values and ethics. They're part of the legacy he left behind."

Francisco waved a dismissive hand as if brushing away an insignificant matter.

"Legacy won't secure our future, Matteo. Our rivals are growing stronger, and we must adapt to survive."

My gaze bore into his, a mixture of frustration and disbelief.

"Adapt by getting into heroin and human trafficking? That's a betrayal of everything our family stands for."

His response was a cool chuckle that sent a shiver down my spine.

"Business evolves, and we evolve with it. The drug trade offers profits we can't ignore and human trafficking. There's always a demand."

The room seemed to close in around us as his words echoed. My father's voice, the lessons he taught me, and his unwavering dedication to upholding the family's name all felt like distant echoes in the face of Francisco's ruthless words.

"Have you forgotten the miracle drug that's revolutionized our income?" I

retorted, my voice tinged with exasperation.

"We don't need to stoop to these levels. The families have united under the new venture."

Francisco's eyes gleamed with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

"The Vitalin market is profitable but won't ensure our dominance. Power comes from having control over multiple fronts. *Non possiamo permetterci di limitarci (We cannot afford to limit ourselves).*"

Anger surged within me, a potent mix of indignation and grief. "You're tarnishing everything my father worked for."

Francisco's lips curled into a contemptuous smile as if my words were nothing more than a fleeting nuisance. "Ah, the righteous defender of virtue. How touching."

I could feel my blood boil at his dismissive tone, the condescension that dripped from his words.

How dare he belittle my father's convictions and dedication to a better way? My fists clenched at my sides, my restraint wearing thin.

"You dare to call him weak?" I shot back, my voice edged with incredulity.

"You, who are willing to sacrifice our family's integrity for the sake of your ambitions? *Pensi di stare meglio (You think you are better off)?*"

His eyes gleamed with a calculated fire, a reflection of his determination to bulldoze over any opposition.

"Ambitions that will secure our dominance, Matteo. That's something your father couldn't comprehend."

My anger burned like wildfire, insulting my father's memory and fueling the flames. "Dominance at the cost of our humanity? Is that the legacy you want to build?"

Francisco's gaze hardened, his expression morphing into thinly veiled

contempt. "Humanity is a luxury we can't afford, not in this world."

The words hung in the air like a bitter taste, a reminder of our stark contrast.

My father had instilled in me the belief that power could be wielded responsibly and that we had a duty to use our influence for good.

On the other hand, Francisco seemed to see power as a means to an end, regardless of the casualties left in its wake.

"You're blinded by your arrogance," I retorted, my voice laced with a cutting edge. "You think power is the only currency that matters, but mark my words, Francisco. Your recklessness will come back to haunt us."

His laughter was a sharp, mocking sound that grated against my nerves. "Ah, the idealist who clings to his father's ideals. I've survived in this world by shedding naive notions. Perhaps it's time you did the same."

The room seemed to close in around us, the tension palpable as our clash of wills escalated.

The insults he hurled, the disrespect he showed for everything I held dear, ignited a fury within me that was impossible to contain.

"You're a disgrace to this family," I declared, my voice cold and unwavering. "You've perverted our values, corrupted our purpose. You're no leader. *Sei un tiranno (You are a tyrant).*"

The words seemed to hang in the air, a barrier between us that crackled with the intensity of our mutual disdain.

Francisco's eyes bore into mine, a mix of fury and triumph that sent a shiver down my spine.

He leaned forward, his voice dripping with venom. "Let's not forget, Matteo, that I am the Don of the De Luca family. My decisions hold the weight of authority, and your opinions are nothing more than futile protests."

The remainder of his position, his control over the family, was like a slap in

the face. Anger surged within me, a fierce torrent that threatened to engulf my restraint.

"And perhaps," Francisco continued, taunting, "if you had been more cooperative and provided the necessary funds when I asked, we wouldn't be having this discussion. *Gli orfanotrofi avrebbero ancora le loro donazioni (The orphanages would still have their donations).*"

His words were like salt in the wound, a bitter reminder of the power dynamics.

My restraint crumbled, my anger boiling over in a surge of frustration.

"You cut off the funding out of spite," I snapped, my voice sharp with accusation. "You've twisted my father's legacy into something unrecognizable."

"You're leading us down a dangerous path," I insisted, my voice low and firm.

Francisco's eyes gleamed with a chilling resolve. "Our family stands for power, Matteo. And sometimes, power requires making hard choices."

As Francisco turned to leave the foyer, his final words sliced through the tense silence, a bitter taste filling my mouth.

"If you're done here, Matteo, I suggest you leave and, next time, have the courtesy to inform me of your arrival."

The contemptuous look he cast my way was a reflection of the disdain he held for my defiance.

"*Ti pentirai di averlo fatto (You will regret that you did),*" I couldn't help but say, my words sharp and laced with a determination that matched his own.

With those words hanging in the air, I turned on my heels and strode away, my head held high.

As I walked, the weight of our disagreement settled in my chest.

The family I had known and the principles I had cherished were overshadowed by his insidious hunger for power.

I wasn't about to let that happen without a fight.

I knew that this clash was just the beginning of a greater battle. The clash of old values and new ambitions, of tradition and recklessness.

As I navigated the path ahead, I was determined to ensure that my father's legacy, of the family's honor, remained intact.

A smirk played at the corners of my lips, hidden from Francisco's view. While he might think he could do whatever he pleased, pulling funding from the orphanages my father had supported, I had a trick up my sleeve.

Once I had put some distance between myself and the confrontation, I pulled out my phone and dialed Antonio's number. As the call connected, I wasted no time getting to the point.

"Antonio," I said, my tone firm, "I need you to make arrangements to provide funding for the orphanages."

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line before Antonio's voice came through, a mixture of surprise and determination.

"Of course, Matteo. Do you want me to look into the specifics?"

"Yes," I replied, "Ensure that the funding is enough to cover their needs for the foreseeable future."

"Consider it done," Antonio affirmed, his tone resolute.

I could feel a small sense of satisfaction building within me. It was my way of counteracting Francisco's callous decision, of ensuring that the legacy my father had built continued to make a positive impact.

My company's resources were at my disposal and could not be controlled by Francisco's whims and desires.

As I ended the call, I couldn't help but smile. The irony of the situation was

not lost on me.

I inadvertently asserted my power and influence by denying Francisco's request for funds. It was a subtle message that his actions meant I couldn't be swayed or manipulated.

Chapter 13

Sophia

The day of the gala had arrived. As I stood before the mirror, adjusting the final details of the exquisite deep blue gown that complemented my complexion, I couldn't deny the flutter of nerves that danced in the pit of my stomach.

It was surprising how much he had been involved in this event. Not only had he arranged for my attendance, but he had also taken care of the attire.

The dress I wore was a testament to his meticulous attention to detail, a silent gesture that spoke volumes.

As I smoothed the fabric, I couldn't help but acknowledge his attention to detail.

The gown hugged my figure elegantly, the fabric soft against my skin. I took a deep breath, attempting to calm my jitters, as I slipped into a pair of heels that added a few inches to my height.

Glancing at my reflection, I wondered if I looked like a woman ready to mingle with tech giants and business magnates.

Attending a high-profile gala wasn't something I was accustomed to. The thought of navigating through a sea of unfamiliar faces and conversing about technology and business trends was daunting.

To top it off, I would be doing it all in the company of Matteo. The man who had become both a source of frustration and an enigma that I couldn't quite unravel.

I had dreaded the idea of going anywhere with him, let alone an event of this magnitude.

Our interactions had been marked by banter and clashes of wit, each encounter leaving me both annoyed and intrigued.

Now, I was preparing to step into a world lightyears away from the comfort of my coding cave.

With a final check in the mirror, I turned away from my reflection and headed to the door, my heart beating faster with each step.

As I stepped outside my house, I was met with a surprise. A sleek car was waiting for me at the curb, its engine idling softly.

I hadn't expected such a luxurious mode of transportation. The door was opened by a well-dressed chauffeur who gave me a polite nod.

"Miss Sophia, Mr. De Luca has arranged for your transportation," he informed me with a professional smile.

I hesitated for a moment, slightly taken aback by the unexpected arrangement. Matteo's involvement seemed to extend beyond just providing the dress.

As I settled into the car, I realized I wouldn't attend the gala alone. My eyes widened in surprise as I saw him already seated inside.

"Matteo?" I exclaimed, my voice betraying my surprise as his unexpected presence caught me off guard.

He turned to me, his lips curving into a faint but undeniably charming smile.

"Good evening, Sophia."

"I... I didn't know you were going with me," I stammered, my words faltering as a sudden rush of surprise and warmth washed over me.

My cheeks tinged with a shade of pink that I hoped he wouldn't notice.

My eyes involuntarily scanned him, taking in his appearance for the first time tonight.

He wore a tailored black suit that seemed to accentuate every confident angle

of his frame and a perfectly fitted white shirt underneath that highlighted his composed demeanor.

The ensemble exuded elegance and sophistication, a far cry from our usual encounters.

I was taken aback, not just by his unexpected presence, but by the undeniable fact that he looked exceptionally handsome tonight.

It was as if he had taken extra care to refine his appearance for this particular occasion.

The realization left me momentarily speechless, my thoughts struggling to catch up with the change in dynamics.

His gaze lingered on me as if he was assessing something beyond my words.

"Well, I thought it would be a shame for such beauty to arrive unaccompanied."

The compliment he offered was so unexpected that I found myself momentarily speechless.

My fingers fumbled with the edge of my clutch as I managed to mumble, "Thank you."

As the car smoothly glided away from the curb, the city streets unfolding before us, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions.

Nervousness, curiosity, and a touch of awkwardness swirled within me.

This wasn't the usual banter or snarky exchanges we engaged in. It was a different kind of conversation, and it felt strangely unfamiliar.

"You look beautiful, by the way," he said, his voice casual yet laced with sincerity.

His compliment caught me off guard once more, and I shot him a quick sidelong glance. There was something genuine in his tone, something that seemed out of place given our usual interactions.

"Thank you. The dress is... stunning."

He nodded, his attention seemingly drawn to the passing scenery outside the window. The quiet hum of the car's engine created a backdrop for my racing thoughts.

It was surreal to be sitting here, engaging in such a conversation with Matteo De Luca.

The memory of the first time we had spoken like this flickered in my mind. That evening at the charity event, we shared a more civil exchange.

But since then, our interactions have been a mix of sarcasm, jabs, and veiled annoyances. This new dynamic was both refreshing and disorienting.

As the silence settled between us, my thoughts drifted back to the upcoming gala. The anticipation of the event mingled with the presence of Matteo beside me, creating a heady mixture of excitement and uncertainty.

I wondered how the night would unfold, whether this newfound civility would continue or if we would revert to our usual repertoire.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realize how much time had passed until the car came to a stop, and I looked out to see the grand entrance of the gala venue.

I stepped out of the car, the weight of the upcoming evening settling over me. The presence of Matteo at my side added a layer of complexity to the experience.

As we stood together, facing the entrance of the gala, I couldn't help but feel a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. I turned to him, a hesitant smile on my lips.

"Thank you for the dress," I said, gesturing to my outfit.

He met my gaze, his expression softening for a moment. "You're welcome."

His eyes held a flicker of amusement as he extended his arm, an unspoken invitation to accompany. Together, we entered the gala, a blend of

sophistication and intrigue.

The night unfolded with a whirlwind of presentations, speeches, and discussions that pulled me into the heart of the tech world.

As I mingled with industry figures and business leaders, I slowly adapted to the event's rhythm.

The gala seemed to stretch into a symphony of success, the air charged with excitement and ambition. As the night progressed, I couldn't help but feel a growing sense of accomplishment.

This was a world I had never imagined being a part of, and yet, here I was, a participant in a grand spectacle that celebrated innovation and progress.

Amid the swirl of conversations and the symphony of clinking glasses, an unusual atmosphere seemed to envelop Matteo and me.

The gala's elegance provided a backdrop of refinement, but what truly stood out was our interaction.

Instead of our usual banter, there were moments of genuine understanding, and our differences were set aside.

It was as though we had stumbled upon a shared wavelength, a bridge between the realms we often found ourselves in.

The laughter of others echoed around us as we stood on the outskirts of the dance floor.

I had to admit, I was surprised at how effortlessly Matteo navigated the social scene, engaging in conversations and flashing charismatic smiles.

He extended his hand towards me, a silent invitation to dance that I hesitated momentarily before accepting.

As we swayed to the rhythm of the music, I couldn't help but marvel at the shift in dynamics. His touch was firm yet gentle, his presence surprisingly comforting.

Gone were the sharp retorts and the veiled insults. All that remained was the connection we were forging, step by step.

"Who would have thought we'd find common ground?" Matteo remarked, his voice low enough to be heard only by me.

I offered a small smile, acknowledging the sentiment. "It's a welcome surprise, I must admit.

The music seemed to carry us along, a dance that transcended the physical steps. With every sway and turn, an unspoken understanding went beyond words.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, it was just the two of us in a sea of people.

"You know," he continued, his voice a playful whisper, "I've been accused of many things, but being a terrible dancer isn't one of them."

A genuine laugh escaped me, surprising even myself. "I'll take your word for it."

The song ended, and there was a fleeting moment of hesitation as Matteo's hand remained in mine. "Care for some fresh air?" he asked, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

Curiosity and a tinge of excitement mingled within me. I nodded, allowing him to lead me away from the crowd and towards a more secluded area of the venue.

The night air was crisp against my skin as we stepped onto a balcony overlooking the city's lights.

"It's breathtaking," I murmured, the view momentarily stealing my words.

Matteo's gaze shifted from the cityscape to me, his eyes unwavering. "Yes, it is."

The tension between us was palpable, charged with a newfound electricity that I hadn't expected. As our eyes locked, the unspoken understanding

between us seemed to intensify.

Without another word, his hand cupped my cheek, his thumb gently caressing my skin. The touch sent shivers down my spine, igniting a fire within me.

At that moment, the distance that had always existed between us evaporated. There was no room for the usual defenses, the barriers we had constructed over time.

Our lips met in a tender and fierce kiss, a culmination of unspoken desires and unexplored emotions.

The world around us faded into the background as we surrendered to the moment, the undeniable chemistry between us sparking into something intoxicating.

His touch was electrifying, his lips igniting a fire that blazed hotter with every passing second.

It was as though the tension that had built between us was finally finding its release, a culmination of a connection we had denied for too long.

As the kiss deepened with our tongues entangling, the balcony's railing supported our bodies as our hands wandered to places highly inappropriate for a sophisticated event like this.

His hands slid down to grab my ass as he pulled me closer to his body. I let out a soft moan, unintentionally opening my mouth wider for his tongue to run rampant.

Filled with desire, I never knew I could feel, I fumbled with his belt and shoved my hands down his trousers to grope his dick. I refused to be outdone by Matteo.

A sense of thrill and satisfaction ran up my spine when I could feel just how hard he was

At that moment, I didn't care for anything else. Even the memory of shooting

someone that had haunted me for so long was nowhere in my head.

My only focus was on how close we were, his mouth and hands on my body. The world around us seemed to blur into a distant haze as the sensations consumed my senses.

Every touch and kiss was a symphony of desire that only played a melody we could hear.

But then, all of a sudden, the sultry haze was shattered by a jarring sound – the ringtone of Matteo's phone.

The shrill noise cut through the fog of our desire, instantly sobering us up. Our lips parted, and I could see frustration and annoyance in his eyes.

He reluctantly reached into his pocket and retrieved his phone, glancing at the caller ID before answering.

"Yes?" His tone was curt, a stark contrast to the intensity that filled the air moments ago.

I took a step back, my emotions swirling with confusion and embarrassment. This was not how I had imagined our night would go.

While the interruption had brought us back to reality, the desire still smoldered beneath the surface.

As Matteo's conversation continued, I struggled to regain my composure. My heart still raced from the closeness we had shared, but reality had crashed back in with a jolt.

Then, the tone of Matteo's voice sharply increased, his exclamation cutting through the air like a knife.

I turned to look at him, my brows furrowing in concern as I caught the expression on his face.

Something had gone wrong – that much was clear from the tense lines across his features.

"What happened?" I ventured, my voice laced with worry. The abrupt shift in his demeanor had my apprehension intensifying.

But before I could receive an answer, Matteo's urgency became palpable. He was already speaking, his words rushed and frantic.

"I can't stay. I have to go, Sophia," he said, his voice strained with urgency and regret. "I'll arrange for a car to take you back. I'm sorry."

With those hasty words, Matteo turned and rushed away, leaving me with a mix of emotions swirling within me.

The ballroom that had felt so magical moments ago now felt vast and empty, as if the energy that had once filled it had been sucked away.

The suddenness of his departure left me feeling cold and unsure, like a bucket of ice water had been poured over the heat that had been building between us. His presence, his touch, and the intensity of our shared moment seemed to dissipate in the wake of whatever had transpired.

I was left to grapple with the abrupt interruption of our passionate encounter, the unanswered questions that lingered in the air, and the unsettling feeling that our connection had been severed as quickly as it had been ignited.

As I stood there, watching the space where Matteo had vanished, I couldn't help but wonder what had gone wrong.

Chapter 14

Matteo

The space between us was charged with desire, the air alive with an undeniable tension as our tongues danced.

Her hand wrapped around my cock was driving me mad. Just before I decided to throw caution against the wind and fuck Sophia right there in the open space, my phone buzzed urgently in my pocket.

A sigh of frustration slipped past my lips as we were startled at the abrupt interruption and separated.

I could already feel the awkwardness between us at that moment. Wishing I could ignore the call, but knowing it could be important, I quickly fumbled for my phone.

I glanced down, and my brows furrowed as I read the caller ID – Leo.

“Yes?” I couldn’t stop my tone from sounding sharp. I loved Leo like my uncle, but I couldn’t help but curse him in my mind at his terrible timing.

"Matteo, you need to hear this," Leo's voice crackled through the phone, urgency evident in his ton

I frowned, casting a last lingering look at Sophia before stepping away. I moved to a more secluded corner of the balcony, my heart pounding in anticipation of Leo's words.

What could be so pressing that he'd interrupt this moment?

"Leo, *cosa sta succedendo* (Leo, what's going on)? I questioned, my voice sharp with a mixture of curiosity and impatience.

"Matteo, I've been digging into your father's case," Leo began, his voice tense. "I uncovered something, something that changes everything."

I felt a chill run down my spine, the air growing heavy with foreboding. Leo's words carried a weight that I couldn't ignore.

"Tell me," I demanded, my voice low and tight.

"Matteo, your father's death wasn't an accident," Leo's words hit me like a physical blow, the impact so profound that I staggered back slightly.

"What?" My voice came out in a sharp yell, my mind struggling to process the enormity of his revelation.

"He was murdered, Matteo," Leo continued, his voice laden with anger and sorrow. "Someone killed him, and it was made to look like an accident."

My thoughts whirled, a maelstrom of confusion, anger, and disbelief. My father's death, long thought to be a tragic accident, was now revealed as a calculated act of violence.

It felt as if the ground beneath me was shifting, the foundation of my understanding crumbling.

"I can't believe it," I muttered, my hand trembling slightly as I clutched the phone.

"What happened?" Sophia's voice cut through my swirling thoughts. I could hear the concern in her voice, but I couldn't answer her.

"Matteo, I know this is a lot to take in," Leo's voice was sympathetic, "but you need to come here. I have more information, and Antonio is already on his way."

"I can't stay. I have to go, Sophia," I said, my voice strained with urgency and regret. "I'll arrange for a car to take you back. I'm sorry."

With those hasty words, I quickly left while dialing Antonio's number.

"Where are you?" I demanded.

"I'll soon be right there. Turning round the corner in less than five minutes."

As I hurried out of the venue, my heart still raced from the intense encounter

with Sophia.

The enchanting atmosphere surrounding us moments ago now felt distant and fragmented, replaced by the urgency of the moment and the truth that had been unveiled.

My heart raced as I reached the street corner where Antonio's car was about to turn. Spotting Antonio's familiar face behind the wheel, relief washed over me as I hurriedly got into the car.

"Antonio, where's Leo?" I asked, the urgency in my voice betraying the turmoil inside me.

Antonio cast me a glance, sensing the gravity of the situation. "He's waiting for us at his place."

With bated breath, I watched as the car sped toward Leo's location, my heart pounding with anticipation.

Soon enough, we arrived at Leo's apartment building. Without wasting a moment, I practically leaped out of the car and rushed to the door.

My heart was racing, ready to face the uncertain path ahead. I felt a surge of resolve. The time had come to confront the past, to unearth the truth that had remained hidden for too long.

Sophia's presence, our shared moment, and the intensity of our connection all felt like distant memories, overshadowed by the urgency of the truth that had been revealed to me.

Leo was there, standing in his doorway, his expression somber. I met his gaze, my eyes seeking answers.

"Matteo," Leo greeted me, his voice low and serious. "Come in. I have the information you need."

My pulse quickened as I followed Leo into his apartment, the air heavy with years of unanswered questions.

As we settled in his living room, Leo wasted no time. "I found out something concerning your father's death, Matteo."

His words hung in the air, heavy with significance. My father's death had always been a lingering mystery, a wound never fully healed.

"Tell me," I urged, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions within me. Leo's gaze met mine, his eyes holding a mixture of sympathy and determination.

"Your father's death wasn't an accident. *Era pianificato (It was planned).*"

What? My father's death was planned?

"Who?!" I couldn't control my facial expression as I stepped closer to Leo.

"Who dared to kill my father?"

"Calm down."

"Calm down! You're telling me to calm down! *Come puoi aspettarti che mi calmi (How can you expect me to calm down)?!*"

"Matteo," Antonio put his hand on my shoulder and tried to calm me. "We know you're angry, but you must be levelheaded for this."

With his grip on my shoulder, Antonio turned me around and faced me. He gently pushed me backward until the back of my knee collided with the couch, and I fell on the furniture.

"No matter who did it, they will pay for it."

I took deep breaths as I tried to center myself. Antonio was right. Shouting and demanding things wasn't going to help the matter. Neither was it going to bring my father back.

"*Hai ragione (You are right),*" I turned to face Leo. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you."

Leo snorted and gave me an amused, albeit sad, smile. "It's not your fault. I understand."

Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply before settling into the couch. Opening them, I directed my gaze to Leo.

“Who killed him?”

“That, I do not know?”

“You don’t know?” Incredulity laced my tone as I stared at Leo.

Leo's expression turned grave, his eyes holding a weight of knowledge. "I didn't know at first, but a few days ago—“

“A few days ago? *Lo sapevi qualche giorno fa (You knew that a few days ago)?*” I interrupted, incredulous. Why was he just telling me now?

“I needed to make sure.” He explained. “I couldn’t just come to you without confirming. I was at the precinct, searching for files on a fellow officer's table. It was purely coincidental. As I was shuffling through the papers, something caught my eye. It was an old case file related to your father's accident.”

My heart raced as I absorbed his words. Back then, Leo hadn’t been around to handle the case surrounding my father's death.

He had been assigned on a mission by my father outside the city. By the time Leo returned, the case had already been wrapped up as a car accident.

"I started reading through it, and there were inconsistencies, details that didn't add up," Leo continued, his voice laced with frustration and determination.

"The report stated that your father's car had collided with a drunken truck driver. But according to the skid marks on the road and the positioning of the vehicles, it seemed like your father's car had been forced off the road."

My mind raced to process the information. Deliberate action. Someone had intentionally caused my father's car to crash.

“Here,” He passed me the files lying on the table. I didn’t hesitate to open them and look at Leo's discussion.

He was right.

Leo's eyes met mine, his expression grim. "Matteo, I think your father's accident was no accident. I think he was murdered."

The words hit me like a blow, the room spinning around me.

"Murdered?" The word tasted bitter on my tongue as I grappled with the implications. "Why would someone want to kill my father?"

"That's what we need to find out," Leo replied, his tone determined.

"I've already started digging deeper into the case, discreetly, of course, but we need to tread carefully. If someone orchestrated your father's death, they won't hesitate to eliminate anyone who gets too close to the truth."

The room fell silent as Leo's words settled over us.

I can still remember the day my father died. He had attended a meeting with another mafia head to discuss terms on the distribution of Vitalin, the miracle drug that could cure all diseases.

The sun had already disappeared when the two finally agreed on the term. However, on his way back, he had been hit by a truck, completely totaling the car and sending it rolling.

When I first heard the news of my father's death, I couldn't believe it was all because of a drunken driver.

It seemed too simple, too mundane to explain the abrupt loss of the man who had been larger than life to me.

Doubts had crept into my mind from the beginning, suspicions that there might have been more to the story than what met the eye.

I had used all the resources at my disposal to dig into the details, desperate to find any evidence hinting at foul play.

There had been something nagging at the back of my mind, a feeling that the circumstances were too convenient, too perfectly orchestrated for it to have

been a mere accident.

My determination had led me to turn every stone, follow every lead, and question every person who might have had a connection to that tragic night.

I had been consumed by the need to know the truth and unravel the mystery surrounding my father's death. Yet, despite all my efforts, I had come up empty-handed.

Even the mafia head my father had met with before the accident had been a suspect in my eyes.

I had subjected him to intense interrogations, convinced that he held some responsibility, that his motives had been sinister.

But to my surprise, he had turned out to be innocent, with no knowledge of the events that led to my father's death.

With time, I had been forced to accept the painful reality that my father had died in a tragic car accident.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, accepting that the man who had taught me strength and resilience had been taken away so senselessly.

And now, sitting in Leo's living room, facing the shocking revelation that my suspicions from the past might have held more truth than I had ever imagined, a wave of conflicting emotions surged within me.

Anger at the possibility that someone had deliberately taken my father away from me.

Frustration that despite my relentless pursuit of answers, the truth had remained hidden and determination to finally uncover the secrets that had shrouded my father's death for so long.

As Leo's words echoed in the air, confirming what I had suspected years ago, I knew I couldn't let this revelation go unanswered.

My father deserved to be avenged, and I was willing to go to any lengths to

find out the truth, no matter how painful or dangerous it could be.

My mind briefly went to Sophia and how her face had turned downcast when I had stated that I needed to leave.

The memory of our almost-shared moment, the fire that had blazed between us, tugged at my conscience, but I threw it to the back of my mind. Avenging my father was more important.

“What about the policeman whose table you searched?” Antonio piped up.

“The fact that you found this there means that whoever did it has men in the police force.” He gestured to the files that were still in my hands.

“That’s where you’ll need to come in.” Leo gave me a serious look. “I can’t get involved; otherwise, my cover could be blown.”

“You don’t need to worry. I’ll handle it, but I can’t promise to return him to you alive.” I said in a low voice.

My mind was filled with thoughts about torturing the culprit behind my father’s death. Though it couldn’t compare to the real thing, I could feel a bit of twisted satisfaction.

I was not going to spare anyone.

Chapter 15

Sophia

I couldn't believe that I gave in to my desires! I covered my face with my palm and groaned on my bed.

Frustration and regret churned within me. What was I thinking?

The intensity of the moment, closeness, and overwhelming emotions had all clouded my judgment.

As I lay there on my bed, replaying the scene in my mind, I couldn't help but berate myself. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

I had promised myself that I wouldn't let my emotions get the best of me or allow our attraction to lead me astray.

Suppressing these feelings hadn't been easy. The tension and chemistry were undeniable and had been simmering beneath the surface for so long.

But I had resolved to stay strong, keep a clear head, and not let myself get swept away by something dangerous.

And yet, at that moment, all my self-control had crumbled. I had let down my guard and let my desires take over, and for what?

A fleeting rush of pleasure that left me feeling more conflicted than ever.

As I lay there, replaying the scene over and over in my mind, I couldn't shake off the nagging curiosity about what had happened.

What had caused Matteo to react abruptly, from that intense moment to a sudden rush to leave?

The memory of his furrowed brows, the shock on his face, and the urgency in his voice played like a loop in my mind.

I knew that something had transpired beyond the intensity of our encounter. But what? What news could he have received that would make him suddenly

pull away?

My thoughts were racing, my imagination running wild with possibilities. The uncertainty gnawed at me, urging me to unravel the mystery behind that phone call.

What could have been so urgent that it prompted Matteo's abrupt departure? My mind raced through possibilities.

Was it a call about his family? Perhaps some urgent matter had arisen that required his immediate attention. Or was it something business-related?

Running a successful company could entail dealing with unexpected crises. Or, for all I knew, it could be something else entirely – something personal, something hidden beneath the surface.

As I mulled over these thoughts, I realized the irony of the situation. Despite working close to each other, I knew next to nothing about Matteo beyond the superficial.

Our interactions had been limited to sarcastic exchanges and veiled insults.

The memory of the charity event where we had first crossed paths resurfaced. Stolen glances, a reckless one-night stand, and the knowledge that there was more to Matteo than met the eye.

He was a man of secrets, and I had unintentionally become privy to one of them.

It was that same night that our paths had become irreversibly entwined. His charm had drawn me in, and the pull between us had been undeniable.

That all changed when I witnessed him involved in something I couldn't comprehend.

As I lay on my bed, my thoughts circling the events of the evening, I knew one thing for sure. Matteo was a complex puzzle, one I was determined to decipher.

The phone call had shaken him. That much was evident, and I couldn't help but wonder how it all fit into the intricate web of his life.

Yet, unraveling his secrets wasn't going to be easy. Trust was a scarce commodity in his world, and prying into his affairs could have consequences I couldn't predict.

The danger was real, and it was a reality I had to navigate if I wanted to uncover the truth behind Matteo's enigmatic facade.

With a sigh, I resolved to approach this with caution. As much as I longed to understand him better, I also understood the risks. The allure of the unknown was strong, but so was the need to protect myself.

Closing my eyes, I pushed aside my swirling thoughts and made a silent promise to myself – to tread carefully, to not let my curiosity cloud my judgment, and to remember that in this intricate dance of secrets, the truth could be both revealing and devastating.

With a groan, I realized I was getting caught up in something that wasn't my business. Matteo's matters were just that - personal.

Yet, the longing to understand, to make sense of his sudden departure, was hard to ignore.

With a deep sigh, I pushed myself up from the bed. I knew I couldn't keep dwelling on this. Whatever it was, it was his concern, not mine.

I had my own life to focus on and my battles to fight, but as I walked around my room, tidying up the disarray of emotions within me, a small part of me couldn't help but hope that someday he might share his secret with me.

I sighed, my frustration mixing with disappointment. I knew that I couldn't change what had already happened. What I could do was learn from this experience.

I couldn't let myself be vulnerable like that again and let the pull between us

cloud my judgment.

With a determined exhale, I vowed to myself that I wouldn't fall into that trap again. No matter how tempting the situation or how strong the attraction, I would stay in control.

I would protect my heart and my sanity, even if it meant fighting against the current of my desires.



“So, how was the party?” Keisha asked as she plopped beside me on her red, soft couch. Yes. Her couch. I was at her house.

After so many weeks had passed and days spent working with Matteo, my brain had finally understood that I was safe.

No one had realized I witnessed what I wasn't supposed to witness. Thinking back on how scared I had been that I had refused to leave my house embarrassed me.

“It wasn't a party. It was a gala.” I rolled my eyes.

“Same thing.” She carelessly waved her hand before shifting until she was facing me.

I leaned away from her eager face.

“So...” She trailed off with a glint in her eyes.

“So?”

“Did you guys fuck?”

“Keisha! What the fuck?” I shouted at her, stuck between being appalled and laughing.

“That’s what I’m trying to ask.” She acted indignant, and I shook my head at her smartass reply.

“No, we did not...fuck.” I chuckled at the crass word. “Seriously, did you have to say it like that?”

“My bad!” She raised her hands and covered her mouth, acting apologetic.

“Next time, I’ll say if you guys cuddled ‘aggressively.’”

What a crazy girl. I playfully pushed her away from me while breaking into laughter.

“So, did you?” Keisha waggled her eyebrows.

I let out an exasperated sigh. She was so stubborn. I knew she wouldn’t stop pestering me unless I answered her question, no matter how reluctant I was.

It wasn’t that I could tell Keisha. It was just that I didn’t want to remember how conflicted I was about my feelings.

On the one hand, I didn’t want to give in to my desires; on the other, I did.

“No, we did not ‘cuddle aggressively.’ I replied, throwing her teasing words back in her face.

"Really?" Keisha's surprise was palpable.

I raised an eyebrow, taken aback. "Why are you surprised? Were you expecting something to happen between us?"

Keisha leaned back against the couch, crossing her arms and looking at me almost amusedly. "Well, yeah."

I gaped at her, struggling to find the words. "Why?"

She shrugged, her grin mischievous. "Oh, come on, Sophia. The sexual tension between you two is so obvious even if I haven’t seen you together yet."

I felt my cheeks heat up, partly from embarrassment and annoyance. "Keisha, seriously? Don't be ridiculous."

She chuckled. "I'm just saying, the vibes are there. It's like a magnetic pull or something."

I sighed, rolling my eyes. "You and your wild imagination."

Keisha's expression turned serious as she leaned in, her gaze locking onto mine.

"But seriously, Sophia, have you thought about it? I mean, he's not just some random guy. He's Matteo, the enigmatic businessman who caught your attention, even if you don't want to admit it."

I was about to retort when her words struck a chord. Matteo did manage to captivate my attention in ways I hadn't anticipated.

Before I could respond, I found myself uttering words that stopped both of us in our tracks. "Keisha, have you forgotten? He killed someone."

Keisha's face fell, her playfulness replaced by a solemn expression. "No, I haven't forgotten."

I shook my head, exasperated. "How can you suggest I'd want to be with someone like that?"

Keisha's voice was surprisingly matter-of-fact as she replied, "Look, Sophia, I'm not saying it's easy to accept. But maybe there's more to the story than we know. People don't just do things like that for no reason."

I stared at her, incredulous. "Are you seriously defending him? Keisha, he killed someone. No matter his reasons, it doesn't change that fact."

She met my gaze evenly. "I'm not defending him. I'm just saying that sometimes circumstances can be more complicated. Maybe he had his reasons, no matter how twisted they might be."

I shook my head, unable to comprehend her perspective. "I can't believe you're saying this. You're acting like it's no big deal."

Keisha's expression softened, and she reached out to touch my arm.

"Sophia, I'm not saying it's no big deal, but you've seen and spent time with him. There's more to him than just that one act. I'm not telling you to forgive or be with him, but maybe try to understand before you completely shut the door."

I stood up from the couch, needing to distance Keisha and myself physically. Her words lingered in the air, a cloud of uncertainty I struggled to dispel.

Was I being too quick to judge Matteo based on a single, horrific act? Could there be layers to his story that I had yet to uncover?

"Sophia, I'm not trying to downplay what he did," Keisha's voice was earnest, her eyes searching mine for understanding.

"I just think that sometimes people do things out of desperation, out of circumstances that push them to the edge. It doesn't excuse their actions, but it might give us some insight into why."

I turned away, my thoughts a jumble of confusion. "I don't know, Keisha. I saw him that night, standing over the body. There was no desperation in his eyes, just... coldness."

Keisha sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I get it, Sophia. I do. But people can be good and bad at the same time. None of us is entirely one or the other. Maybe there's a side to Matteo that we haven't seen, one that explains what happened."

I walked to the window, staring out at the cityscape below. The lights were beginning to twinkle in the gathering darkness, a reflection of the thoughts swirling in my mind.

Keisha had a point – there was so much I didn't know about Matteo, his life, his past, his motivations. But did that justify his actions?

"It's not that simple, Keisha," I finally said, my voice tinged with frustration.

"Even if there's more to his story, it doesn't erase the fact that someone lost

his life because of him."

Keisha joined me at the window, her gaze thoughtful. "You're right. It's not simple. But life rarely is. I'm just asking you to consider that there might be layers to this situation that we can't fully understand. Besides, have you forgotten?"

I stared at her, confused.

"You're a hacker. You can find out what you can about him." She smirked.

I turned to her. My expression conflicted even if I reciprocated her smirk with a small laugh. "And what if understanding doesn't change anything? What if I still can't get past what he did?"

Keisha gave me a reassuring smile. "Then that's okay too, Sophia. You have every right to feel the way you do. I want you to remember that people are complex, and sometimes, they surprise us in ways we never expected."

As I looked at Keisha, her words resonated within me. It was true – people were complex, and Matteo was no exception.

I couldn't deny the chemistry between us, the pull that seemed to defy logic. But could I find a way to see beyond his actions? I wasn't sure.

Chapter 16

Matteo

The weight of Leo's revelation still pressed heavily on my mind. The carefully orchestrated death of my father was a truth I struggled to accept.

Anger churned within me, but I had managed to rein it in, channeling it into a determination to seek justice for my father's memory.

My plans were set into motion. I had dispatched Antonio to deal with Detective George, to bring him to a safe location where we could extract the truth from him.

Only when George was out of the picture could I focus on unraveling the bigger picture surrounding my father's death.

It was risky, but I couldn't afford to let George slip through my fingers.

As I sat in my office, my fingers drumming rhythmically on my desk, my thoughts strayed to Sophia.

The gala, the interrupted moment between us – they seemed like distant memories now, overshadowed by the gravity of recent events.

The news that had shattered the illusions of my father's accident was more important than anything else, yet a pang of guilt tugged at me for leaving Sophia alone at the event.

I couldn't have explained the urgency that had driven me away. How could I have told her that the very core of my family's tragedy had been shaken, that the man responsible for it was about to face justice?

It was a burden I had to bear alone for now.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced at it to see a message from Antonio. He had George secured and was awaiting further instructions.

With a sense of grim determination, I sent him a reply, confirming that he should keep George in a safe location until I arrived.

As I put my phone down, the door to my office opened, and there she was – Sophia. A mix of relief and guilt washed over me.

Relief that she was safe and unharmed, guilt that I had left her without an explanation.

"Hey," she greeted, her voice tinged with awkwardness. "I didn't expect to see you here."

I offered a half-smile, trying to break the tension. "Where else would I be? This is my company, after all."

In return, she managed a small smile, but something about her demeanor felt off. Her usually warm and playful attitude was replaced by a certain coldness, a distance that hadn't been there before.

It was like an invisible barrier between us, and I couldn't help but wonder if it had to do with the night we shared – the night I abruptly left her due to that urgent phone call.

"I know I disappeared suddenly the other night," I began, intending to explain the situation, "but there was a..."

She raised her hand, cutting me off. "It's okay, Matteo. You don't have to explain. Your personal matters are none of my business."

Her words hit me like a cold shower. While I expected a reaction, this wasn't what I had anticipated.

I watched as she walked over to her desk, her movements deliberate and controlled.

She picked up a stack of papers, determined to bury herself in work.

My frustration grew, and a mix of emotions churned within me. I couldn't let her dismiss it like this. I walked over to her, determined to break through her

defenses.

I gently took her hands in mine, holding them in an intimate gesture. "Sophia, you can't just ignore what happened between us that night."

She pulled her hands away, her expression guarded. "Matteo, what happened was a mistake. Let's not make it into something it wasn't."

I was taken aback, incredulity coursing through me. "A mistake? Are you joking?"

She looked me in the eyes, her gaze unwavering. "I'm not joking, Matteo. It was a lapse in judgment, plain and simple."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Anger and confusion surged within me. "You can't honestly stand there and tell me what we shared meant nothing. That there's nothing between us."

Sophia's expression remained unchanged. "There's nothing between us, Matteo. It was a momentary lapse, and it won't happen again."

I felt like the ground was shifting beneath me. Everything I thought I understood was being challenged. "You're seriously trying to tell me that you don't feel any of this tension or attraction?"

Her reply was cold and firm. "I'm not attracted to you, Matteo. Whatever happened, let's forget about it."

I was speechless, a mix of hurt and frustration inside me. "You're going to keep up this act? You're denying what's right in front of us?"

Sophia's voice remained steady. "There's nothing to deny."

Frustration clenched at my chest, tightening like a vice. I couldn't believe she was trying to brush off everything that had passed between us.

Without thinking, I stormed over to her, the atmosphere charged with our unresolved tension. I loomed over her against the wall, our proximity becoming palpable.

At that moment, I could feel the electric pull between us, the magnetic force that had drawn us close repeatedly.

Our eyes locked, and I saw a flicker of uncertainty in her gaze, a crack in the facade she tried desperately to maintain.

"You can't honestly stand there and deny it," I whispered, my voice rough with frustration, as I leaned closer to her.

Our breaths mingled, lips hovering dangerously close, the temptation to bridge the distance almost overwhelming.

My hands moved of their own accord, wrapping around her waist, the soft curve of her hips fitting perfectly against my palms.

The silk of her dress felt like a tantalizing barrier as the warmth of her skin radiated through the fabric.

Her breath hitched, a barely audible sound that fueled the fire raging between us.

Up close, her features were even more captivating. Her eyes, usually so lively, held a mixture of defiance and vulnerability.

Her lips, plump and inviting, were parted slightly as if she were struggling to find the right words. I could feel the heat emanating from her.

Instead of pushing me away, Sophia's hands came to rest on top of my arms, her fingers tightening around my biceps.

The touch was electrifying, igniting a fierce desire I had been trying to suppress. It was as if she was silently urging me to close the gap, to bridge the distance that still separated our lips.

Our gazes remained locked, the unspoken tension hanging like a live wire. The world around us seemed to fade into nothingness, leaving only the charged connection between us.

At that moment, it was a battle of wills, desire, and the overwhelming need to

give in to what had been building between us since that fateful night.

And then, just as our lips were about to meet, a knock on the door shattered the charged atmosphere.

We leaped away from each other as if burned, our heartbeats racing in tandem. Clearing our throats awkwardly, we exchanged a glance filled with embarrassment and frustration.

I gestured for the person to enter, annoyance flooding me at the interruption. The door swung open, revealing none other than Antonio.

His observant gaze took in the room's tension, and as he looked at Sophia, I could see as realization dawned on him.

His eyes slightly widened when he recognized Sophia from her ID card that Leo had shown us back then.

Since I had decided to deal with Sophia, Antonio had not come into much contact with her, especially as I had more important jobs outside the company for him.

To be truthful, another part of why I had decided to handle Sophia on my own and call Antonio less often to the company was that I wanted to avoid Antonio catching a whiff of my feelings for her.

He would disapprove, and by the slow movement of his eyes landing on me, accompanied by a slight frown, I knew Antonio was aware of something between us.

It was as if he could sense the underlying currents that had just been interrupted.

I cursed inwardly. Could he even accuse me of developing something between myself and Sophia when Sophia denied what we had?

I snorted to myself. It was wishful thinking. Antonio was too observant and stubborn.

I cleared my throat to dispel the awkward silence that had descended in my office. "What brings you here?" I questioned Antonio, regaining my composure.

His gaze flickered between me and Sophia, a knowing glint in his eyes. "I tried calling you, but you were not picking up.

I was worried...that something had happened...to you," Antonio replied, his tone neutral.

I exchanged a glance with Sophia, catching her fidgeting with the documents on her table out of the corner of my eye.

She seemed determined to remain inconspicuous, to the point of avoiding eye contact.

"Ah, yes, I was caught up in something," I replied vaguely, not wanting to delve into my earlier encounter with Sophia.

"Let's go." I gestured to the door. Clearly, Antonio had something important to tell me; otherwise, he wouldn't have come here.

"I have something important to attend to." I turned to Sophia, who had been watching me but quickly averted her gaze when our eyes met. "I'll see you later."

Sophia nodded without looking at me again, and I left my office with Antonio in tow, his gaze sweeping over the two tables in my office with a blank expression.

The tension between Sophia and me still hung in the air, unresolved and unspoken, but matters at hand demanded my attention.

Whatever unspoken desires lay between us, as well as her eagerness to deny the tension between us, would have to come later.

Antonio and I walked briskly down the corridor, heading for an empty, secure room to discuss matters privately without fearing anyone overhearing.

As we entered the room and closed the door behind us, I wasted no time getting to the point.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice low and urgent.

Antonio's expression was serious as he leaned against a table. "*Lo abbiamo (We have it)*, Matteo. We've got George locked up in the safe house. I made sure we weren't noticed or followed."

Relief washed over me at his words. Getting George into our custody was a crucial step, and knowing it had been done without any complications was a weight off my shoulders. I nodded appreciatively at Antonio.

"*Grazie (Thank you)*," I said, sincerely grateful for his dedication and efficiency.

Antonio nodded in return. "*Ovviamente (Obviously)*. You know I've got your back."

I appreciated Antonio's loyalty and the trust we had built over the years. He was a valuable asset, and I knew I could rely on him.

"I plan to deal with him in a week," I informed Antonio, my thoughts racing as I strategized.

"I want to wear him down, make him anxious. He'll expect me to want to see him as soon as possible, but if I wait, it'll put him on edge."

Antonio raised an eyebrow. "Playing the long game?"

I nodded. "*Esattamente (Exactly)*. I want to unsettle him. Make him doubt his situation."

Antonio's lips curled into a slight smile. "*Nessun problema (No problem)*."

"Give him only enough food to survive. I want him weakened and on the verge of giving up when I see him." I commanded, and Antonio nodded his head.

We continued to discuss the details of our plan, ironing out any potential

issues and contingencies. As we spoke, I couldn't shake off the lingering thoughts of Sophia and our tense encounter.

A lot was on my plate, but that didn't mean I could ignore our unresolved tension.

Antonio and I concluded our discussion with our plan and a week to prepare. I knew the upcoming days would be crucial, and I needed to ensure everything was set in motion to achieve the outcome we desired.

As I was about to leave the room, a call of my name stopped me in my tracks. I turned back to Antonio, who had a thoughtful expression.

"Matteo," he began, his voice cautious, "you know I respect your choices, *ma non posso fare a meno di chiedermelo (but I can't help but wonder)* if you know what you're doing."

Internally, I grimaced. It was clear what he was talking about. It was none other than the scene charged with desire between myself and Sophia in my office.

I had expected Antonio to bring up the awkward encounter with Sophia sooner or later. He was perceptive and protective, qualities I valued in him, even if they did lead to these uncomfortable conversations.

I met his gaze squarely, trying to convey my confidence even as I wrestled with my doubts. "I know what I'm doing, Antonio. *Non devi preoccuparti (You do not have to worry).*"

He crossed his arms over his chest, his expression still a mix of concern and skepticism.

"It's not just about that night. It's about everything, Matteo. Getting involved with someone from within the company... We still don't have concrete evidence that your uncle didn't send her."

I sighed inwardly. Antonio had a point, and his cautious nature was both a

strength and a frustration.

We had been investigating the possibility that someone within the company might be a mole, sent by my uncle to gather information or keep tabs on me. While we hadn't found evidence suggesting Sophia was involved, we couldn't rule out the possibility entirely.

"I understand your concern," I admitted, choosing my words carefully. "But we've been monitoring her closely, and nothing has raised any red flags."

Antonio's gaze remained unwavering. "I know you, Matteo. I know that when it comes to business, you're usually ruthless and calculating, but this...this feels different. You're letting emotions cloud your judgment."

My jaw clenched at his words. I knew he was right. Emotions were a liability, a vulnerability I couldn't afford.

Yet, I couldn't deny the pull I felt towards Sophia, the way she had gotten under my skin despite my best efforts to observe her intentions.

"*Posso farcela (I can do it)*, Antonio," I said firmly, my tone brooking no argument. "I won't let personal matters interfere with the business."

Antonio studied me for a moment, his gaze intense. "Just be careful, Matteo. We can't afford any missteps, especially now."

I nodded, acknowledging his concern. "*Lo so (I know)*. I'll keep that in mind."

With a final glance, Antonio seemed to accept my response reluctantly. He was right to be cautious, and I appreciated his loyalty and dedication to ensuring our operations remained secure.

As I left the room again, I knew that the lines I was navigating between business and personal, loyalty and desire – were treacherous.

But for now, I was determined to tread carefully and maintain control, no matter how much Sophia's presence challenged that resolve.

However, I knew that my words were empty. There was just something about

her that kept drawing me toward her. I refused to believe it was anything more than mere sexual desire.

The only thing I was sure about was that I couldn't stay away from her even if I tried.

Chapter 17

Sophia

Fuck!

So much for never letting my guard down.

I covered my face in embarrassment. I could still feel a residual arousal and the warmth of his palms around my waist.

The tension in the room had been suffocating, a magnetic force pulling me closer to him even as I tried to resist.

I could still remember how he looked at me with so much desire in his eyes. Gosh, it made me wet just thinking about his smoldering gaze.

Don't even start with how his big hands gripped my waist. The strength behind his grip had filled my mind with so many dirty thoughts of how he could handle me.

My attempt to distance myself from Matteo had failed miserably. The events of the charged encounter had shattered any pretense I had left just moments ago.

Thankfully, we had been interrupted; however, I froze in surprise when I saw who I had entered.

The man that had entered...he had been there with Matteo on that night when he had shot that person.

There was no way I could ever forget the people that had been present that night.

Even though I had kept my head down during their conversation, I couldn't help but steal a few glances at them.

It was jarring seeing two killers in front of me interacting in a way that didn't match the picture I had of them in my head.

Regardless, I was relieved when they left the office. Seeing them like this, Keisha's words floated in my head.

"But maybe there's more to the story than we know. People don't just do things like that for no reason."

"I'm just saying that sometimes circumstances can be more complicated than they appear. Maybe he had his reasons, no matter how twisted they might be."

I groaned out loud in frustration.

My thoughts were a whirlwind of confusion and conflicting emotions. My attraction to Matteo was undeniable, a stronger force with each interaction.

It was maddening how he could evoke such feelings in me – frustration, desire, anger, and curiosity.

And then there was the question that lingered like a specter in my mind: Why had he done it? Why had he taken a life that night?

Was there more to it than met the eye? Keisha's words resonated in my head. Maybe there was a reason, a motivation that I couldn't comprehend from the surface.

I found myself lost in thought, pondering the possibilities. What could drive someone to commit such an act?

Despite how curious I was, asking Matteo the reason why was out of the question. Annoyingly, Keisha's voice floated into my head once again.

"Besides, have you forgotten? You're a hacker. You can simply find out what you can about him."

With a grimace, I slipped my hand into my bag and pulled out a USB. I couldn't believe I was going to do this.

Quickly walking to the door and opening it to check the corridor, making sure that Matteo and his companion were not likely to return anytime soon, I

made my way over to Matteo's desk, where his laptop was located.

Despite knowing my past, I thought he'd be smart enough not to leave his laptop around me.

A part of me felt it wasn't due to carelessness but because he trusted me not to invade his privacy. Yet another part of me felt conflicted about breaking his unsaid trust.

Inserting the USB into his laptop, I watched as the data extraction process began. This wasn't an ordinary USB – it was a USB Data Extractor, a device I had acquired from my contacts in the hacking world.

It could quickly and discreetly copy all the data from a connected device, leaving no traces behind.

My heart pounded with a mix of nervousness and adrenaline. I checked the corridor once more, my senses on high alert.

The idea of Matteo and his companion returning before I had fully copied his data sent a surge of urgency through me. I couldn't afford to be caught in the act.

As the extraction progress bar advanced, I couldn't help but wonder what they had been discussing for so long.

What could have been so important for Matteo's companion to come here even though he hadn't answered his phone?

My mind raced with possibilities, each one more ominous than the last. Irony and sarcasm tinged my thoughts as I hoped it wasn't another murder they were planning.

Caught up in my thoughts, I was completely unprepared for when the door opened and Matteo entered the office.

My heart leaped into my throat as panic set in. I quickly moved in front of his desk, trying to shield his laptop from his sight.

The USB data extractor was still plugged in, and I prayed that he wouldn't notice anything.

Matteo raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised by my behavior. "Sophia, what are you doing?"

My mind raced, searching for a plausible explanation. I obviously couldn't reveal what I was doing. I swallowed hard, my palms growing clammy as he approached me with a curious expression.

In a state of panic and not knowing what else to do, a surge of impulse took over me. Without thinking, I grabbed Matteo by his collar and yanked him toward me, and our bodies suddenly closed.

I found his lips in a desperate kiss, a wild attempt to divert his attention from his laptop and the USB.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Our lips crashed together, and a rush of electricity coursed through me.

It was a reckless move, driven by panic and mixed emotions that I couldn't fully comprehend. As my lips pressed against his own, I could feel his surprise, his body tensing beneath my touch.

But then, to my astonishment, Matteo started to respond. His initial surprise melted away, replaced by a growing intensity that matched mine.

His hands moved to my waist, pulling me closer as his lips pressed firmly against mine. The sensation was electric, a heady mix of desire and desperation that seemed to swallow us.

His lips were warm and demanding, moving against mine with a hunger I hadn't anticipated but had reciprocated.

I could feel his fingers tightening on my waist, his body pressing against mine as if he couldn't get enough.

As the kiss deepened, our tongues entangled, and the world around us faded

into the background. He and I were caught in raw desire and unspoken tension.

My fingers found their way to the collar of his shirt, and my nails grazed against his skin as a surge of heat coursed through me.

Our breaths became ragged and urgent, the chemistry between us igniting like a spark that had been smoldering for far too long.

I could taste the mingling of desire and frustration in how his tongue wrapped around mine, a silent admission of the emotions simmering beneath the surface.

It was as if all the barriers between us had dissolved. The lines between attraction and conflict blurred, leaving only the pulsating need that drew us together.

But just as quickly as it had started, the kiss was broken by the loud crash from the corridor, shattering the bubble of intimacy we had created.

Our breaths were heavy, our eyes locked as we tried to comprehend what had transpired between us.

As the seconds passed, I realized the gravity of what I had just done. My grip on his collar loosened, and I slowly pulled away, our eyes meeting in a mixture of shock and confusion.

My heart hammered in my chest, and I could hardly believe what I had just done.

"Uh, we should probably check what's going on," I mumbled awkwardly, my mind still reeling from the impulsive kiss and the sudden interruption.

It was as if our brains were buffering, our movements slow and uncertain. Matteo seemed just as taken aback as I was, his expression a mix of surprise and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

Without waiting for his response, I turned towards the laptop, quickly

yanking the USB out of the port and stuffing it into my pocket.

My heart raced as I rearranged the desk and laptop, trying to erase any trace of what I had done.

As I approached the door and stood behind him, I could feel Matteo's eyes on me, but I didn't dare meet his gaze.

I needed to get out of there, to put some distance between us and the whirlwind of emotions that had erupted at that moment.

Taking a step forward and standing beside Matteo in the corridor, I could see the cause of the commotion.

Two employees had collided, dropping the load they had been carrying. It was a mundane and innocent enough reason for the chaos and a stark reminder that the world outside our bubble of tension and desire was still turning.

I cleared my throat, my voice sounding too high-pitched as I gestured toward the scene. "Looks like they had a little accident."

Matteo nodded, his expression unreadable. "Yeah, seems like it."

We watched as the employees scrambled to gather their fallen papers and belongings.

As we stood side by side, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen next, how this unexpected twist would alter the already complicated dynamic between us.



The day eventually ended, a fact for which I was grateful. The office atmosphere had returned to normalcy, but the unfolding events still lingered

in my mind.

I rushed home, my heart pounding with anxiety and anticipation. The USB that held the extracted data burned in my pocket, a reminder of the risk I had taken.

Once home, I hurriedly connected the USB to my laptop and waited for the contents to load.

As I watched the progress bar inch forward, my thoughts drifted back to the chaotic events in Matteo's office.

We had kissed twice in a day, which seemed both crazy and maddening. Just hours before, I had denied any connection between us, yet there we were, our lips colliding in intense tension.

The memory of our second kiss, initiated by me in a state of panic, made heat rise to my cheeks. I covered my face with my hands, overcome with embarrassment and shame.

What had possessed me to do something so reckless, so out of character? Fuck.

I could already imagine myself telling Keisha about it and her having a blast at my expense.

As the data finally loaded on my laptop screen, I pushed aside my swirling thoughts and focused on the task.

There was much to uncover from the information I had extracted, and I couldn't let my inner turmoil distract me from the truth hidden within the digital files.

With a deep breath, I began delving into Matteo's laptop's secrets, hoping to uncover my desperately sought answers.

My initial shock grew into conflicting emotions as I navigated through the data. The information I was uncovering seemed to paint a contradictory

picture of Matteo.

On one hand, there were indications of a man deeply entangled in something dangerous.

Yet, on the other hand, there were glimpses of a person who seemed to be making a positive impact, a side of Matteo that I hadn't anticipated.

It was baffling. How could someone who appeared to be involved in questionable dealings also be so dedicated to magnanimous efforts?

The stark contrast left me struggling to make sense of the puzzle before me.

I glanced at the pile of data on my computer screen, a mixture of intrigue and confusion clouding my thoughts.

Could a person truly be both a perpetrator of questionable and good actions?

My mind wrestled with the contradictions, trying to reconcile Matteo's identity's different facets that were slowly unveiled through the digital maze before me.

A question lingered in my mind as I continued to scroll through the information. Was there more to Matteo than met the eye?

The more I delved into the data, the more I realized that the answers I sought were far from straightforward.

As for what the data was about... I was still having a hard time digesting it.

Chapter 18

Matteo

The preparations for our company's annual charity event were in full swing, and I couldn't help but feel a mixture of anticipation and responsibility.

This tradition, which had been established by my father and continued by me, held a special place in the company's culture.

It was more than just an event; it reflected our commitment to giving back to the community that had played a role in our company's success.

Walking through the venue, I checked on every detail – from the decorations to the guest list to the schedule of events.

The ballroom was transformed into an elegant space adorned with our company's colors and branding.

The soft glow of the company banners and strategically placed lighting cast a warm ambiance that was befitting of the occasion.

My father had ingrained in me the importance of using our company's resources to make a difference to support causes that mattered.

It was a lesson that had stayed with me, guiding our company's actions and decisions.

This event was a tangible way to demonstrate that commitment, bringing together employees, partners, and stakeholders to contribute to causes that aligned with our values.

As the evening approached and the event unfolded, I was engrossed in the tasks at hand – greeting guests, making announcements, and ensuring everything ran smoothly.

The flurry of activity served as a temporary distraction from the thoughts lingering in the back of my mind.

Yet, as the night progressed, I couldn't escape the pull of those thoughts any longer.

No matter how busy I kept myself, the fact that Sophia was also present at the event was a constant reminder.

It was as if her presence was a magnetic force, drawing my attention despite my attempts to focus on the event.

I watched the interactions around me – colleagues, acquaintances, and friends engaging in conversations and laughter.

But even amid the celebrations, my gaze kept drifting to Sophia.

Her presence seemed to light up the room, and I found myself involuntarily tracking her movements, even when I had other responsibilities to attend to.

It was frustrating, to say the least. I had always prided myself on maintaining composure and staying in control.

But with Sophia around, it was as if my equilibrium was disrupted, and I was left grappling with emotions I couldn't easily decipher.

I sipped my drink, my eyes inadvertently following Sophia as she mingled with guests.

Every time she smiled and laughed, it was like a magnetic pull that I couldn't resist.

Yet, there was a fear of crossing a line that neither of us seemed willing to acknowledge.

As the event continued, I found myself stealing glances at Sophia whenever possible.

Her presence seemed to have an uncanny ability to draw my attention, even amidst the crowd and the responsibilities of hosting the event.

But it wasn't just her presence that occupied my thoughts – it was the memory of what had transpired in my office.

I couldn't shake off the memory of that impulsive kiss, the way Sophia had yanked me closer, her lips claiming mine with a mix of urgency and something deeper.

It was a memory I couldn't ignore, even if I wanted to. Truth be told, I didn't want to forget.

There was a rawness to that moment, a vulnerability that had surprised me. But her actions had left me baffled. One moment, she vehemently denied any connection between us, insisting there was nothing but a mistake.

And the next, she was initiating a kiss that had left both of us reeling. The contradiction was maddening, and I grappled with the confusion it brought.

As the night wore on, I noticed a shift in Sophia's demeanor toward me.

The coldness that had characterized her interactions with me seemed to have thawed, replaced by an awkwardness that was hard to ignore.

It was as if our tension had broken, leaving us both uncertain.

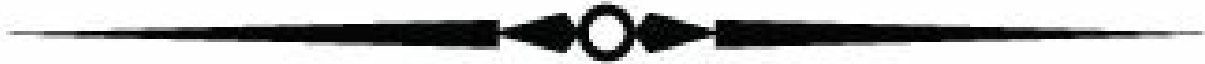
Our glances were filled with longing, questions, and other emotions that neither of us seemed willing to voice.

It was a silent dance, a push-and-pull that neither of us wanted to engage in fully. Perhaps we were both afraid of what it might mean.

So, we continued to steal glances while keeping a careful distance. It was a strange limbo we found ourselves in, with neither of us willing to make the first move.

Aware of the undercurrents that pulsed between us, I couldn't help but wonder where this unspoken tension would lead us as the night drew to a close.

Whether either of us would be brave enough to make the first move.



As time passed, the event continued to unfold with the lively chatter of executives and the gentle hum of conversation filling the air.

I engaged in discussions, my attention divided between the conversations and the curious glances I occasionally stole in Sophia's direction.

There she was, by the table, sipping on a glass of non-alcoholic wine, her presence a calming contrast to the bustling atmosphere.

But just as I was settling into the rhythm of the event, a sudden movement caught the corner of my eye.

I turned my head slightly, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw a figure approaching the banquet table where Sophia was.

My eyes widened in astonishment as I fully turned my head to see who it was. It was none other than my uncle, Francisco Cortigini.

My mind raced in disbelief. What was Francisco doing here?

This event was meant for the company and its charitable endeavors, not for family members with questionable intentions.

My initial shock turned into a gnawing sense of concern and suspicion. As our eyes met, a tension-filled moment passed between us.

Beside me, Antonio's expression mirrored my shock. Our unspoken exchange confirmed that this was unexpected and unsettling.

Francisco's presence here raised more questions than answers, and I couldn't help but wonder what his motives were.

This event was meant to celebrate the company's efforts to give back, not to become a stage for family politics and hidden agendas.

My fists clenched involuntarily as anger surged within me. How dare Francisco soil this event, tarnishing the tradition that my father had upheld for years?

What was he planning by showing up uninvited? The audacity of his actions ignited a fiery flame of fury in me.

I furrowed my brows, thinking deeply as I contemplated Francisco's potential motives. His presence was a disruption.

I couldn't shake the feeling that his ulterior motives, more than anything else, unsettled me.

Antonio, sensing my anger and frustration, approached me discreetly.

"Do you want me to handle Francisco?" he asked in a low voice, his gaze fixed on the unwelcome guest.

I hesitated, weighing my options. While some of me wanted to remove Francisco from the event swiftly, I knew such a move could draw even more attention and potentially lead to a scene.

I shook my head slightly, my jaw set in determination.

"No," I replied quietly, my voice firm. "I don't want to make a scene, but keep an eye on him. I want to know every move he makes and every interaction he has. *Qualcosa non va (Somethings wrong).*"

Antonio nodded in understanding, his expression serious. "*Inteso (Understood).*"

As the event continued, I shifted from the celebrations to Francisco's presence.

I couldn't shake the feeling that he had some hidden agenda, something beyond mere coincidence.

Whatever it was, I was determined to uncover the truth and ensure that his plans, whatever they may be, wouldn't jeopardize the charitable event.

My attention was suddenly drawn to a scene that intensified the knot of anger in my stomach. There was Francisco, chatting with Sophia.

The wave of anger that crashed into me was tremendous, and I marveled at my self-control for not storming over and yanking my uncle away from her.

They appeared engaged in casual conversation, wearing smiles that only fueled my frustration.

My mind raced with conflicting thoughts. Was Sophia truly working for my uncle?

But then, I questioned why they would openly expose their cooperation for me to see.

Maybe she didn't recognize Francisco as my uncle crossed my mind, but I quickly dismissed it.

It was unlikely, especially given the lengths she had gone to extract information from my laptop. A fact she still does not have a clue I know about.

As I observed from a distance, the puzzle pieces eluded me. Was this yet another scheme to trick me off guard and deceive me?

My thoughts were in chaos as I tried to make sense of the situation, to decipher the dynamics between them.

My attention sharpened as I saw Francisco lean in closer to Sophia, and her expression shifted from polite engagement to surprise and discomfort.

It was a subtle change, but I had grown adept at reading people's expressions, especially Sophia's, with how long I'd been observing.

She began to step away, clearly wanting to extricate herself from the conversation. Yet, Francisco's grip on her arm stopped her in her tracks.

A surge of protectiveness coursed through me. Despite the complex web of emotions between Sophia and me, I couldn't stand seeing her uncomfortable

and trapped in a situation she wanted to escape.

My jaw tightened, and I found myself striding purposefully toward them, determined to intervene before things escalated further.

As I approached, I caught Sophia's eye for a brief moment. Her expression held a mix of surprise and relief, as if she hadn't expected me to come to her aid but was also grateful that I had.

I met Francisco's gaze with a steely glare, my anger barely contained beneath the surface.

"Francisco," I said evenly, my voice carrying a hint of warning. "Is everything all right here?"

Francisco turned his attention toward me, his expression shifting from a casual smile to something more guarded.

"Matteo," he greeted with a nod. "Just having a pleasant conversation with one of your employees."

Sophia's discomfort was palpable, and I couldn't ignore the tension in the air. I looked at her and then back at Francisco, my tone firm.

"I think Sophia has had a long day. She must be tired."

Francisco's lips curved into a polite smile, but his eyes remained sharp.

"Of course, Matteo. I was sharing some insights about the company's philanthropic efforts with...Sophia, here."

My teeth gritted at how obviously he pronounced her name, but my expression remained blank otherwise.

I could tell there was more to his words than met the eye, but I didn't have the time or patience to engage in a power play with him.

Instead, I turned my attention to Sophia, offering her a reassuring smile.

"Why don't you take a break, Sophia? Enjoy the rest of the evening."

Sophia's relief was evident as she nodded, her gaze flickering briefly to

Francisco before she excused herself.

As she walked away, I couldn't help but feel a surge of protectiveness and a burning desire to shield her from whatever game my uncle was playing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, keeping my voice low yet laced with a sharp edge.

"Matteo, is this how you talk to family?" Francisco chuckled, casually swiping a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray.

His demeanor was irritatingly composed, as if he hadn't just stirred up a storm by cornering Sophia.

"You don't get to play the family card," I shot back, my jaw clenched tightly.

"This event is for the company, not for whatever scheming you have in mind."

Francisco's chuckle grated on my nerves. "Ah, always the fiery one, Matteo, but mark my words, this company will soon belong to me."

I couldn't help but laugh, a dry, cynical sound. "Is that your fantasy, Uncle? Because in reality, you'll never get your hands on this company."

His smile faded, and his façade of composure cracked for a moment. "You're quite the optimist, aren't you?"

"Optimism and reality often align," I retorted, satisfaction filling me as I hit a nerve.

Francisco's tone turned colder as he spoke, his words edged with a venomous undertone.

"Enjoy your little company while it lasts, Matteo, and relay my farewell to the charming Miss Sophia."

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving me angry and uneasy. I caught Antonio's eye, gesturing for him to follow and tail Francisco. My uncle's sudden appearance was clearly part of a larger game I couldn't

ignore.

Turning my attention back to the event, I found Sophia standing by the table, a non-alcoholic wine glass in her hand.

The soft glow of the lights danced in her eyes, but a hint of lingering unease didn't escape my notice. With each step closer, my concern deepened.

"Everything alright?" I asked, my tone gentle and filled with genuine concern.

I wanted to reassure her to dispel any discomfort that might have taken root in her.

She gave me a reassuring smile, but I could see the shadow behind it. "Yes, I'm fine. Just caught off guard by unexpected guests."

I nodded, understanding the sentiment all too well. "Events like these can bring surprises."

Sophia's laughter was soft, a fleeting melody that matched the ambiance of the evening. "Tell me about it. Sometimes, you never know who you'll run into."

As we exchanged words, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more beneath the surface, hidden behind the small talk.

The unspoken tension between us seemed to ebb and flow like an undercurrent, and I wanted to bridge the gap, to bring our connection back into focus.

But the event wasn't the place for heavy discussions, and I was acutely aware of the prying eyes surrounding us.

So, I settled for a small smile, hoping to convey a sense of comfort. "Well, if you need an escape from the chaos, feel free to find me."

Sophia's eyes met mine as if the world around us faded momentarily. The unspoken words hung in the air, a promise of understanding and support.

She hesitated briefly before speaking, her voice soft but curious. "You seem to know that man from earlier."

I met her gaze directly; my expression was guarded yet sincere. "We're not on good terms, and I advise you to steer clear of him."

Sophia's lips curved into a wry smile. "Noted. Thanks for the warning."

As the night continued, I couldn't help but appreciate the small moments of normalcy amidst the chaos.

Sophia's presence was a welcomed distraction from the chaos that my uncle's appearance had caused.

Even though I was still trying to piece together his motives, I knew I wouldn't let anyone jeopardize the company or the tentative bond between Sophia and me.

At the same time, I supposed I had him to thank for closing the distance between us.

Chapter 19

Sophia

Ever since the day I had extracted the data from Matteo's laptop, a new layer had been added to the enigma that was Matteo De Luca.

As I delved into the files, I uncovered an unexpected and somewhat baffling side of him.

The large sums of money he had been donating to orphanages, charities, and NGOs starkly contrasted with the image I had formed of him.

The data revealed his consistent and substantial contributions to various causes, reflecting compassion and generosity that seemed incongruent with his reputation as a dangerous man.

The orphanages he supported, the scholarships he funded, and the medical centers he aided painted a picture of a man actively working to positively impact the world, starkly contrasting his more questionable dealings.

The shift in my perception of Matteo was a whirlwind of emotions that left me grappling with many conflicting feelings.

How could a man who donated so much to charity and was seemingly kind-hearted also be entrenched in a world of shadows and secrecy?

The duality of his character both intrigued and bewildered me, casting a new light on the enigma he presented.

My changed opinion of him stirred turmoil within me, one that manifested in the way I struggled to interact with him.

The weight of my previous assumptions and the coldness I had displayed towards him contrasted starkly with the newfound understanding I had gained.

It was as though I was treading on unfamiliar terrain, unsure how to navigate this new dynamic between us.

But then came the company event, a night that shattered the layers of tension and uncertainty that had formed between us.

When he rescued me from the probing questions of the enigmatic Francisco, Matteo's intervention was a turning point.

At that moment, his humor and wit disarmed me, and I couldn't help but let down my guard.

His unexpected charm and genuine concern broke through the barriers I had erected, and I responded kindly.

Francisco's unsettling inquiries about Matteo and insistence on dancing with me initially made me suspicious.

But in the face of his charm, my curiosity got better. As he guided me through the dance floor, our conversation flowed effortlessly.

For the first time, I saw a side of him that wasn't entangled in the complexities of my past interactions with Matteo.

The awkwardness that had tainted our interactions was replaced by a newfound ease, a shared understanding of the contradictions that made up our lives.

As the night unfolded, I couldn't help but relish the moments we spent together, our laughter cutting through the air as we exchanged stories and shared anecdotes.

It was a welcome respite from the tensions that had haunted our exchanges, a glimpse into a different side of the man who had once been a mystery to me.

Each day, I found myself drawn to Matteo in ways I couldn't quite explain.

The memory of our shared moments, the electric current of unspoken tension that seemed to buzz between us, and the knowledge that he existed in a gray

area rather than a simple dichotomy of good and bad all combined to create an irresistibly compelling force.

My curiosity and attraction grew stronger despite my reservations and our secrets.

Though it didn't mean he automatically became a good person because of what I had found, it meant I could give him the benefit of the doubt.

Working together day in and day out only served to amplify the emotions I felt for Matteo.

The more I got to know him, the more his layers unfurled before me, revealing a complexity I hadn't expected.

Despite my reservations and the secrets still veiled between us, my curiosity and attraction grew stronger with each interaction.

Learning about his charitable activities didn't instantly transform him into a completely different person, but it did add nuances to his character that made it harder to dismiss him as just a shadowy figure.

However, as the days passed and our collaboration continued, the professional and personal lines blurred.

Working together so closely only intensified the unspoken tension, making every shared glance and subtle touch feel charged with an energy I couldn't ignore.

As the days melted into one another, our collaboration seemed to lessen our distance.

The distinction between professional and personal blurred, and the unspoken tension simmering beneath the surface grew more palpable.

Every shared task, every exchanged glance, seemed to charge the atmosphere with an energy that was impossible to ignore.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, we were still at the

company, working on a project that demanded our attention.

The day's weariness had taken its toll, leaving us with appearances that were no longer as polished as they had been in the morning.

Matteo's top buttons were undone, revealing the alluring curve of his Adam's apple and the enticing expanse of his collarbones.

His sleeves were rolled up, exposing the strength in his forearms. I, too, had let some buttons of my blouse go.

My hair was slightly in disarray from my constant habit of running my fingers through it in contemplation.

During our focused collaboration, Matteo's voice broke the concentration. "Sophia, come here for a moment," he requested, his tone a mixture of professionalism and something deeper that set my heart racing.

Walking over to his side, I looked at his laptop screen, where he showed me a cybersecurity section he wanted to implement in the company.

As we discussed the details, our proximity slowly stirred emotions simmering beneath the surface for far too long.

Bending down slightly to get a better view of the screen, my senses were flooded with his presence, scent, and body warmth.

The air was now charged with a different energy, a tension that had built up over time.

Suddenly, I turned to face him, my heart pounding. Our eyes locked, and I could see all the desire and longing we had been trying to suppress in that intense gaze.

The room seemed to close around us, and all the unspoken words seemed to hang in the air.

In that charged moment, all restraint crumbled. Without hesitation, without second-guessing, we lunged toward each other.

Our lips met in a passionate collision that spoke of months of tension and emotions held back. Our kisses were desperate, fueled by a hunger growing for too long.

Matteo's hands found their way to my waist, pulling me closer as I straddled his legs while my fingers entangled themselves in his hair, pulling him in deeper.

The kiss was a chaotic mix of urgency and raw desire. It was a kiss that held within it all the pent-up emotions, all the longing, and the realization that no matter how much we had fought it, we were irrevocably drawn to each other. Matteo whirled the spinny chair and moved us away from the table, allowing us to explore each other without any hindrance. I let out a high-pitched whine when his hands slid down to my ass.

"Shh, baby," Matteo's voice rumbled against the warmth of my neck. My head tilted upward, and my eyes fluttered shut as a shuddering breath escaped my painted lips. "Just relax. I'm going to make you feel amazing."

I hummed softly, my hand finding its way into Matteo's hair as he lazily pressed open-mouthed kisses onto my pale skin.

His lips occasionally nipped and sucked, leaving a trail of red marks in their wake. Slowly, his kisses ascended toward the corner of my jaw, where he left a tantalizing mark.

A groan escaped me as my thighs instinctively parted when Matteo's fingers brushed the inside of them.

With a firm tug, my skirt bunched around my waist, and his lips traced a heated path from my neck to my jaw.

I stole a glance at him, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. The corner of his lips twitched upwards, desire and amusement flickering in his gaze.

Matteo's fingers traced delicate patterns over the fabric of my lingerie,

exerting gentle pressure when he circled over my sensitive spot.

I felt the dampness spreading as my body responded to his touch. His other hand deftly undid the top buttons of my blouse, his palm cupping and teasing my breast through the fabric of my bra.

His lips descended, leaving a trail of heated marks before pulling away. A whimper of protest left me, my hand reaching out as if to guide his head back down, but he halted me with a firm, seductive gaze.

"Don't be naughty," he chided, his lips curling into a knowing smile. Matteo pressed a tender kiss to my mouth, and I sighed, content and craving more.

His eyes locked onto mine as he guided me off his lap, his skilled fingers deftly working on the buttons of his trousers.

"Thank you for following instructions, *Principessa (Princess)*," he murmured, rewarding me with a quick kiss that I attempted to deepen, only to have him pull away, his fingers deftly fumbling with his boxer briefs.

I whimpered in anticipation, my hands reaching out instinctively to help him. He inhaled sharply, freeing himself from his constraints. A well-manicured hand took hold of his shaft, his jaw tensing from the surge of pleasure.

As I knelt between his legs, a line of saliva dribbled onto the head of his erection before I took him into my mouth.

Matteo groaned above me, his fingers finding solace in the tangle of my dark hair.

"You're incredibly skilled at this, princess," he sighed as I looked up at him through my lashes, warmth spreading in my stomach at his praise.

I doubled my efforts, my tongue and lips working in harmony. A gentle push on the back of my head encouraged me to take him even deeper, and despite the slight gag reflex, I adjusted willingly.

As I continued, a moan escaped me at the fleeting thought of someone

walking into the office, even though I knew it was unlikely given that we were the only two people around, save for the security guards.

Yet, the tantalizing idea added to the excitement, tingling my senses. The vibrations from my moan elicited a shudder from him.

He pushed my head away gently, and I settled back on my ankles, my gaze locked onto his with pupils dilated in desire.

The approving curve of his lips sent my heart racing, and he lifted my chin with a seductive yet tender touch, drawing me into a heated kiss.

Our lips met in a passionate dance, and as we pulled away, I found myself panting for air, my hunger for him only growing stronger.

"Come on, *bella ragazza (beautiful girl)*," he murmured, his words a warm caress against my lips.

"As much as I'd love to continue this, we've been cooped up in this office for far too long."

Suppressing the protests that threatened to escape, I held back my retorts.

He smirked knowingly, rebuttoning my blouse and granting me some modesty despite the evident marks on my collarbone and neck.

My smudged lipstick was left unattended, but he assisted me to my feet with a gentle touch.

When I turned to inquire about something, he shook his head with a self-assured expression.

He tidied himself up, adjusting his briefs, zipping his trousers, and fastening the button. Rising to his feet, he approached me, guiding me backward until my desk met the backs of my thighs.

He lifted me with care, seating me on the surface as he positioned himself between my legs, his kiss a fiery display of passion.

Our tongues entwined leisurely, my eyes fluttering shut as a moan escaped

the kiss, my nails lightly grazing the nape of his neck.

A groan slipped from me when he pulled away, and he reassured me with a gentle squeeze of my hip.

"Just a little longer," he promised, his voice a sensual murmur that sent shivers down my spine.

As we emerged from Matteo's office, the security guard stationed by the elevator entrance seemed taken aback.

Heat flooded my cheeks, fearing that the guard had overheard or suspected something.

Matteo drew me close to his side, his lips brushing my ear as he quietly instructed me to bid farewell to the guard.

My face burning, I complied, my head dipped in embarrassment as I hastily walked into the waiting elevator, seeking refuge from further embarrassment.

Matteo followed, his embrace seemingly innocent as we stood in the elevator.

However, the undeniable presence pressing against my back said otherwise.

I allowed a subtle sway of my hips, feeling a sharp intake of breath against my neck and relishing in the soft kisses he peppered there.

Right now, my mind was fogged with desire, and I wasn't sure if I would regret this the next day, but I was going to allow myself to succumb to the desire that had been steadily increasing this once.

Chapter 20

Matteo

Urgently, we both moved, our arms brushing against each other as we hurriedly discarded our pants. We stumbled awkwardly towards the bed, shedding our clothes along the way.

Swiftly unhooking her bra, I used a deft twist of my fingers behind her back. Her hands were everywhere, tracing over my chest, exploring my arms, guiding me towards the bed.

I followed her lead onto the comforter, hungrily capturing one of her nipples in my mouth.

Fingers dug into my backside, leaving crescent-shaped marks on my skin, and I groaned against her breast, savoring its softness.

It felt like we were wrapped up in our world, nothing else existing beyond our entangled bodies.

Luckily, despite the heady fog of desire dulling my thinking faculties, I still had enough sense to drive us to a hotel.

No matter the lust, I felt strongly that I would not risk bringing her to my house. It would cause a lot of trouble.

Arching her head, she gasped softly as my mouth worked over her nipple. Pulling at my hips, she urged me closer, but I knew plunging into her too quickly wouldn't be the best move.

My entire body was ablaze, nerve endings sparking in ways I'd never experienced before.

For a moment, I lifted myself, indicating that she should move up towards the pillows. Still cocooned in the comforter, she complied, and I descended to take her other breast into my mouth.

She ceased pulling at my hips, her fingers tangling in my hair instead. She squirmed beneath me as I slid my hand down her stomach, tracing the path of her pelvis, my fingers inching their way between her thighs.

In response, she widened her legs, pressing against my hand as I lightly brushed a finger over her clit.

I released her nipple with a hint of reluctance, shifting my focus to other areas of exploration. Denied the pleasure of her mouth, I wanted to savor every part of her that I could.

Kissing and licking my way over her ribs and down her stomach, I noted her belly trembling beneath my lips.

I exercised restraint, avoiding the impulse to leave marks that might not be appreciated in the morning light.

Continuing my journey downward, I shuffled along the bed, feeling my erection drag across the comforter. My legs were awkward, but my attention was solely on hers.

One arm slipped beneath her thigh, raising it with my shoulder. Nestling my face into her curls, I inhaled her scent and tasted her hot folds with my tongue.

Flicking my tongue against her clit, I relished the moan that escaped her lips

and the sensation of her heel nudging against my back.

Sealing my mouth around her, I began with gentle suction, gauging her body's response. I reached up to cup my hand over the curve of her breast, my thumb brushing against her damp, erect nipple.

Taking a momentary break from her clit, I moved lower, deeper, sliding my tongue over her opening before delving inside. She arched against me, her fingers pulling at my hair, her breaths coming in uneven gasps.

Locating her clit with my other thumb, I rubbed it gently while exploring her inner depths with my tongue.

I hummed in satisfaction at the eager reception of her body as I guided her toward her first climax, each movement of my tongue perfectly timed.

I felt her orgasm building, a tidal wave of sensation she rode. She shivered as she came around my tongue, suppressing her sounds by pressing her lips together.

I focused on her thigh, allowing her to catch her breath as I peppered kisses along her leg. My hands roamed her stomach and sides, my palms caressing her skin. Her nails dug into my shoulders.

"I want you inside me," she managed to say between breaths. A surge of heat coursed through me at her words.

"Mhm...", I agreed, my aching erection yearning for her. Shifting my hips, I positioned myself at her entrance, the throbbing length of my cock demanding release.

Her walls still convulsed, spasming in anticipation, and I eased myself into her wet pussy in a single, slick motion.

My hands gripped the bedspread as I looked down at her, my gaze locked onto her face before pressing my lips to her collarbone and then the sensitive hollow of her shoulder.

Her walls clenched around my cock, her body pulsating around me. I couldn't hold back any longer. I came almost immediately, buried deep inside her, my hips still as I pulsed and emptied myself into her body.

It was an electrifying moment, and I wished for time to freeze. After a few seconds, her leg fell away, and she sank back onto the bed, her chest rising and falling as she struggled to catch her breath.

As our breaths slowly steadied, a strange sense of clarity washed over me. My mind felt clear and muddled simultaneously, inundated with thoughts that raced like wildfire.

The intensity of what we'd just shared was undeniable, and while I didn't regret it, a wave of uncertainty crashed over me.

What were we? What did this mean? I was both exhilarated and apprehensive, caught in the crossfire of desire and confusion.

Sophia cleared her throat, breaking the moment of introspection. Her voice, though slightly strained, cut through the charged atmosphere.

"I'm going to take a shower," she said, her words almost a whisper as if she were grappling with the aftermath of our passionate encounter.

She covered her body with a blanket as she stood, and I couldn't help but feel amused. What was the point of such an action when I had already seen and explored every inch of her curve?

Despite the amusement, I refrained from commenting. I didn't want to risk causing tension, especially if she regretted our actions.

My heart danced on the edge of relief when she didn't immediately storm off, expressing regret or anger.

Still, my smile dimmed as the weight of the situation settled in my mind. Sophia's association with my uncle's potential treachery gnawed at my thoughts.

At this juncture, I could no longer deny the feelings I was slowly developing for her, and the thought of Sophia being involved in my uncle's sinister plans was unbearable. I knew I had to investigate her background thoroughly.

I would need to pull no stops to determine whether she was his informant. Only then could my mind rest in peace.

It was a lie. My mind could only rest in peace if she were found innocent; otherwise, I wouldn't know how crushed I would be if she weren't.

My phone rang as I wrestled with these thoughts, jolting me from contemplation. Antonio's name flashed on the screen. I answered, and his voice was terse and to the point. "George is ready to talk."

I knew that what he had to say could be the key to unraveling the truth about my father's death.

With a heavy sigh, I knocked on the bathroom door, where Sophia was showering. "Sophia, I have to go," I called out. "Something urgent has come up."

There was a muffled acknowledgment from the other side. I could imagine her confusion, but this couldn't wait.

I continued, my voice softer this time, "You can stay here for the night. We'll talk when I get back."

Before leaving, I hesitated momentarily, then turned back to face the closed bathroom door.

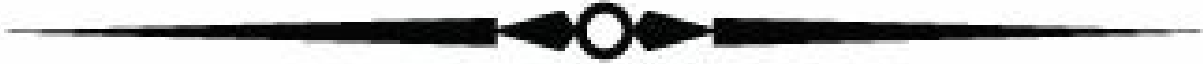
"And just so you know," I said, my words rushed but sincere, "I don't regret what happened between us. We still need to talk, so there's no misunderstanding."

I heard a small, understanding smile in her voice as she replied, "I understand, Matteo."

With a nod, I left the room, locking it behind me. As I exited the hotel, my

thoughts were divided between the urgent situation with George and my complicated feelings for Sophia.

Making my way to the location Antonio had given me, I was lost in my thoughts. As I approached the location, my heart raced with anticipation and anxiety.



The abandoned warehouse was cloaked in darkness, the only light source coming from a single overhead lamp hanging over a table.

As I entered, my footsteps echoing against the concrete floor, the tension in the air was palpable. Antonio stood by the table, his gaze fixed on the haggard and pale figure seated there – George.

The weariness etched on George's face mirrored the turmoil within him. His complexion was ashen, starkly contrasting to the healthy color he might have possessed before.

A week of confinement had taken its toll, leaving him looking like a shadow of his former self.

George's eyes held a dullness that spoke of exhaustion and desperation. Dark circles framed his eyes, evidence of restless nights and his torment.

His cheeks seemed sunken, and his skin clung tightly to his bones. His hair hung in disarray, and his clothes were wrinkled and soiled.

He had been denied even the most basic comforts, existing solely on meager food and water rations. Exactly as I had ordered it to be.

As he sat there, slumped and his hands resting on the table's surface, they trembled slightly – a testament to his weakened state and emotional weight.

His lips were parched, and his throat was likely dry from days of inadequate hydration.

With a calm but determined demeanor, I walked over to the table and sat, facing George. Antonio's presence beside him was a stark reminder that caution was essential, even in this fragile state.

George's eyes lifted, and a mixture of surprise and fear flashed across his features.

"Matteo," he stammered, his voice shaking.

"George," I replied evenly, my voice blending intensity and resolve. "I see you remember me. We have some unfinished business, you and I."

George's lips trembled. It was clear he didn't know why he was there. I leaned forward slightly, my gaze narrowing.

"You're here because you have the answers I need. About my father's death."

He looked away, his jaw clenching, but I wasn't about to back down. I gestured subtly to Antonio, a silent signal that we couldn't afford to waste time. The gravity of the situation demanded swift action.

Antonio, his expression unyielding, moved closer to George. The room was filled with an unsettling tension as the inevitability of what was to come hung heavily in the air.

Antonio's hands, usually steady and precise, were now instruments of coercion.

As Antonio's methods began, George's body convulsed involuntarily. The pain was evident in his clenched teeth and the sweat beads forming on his forehead.

His weakened state made him susceptible, and the torment didn't take long to break through his resolve.

Gasping for breath, George's head hung low, his body trembling. The ordeal

had stripped away whatever remained of his defiance.

His voice, strained and hoarse, finally shattered the silence that had enveloped the room. "I'll talk," he croaked, his admission bringing a small smile to my face.

Antonio stepped back, creating a bit of distance, but the charged atmosphere in the room persisted. My focus remained unwavering as I leaned in, fixating on George's eyes, searching for even the faintest trace of deception.

"Tell me everything-" I pressed, "-about my father's accident," my voice edged with urgency.

George's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, his gaze skittering around the room, unable to hold my steady stare.

Finally, his eyes met mine, and he released a heavy sigh that seemed to carry the burden of his guilt. With a somber, defeated demeanor, he began to speak. In a voice laden with confession, George unveiled the truth that had long been veiled in shadows. He unraveled the web of deceit that surrounded my father's death.

It was a tale of betrayal and corruption, a story that implicated not just George but many others who had conspired to hide the malevolent truth.

He recounted how he had been bribed, a sinister exchange that had led him down a treacherous path.

The case, which should have been a pursuit of justice, had been compromised from the start. He confessed that he had been present at the scene, meticulously arranging the evidence to fit the narrative of an accident.

And chillingly, he admitted to being there when the collision occurred – a deliberate act meant to snuff out my father's life.

My fists clenched as rage surged within me, my grip on control tenuous at best. George's words painted a horrifying picture, one that shattered the

façade of innocence surrounding my father's tragic fate.

Seized by a volatile mix of emotions, I lunged forward, my hand gripping George's collar with an intensity that mirrored the fire in my eyes.

Fear and desperation etched across his face, he pleaded, shouting that he hadn't been the one who had brought an end to my father's life.

The words hung in the air, an admission reverberating through the room, amplifying the weight of our unearthing truth.

A chill coursed down my spine, and I froze, my gaze locking onto George's tearful eyes. His words, seemingly innocuous, held a revelation.

He had said it – my father was still alive after the crash. The implication was clear: someone had taken advantage of my father's vulnerability and pain to silence him forever.

In a cold and calculated voice, I demanded, "Who was it?"

George's cries continued, his words coming out in a jumbled stream of protest and despair. But through the chaos, a name emerged.

The room fell into a haunting silence, the revelation like a storm that left devastation in its wake.

Without uttering a word, my hand moved with a purpose almost detached from my consciousness. Swiftly, almost mechanically, I reached into Antonio's back pocket and retrieved the gun.

Despite my familiarity with the weapon's weight, it felt strangely cold and heavy against my palm.

George's cries had quieted, his eyes wide with terror and realization.

Time seemed to slow as I raised the gun, my finger tightening around the trigger. A resounding crack pierced the air, cutting through the suffocating tension like a blade.

At that moment, everything stood still as George's cries abruptly ceased.

His body slumped in the chair, eyes vacant and devoid of the terror that had consumed them just seconds before.

The room was consumed by an eerie silence, starkly contrasting with the noises that had filled it moments ago.

Meanwhile, the name of the person who had murdered my father echoed in my head.

Francisco Cortigini.

Chapter 21

Sophia

'Should I stay or should I leave?' That was the question swirling around in my head as I emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a plush bathrobe and gently patting my hair with a fluffy white towel.

I settled onto the bed with a sigh, my thoughts in a whirlwind. It was a strange mix of emotions that had settled in me.

On the one hand, a part of me felt a touch of insanity at the realization that I had given in to my desires and allowed myself to be with Matteo.

But on the other hand, there was a surprising sense of calm that seemed to envelop me.

What was the use of continuing to battle against our undeniable attraction? It was staring us in the face, undeniable and inescapable.

And it was pretty clear that I wasn't the only one caught in this internal tug-of-war. Matteo wasn't immune, either.

But that led to the big question: What was next? Where did we go from here? We had ventured into a territory that was more than just physical.

It was uncharted waters for both of us. It was like we had opened the door to

something exciting and unnerving.

With the towel discarded on the side table, I lounged back against the pillows, my gaze drifting up to the ceiling as if I expected it to give me some revelation.

Of course, the ceiling remained steadfastly unhelpful in that regard.

My mind recalled Matteo's sudden departure and the cryptic nature of whatever had called him away. His tone had been serious, hinting at something significant, maybe even another one of his secretive missions.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. Matteo certainly had his fair share of enigmatic secrets.

He was like a riddle, and every time I thought I was getting close to solving it, he'd present another twist that sent me right back to the beginning.

His aura of mystery was one of the things that had drawn me in, like a magnet pulling me toward the unknown.

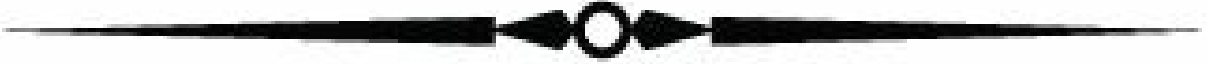
With a sleepy yawn, I realized that overanalyzing the situation wouldn't get me anywhere. Matteo had mentioned that we would talk about whatever was happening between us.

Whether I was eager or apprehensive about that discussion was a bridge I'd cross when I got to it.

Shaking off the mental turmoil, I snuggled deeper into the cozy pillows. Sleep was a tempting escape, a brief hiatus from the tangled web of thoughts and emotions.

As my eyelids grew heavier, I sighed softly, hoping that tomorrow's daylight might bring a bit more clarity to the swirling mess of my mind.

And with that fleeting hope, I closed my eyes, letting the unanswered questions and unspoken sentiments drift away into the realm of dreams.



The next morning, I sat by the window in my hotel room, cradling a cup of coffee. The previous night's events were still fresh in my mind, and I couldn't help but feel a mixture of emotions.

I picked up my phone and dialed Keisha's number, needing someone to talk to about everything that had happened.

"Hey, Keisha," I greeted her as she answered the call.

"Hey, Sophia! How was the charity event?" Keisha's voice carried her usual cheerfulness.

I hesitated for a moment, not quite sure how to express what I was feeling.

"It's been... eventful, to say the least."

Keisha's curiosity was palpable. "Eventful? Tell me more!"

I took a deep breath, deciding to start with the positive aspects of the event.

"Well, the event itself was nice. We managed to raise a good amount for the charity. The decorations were beautiful, and people seemed to be enjoying themselves."

"That's great to hear! But I sense there's more to the story," Keisha prodded.

I chuckled, Keisha's intuition never failing to amaze me. "Yeah, there was a... slightly creepy encounter. This guy approached me, and he gave me the creeps. But, you know, Matteo stepped in and managed to diffuse the situation."

Keisha's laughter rang through the phone. "Matteo to the rescue, huh? That guy doesn't seem to leave your side."

I chuckled in agreement, though I didn't elaborate further. "Yeah, something like that. But that's not why I called you."

Keisha's tone turned more serious. "Alright, spill it. What's going on?"

Taking a deep breath, I hesitated before finally letting the words tumble out.

"One thing led to another, and... I ended up spending the night with Matteo."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, and then Keisha's voice erupted in excitement. "Oh my gosh, Sophia! Are you serious?!"

I couldn't help but laugh at her reaction. "Yes, I am serious."

Keisha's excitement was contagious. "Wow, that's quite a development! How did that happen?"

I sighed, trying to find the right words. "It's hard to explain. We were talking, and then somehow, things changed, and... well, you know."

Keisha's playfully teasing tone was back. "Oh, come on, Sophia! Details!"

I blushed even though she couldn't see me. "Keisha, it's not like that! I don't want to give you all the details."

She laughed. "Alright, alright, I won't pry. But I'm thrilled for you, Sophia. It sounds like something straight out of a romance novel!"

As her laughter faded, Keisha's tone turned more thoughtful. "You know, Sophia, I can't help but sense that you're not as happy about it as you should be."

I sighed, grateful for her perceptiveness. "Yeah, you're right. I mean, I don't even know what to feel. I've finally stopped denying my feelings for him, but now I'm unsure if I want to pursue anything with him."

There was a pause on the other end before Keisha spoke again. "So, where is he now?"

"He left last night," I answered. "Something urgent came up, and he had to go. But he said we'll talk about it."

Keisha's voice held a hint of encouragement. "Sophia, the fact that he wants to talk about it is a good sign. Someone who didn't have genuine feelings wouldn't bother addressing what happened."

I knew she was right, but a small part of me couldn't help but be apprehensive. "I get that, Keisha. It's just... It's already the next day, and he hasn't even sent a message or anything."

Keisha's tone turned soothing. "Sophia, calm down. Patience is key here. You know how busy his life is. He'll reach out when he can."

I knew she was making sense, but my anxious thoughts had a way of taking over. "I guess you're right. I need to stop overthinking."

Keisha's laughter tinkled through the phone. "Exactly! And remember, I'm here to distract you from those overthinking sessions anytime."

I chuckled. "Thanks, Keisha. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably drive yourself crazy," she quipped playfully.

I laughed, too, feeling lighter than before. "Yeah, probably."

After a few more minutes of chatting, we ended the call. I set my phone down on the bedside table and stared at it momentarily.

A small sigh escaped my lips as I found myself once again lost in my thoughts. I couldn't shake off the curiosity about the call that had pulled Matteo away last night.

It must have been something significant to warrant his abrupt departure.

I picked up my phone again, my fingers hovering over the screen. Should I send him a message to ask if everything is okay?

With a resigned sigh, I stood up. Patience, I reminded myself. Patience was key, as Keisha had wisely pointed out.

Matteo would reach out when he was ready, and until then, all I could do was wait and try not to let my mind run wild with unnecessary speculations.

I decided to give myself a break from work. I dressed in comfortable clothes and left the hotel, heading home instead of going to the office. The fresh air and the familiar streets helped to ease my mind as I walked.

Work could wait for a day. I doubted Matteo would complain about it. It was strange how quickly he had become a significant presence in my life, even if it was just for a short time.

I couldn't deny the connection that had formed between us, and as confusing as it was, I knew I wanted it.

As I entered my apartment, I glanced at my phone, wondering if there would be a message from him.

But there was none. Patience, Sophia.

Patience.

Chapter 22

Matteo

Sitting in the plush surroundings of my study, I held a glass of wine and stared at nothing. On the inside, I was in a whirlwind of anger and disbelief. On the surface, I maintained a composed demeanor, hiding the storm within me.

Francisco Cortigini – my uncle, my blood – the man I once admired and looked up to, had orchestrated my father's death.

It was a betrayal that left me seething. I tried to keep a calm facade, even as a tempest of emotions churned beneath.

The desire to act, to confront my uncle, surged through me. The man who played a part in taking away someone I held dear. The mere thought made me want to spit in disgust or even strangle him.

I tightened my grip on the wine glass, feeling the coolness of the glass against my skin. It was as if my knuckles were trying to channel all the frustration and anger that was boiling inside me.

I couldn't wrap my head around how he could kill his brother. His own family.

Why did he do it? No excuse was justifiable, no matter how much I tried to think of the reason behind his actions. Was it because he wanted to be the head of the family, so he killed my father?

Bullshit?

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself not to let this anger get the best of me. Smashing the wine glass against the wall might feel satisfying for a second, but it wouldn't solve anything.

And I didn't want to deal with the aftermath of broken glass and spilled wine right now.

So, exhaling slowly, I tried to focus on letting go of the tension in my hands. I knew I needed a clear head to deal with this situation.

I took another deliberate sip of the wine as the bitterness of my thoughts seemed to fade, replaced by a need for careful consideration and strategic planning. I understood the importance of playing this situation smartly.

Glancing at the pile of documents on my table, I couldn't help but feel anticipation and frustration.

These papers contained the information Antonio had meticulously compiled, revealing the intricate web of deceit my uncle had spun behind my back. Each sheet held a puzzle piece waiting to be fit into the bigger picture.

Picking up the topmost document, I began to read. The words on the pages spelled out my uncle's detestable activities, highlighting that he had restarted a heroin business.

I had adamantly refused to fund the business, claiming it contradicted our principles. So, he used the money he had pulled out of the orphanages to do this.

As I read through the details, my anger simmered beneath the surface. The documents painted a damning picture of his double standards and disregard

for the core values that had guided our family for generations.

Seeing how easily he had discarded our code of loyalty and integrity was infuriating.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to remain composed. Leaning back in my chair, I set the document aside and stared at the pile. My mind was racing, formulating plans and counter plans.

I reached for another document, my fingers curling around the edge, and as I flipped it open, the words that met my eyes ignited a fresh surge of anger within me.

This document revealed something even more despicable – my uncle's involvement in a human trafficking business.

The information across the page painted a grim picture of the lives he had callously exploited for profit.

Disgust churned within me as I read through the details of his abominable activities. How could he sink so low?

How could he betray our family's values and basic human decency? The trafficking of innocent women, their lives shattered for his monetary gain. It was sickening to my core.

My hands clenched into fists, the paper in my grip crumpling as my rage surged.

The orphanages he had cut funds from and the lives he had destroyed with his drug and trafficking operations, all while pretending to uphold honor within the mafia.

This was the true face of Francisco Cortigini.

Fury burned in my veins as I dropped the document onto the table. Francisco's actions were beyond redemption.

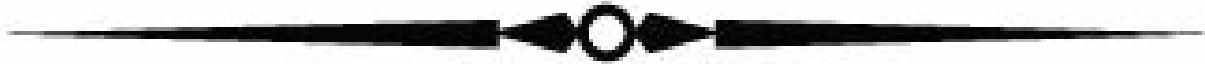
I snatched my phone and dialed Leo's number, my voice steely with

determination as I waited for him to pick up.

The truth needed to be exposed, and Francisco's actions would have severe consequences.

I didn't waste any time as Leo's voice crossed the line. "Leo, we need to meet immediately. It's about Francisco."

The urgency in my tone was palpable, and I disconnected the call before he could respond. My next call was to Antonio, my words clipped and resolute. "We have work to do."



The tension in the room was palpable in my study as Leo, Antonio, and I gathered around a table strewn with documents and maps.

It was time to strategize on how to deal with Francisco's growing businesses – a thorn in our sides that needed to be removed.

I would deal with Francisco in a way that would leave him with nothing. Instead of going after him directly, something I wasn't yet ready for, I would tear down his goals, slowly driving him to the brink of madness before finally tearing him down.

Antonio leaned forward, his expression serious. "Matteo, we've been digging into Francisco's operations, and we've managed to pinpoint the location of one of his warehouses where he's storing the drugs."

I nodded, my mind already spinning possibilities. "*Buon lavoro (Good work)*, Antonio."

I glanced between them, a plan forming in my mind. "Here's what we're going to do. Antonio, dispatch our men to locate that warehouse. Once you

have the exact location, make an anonymous call to the police, tipping them off about an illegal operation. Leo, you can direct them to raid the place, seize the drugs, and dent Francisco's new venture. Also, if you can find evidence directly implicating Francisco, you know what to do."

I gave Leo a knowing glance, and he nodded.

Antonio nodded, jotting down notes on a pad of paper before him. "Got it. I'll handle the logistics and ensure the police get the necessary information."

I leaned forward, my gaze fixed on Antonio. "Antonio, I need you to gather a team of our best men and find out the whereabouts of the women who have already been trafficked. *Dobbiamo agire rapidamente (We must act quickly)*."

Antonio nodded, determination in his eyes. "*Consideralo fatto (Consider it done)*, Matteo. I'll assemble a team and start tracking down any leads we can find."

Leo chimed in, his voice unwavering. "I'll get in touch with the police. With their resources and connections, we can expedite locating the women and ensuring their safety."

I felt a surge of gratitude for Leo's dedication. "*Grazie (Thank you)*, Leo. That will speed up our efforts."

Our plan was straightforward – find the women who had fallen victim to Francisco's operations and ensure their rescue.

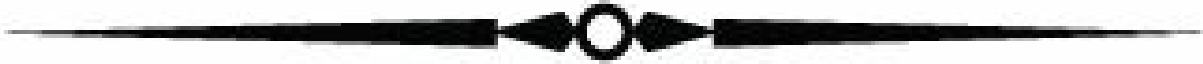
We couldn't let a moment slip by; every second counted when lives were on the line. However, we had to be careful so they wouldn't suspect anything and relocate the women.

Leo leaned back, a thoughtful expression on his face. "This will catch him off guard, so we must prepare for backlash. Francisco won't take this lying down, especially if you're not planning on hiding your involvement."

I tapped my fingers on the table, a steely resolve in my gaze. "*Hai ragione*

(You are right). We need to be ready for whatever retaliation he might attempt. This is the beginning of our battle, and we can't afford to lose ground."

The stakes were high, and we had to play this smart.



The plan had unfolded with surprising success. It had taken time, but Antonio had managed to dig up the location where the drugs were stashed, and after discreetly tipping off the police, a raid had been executed.

The drugs were seized, and a handful of Francisco's men were caught in the net.

But as Leo later informed me, these individuals were nothing more than foot soldiers in the grand scheme of things – they knew little that could incriminate Francisco. It was both a victory and a mild setback.

I leaned back in my chair, fingers tapping rhythmically on the desk as I considered the developments.

It wasn't all bad. After all, my vendetta against Francisco was far from over, and the fact that these underlings had been caught might prove useful in the long run.

I wanted to handle Francisco myself, to make him answer for his sins – especially the ones that had led to my father's death.

And then there was the matter of the trafficked women. Some had been successfully rescued, their lives spared from the clutches of that vile trade.

The police were working tirelessly to locate the others, and I knew that justice, in its own time, would be served to those responsible.

A smirk tugged at the corner of my lips as I imagined Francisco's reaction – his anger, frustration, and helplessness.

It was a satisfying thought that every move he made would bring him closer to his downfall.

I hadn't even gone to my company to ensure everything went well, not that my presence was always needed, but the fact that it had been quite a long time since I had seen Sophia made me feel uncomfortable.

I was used to seeing Sophia every day. Not only that, but the last time we saw each other was after we had fucked in the hotel.

I had taken off and even told her we would talk about 'us,' but three days had passed, and I hadn't even contacted her.

I knew my actions made it look like I was a dick, fucking her and then ignoring her, but I didn't know what to tell her.

How do I tell her that I had found out my uncle, the man who had disturbed her at the event, killed my father for reasons unknown, and I was planning on dealing with him by stripping him of his power, assets, and authority before finishing him off?

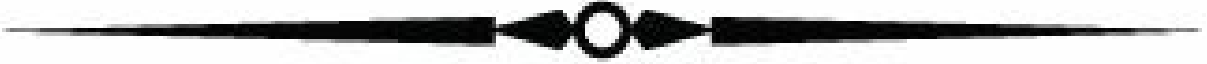
With a sigh, I reached for my phone, which I used for my daily activities, and pulled up Sophia's contact. There was no missed call or message.

Was she pissed off? If she was, I couldn't blame her. However, with all that was happening, I still didn't have time to talk with Sophia.

I could only message her that something important had come up and that I couldn't contact her until everything was settled before switching the phone off.

I couldn't afford for there to be any distraction, even if it were Sophia.

Especially if it was Sophia.



My phone buzzed on the desk, interrupting my focused reading. I picked it up and saw Antonio's name flashing on the screen. With a sense of anticipation, I answered the call.

"Matteo, listen," Antonio's voice was tense, and his words were rapid. "Francisco is on the move. He's heading to your location."

I couldn't help but smirk, a knowing smile curling my lips. Of course, my uncle's fury had led him straight to my doorstep.

His illicit businesses were disrupted, and he undoubtedly believed I was behind it. The realization that he was being cornered by his actions amused me.

"Thanks for the heads up, Antonio," I replied, my voice dripping with amusement. "Let's see how this unfolds."

After several more exchanges, I ended the call and set my phone down. It was time to witness the drama firsthand.

Leaving my study behind, I descended the grand staircase of my house. The air was charged with anticipation as I made my way to the foyer.

I could hear raised voices and commotion outside, indicating that my uncle had arrived, his anger preceding him like an invisible storm cloud.

As I reached the entrance, I found my men forming a human barrier, preventing Francisco from advancing further.

With his face flushed with rage, my uncle attempted to push past them, his voice strained with fury. I leaned against the doorframe, a smirk still playing on my lips.

"Matteo! You dare challenge me like this?" His words were laced with indignation and impotent rage.

I shrugged nonchalantly, maintaining my calm exterior. "Uncle Francisco, it seems you've taken quite an interest in my affairs."

He glared at me, his fists clenched. "You've been meddling with my businesses, trying to dismantle what I've worked so hard to build."

I raised an eyebrow, my smirk widening. "You mean the businesses that contradict our principles? I'm merely preserving our family's legacy."

He snarled, his frustration evident. "Don't pretend like you're doing this for the family. You're trying to undermine me."

I chuckled, shaking my head in mock disbelief. "Undermine you? No, Uncle, I'm simply cleaning up the mess you've made."

The tension in the room was palpable as our gazes locked in a silent battle of wills. My amusement was clear while he was in a storm of anger and embarrassment.

The seconds stretched on before I finally gestured to my men. "Escort my uncle off the premises. I'm busy."

"And also," I faced Francisco, "have the courtesy to inform me of your arrival."

I threw back the words he had disdainfully said to me weeks ago when I had gone to his house to demand an explanation for why he had cut the orphanage funding.

What went around came around.

As my men gently but firmly guided Francisco away, I watched with a satisfied smile. The storm had come to my doorstep, but I held the power in this confrontation.

It was time to make him realize that the consequences of his betrayal would

be far-reaching and irreversible.

Chapter 23

Sophia

Three days had passed since that intense night with Matteo, and a strange mix of emotions had occupied me.

It wasn't that we were avoiding each other, far from it. Rather, circumstances seemed to have conspired to keep us apart.

The first day after that night, I decided not to go to work, opting to give myself a bit of space to process everything that had happened.

But as the hours ticked by, my phone remained silent, void of any messages or calls from Matteo. I glanced at it more often than usual, a mixture of hope and anxiety curling within me.

The second day was no different. Matteo was nowhere to be seen at the office. It was strange, considering the frequency of our interactions before that night.

Questions whirled in my mind – did he regret what happened? Did he have second thoughts? Or was he just as unsure as I was about navigating this new chapter between us?

I couldn't deny the disappointment that crept in. I had thought there would

have been some form of communication. A text, a call, anything to acknowledge what had transpired, but the days passed silently.

It was the third day, and I sat at my desk in his office, which at this point had become *our* office.

Drumming my fingers lightly against the keyboard, I found my thoughts drifting back to that night.

The warmth of his touch, the intensity of his gaze, the way he made me feel desired and vulnerable all at once.

Part of me wanted to reach out, to break the silence and seek clarity, but another part hesitated, unsure if I was overthinking things or if there was a deeper reason for his absence.

Perhaps he was grappling with his own emotions, just as I was.

Maybe he was still dealing with the issue that had popped up, and three days didn't seem too long for him to handle it. He wasn't even coming to work.

As I was about to type out a message to Matteo, my phone buzzed with a notification.

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of his name, a mix of relief and anticipation flooding me. I quickly opened the message, eager to finally hear from him.

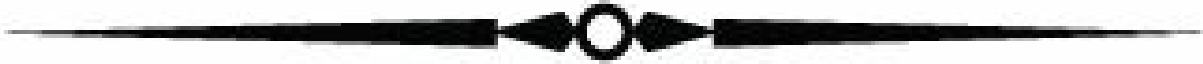
However, the words on the screen caused a mixed reaction within me. "Hey, Sophia, I'm sorry for not reaching out earlier. I'm dealing with something important right now, and I won't be able to talk or communicate for a while. I'll explain everything once this matter is resolved. Take care."

I sighed and leaned back in my chair, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. On one hand, I was relieved that he had finally reached out, letting me know he was okay.

But on the other hand, the news that he wouldn't be able to talk or

communicate for some time slightly dampened my mood.

With a sigh, I placed my phone down on the desk, my mind already occupied with relief, understanding, and a hint of longing to understand where we stood with one another.



A week passed, and Matteo's silence took a toll on me. But there was something else that was adding to my distress.

I had been feeling increasingly nauseous and tired in the mornings, struggling to eat without the threat of throwing up.

At first, I attributed it to the worry and anxiety over Matteo's absence. But as the days passed and the symptoms persisted, I began to wonder if something more was happening.

I had taken a few days off work, unable to muster the energy to leave my house, let alone face a whole day at the office.

Keisha had offered to help, and I had asked her to pick up some medicine for me. Today, she had come to visit, a small bag of medicine in her hand.

"Hey, how are you holding up?" Keisha's voice was filled with concern as she handed over the bag.

I managed a weak smile as I took the bag from her. "I've been better, to be honest."

She sat down beside me on the couch. "I brought you some medicine. Hopefully, they'll help."

"Thanks, Keisha. I appreciate it."

Keisha's eyebrows knitted together, her concern deepening. "Sophia, I get that you're stressed about Matteo and all, but these symptoms are similar to —"

I interrupted her, not wanting to entertain the possibility as it was impossible. Matteo had used a condom each time we had been together. So, there was no way I could be pregnant.

"Oh, I doubt it's anything serious. Maybe I'm just coming down with something."

She gave me a skeptical look, clearly unconvinced. "Sophia, you do know that condoms aren't foolproof, right? They can fail sometimes."

I sighed, feeling a mix of defensiveness and frustration. "I know that, Keisha. But it's highly unlikely. We were careful."

Keisha raised an eyebrow, her expression challenging. "Careful doesn't mean it's impossible. Look, Sophia, I'm just saying it wouldn't hurt to take a pregnancy test to rule it out."

I crossed my arms, still resisting the idea. "Keisha, I'm telling you, it's not necessary. Besides, I don't even have the energy to go out and get a test right now."

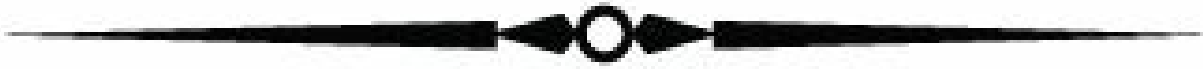
She sighed, her concern evident. "Fine, I get it. But if you change your mind, let me know. I'll be more than happy to help."

We sat silently for a moment, the tension in the air palpable. Finally, I gave in, feeling a mix of resignation and irritation. "Okay, fine. If it puts your mind at ease, I'll let you buy a damn pregnancy test."

Keisha's face lit up with a triumphant smile. "Great! I'll go get one right now." She quickly made her way out the door.

As she left to get the pregnancy test, I couldn't help but feel a flutter of nervousness in my stomach.

It was probably nothing, I reassured myself, but deep down, a small part of me wondered if Keisha was right; there was a chance, however slim.



I stood in my bathroom, my heart pounding so loudly I thought it might burst out of my chest. The pregnancy stick sat on the edge of the sink, and I anxiously waited for the lines to appear.

Slowly, two faint lines materialized in the small window, one next to the other. A sense of disbelief washed over me as I stared at the lines, my mind struggling to process what I saw.

"Hey, Sophia, what's the result?" Keisha's voice came through the closed bathroom door, tinged with excitement and concern.

My throat felt dry, and my hands trembled slightly as I tried to find my voice. "I... I'm not sure yet."

I heard her footsteps approaching, and my heart raced even faster. Keisha entered the bathroom, her eyes locked on the pregnancy test.

A hushed silence settled between us as we both focused on the lines that had appeared on the stick.

Finally, Keisha broke the silence, her voice gentle. "Sophia, those lines... they mean..."

I nodded, my gaze still fixed on the test. "Yeah, I know. It's positive."

Keisha placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Sophia, I'm here for you, whatever you decide."

I shook my head, racing to find an explanation to make the positive result seem like a mistake. "No, Keisha, there has to be some error. Maybe the stick

is faulty or something."

Keisha's expression was a mix of concern and sympathy. "Sophia, denying it won't change the reality."

I clenched my fists, frustration and denial welling up within me. "I can't be pregnant, Keisha. It's just... not possible."

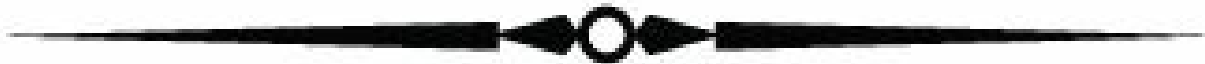
She sighed softly, her tone gentle. "Sophia, I understand this is a lot to take in. But ignoring it won't make it go away. The best thing to do right now is to confirm it properly."

I inhaled deeply, feeling a mix of emotions swirling within me. Slowly, I leaned against the sink, my legs feeling weak.

Keisha offered a reassuring smile and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Why don't we go to the hospital and get a proper test done? That way, you'll have a definite answer."

I nodded, realizing that facing the truth head-on was the only way forward. "Okay, let's do that."

As we left the bathroom, my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. Denial was still there, but it wasn't something I could avoid forever.



There was no way I would believe that I was pregnant because of a pregnancy stick. Those things were inaccurate, so it had to be a mistake.

That was what I kept telling myself even as I sat in the doctor's office, my mind a mix of anxiety and denial, waiting for the results.

I had gone with Keisha to the hospital to take a proper test, and the doctor had been kind, assuring us that we would receive the result after a couple of hours.

We were seated on the edge of our seats, waiting with bated breath as the doctor unfolded the report.

The atmosphere in the room felt tense, the seconds ticking by like hours. The doctor's gaze moved over the paper, and then she turned to look at us with a warm smile. "Congratulations, you're pregnant."

The words hung in the air, a weighty acknowledgment of a reality I had tried hard to deny. I looked at Keisha, our eyes meeting, and in that moment, the world seemed to tilt on its axis. It was as if time had momentarily frozen.

"Congratulations," the doctor had said.

Fuck!

Chapter 24

Matteo

I had been on edge, watching for any signs of my uncle's retaliation. Surprisingly, he appeared to be lying low for now.

According to Leo, the police had interrogated the arrested men but gleaned no useful information from them. On a brighter note, most trafficked women had been located and rescued – a relief amidst the tension.

With things settling down, I felt it was finally time to return to the company. It had been a whirlwind due to the investigation, and I hoped to catch up with Sophia.

I needed to discuss things with her, but the chaos had kept me occupied.

Stepping into my office, I immediately noticed Sophia's absence. Where was she? My concern grew as I scanned the room. Deciding to get some information, I stopped a passing colleague.

"Hey, have you seen Sophia?" I asked.

"No, she didn't come in today," the employee replied.

I frowned, a sense of unease creeping in. "Do you know if something happened to her?"

The colleague shook their head. "I'm not sure. She's been absent for a few days now."

A few days? That wasn't like Sophia. I couldn't help but worry – was she okay? I returned to my office and took a closer look at her desk. It was tidy, but I noticed some of her items were missing. A tight knot formed in my chest. Why were her belongings gone?

I took a deep breath, reminding myself not to jump to conclusions. I sank into my chair, trying to steady my racing thoughts. There had to be a reasonable explanation for all of this.

I couldn't let the unease continue to gnaw at me. Pulling out my phone, I dialed Sophia's number, hoping for a quick reassurance that she was fine.

The first ring, then the second, and... no answer. I tried again, my heart sinking with each unanswered call. It wasn't like her to miss my calls, especially when I was concerned.

After a series of unsuccessful attempts, a nervous frustration grew. She had always been reachable, and this silence was unsettling. My fingers danced over the screen as I composed a message.

'Hey Sophia, I've been trying to reach you. I heard you haven't been at the office for a few days. Everything alright?'

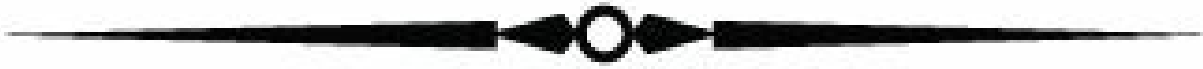
With the message sent, I leaned back in my chair, my mind a whirlwind of possibilities. Maybe she was catching up on much-needed rest if she wasn't feeling well, or perhaps she had something important to attend to.

Regardless, I reassured myself that she would surely get in touch once she saw my missed calls and messages.

As minutes ticked by, I couldn't help but fidget, my gaze periodically drifting to my phone. Each second felt like an eternity.

I tried to busy myself with other tasks to distract from the growing worry, but

it was no use. I just hoped beyond hope that she was okay and that she would reach out soon.



Enough was enough. Sophia was not returning my calls and messages, and after waiting three days, I couldn't wait any longer, so I went to her home.

It was odd that she hadn't come to work for a week. At first, I wanted to give her space, thinking she was upset at my sudden disappearance, but it seemed like something else had happened.

She hadn't come to work in ten days, including the days I was away.

There was no way she would hold a grudge for so long, especially since I had already given her a heads-up.

I knocked on the door, but there was no response.

"Sophia?" I called out, knocking on the door again.

Was she ignoring me? My patience was already wearing thin. I moved away from the door and checked the windows.

There was no sign that anyone was inside. Was she sleeping in her room? Had something happened?

My mind went through so many scenarios, and the thought that maybe she had been kidnapped by Francisco filled me with fear.

Was that why Francisco had been quiet all this time? Was it because he had already kidnapped Sophia?

My concern for Sophia outweighed any hesitations about crossing boundaries. I knew I had to act quickly.

Leaving her apartment's hallway, I maintained a composed demeanor as I discreetly assessed my surroundings. I needed to find a way in without raising any suspicions.

I slipped around the side of the building, where the kitchen window was partially shielded by a large shrub.

Keeping my movements natural and unhurried, I reached into my pocket and retrieved a pair of disposable gloves – a precautionary measure to avoid leaving fingerprints.

A small sigh of relief escaped my lips as I examined the window. It was unlocked. While relieved, I couldn't help but worry at how careless she had been.

I carefully pushed the window open, my gloved fingers gripping the frame. Slowly and noiselessly, I lifted the window higher enough to slip inside without causing any commotion.

My entry into her apartment was swift but deliberate. I closed the window behind me, careful not to disturb anything.

The room was quiet; the only light source was the soft glow filtering through the curtains. My eyes scanned the space, and I noticed that everything seemed to be in its place, giving no signs of a struggle.

I went through her entire house, room by room, but there was no sign of Sophia. Even her bed looked untouched, not a wrinkle in sight.

However, her wardrobe told a different story – several hangers were left bare, like something was off.

I scratched my head, mentally going through the possibilities. Was she crashing at a friend's place? It wasn't like her to just up and leave without a word, though.

My phone felt heavy in my pocket, and I knew I had to ask for more

information.

Stepping out of her house, I fished out my phone and dialed Antonio's number. He picked up after a few rings.

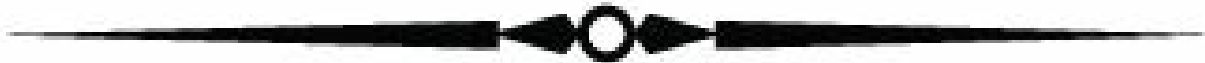
"Antonio," I began, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need a favor. I can't find Sophia anywhere in her house. It's like she just vanished. Can you look into where she might be?"

There was a pause on the other end before Antonio responded, his tone serious. "I'll start making some inquiries and see what I can find."

I exhaled, a mix of relief and worry washing over me. "*Grazie (Thank you)*. Also, I want you to send some men to watch Francisco closely. Find out if he's got any connection to Sophia's disappearance."

"*Avete capito bene (You got it)*. I'll have a team tail him discreetly and report back to me. If he's involved, we'll get to the bottom of this."

Hanging up, I stared at the phone in my hand, hoping for answers and fearing the worst.



After a bit of a wait, Antonio came through with the info. Turns out, Sophia had been crashing at her friend Keisha's place. Antonio sent me the coordinates, and I made my way over there.

Standing before Keisha's house, I took a moment to collect myself before knocking on the door. It opened, revealing a woman who I guessed was Keisha.

"Hey," I said, doing my best to keep things cool. "Is Sophia around?"

Keisha eyed me skeptically. "And you are...?" she responded, her tone cautious.

"I'm Matteo," I told her. I wasn't expecting her to know who I was, but it seemed she did because of the way her eyes widened in surprise.

Without a word, she stepped back and motioned for me to enter. "She's inside," she said, her voice softer now. "I'll give you guys some space."

"Thanks," I replied, genuinely grateful, as she left us alone and, at the same time, confused as to why she would leave. Taking a deep breath, I walked into the house.

Seeing Sophia was a mix of relief and nerves. I just hoped we could sort things out, whatever those things were.

I walked into what I believed to be the living room. My heart was running a marathon in my chest.

I spotted Sophia lounging on the couch, her eyes fixed on the television screen. She seemed so engrossed in whatever she was watching that she didn't notice my presence.

"So, who was at the door?" she called out casually, not looking away from the TV.

I cleared my throat, my voice trembling slightly as I said, "Sophia." Her name hung like a weight, and she abruptly turned her head toward me.

Her expression shifted from indifference to surprise as she locked eyes with me. "Matteo?" She sounded astonished, as if she hadn't expected to see me standing there.

Seeing Sophia's face again after what felt like an eternity was a jolt to my senses. It reminded me that it had been quite a while since we'd seen each other.

And there she was, looking just as stunning as I remembered, even as she was

dressed casually. Her surprise at my presence was etched all over her features.

"Yeah, it's me," I replied, my voice a tad scratchier than I'd have liked.

Sophia sat up on the couch, her attention now fully on me. "What are you doing here?" she asked with a hint of confusion.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "I've been looking for you," I began. "You haven't been to the company for days, and nobody seemed to know where you were. I was worried."

Sophia scoffed, her disbelief evident. "You were worried?" She raised an eyebrow. "Funny because I've been wondering where you've been all this time, Matteo."

I sighed, feeling the tension in the room building. "I told you I had something important to take care of. But that's not the point right now. Why haven't you been coming to work?"

Sophia's expression hardened, and her voice turned defensive. "I'm not coming back to work, Matteo."

Confusion and irritation washed over me. "What? Why? We can discuss this, but you can't quit like that."

Our conversation quickly escalated into an argument. We exchanged heated words, frustration, and hurt feelings bubbling to the surface.

During our emotional exchange, as Sophia's anger seemed to reach its peak, she blurted out something that brought the argument to an abrupt halt.

"I can't come back to work, Matteo," she said, her voice breaking slightly. "Because I'm fucking pregnant."

The room fell into stunned silence as her words hung in the air, the weight of their implications sinking in for both of us.

"What?"

Chapter 25

Sophia

Matteo's exclamation of "What?" reverberated in the air, and in that split second, I wished I could retract those words. I hadn't meant to blurt it out like that.

His face turned into a canvas of expressions – shock, confusion, and sheer bewilderment. It was as if I had just dropped a bombshell, which, I guess, in a way, I had.

There was no escaping this now; the truth hung between us like a weighty secret.

"Repeat what you just said," he demanded, his voice a mix of urgency and disbelief.

I took a deep breath, realizing there was no point in dancing around it now. The cat was out of the bag, and there was no shoving it back in.

"I'm pregnant," I reiterated, my voice a blend of vulnerability and a strange resolve.

But even as I said the words, there was an odd sensation – like time had momentarily paused. Seeing Matteo in Keisha's living room after our heated

argument seconds ago was surreal.

How had he even tracked me down? That question hung in my mind like a cloud.

Since I had confirmed that I was pregnant, coupled with Matteo's continuous absence, I stopped working. It wasn't that I wasn't going to work at all, but I didn't want to work for Matteo anymore.

Since then, I had stayed with Keisha, not wanting to be alone. However, I never expected Matteo to come looking for me.

"How did you find me?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me. I wanted to understand how he had managed to locate me so unexpectedly.

There was no immediate response. Instead, he stepped closer, his gaze locked onto me with a mix of emotions – almost a sort of awe that I couldn't quite decipher.

It was his next words that cut through the thick air between us.

"Wow," slipped out of Matteo's mouth as if he couldn't quite contain his surprise. His features danced between awe and bewilderment, and he looked at me like I was some enigma he was struggling to comprehend.

I couldn't blame him for his astonishment; it was much to take in. It wasn't exactly how I had imagined revealing this news to him, but there was no turning back now.

"How...?" he started, his voice trailing off, clearly grappling for words. "We used protection, so how?"

I shrugged, feeling a mixture of exasperation and helplessness. "Condoms aren't foolproof, Matteo."

His next question caught me off guard, and a hint of annoyance crept into my expression. "Is it mine?" he asked.

I felt a flicker of indignation at the implication that I could have been with

someone else.

I frowned, and my response curt. "Of course, it's yours."

He seemed to realize his mistake almost immediately. "I'm sorry, Sophia. I didn't mean to doubt—"

"Look, Matteo," I interrupted, my tone a mix of frustration and weariness. "I haven't been with anyone else but you."

The room fell into a contemplative silence after our exchange, the weight of our situation pressing down on us.

I couldn't help but feel a mixture of emotions and uncertainty swirling within me. This was uncharted territory for both of us.

Matteo's voice broke the silence as I gathered the courage to speak my mind and let him know I was keeping the baby. "I'm sorry. It's just that we used protection, and I assumed—"

"Assumptions don't make for reliable birth control," I muttered under my breath, my words almost a reflexive response.

However, it seemed that fate had a hand in our conversation because, at the same moment, Matteo spoke as well, his words overlapping with mine. We both blinked, realizing we hadn't heard what the other had said.

Matteo recovered first, a look of anticipation in his eyes. "Could you please repeat that?" he asked, his voice a mix of curiosity and concern.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding, and said it more clearly this time. "I'm keeping the baby."

A genuine smile spread across Matteo's face, and his eyes softened with relief. "Good," he replied, his voice carrying a sense of acceptance and determination.

I was taken aback by his response, unsure what to make of it. But before I could fully process his reaction, he continued, "And I think you should move

in with me."

I couldn't help but exclaim with a surprised "What?" His proposition caught me off guard. I immediately blurted out, No!"

He seemed taken aback by my swift rejection, and he frowned slightly. "Why not?" he asked as if he couldn't understand why I would refuse his proposition.

I spluttered, caught off guard by his question. "What do you mean, why not?" I shot back, my frustration evident in my voice. "What kind of relationship do we have that I should move in with you?"

Matteo's expression softened, and he let out a sigh. "Sophia, you're the mother of my child," he said, as if that statement explained everything.

I couldn't help but scoff at his response. "Is that all?" I retorted, my tone dripping with sarcasm. "Just because we're having a baby doesn't mean we're suddenly a perfect match."

He looked a little hurt by my words, but I couldn't bring myself to care. "I thought... I thought our feelings for each other were mutual," he said, his voice quieter now.

I rolled my eyes, incredulous. "Mutual feelings?" I repeated, a humorless laugh escaping my lips. "When exactly was it established that our feelings were mutual? Right after we slept together and you promptly disappeared to attend to your 'important matters'?"

Matteo's apologetic look seemed to hang in the air, suspended between us like a fragile bridge. As he opened his mouth to respond, I couldn't help but let out a cynical laugh.

"Yeah, I know. You were busy," I repeated, my fingers making exaggerated air quotes around the word 'busy.' My frustration and skepticism had taken root, and I wasn't ready to let him off the hook so easily.

He stepped closer, his eyes holding a sincerity that was hard to ignore. Slowly, hesitantly, he took my hands into his own. I was still seething, my anger like a fire burning, but something about his touch had a calming effect.

"I'm sorry, Sophia," he said, his voice earnest, his gaze not leaving mine.

I allowed him to hold my hands, still simmering with irritation but feeling a certain pull toward him. His apology wasn't just for the sudden absence; it was like he was apologizing for something more, something deeper.

And then, as if he had been silently debating with himself, he took a deep breath and continued, "I disappeared because I found out that my father's death wasn't an accident. It was planned."

My anger was replaced with shock, a surge of concern rushing me. I stared at him, my mind struggling to process his revelation. "What? Planned?" I repeated, my voice almost a whisper.

Matteo nodded, his gaze fixed on mine. "Yes," he confirmed, his expression heavy with the weight of that truth.

In an instant, my entire perspective shifted. The frustration and anger I had been holding onto felt insignificant compared to the bombshell he had just dropped.

Without thinking, I rushed toward him, my hands reaching out to hold his arms as if to ground him in reality.

"Are you alright? I'm so sorry, I didn't... I didn't realize something like that could be the reason," I babbled, my words a mixture of concern and genuine regret.

He looked at me, his eyes softening as he seemed to appreciate my concern.

"It's... It's alright. You couldn't have known," he replied, his voice laden with emotions.

I realized his father's death had never come up in conversation during our

time together. I had no idea that he wasn't even alive.

My heart sank as I considered the weight of his burden, the pain he must have carried in silence.

"It's not as if I wanted to leave," Matteo began, his voice carrying a mixture of explanation and apology. "As you can see, I had to go. It was something I needed to handle."

I sighed, my anger slowly giving way to understanding and empathy. I felt bad for my initial reaction, for jumping to conclusions without knowing the full story.

But even as I softened towards him, it didn't mean I would suddenly agree to move in with him. I shook my head, meeting his gaze.

"I'm sorry for my reaction earlier," I said sincerely, my regret evident in my tone.

"But just because I understand now doesn't mean I'm going to change my mind about living together. I can't make a decision like that based on this revelation."

Matteo nodded, a mixture of disappointment and acceptance in his eyes. "I won't force you, Sophia," he said, his voice gentle. "I'll give you the time you need to decide. Even if you don't want to live with me, I'll respect your decision."

I appreciated his understanding and his willingness to let me decide without pressure. It was a complex situation that couldn't be resolved in a single conversation.

I still had doubts and concerns and needed time to figure things out. But knowing that he wasn't pushing me into anything made a difference.

"Thank you, Matteo," I said, my voice carrying a mixture of gratitude and relief. "I need some time to think about everything."

He nodded once more, his gaze steady. "Take all the time you need, Sophia." With that, Matteo took his leave, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I watched him go, a sense of mixed emotions swirling within me.

It wasn't like our conversation had tied up all loose ends, but at least there was some understanding now.

A knock echoed through the room as I stood there, contemplating the whirlwind of events just about five minutes after Matteo's departure.

I furrowed my brows, wondering if Keisha had returned. She was in for an earful for disappearing like that if she had.

I approached the door, my frustration brewing at the thought of giving my best friend a piece of my mind. But as I swung open the door, ready to launch into my tirade, the words died on my lips.

It wasn't Keisha.

Standing before me was the man who had made me uncomfortable at that charity event, the same guy whom Matteo had warned me against.

Francisco, that's what he had introduced himself as. His presence there, on my doorstep, sent me an unexpected jolt of surprise. What the fuck was he doing here?

How the fuck were people finding out my location? At least with Matteo, I could still understand how he found me. He could find out anything if he could find my hacking past, but what about this man?

Why was he here? "Francisco?" The word escaped my lips, more a reflex than an actual question, as I stood there, caught off guard by his presence at my doorstep.

He smiled. However, it was a gesture that didn't quite reach his eyes, making me feel oddly uncomfortable.

"Ah, I'm pleased you remember my name," he said, his tone smooth and

polished.

I shifted slightly, my discomfort growing as he seemed to take in every detail of my reaction. He then asked, "May I come in?"

I hesitated, my instincts urging caution. Despite his polite demeanor, something about him made my skin crawl. "I'm sorry, but I can't invite you in," I replied politely, trying to mask my unease.

His smile didn't waver, but a glint in his eyes made me even more wary. "Fair enough," he said, his tone even.

"I was driving by and saw my nephew leaving your place. Surprisingly, I also saw the beautiful woman who had captured my attention at the charity event." His words were intended to flatter, but they had the opposite effect on me. I shifted uncomfortably, the age difference between us becoming more apparent than ever.

With his salt-and-pepper hair, he looked old enough to be my father, but his appearance was well-maintained, as if age hadn't worn him down.

The whole situation felt surreal, and I couldn't help but wonder how old he was to be so blatantly flirting with someone as young as me.

Just as the weight of the revelation about Matteo's uncle began to settle in, Keisha's voice broke through the tense atmosphere. "What's going on?" she asked. Her tone was a mix of curiosity and concern.

I turned to see Keisha standing behind me, her presence offering a sense of relief. "Keisha," I said, a mixture of surprise and gratitude.

Francisco's attention shifted to Keisha, and he offered her a polite smile. "And you are?"

Keisha's expression didn't seem too pleased, her brows slightly furrowed as she crossed her arms. "I'm Sophia's friend," she replied curtly, her gaze fixed on Francisco. "And who might you be?"

Francisco's smile remained, and his tone retained its smooth politeness. "I came to greet Sophia," he said, explaining his unexpected presence.

He then turned his attention back to me, his gaze lingering momentarily before speaking again. "I should take my leave now," he said, his voice carrying a note of finality. "Sophia, I'll see you later."

As he walked away, a sense of unease lingered in the air. The whole encounter had left me feeling more bewildered than ever, and I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to the situation than met the eye.

"Who the fuck was that?" Keisha's bewildered voice sounded from right beside me.

I didn't even know where to start.

Chapter 26

Matteo

Back at home, I sank into my couch, the day's events replaying in my mind like a movie on repeat. Sophia's revelation still had me reeling.

Pregnant. I couldn't believe it. It was one of those moments that seemed too surreal to be true.

Slowly, the shock began to wear off, and a whole mix of emotions settled in. I mean, a baby wasn't exactly on my radar, that's for sure.

But my old man always hammered into me the importance of being responsible and stepping up when life throws you a curveball. He was a stand-up dad, and those lessons he drilled into my head stuck.

Sure, this wasn't part of the grand plan I had in my head, but hey, life's all about surprises, right, and I wasn't actually against the idea.

A grin played on my lips as I leaned back, thinking about how life could spin you around and make you see things from a different angle.

Parenthood? Yeah, why not? I was up for the challenge, ready to dive into the unknown with a mix of nerves and excitement. Who would've thought, huh?

My grin faded slightly as I remembered Sophia's hesitation about moving in

with me. Of course, I had assured her that her decision would be respected, and I meant every word.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I wouldn't attempt to present my case. Conveying the potential benefits of living together was something I intended to explore.

Life was throwing me many unexpected curve balls lately, and navigating it wasn't always smooth. Parenthood was a wild twist, and Sophia's stance on living together added another layer of complexity.

But I had always been up for challenges, and this was no different. If I believed in something, I would put in the effort.

The smile on my face faded completely as a less cheerful reality set in. We had some serious conversations ahead, no doubt about that.

It wasn't just about our current situation but about delving into feelings and emotions we hadn't explored. And then there was the bigger issue—my true identity. Just thinking about it was enough to put a damper on things.

Sure, it was a relief to know that she wasn't tied up with Francisco in any way, but the fact that she had no clue who I was hung in the air like a rain cloud.

I wondered how Sophia would react when she found out the truth. Would it push us apart and create a gap that couldn't be bridged?

It was a tough question, and the uncertainty gnawed at the edges of my thoughts. Facing that conversation was inevitable, and the thought was like an approaching storm, with the outcome as unpredictable as the weather.

Staring at the ceiling, my mind wrestled with a tough decision. I couldn't escape the fact that there were two paths ahead, each with its own challenges and uncertainties.

The first option was to gradually convince Sophia to move in with me, laying

down a foundation of trust and comfort before slowly unveiling my true identity.

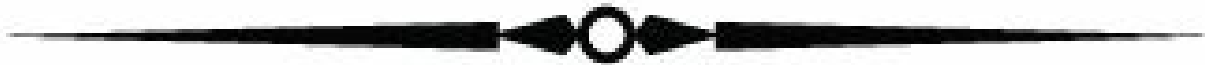
It seemed like a gentle approach, a way to ease her into the complexity of my world. But then again, I questioned whether I could build a future with her while keeping such a significant secret. It was impossible.

On the other hand, there was the alternative of being upfront and honest about who I was, throwing it all out there before even trying to persuade her about living together.

It had a certain level of integrity, but the risk was that the revelation might overshadow any other discussions we needed to have.

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. I reached a decision, at least for the time being. Amidst the maze of uncertainties, I recognized one conversation that had been long overdue—the discussion about my feelings for Sophia. It was a topic that couldn't be put off any longer.

Tomorrow, I resolved, I would sit with her and lay my cards on the table. It felt like the right place to start. With that plan in mind, I allowed myself to relax a bit.



The next day, with a determined mindset, I headed over to Keisha's place to have that much-needed conversation with Sophia. Parking my car, I got out and went to Keisha's building.

However, as I approached the building, my steps faltered. I felt uneasy as I saw a familiar figure leaving the vicinity.

It was Francisco. My eyebrows furrowed, suspicion gnawing at my thoughts. What the fuck was he doing here?

Worried, I quickened my pace, my mind racing with questions. Had he talked to Sophia? What did he say to her? Did he do anything to her? A rush of concern flooded me as I reached the door and knocked on it.

No response.

I knocked harder, the urgency building within me. Still, silence.

Exasperation mingled with worry as I banged on the door, a tinge of panic edging in. What was going on?

Finally, the door swung open, and Keisha's voice sounded irritated, "Could you take a hint? We didn't answer the door the first time."

Her annoyance, however, quickly shifted to surprise as she registered my presence. "Oh," she stuttered awkwardly, "I didn't know it was you, Matteo."

I brushed past her response, driven by concern, and scanned the room. There was Sophia, pacing with a visible mix of frustration and unease.

Urgency propelled me toward her. I gently grasped her shoulders, my worry evident in my touch.

"Hey, are you okay?" I inquired, my voice laced with tension. Sophia's startled gaze met mine, and at that moment, it was clear that something was off. Her admission only confirmed my suspicion.

"I didn't know you were coming today," she said, a mix of surprise and disconcertment in her eyes.

Concern etched my features as I asked, "What was Francisco doing here?"

Sophia blinked, momentarily surprised by my knowledge of Francisco's visit. Then realization dawned on her—my concern likely stemmed from seeing him leave.

She nodded briefly before answering, "I'm not entirely sure. Keisha answered

the door when he came by. She said I wasn't around."

Her slight lean towards me as she spoke warmed me, even amid the tension.

It was a subconscious gesture, perhaps seeking comfort in my presence.

I apologize for misunderstanding your request. Let me provide you with the correct version:

"Was this the first time he showed up?" I asked, my mind recalling Keisha's words from earlier. Shortly after I arrived, I explained how I had seen Francisco leaving the area yesterday.

Her response triggered a curse to slip from my lips. Sophia's brow furrowed, concern growing. "Matteo, what's going on?"

It was clear that I needed to come clean about the situation. "Actually," Sophia began, her voice carrying a mix of unease and revelation, "Francisco told me that he's your uncle."

A jolt of surprise and trepidation coursed through me. What the fuck was Francisco playing at?

Sohia nodded, her expression serious. "Yes, he did."

I took a moment to absorb this unexpected twist. "Yeah, he's unfortunately my uncle," I finally confirmed, my mind racing to understand the implications of his visit. "He's not someone you should be getting involved with."

"That's why you told me to stay away from him, right?" Sophia asked, her gaze searching mine.

I nodded, my concern for her well-being deepening. "I wasn't joking when I said he's dangerous."

Sophia's understanding nod indicated that she was starting to grasp the gravity of the situation. "Then what is going on between you?"

I sighed, my frustration evident. "My father left our family company in my

hands when he passed away," I explained. "But Francisco isn't too thrilled about it. He's been trying to gain control of the company, and I'm afraid he'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Sophia's expression shifted to surprise and disbelief. "He would go to such lengths even against his own family?" she questioned, her tone tinged with incredulity.

As she expressed her astonishment, a bitter realization settled within me. I thought to myself that I wasn't surprised anymore.

I had witnessed firsthand the extent to which Francisco was willing to go to have his way, even if it meant turning against his blood.

Amid the weight of the situation with Francisco, my original purpose for coming here—to have a heart-to-heart about our feelings—felt like a distant memory.

Knowing that Francisco was closely watching Sophia, my priority shifted. I couldn't ignore the potential danger she might be in.

"Sophia," I began, my voice more serious now, "I think it might be best for you to move in with me. It's not safe for you to be alone. Francisco's actions... they're unpredictable."

She hesitated, her expression conflicted. "I still need time to think, Matteo," she said softly, her gaze shifting away.

"Time might not be on our side," I replied, my voice firm. "I don't want to risk your safety."

Before the conversation could escalate further, Keisha interjected. "Honestly, Sophia, I agree with Matteo on this one. Given the situation, it might be the best option."

Sophia's immediate response was to begin arguing her case, but Keisha's voice held a tone of authority that stopped her in her tracks.

"Stop being so stubborn, Sophia," Keisha urged, her tone more serious than usual. "This isn't just about you anymore. You have another life to think about."

Sophia fell quiet at that, her resistance seemingly softened by the weight of Keisha's words. She looked torn, a mix of emotions crossing her face. "What about your safety, Keisha?" she finally asked with genuine concern.

Keisha waved off the concern with a dismissive hand gesture. "Don't worry about me. Francisco only came because of you. Now that you're not here, he should stop showing up." Her words were confident as if she had already thought about this.

I jumped in, wanting to assure both of them. "I'll make sure to keep an eye on Keisha," I stated firmly, my intention clear.

In my mind, I was already forming a plan to get some of my men to discreetly stake out the area, ensuring Sophia's friend remained safe.

Sophia's tension seemed to ease at my assurance, and I could see the beginning of acceptance in her eyes. After a brief pause, she finally nodded.

"Okay, I'll move in with you."

Chapter 27

Sophia

Now, Matteo and I were at my place, tackling the task of packing up my stuff. Seeing my belongings neatly folded and placed into boxes was a bit surreal.

As I went through the motions, there was a mixture of emotions swirling within me. Part of me felt a sense of excitement and anticipation about taking this step with Matteo.

Even though I hadn't agreed at first, another part of me felt conflicted, almost overwhelmed.

The past few days had been a whirlwind, each moment with new revelations. From the unexpected news of my pregnancy to discovering Matteo's hidden reasons for his absence and then being visited by Francisco, his dangerous uncle – it felt like life had suddenly shifted into high gear.

And now, here I was, packing up to move in with Matteo. While I knew it was the right move for my safety, a part of me couldn't help but feel like my life was moving at an exhausting pace.

With a deep breath, I continued folding clothes and placing them in boxes. As

I sat down on the bed, I felt mentally drained. The weight of recent events had caught up with me, and I was finding it hard to keep up with the rapid changes.

Matteo's concerned voice broke through my thoughts. "Everything alright?"

I looked up at him, and the floodgates of frustration opened. "Honestly, Matteo, it's just... so much has happened so quickly. I want things to slow down a bit, you know?"

He came over and crouched before me, taking my hands into his own. His touch was warm and grounding.

"I get it, Sophia. Believe me, I do. It's been a roller coaster, and I'm sorry for everything you've had to deal with."

I sighed, my shoulders slumping as I leaned my forehead against our joined hands. "It's not just that, Matteo. It's... moving in with you, for instance. It's a big step, and we haven't even had a proper conversation about what all this means for us."

He nodded, his gaze unwavering. "You're right. We've been dealing with so much external stuff that we haven't had the chance to talk about our feelings, about us."

I looked up at him, my eyes searching his for understanding. "And what about you? How do you feel about all of this?"

His grip on my hands tightened slightly, a reassuring squeeze. "Sophia, I won't deny that things have been a whirlwind. But through all of it, one thing has become crystal clear. I care about you. More than I can put into words. And I want us to have a chance to explore where this could go."

I felt relieved at his honesty. "I feel the same way, Matteo. But it's just... overwhelming, you know?"

He smiled softly, his thumb gently stroking the back of my hand. "We'll take

it one step at a time. Starting with moving in together. And then, we'll have all the conversations we need."

As he leaned in, his lips brushed against mine in a tender, reassuring kiss, and at that moment, I felt a sense of calm wash over me.

Our lips met and were swiftly followed by slick, skillful tongues. I moaned into his mouth as I raised my arms to encircle his neck and draw him closer.

Matteo pulled back to slowly kiss down my torso, pulling my shirt up to my boobs as he passed over my stomach.

He didn't bother pausing at the waistband of my shorts, continuing his path as he left a trail of kisses down my right leg with every new inch of skin revealed until the garment was tossed beside the bed.

I took this moment to remove my shirt, and he removed his as well, leaving him in just his underwear and trousers.

Leaning back down into position, he made sure to leave an equal amount of kisses on his way back up my left leg. I reveled in the feeling of his soft lips on my bare skin, anticipating the contact of his tongue.

With every little breath I made, he could feel himself getting harder. I watched eagerly, admiring him as he moved closer.

Fuck!

Matteo sweetly kissed the junction where my inner leg met my vulva and then paused for a moment before beginning his work, locking eyes with me as the flat of his tongue made contact with my labia in a smooth upward motion.

My voice echoed deliciously in every room as he fucked me with his tongue. My moans became louder as he licked up to my clit in a series of short, teasing flicks. Alternating between gentle sucks and circles, his hands rested on my hips.

One of my hands gripped the pillow under my head, and my other wrist sat under one of my breasts before gliding up to cup myself with my thumb rubbing over my hardened nipple.

I held my breath when Matteo's right hand moved inward, knowing exactly where he was going.

With his thumb and forefinger on either side, he gently pulled up on the top of my vulva, exposing more of my clit for easier access.

I shuddered and let out a loud, strangled moan as his tongue flicked rapidly over the bud. I brought down the hand, cupping my breast to grip his arm, holding my vulva in position.

Matteo smiled to himself as he took his fingers on his left hand and began teasing my entrance. He slipped in easily and massaged upwards as he pumped his hand, resulting in a solid "Fuck!" from me and a soft laugh from him.

He quickened the pace of his tongue, and within a moment, he could feel my silky walls pulsing around his fingers.

I closed my eyes and clenched my hands tightly as a fire ran through me. My breath caught in a silent scream before my loudest moan echoed throughout the walls.

Matteo slowed as my muscles relaxed, only pulling out when I motioned him up to kiss me. I loved how I could taste myself on his lips after he just ate the fuck out of me.

"Where do you want me?" I asked, breathing heavily while my eyes were focused on his lips.

He took a moment to consider as he removed his underwear before sitting back and pulling me into his lap. "This seems good."

He stroked my hair as our lips met once again. Slowly, I guided his tip into

my entrance and sunk unto his length. I could feel how rock hard he was by now, and I was soaking wet for it.

Matteo grunted at the contact. The lower I got, the tighter he gripped my waist.

He peppered kisses across my collarbone as I re-positioned my legs so my feet were flat on the bed, allowing me a slightly different range of motion.

My left hand sat behind me on his leg for added stability, and my right caressed the back of his head, raking my fingers through his loose hair, drawing our faces closer together as I began moving.

Matteo traced the features of my face with his eyes as I slid up and down his cock.

I leaned in for a kiss, pulling on his bottom lip with my teeth and trailed a few kisses across his cheek. I licked along the edge of his ear before nibbling gently. He nearly melted.

His breath was quickening with my pace. Matteo caressed his hands over my curves as I ground my hips into his, and he pressed his hips upwards into mine. He was getting impatient.

I whined when he played with my nipples, and then I felt his hands begin roaming over my shoulders and down my arms, and suddenly, I found myself pinned down to the bed with his mouth on my throat.

It knocked the wind out of me for a split second. I loved it. I let out a shaky whimper as Matteo sucked on one of my nipples and slid his hands up my wrists to interlock our fingers.

He smirked and pounded into me harder, urging me to cum and trying his best to hold out just a little longer.

He kissed me passionately before moving his hands to my thighs for leverage. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him in close.

He groaned deeply as he came inside me, his hips moving all on his own as he reached his completion.

I followed quickly behind, screaming his name out repeatedly like a mantra until my orgasm ran its course.

We remained still for a few moments, basking in the afterglow of our shared kiss, the world around us seeming to fade into the background as Matteo pressed his forehead gently against mine.

"We're supposed to be packing my stuff," I chuckled softly, my fingers tracing light patterns on his hand.

Matteo's index finger drew delicate, swirly shapes along my arm, his touch soothing. "We can finish up tomorrow and move to my house afterward."

I shifted slightly, looking into his eyes, a content smile on my lips. There was a happiness blooming within me.

In the beginning, there had been doubts, uncertainties, and a whirlwind of emotion, but now, in this moment, I was genuinely happy.

"I'm happy," I admitted, a genuine smile tugging at my lips as I looked into Matteo's eyes.

He smiled and leaned in until our lips were just barely grazing. "Me too."

Chapter 28

Matteo

As the morning light filtered through the curtains, I slowly stirred, my eyes fluttering open. The sight that greeted me instantly brought a grin to my face. There she was, Sophia, sleeping peacefully beside me.

The memories of the night we had shared came rushing back, and the warmth of those moments filled the room.

With a silent chuckle, I brushed a strand of hair away from Sophia's face, careful not to wake her. The grin on my face was impossible to contain.

There was something undeniably special about waking up to her presence, a feeling of comfort and happiness that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Careful not to disturb Sophia's peaceful sleep, I gently slid out of bed, letting the covers fall back into place. With a final glance at her, a soft smile on my lips, I quietly stood up, ready to take care of the remaining tasks.

The clothes that Sophia had set aside for packing were neatly arranged outside. I picked them up individually, carefully folding them and placing them into boxes.

As I worked, my mind was filled with purpose and a determination to ensure everything was handled.

I surveyed the room once the clothes were neatly packed, ensuring nothing was left behind. It was a small yet meaningful step to symbolize the transition that Sophia and I were embarking upon – from her place to ours.

With the boxes ready, I pulled out my phone and dialed one of my trusted subordinates.

I explained the situation and asked him to come over and pick up the boxes for delivery to my house. He assured me that it would be taken care of promptly.

As I hung up, I took a moment to gaze around the room, the memories of the past day and night flooding my thoughts. It was amazing how much could change in such a short period.

And as I looked at Sophia, still peacefully asleep, I decided to make her something to eat when she woke up.

It was a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs, fresh vegetables, and toasted bread. A light and wholesome meal, perfect for starting the day.

As I flipped the eggs, I felt a familiar pair of arms wrap around my stomach. Even before I turned around, I knew it was Sophia. The warmth of her touch against my back sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

"You're up early," I remarked, my voice tinged with a smile.

She leaned her head against my back, her voice soft and affectionate.

"Couldn't let you do all the work alone."

I turned off the stove and gently placed the spatula down, turning in her embrace to face her.

The sight of her tousled hair and the sleepiness still lingering in her eyes was endearing. Our eyes met, and in that moment, words weren't necessary.

We shared a quiet, intimate moment, standing there wrapped in each other's arms. It was a domestic yet profoundly comforting feeling, as if we were already carving out a space for ourselves in this new chapter of our lives.

"You know," she mused, her lips curving into a teasing smile, "I didn't know you were capable of cooking."

I chuckled, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. "I have a few hidden talents."

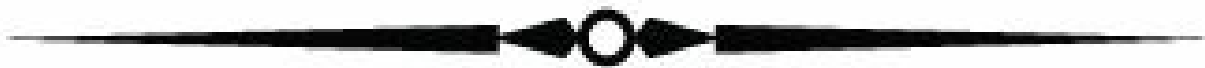
She laughed softly, the sound like music to my ears. "Well, I'm impressed. Maybe you can cook more often."

"Consider it a deal," I replied, leaning down to kiss her forehead gently.

Reluctantly, she untangled herself from our embrace, her expression slightly regretful. "As much as I'd love to stay here, I think a shower and some fresh clothes are in order."

I nodded in agreement. "I'll finish up here."

With a lingering smile, she headed to the shower, leaving me to prepare breakfast.



After breakfast, Sophia and I went to my house. As we approached, I couldn't help but be amused by the look of astonishment on her face. Her eyes widened, and she blinked several times as if trying to take in the grandeur before her.

I couldn't blame her for the reaction. My house was more than just a house – it was a sprawling estate that had been in my family for generations.

It stood tall and regal, surrounded by meticulously maintained gardens and a wrought-iron fence. The architecture blended classical and modern, with large windows allowing natural light to flood in.

As we entered the front door, a spacious foyer was adorned with elegant chandeliers and marble flooring.

To the left, a grand staircase curved upwards, leading to the upper floors.

To the right, a cozy sitting area was arranged with plush couches and tasteful artwork adorning the walls.

Sophia's gaze wandered around in wonder, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Impressed?" I asked with a playful glint in my eyes.

She turned to me, her expression a mix of surprise and amusement. "More like stunned. This is... quite the place."

I chuckled. "It's been in my family for a while. I'm the current caretaker."

As I showed her around, I led her to the spacious living room that opened to a terrace overlooking a meticulously landscaped garden.

Sophia's eyes widened even more as she took in the view. "This is incredible."

I grinned. "Well, it's not every day you get to move into a mansion."

As we continued our tour, exploring the elegant dining room, the modern kitchen, and the various sitting areas, Sophia's surprise gradually gave way to a sense of appreciation for the house's beauty and comfort.

"I can't believe I'm going to be living here," she said, her tone tinged with disbelief.

I placed a hand on her shoulder, a warm smile on my face. "Welcome home, Sophia."

We spent some more time wandering through the halls, with me sharing stories about the house's history and its significance to my family.

I recounted how it had been passed down through generations, each leaving its mark on architecture and design.

Sophia seemed genuinely interested, asking questions and marveling at the family heirlooms displayed with care.

After a while, my phone buzzed, and I excused myself briefly. One of my subordinates had messaged, informing me that someone was at the gate.

My heart sank as I read the message: it was Francisco. I turned to Sophia, concerned, and asked if she could stay inside for a moment.

She looked a bit puzzled but nodded, her gaze returning to the paintings on the wall. I made my way to the gate, my thoughts racing.

When I saw Francisco standing there with a smirk, my tension only grew. I approached him, my voice dripping with irritation. "What are you doing here, Francisco?"

He chuckled as if enjoying my discomfort. "Just paying a little visit, Matteo. *Sto controllando la mia famiglia (I'm checking on my family).*"

I clenched my jaw, my patience wearing thin. "Cut the act. You're not fooling anyone. Stay away from Sophia."

His smirk only widened, and he stepped closer, invading my personal space. "Sophia, huh? She's charming, *non è lei (is she not)?*"

My voice turned cold and dangerous. "I mean it, Francisco. *Mantieni le distanze (Keep your distance).*"

He laughed, the sound grating on my nerves. "Do you honestly believe having her move into your fancy mansion will keep her safe from me? Didn't you think about her before messing up my business?"

My fists tightened at my sides. "She's off-limits, Francisco."

He leaned in, his tone dripping with mockery. "Or what, Matteo? *Cosa puoi fare per fermarmi (What can you do to stop me)?*"

My restraint was slipping, and I leaned in closer, our faces inches apart. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

He chuckled again, unfazed by my threat. "Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea. If you think I'll let you off the hook after ruining my business, then you're sorely mistaken. *Non ti risparmiarò (I won't spare you).*"

I was about to respond when Sophia's voice called out from behind me, her tone questioning. "Matteo?"

I turned to see her standing there, her expression a mix of concern and curiosity. I took a step back from Francisco, my focus shifting to her. Sophia looked between us, sensing the tension in the air.

"Everything okay?" she asked, her gaze shifting from me to Francisco.

I managed a tight smile, my attention on Sophia. "Yeah, just a minor disagreement."

Francisco chimed in, his tone dripping with faux politeness. "Indeed, just a friendly chat between family."

Sophia raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying his act. "Family, huh?"

I nodded, trying to downplay the situation. "Yeah, something like that."

Francisco chuckled once more, his eyes locked onto Sophia. "Well, I'll be on my way. Lovely seeing you again, Sophia."

He then faced me. "You'll regret what you did."

Before I could react, he turned and walked away, leaving me seething with anger.

I turned back to Sophia, frustration evident in my expression. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

She shrugged. "No need to apologize, but I feel this isn't the end."

I sighed. "You're right. He's not one to back down easily."

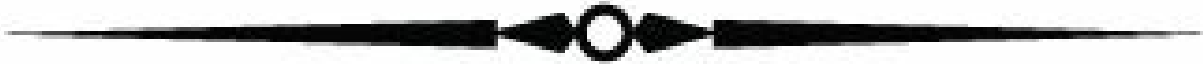
Sophia's gaze softened as she looked at me. "Just promise me you'll be

careful, Matteo."

I reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "I promise. I won't let anything happen to you."

She smiled, a mixture of gratitude and concern in her eyes. "I know you won't."

There was a brief pause, the weight of our conversation hanging in the air. I leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Let's head back inside," I suggested, my hand finding hers as we walked back to the house.



Days after Sophia moved in, things began shaping up nicely. Our daily routine had a comforting rhythm— breakfast together, work (for me, at least), and evenings filled with laughter and shared stories. It felt like we were building something solid, something worth cherishing.

Of course, lurking in the background was the constant reminder of Francisco's threats. The guy didn't back down easily, and I wasn't about to underestimate him.

So, I increased the security around the house and kept a watchful eye on Keisha. It was a necessity, even though it meant I had to leave Sophia behind at times.

Those absences weighed on me, I won't lie. I hated not being there with her all the time, but duty called, and I couldn't ignore it. Still, no matter how far I had to roam, coming home to Sophia made it all worthwhile.

I stepped through the front door, and my heart lightened by the thought of seeing Sophia again.

I had come from a meeting with the heads of some smaller mafia families, and it had gone well. Progress was made in consolidating support from smaller mafia families.

My smile, however, faltered when I saw her. There was tension in the air, and it wasn't one that I was used to feeling around her.

Her expression, far from joyful, seemed almost hostile. My gaze lowered to see her grip on a file and some photos.

"Hey," I greeted tentatively, my voice unsure as I approached her, but the way she stepped back made it clear that something was wrong.

I frowned, my eyes narrowing as I observed the file contents and photos on the coffee table.

My blood ran cold as I saw images of myself in various mafia operations – scenes of violence, of me holding a gun, and even worse, a couple of snapshots with a dead body. The insinuation was clear, and I felt a chill down my spine.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Chapter 29

Sophia

"What the fuck is going on?" I demanded from Matteo, who stood still and stared at the photos and documents I had thrown on the table.

I couldn't believe what I had seen. My heart raced, and my voice, a mix of fear and anger, demanded answers from Matteo, who remained silent, his eyes locked onto the damning evidence.

My day had started just like any other. I had been chatting with Keisha on the phone, recounting my life living with Matteo. It had seemed peaceful, but then, the doorbell had shattered the moment's tranquility.

At first, I had ignored it, confident that Matteo's vigilant security team would thoroughly screen any visitor, but when the doorbell continued to chime insistently, my unease had grown.

Why wasn't anyone attending to it? Had something gone wrong with the security protocols? My anxiety had peaked, and with a sinking feeling, I had ventured to answer the door.

Opening it, I had expected to find someone – a delivery person, perhaps, or one of Matteo's security personnel but there was no one there, just a parcel

left on the ground.

My heart raced as I retrieved the package, and as soon as I saw its contents, my world seemed to crumble.

The photos depicted Matteo in the most incriminating situations – standing over lifeless bodies, overseeing crates filled with illicit substances, and engaging in acts that left no room for doubt.

The accompanying documents outlined deeds that sent a shiver down my spine, detailing activities I could hardly fathom. It was a chilling revelation of a side of Matteo I had never known, leading to the current situation.

I couldn't help but demand answers from Matteo, my voice trembling with shock and disbelief.

“Sophi-“ Matteo started to say, but I cut him off, not interested in any excuses he wanted to give.

“I asked you a question, so fucking answer me.”

Seeing all these photos made me feel like a fool. Didn't these mean I had been right to be wary of him?

I couldn't believe I had decided to listen to Keisha when she said there might have been a reason. Was there also a reason for why he had killed all these people?

“I can explain.” Matteo took a step towards me. I could see the anxiety on his face and how desperate he looked.

“Start explaining,” I demanded, my voice shaky no matter how strong I tried to will it to be.

I thought about all the times we had spent together. Was all of that a lie? When he told me about his father? Had that also been a lie? Fuck! He even lied about his father?

“Was everything a lie?” The words tumbled from my lips, filled with

disbelief and anger. "Was your father truly killed, or did you make it up to buy sympathy from me?"

The moment those words escaped, I could sense the tension in the room. Matteo's reaction was instantaneous.

"Sophia!" His voice boomed, and I jolted in surprise at the sharpness of his tone.

I could see the anger in his eyes, but he was making a visible effort to control it. His voice was measured as he spoke, "I understand you're angry, Sophia, but you shouldn't speak of my father like that. I didn't lie about his murder."

Feeling mixed emotions – anger, confusion, and a gnawing sense of betrayal – I watched as Matteo closed his eyes briefly and inhaled deeply.

It seemed like he was trying to collect himself. After a moment, he opened his eyes and said, "Let's both sit down. It'll be better this way."

I hesitated, my pride warring with my need for answers, but eventually, I relented. I sat on the couch, my gaze locked on Matteo as he settled onto the adjacent sofa.

"First things first," he began, his voice steady. "I need you to understand something fundamental about me, Sophia. I'm part of the mafia."

I blinked, the revelation hitting me like a freight train. What the fuck? My mind raced to process this information. Matteo, a mafia member? It seemed almost surreal.

He continued, "My father was the Don before he was murdered. After his death, I was supposed to take over, but my uncle, Francisco, usurped his position. We've been at odds ever since."

Matteo's words hung heavy in the air.

He explained, "Some of those pictures are real but taken out of context. Yes, I've killed people in the past. But it's not what it looks like. The bodies you

see in those photos, among them were my men. I had to eliminate the ones who wanted to follow my uncle."

My eyes widened as I tried to comprehend the gravity of his words. The man I had fallen for was involved in a world of crime and violence that I couldn't fathom.

Matteo leaned forward, his eyes searching mine for understanding. "My father didn't want our family to follow the traditional path of dealing drugs and weapons. Instead, we turned to Vitalen, a miracle drug that's improved lives. My uncle doesn't agree with that. He wants to return to the old ways of dealing drugs and human trafficking. I've been trying to put an end to it."

As he spoke, I could see the conflict in his eyes.

My mind raced as I tried to process everything Matteo had revealed. The world I thought I knew had shifted on its axis, and I felt like I was stumbling through a dark tunnel, searching for clarity.

Finally, I mustered the courage to ask the question burning in my mind since he started explaining. "Who... who killed your father?"

Matteo's gaze never wavered, and his voice was steady, filled with a bitter resignation. "Francisco."

The shock hit me like a physical blow, and I couldn't contain my disbelief. "What?!" I exclaimed, my voice rising. "How... how could he kill his brother?"

Matteo's response was laced with sardonic bitterness as he chuckled darkly. "That's the same question I asked myself when I found out."

"How...did you find out?" I carefully asked.

Matteo's eyes darkened as he recounted the story. "I have a close friend in the police force, Leo. He stumbled upon some classified documents left

unattended on an officer's table. Naturally, I had him brought in for questioning, and I had the chance to interrogate him."

Sophia winced at the word 'interrogate.' "What kind of questioning are we talking about here?"

Matteo's response was grim. "You can use your imagination, but it wasn't a peaceful conversation."

I swallowed hard, my stomach churning at the implications. "And this conflict with your uncle... You said you've been building your force. What do you plan to do?"

Matteo's voice took on a chilling tone. "At first, I intended to take back my rightful position as the Don and let my uncle roam wherever he pleased, but after learning the truth about my father's death..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. The darkness in his eyes said it all.

I let out a shaky exhale. "I didn't sign up for this," I stated, trembling.

Matteo's gaze intensified momentarily before he calmly replied, "No one ever does, Sophia."

But then, in my anxiety, I let something slip that I hadn't intended to reveal.

"I should have run away when I saw you... when I saw you kill someone."

My words hung heavy in the air, and I froze wide-eyed.

To my astonishment, Matteo didn't show any surprise. Instead, he nodded somberly. "I've known you witnessed that, Sophia."

My eyes widened in shock. "You... you knew?"

He met my gaze, his expression unwavering. "Yes, I did."

I couldn't contain my curiosity and concern. "How did you know?"

Matteo sighed, his eyes dropping to the floor before returning to mine. "One of my connections in the police force found your purse near the scene," he

began. "After that, you became distant, avoiding me, and I put two and two together."

I felt a shiver run down my spine, realizing he had been aware of my secret for some time. Fear and confusion swirled within me.

If he had known about my witness to murder all along, did that mean he was going to... silence me? But why hadn't he done anything sooner if that was the case?

My voice trembled as I asked, "If you knew, why didn't you... do anything?"

Matteo's frustration was palpable, and I could see it in how his brow furrowed, and his fingers tapped impatiently on his thigh.

He let out a sigh of annoyance and exasperation, and then he spoke, his voice tinged with irritation. "Sophia, if I had any intentions of harming you, I would have done so long ago. I had my reasons for not revealing the truth sooner. I needed to be certain that you weren't sent by my uncle."

His words hit me like a jolt of electricity, and my confusion deepened. "Sent by your uncle?"

Matteo nodded solemnly, his gaze fixed on me. "My uncle has a history of using people close to me to gather information or gain an advantage. I couldn't take any risks. I had to be sure you were here because you genuinely wanted to be, not because you were sent to spy on me."

The revelation sent a chill down my spine. It was becoming increasingly clear that Matteo's world was a tangled web of secrets, danger, and suspicion, far beyond anything I had ever imagined.

Our conversation hung in the air like a fragile thread, both of us aware of the weight of the decisions we were facing.

"What would you have done if I had been sent by your uncle?" Sophia finally asked, breaking the tense silence.

Matteo's eyes met mine; his expression was unwavering. "I wouldn't have killed you," he stated firmly. "I would have sent you away."

I couldn't help but make a face at that revelation, my confusion and fear bubbling to the surface.

"I can't handle all of this, Matteo," I admitted with a heavy sigh. "I didn't sign up for a life filled with mafia craziness. I can't bring our baby into such a volatile environment."

Matteo reached out and gently took my hand, his touch warm and reassuring. "Sophia, I promise you, everything will be sorted out before our child is born. I'll make sure of it," he said earnestly, his gaze locked onto mine.

But despite his words, I couldn't shake the unease that gnawed at me. The uncertainty of it all weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Matteo's voice turned softer, more vulnerable as he continued. "You need to know something, Sophia. I didn't have to pay attention to you. But from the moment we met, you captured my attention in a way I can't fully explain. Even when you disappeared that night at the hotel, I searched for you relentlessly. I wanted you, even if I didn't fully understand my emotions."

I looked at him, his confession stirring a swirl of emotions. The complexity of our situation, his honesty, and the depth of his feelings left me torn.

He concluded, his voice filled with sincerity, "I don't know what I'll do if you leave with our child. Please, Sophia."

Matteo's words were heavy with concern as he continued, "Sophia, you need to understand that leaving now would be incredibly dangerous. Francisco, my uncle, is not someone to be taken lightly. He's ruthless and will stop at nothing to get what he wants, even if it means harming you or our child."

His warning echoed in my mind, and I couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear. I couldn't ignore the very real threat that Francisco posed. While it wasn't the

life I had imagined for myself, staying by Matteo's side seemed the safest choice for now.

Internally sighing with a mixture of annoyance and resignation, I finally relented,

"Fine, I'll stay."

Chapter 30

Matteo

Telling Sophia about my life in the mafia had always been a part of my long-term plan. I knew she would have to be let in on the truth at some point, but I had hoped for a more controlled and gentle revelation.

I had intended to gradually ease her into my world, to provide the necessary explanations and assurances along the way.

However, the way she found out, with those incriminating photos and documents, was far from what I had intended. It was sudden, jarring, and forced me to reveal everything quickly.

I had wanted to protect her from the harsh realities of my life for as long as possible, but circumstances changed my plans.

As I sat there, my mind raced with thoughts and uncertainties. I had wanted to protect Sophia from the harsh realities of my life for as long as possible, shield her from the darkness that surrounded me.

But the unexpected revelation had forced my hand; now she knew about my involvement in the mafia.

I couldn't help but wonder how this newfound knowledge would affect our

relationship. Would she look at me differently now?

Would she still want to be with me, knowing the world I belonged to was dangerous and morally complex? The weight of those questions bore down on me.

Even though Sophia had agreed to stay, I couldn't shake the feeling of uncertainty. I couldn't predict how our relationship would fare in the future.

Would she still be by my side once everything was sorted out? I hoped she would with all my heart, but I knew that hope alone wouldn't be enough to sustain us.

I was lost in thought, gazing at the table where those unsettling pictures and documents lay. My eyes narrowed as I contemplated just how Sophia had come into possession of such damning evidence.

I couldn't help but wonder, had she left the house? Or had someone ventured here?

Furrowing my brows in confusion, I turned to Sophia. "Sophia, who gave you the package?"

Sophia hesitated for a moment before answering, "I... I don't know, Matteo. I just found it at the door."

My mind raced with worry as Sophia continued, explaining, "The doorbell kept ringing, and when I went to check, none of your guards were there. I found the package on the ground."

I frowned deeply, considering her words. "None of my guards were supposed to let anyone in without my approval. When I arrived earlier, they were stationed exactly where they should be." I muttered.

I quickly stood up and headed straight to the entrance of my house, my mind racing with questions. What the fuck was going on?

Approaching my guards stationed at the entrance, I demanded answers. "Who

delivered that package to Sophia?" My tone conveyed the urgency of the situation.

Confusion clouded their faces. "What parcel?" one of them asked.

Impatiently, I clarified, "The one with the pictures and documents."

They exchanged uncertain glances. "We don't know about it, boss," the other guard replied.

Growing increasingly frustrated, I asked about the guards on duty before them. Their names weren't familiar; I knew all my security personnel personally, and these two didn't belong to my team.

My heart sank. This security breach was a grave concern; I needed to uncover its truth.

I pressed further, "Who were the guards on duty before you two?"

The first guard hesitated before answering, "Uh, their name tags said Alex and Jake, sir."

Alex and Jake? I didn't recall any personnel by those names in my security detail. My dread deepened. "Where are they now?"

The second guard replied. "We took over from them. They left when our shift started."

This situation was more alarming than I had initially thought. I had to find out who these mysterious guards were and how they had gained access to my home. I ordered, "Bring me the head of security, now."

Both guards nodded and hurriedly went to carry out my command.

The two guards returned with somber expressions, their faces etched with worry. I could feel the weight of their news even before they spoke a word. Dread settled deep within me, like a heavy stone in my chest.

One of the guards, his voice low and troubled, reported, "Boss, we couldn't find the head of security. He's nowhere to be seen."

I clenched my fists in frustration and anger. This situation was spiraling out of control, and it was becoming clear that there was a traitor within our ranks. My mind raced, connecting the dots. Who else but Francisco would orchestrate something like this?

I cursed under my breath. The breach of security was not just about photos and documents. What if the infiltrators had been ordered to kidnap Sophia instead of leaving behind that damning parcel? The mere thought made my blood run cold.

I couldn't help but blame myself for being unable to protect Sophia from external threats and internal betrayals. How could I ensure her safety when I couldn't tell who among my trusted men had turned against me?

As anxiety and frustration gnawed at me, I knew I had to act swiftly. I turned to the guards with a firm resolve.

"Double the security around the perimeter of the house. No one gets in or out without my explicit permission," I ordered, my voice carrying a tone that brooked no argument.

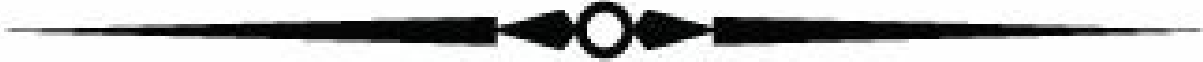
They nodded. I couldn't afford to let my guard down. If Sophia and our unborn child were to be protected, drastic measures had to be taken.

I also needed to find the head of security. His absence raised a red flag, and I had to determine whether he was involved or had been compromised. Either way, I couldn't trust anyone until I had solid answers.

With a sense of urgency gnawing, I pulled out my phone and dialed Antonio's number. He was one of the few individuals I trusted implicitly in my organization, the only other person being Leo. He picked up after several rings, his voice low and alert.

"Antonio, we have a problem," I began, my words laced with gravity. "I need you and Leo to come over immediately. There's a traitor in our midst."

Antonio, ever the reliable one, didn't hesitate. He acknowledged my request and assured me they would be there shortly. I hung up, knowing they would arrive as quickly as possible.



Antonio and Leo arrived promptly, and I led them into the living room. Sophia was safely tucked away in her room, and while I longed for the day when she could meet the key people in my life, this was not the time. She had been through enough, discovering the truth about my involvement in the mafia.

I wasted no time explaining the situation, recounting how Sophia had received the package containing those incriminating photos and documents. It was a grave security breach that left me deeply concerned about the safety of my loved ones, especially Sophia.

As I spoke, the weight of the situation settled on my shoulders, and I couldn't help but feel disheartened. It seemed like my uncle, Francisco, was always one step ahead.

Whether it was trying to usurp my position within the mafia or threatening Sophia's safety, he remained a constant threat.

I turned to Antonio and Leo, my voice firm. "*Dobbiamo estirpare i traditori tra noi (We must root out the traitors among us)*. This breach in our security is unacceptable, and I won't tolerate anyone jeopardizing the safety of those I care about. Sophia needs to be protected at all costs."

The room fell into a tense silence as we contemplated our next moves, knowing we were engaged in a dangerous game with high stakes.

I made another crucial decision as we discussed our plan. "Antonio, Leo, I want you to immediately replace the security personnel at the house with our most trusted men. I can't afford any more lapses in security, *soprattutto non con la sicurezza di Sophia in gioco (especially not with Sophia's safety on the line).*"

They nodded in agreement, and Antonio assured me, "Consider it done, Matteo. We'll handle the rotation and make sure only our most loyal men guard the premises."

I leaned forward, my expression hardening. "There's one more thing we need to address. Francisco."

Leo spoke first, his voice low and determined. "Matteo, we've got to send a message to Francisco. He's been playing his games for far too long."

I nodded, my jaw clenching with resolve. " He needs a lesson, a reminder that he can't further threaten Sophia or manipulate this situation. We must knock him off his high horse and clarify that we won't bow down to his intimidation."

Chapter 31

Sophia

As the days passed since the revelation of Matteo's involvement in the mafia, I found myself in a whirlwind of emotions.

I still couldn't believe the man I had fallen in love with was deeply entrenched in such a dangerous world. It was surreal, like a plotline from a movie, but this was our reality.

I knew that I needed time to process everything, to come to terms with the harsh truths he had shared with me, and so, I decided to continue working, at least until the bump of my growing pregnancy became well and visible.

It was a small way to maintain some semblance of normalcy in my life, to keep the routines I had known before this chaos descended upon me.

Working from home had become the new normal for me. Matteo had insisted that it was for my safety, and while I understood his concerns, the constant reminders of the dangers lurking outside began to wear on my nerves. At times, I was irked by the very thought of it all.

A part of me couldn't help but wonder if I should have never crossed paths with Matteo. Perhaps then, my life would have remained uncomplicated

without the looming threats and the shadow of the mafia hanging over us.

But deep down, I knew that regret was a fruitless emotion. I had chosen to stand by Matteo and continue to do so for our child's sake.

I had to admit that even though I wasn't entirely comfortable with the whole mafia situation, there was something undeniably reassuring about Matteo's commitment to my safety.

As the days passed, I couldn't help but appreciate the lengths he was going to. Our home had transformed into a fortress, with an increased security presence that left me feeling both safe and slightly claustrophobic.

But whenever I saw Matteo making those seemingly urgent phone calls or discussing matters with his trusted associates, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the gravity of his responsibilities.

While I continued to work from the safety of our home, Matteo's dedication and determination to protect me created an undeniable sweetness that touched my heart, even amidst the chaos of our circumstances.

As for my relationship with Matteo, it had undeniably taken a complicated turn since the revelation of his involvement in the mafia.

Feelings I'd thought I could suppress still lingered, stubbornly refusing to fade away. It was frustrating, to say the least.

I understood the weight of his responsibilities and the revenge he sought for his father's murder, but it didn't make our situation any less awkward.

Strangely, I found myself empathizing with his predicament. I would likely do the same if I were in his shoes, seeking retribution for my father's death.

The thirst for justice was a powerful force. At the same time, it was difficult to comprehend how his flesh and blood uncle could betray their family in such a despicable manner.

Our interactions had become strained, almost as if we were navigating

uncharted territory. On one hand, Matteo was perpetually occupied with the secretive world of the mafia, leaving us with limited time to see each other.

On the other hand, when we did cross paths, the atmosphere felt stilted, as if we'd forgotten how to be comfortable around one another.

It was as though we were walking on eggshells, afraid to say or do anything that might exacerbate the already fragile situation.

My phone chimed with an incoming message, disrupting the momentary peace I'd found in my work. I picked it up, curiosity mixed with a hint of unease, as I saw that the message was from an unknown number.

I furrowed my brows, contemplating whether this might be a new number Keisha was using. She'd mentioned considering a change recently, but as I read the message, the sense of unease grew into a knot of dread deep within me.

The message was not from Keisha; it was a veiled threat to mock my parents' death. It insinuated that their deaths, which I had always believed were tragic accidents, were not accidental but part of a sinister plan.

The words cut like a knife, and a cold shiver ran down my spine.

I re-read the message, my hands trembling slightly, trying to make sense of it. Who could be sending such a message, and why? My phone dropped from my hand onto the table.

I sat there, my thoughts jumbled, trying to make sense of the words that had just landed like bombshells.

The room felt stifling, and my breathing grew shallow as I replayed the message's veiled implications.

Could it be true? Could my parents' deaths have been something other than the tragic accident I had believed them to be all these years?

A sense of dizziness washed over me like a rug had been pulled out from

under my feet. The thought that someone out there knew something about my family's past, something I was completely unaware of, filled me with a profound sense of unease.

I couldn't help but glance around the room as though expecting an answer or an explanation to materialize out of thin air, but there was nothing, just the unsettling silence of my empty home.

My heart raced as I sat there, my mind swirling with emotions and questions. If my parents hadn't truly died in an accident, what would have happened to them?

What about all the suffering I endured, the hardships I faced, and the sacrifices I made because of their deaths?

I couldn't help but think about when I struggled to make ends meet, working odd jobs to survive.

I spent countless nights honing my tech skills, diving into the murky world of hacking to make some extra money, all while living in fear of being caught.

The relatives who treated me like a burden, as if I didn't exist, and the isolation I felt.

If someone had sent me this cryptic message, they must have information about my parents' deaths. They might hold the key to unraveling the mysteries of my past, even if it meant confronting painful truths. I couldn't let this message go unanswered.

With a deep breath, I picked up my phone again, staring at the message as if it held the key to some hidden truth. My heart was pounding, and my fingers trembled as I typed out a message to the unknown sender.

The words needed to be cautious probing, yet not revealing my feelings and fears too much. It was a shot in the dark, but I had to take it.

"Who are you? What do you mean about my parents' deaths? I typed, my

words careful and measured. As I hit send, I couldn't help but wonder if this message would finally bring me the closure I had been seeking for so long.

As seconds turned into minutes, which stretched into an agonizing eternity, I was on the edge of despair. Why wouldn't this anonymous person answer?

If they weren't going to reply, then why had they dropped this cryptic bombshell in the first place?

My breaths came out faster, harsh pants escaping my trembling lips. Tears streamed down my face, blurring the screen of my phone.

Panic began to claw at me, its grip tightening with every passing moment. I could hear myself muttering the same question repeatedly, a desperate plea for answers.

"Hurry up, please, just reply," I muttered, my voice quivering with anxiety. It was as if I could only focus on that one burning sentence, the insinuation that my parents hadn't died in an accident.

The implications were overwhelming, and I needed to know the truth. I needed closure, even if it meant facing painful realities.

I heard someone calling my name as I sat there, trapped in the vortex of my emotions and lost in the whirlpool of unanswered questions.

At first, the voice seemed distant, barely registering in my distraught mind, but it grew more insistent.

Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from the screen of my phone; my vision blurred from the tears. There, in front of me, stood Matteo. His face was etched with worry and panic, and his eyes widened in alarm when he saw the tears staining my cheeks.

"Sophia, what happened?" he demanded urgently, his voice laced with concern. He reached out to touch my trembling shoulder, but I couldn't find

the words to respond. Instead, I handed him my phone, my fingers still shaking.

With a furrowed brow, Matteo took the phone from my trembling hands and read the message out loud.

"Dear Sophia," Matteo began, and I watched his face, which mirrored the unease growing inside me.

"Your parents' deaths were a chilling reminder of how they died. It wasn't an accident, but it was... accidental in a way. You've suffered for nothing, dear. All those struggles, the shunning, the hardships you endured were pointless."

Tinged with dread, his voice continued to play out the sinister message.

"Consider this a warning. History has a way of repeating itself when you least expect it. Be careful, Sophia."

My tears had already numbed me while Matteo read the message aloud.

Chapter 32

Matteo

I was utterly appalled by the message Sophia had received. What the hell was Francisco playing at? Who else would send such a cryptic and disturbing message if not him? But what did it mean?

It contradicted what I had learned during my investigation into Sophia's past. I knew her parents had died, but this message suggested it wasn't an accident, yet hinted that it was. It made no sense, and I needed answers.

Pushing aside my confusion and frustration, I focused on Sophia. She had stopped crying and was now staring blankly at the message. Her eyes held a haunting mix of confusion and fear.

I wrapped my arm around her trembling shoulders, pulling her closer to me in an attempt to offer some form of solace. Regardless of the message's cryptic nature, one thing was clear: I needed to get to the bottom of this.

I held Sophia close, my heart heavy with worry. Whatever this message meant, it had shaken her deeply, and I couldn't ignore it. We needed answers, and we needed them fast.

"Sophia," I began gently, "I don't know what this message is all about, but we'll figure it out together. You're not alone in this, okay?"

She nodded weakly, her eyes still fixed on the message. Clearly, this had opened up old wounds and fears she thought were buried. I couldn't blame her.

The idea that her parents' deaths might not have been the tragic accident she'd believed for so long was a lot to process. After all, I should know. I had experienced the same thing.

I left her for a moment to fetch a glass of water, my mind filled with the bitter irony that Sophia and I were both victims of Francisco's twisted machinations. Fate, it seemed, had a cruel sense of humor.

Walking back to her with the glass of water, I handed it to her, and she accepted it with trembling hands. She took a sip, and I watched as she let out a shaky exhale, the tension in her body slowly ebbing away.

We sat there in silence; the weight of the message was still heavy in the air, but at least she had something to drink now.

As Sophia shared the tragic story of her parents' demise, I couldn't help but be struck by the uncanny resemblance between her parents' supposed accident and the incident that claimed my father's life.

It was almost as if the same dark force had orchestrated both tragedies.

She told me how it had happened when she was just 18 years old. Her parents had been driving, and a truck had recklessly run a red light, crashing into their vehicle.

The truck driver was allegedly drunk, adding a layer of senseless tragedy to the already devastating accident.

As she let out a bitter scoff, I felt a heavy weight settle in my chest. It was chilling how our stories mirrored each other.

I wanted to tell her what I suspected—that my uncle, Francisco, was somehow involved in both of our families' tragedies, but I held back, realizing that I needed more concrete evidence before I could share such a grim theory.

Lost in my thoughts, I was startled when Sophia called my name, her voice pulling me from the depths of my contemplation. She asked if I was okay, concern etched on her face.

I managed a faint smile, trying to ease her worry. "I'm fine."

I decided to keep my suspicions about my uncle to myself for now. There were too many unanswered questions and dangers lurking in the shadows. Until I had more information, it was better to wait before revealing anything.

"I'll discover what happened to your parents, Sophia. You deserve to know."

She nodded, her eyes showing a glimmer of determination amidst the lingering unease. Sophia wiped her face, erasing any residual tear stains, giving me a shaky, yet heartfelt smile. "Thank you, Matteo."

I gently suggested to her, "Sophia, changing your phone and SIM card might be a good idea. Just to be on the safe side."

She nodded, looking at her phone. I took it from her hand and told her I would get her a new one soon. There was no need for her to torture herself looking at the message.

I was surprised when, out of nowhere, she wrapped her arms around me in an embrace. But I didn't hesitate to hug her back, feeling a sense of relief wash over me.

Our relationship had been strained since she learned the truth about me, and I had feared it might never recover. But at that moment, as we clung to each other, I saw a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, things could get better between us.



With a renewed sense of purpose, I began to set my plans into motion. With how Francisco was behaving, there was no time to waste.

I held secret meetings with the few remaining loyal leaders who had served under my father. Together, we began crafting a strategy to regain control of the family.

It was a risky endeavor, filled with political intrigue and power struggles within the underworld. But I was determined to pay my uncle back for the betrayals he had committed.

Revenge was a dish best served cold, and I intended to make it ice-cold.

Simultaneously, I delved deeper into the investigation regarding the deaths of Sophia's parents. It was clear that Francisco had something to do with it, but the why and how remained shrouded in mystery. I tapped into my contacts, using every resource to uncover the truth.

Days turned into weeks, and our plans slowly began to take shape. We gathered intelligence, rallied our loyalists, and probed for weaknesses in my uncle's empire. The tension within our family grew thicker each day, and I could feel the storm brewing.

Three long years had passed since my uncle brazenly seized control of our family's mafia operations. It had been a period filled with clandestine meetings, covert dealings, and an intricate dance of alliances.

At first, my uncle had likely thought I was an easy target, ripe for manipulation. But as time passed, it became evident that I wouldn't just fade away.

Instead, I spent those years methodically laying the groundwork for my return, building a network of loyal supporters, and patiently awaiting the right moment.

During my uncle's reign, our family underwent a significant transformation. He steered us into darker waters, engaging in illicit trades like drug trafficking and human smuggling, betraying the principles my father had upheld.

It caused a rift within the organization as many loyalists yearned for the days of my father's leadership.



In the softly lit room, I leaned forward, my eyes fixed on Leo and Antonio as I recounted the unsettling message Sophia had received.

"The message hinted at something ominous regarding her parents' deaths," I explained, my voice tense with concern. "It said their deaths weren't an accident, but it was... accidental in a way."

Leo's furrowed brows deepened as he leaned forward, his voice carrying the weight of his concern.

"Matteo, we need to be cautious here. Francisco doesn't play games without a reason. If he's sending cryptic messages about Sophia's parents, there must be something he's hiding."

Antonio, ever the pragmatic one, said, "And what if this is a way to divert your attention, Matteo? What if he's using this to distract you from something more significant?"

Their points were valid, and I couldn't ignore the possibility. My mind raced as I considered their words. "You're right, both of you. We need to be careful and not jump to conclusions, but this message... it feels personal."

Leo, with his years of experience in this world, nodded sagely. "Personal or not, we have to handle it with caution. I'll start gathering information on Sophia's parents' deaths discreetly. We don't want to tip our hand to Francisco prematurely."

Antonio, ever the voice of reason, seconded the motion by chiming in. "I'll assist Leo in the investigation.-"We can start digging into their deaths. See if there's anything we can uncover. We need to tread carefully though, Matteo.""

I nodded in agreement, appreciating their unwavering support. "*Grazie (Thank you)*, both of you."

As the conversation shifted, they inquired about Sophia. I couldn't help but smile at their concern. "She's doing better now, all things considered."

Leo's eyes bore into mine, a stern and paternal expression. "Matteo, you must be even more careful with a child on the way. You have more to protect now."

Their genuine concern warmed my heart, and I nodded in acknowledgment.

"I know, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep them safe."

Chapter 33

Sophia

Being five months pregnant was taking a toll on me physically and emotionally. It was my first pregnancy, and the early stages were not kind.

The constant nausea that seemed to linger like an unwelcome guest, the fatigue that clung to me like a heavy cloak, and the mood swings that turned even the most mundane conversations into emotional rollercoasters were all part of the package.

As much as I had tried to prepare myself, nothing could truly prepare me for the reality of it. Some days, I marveled at the miracle growing inside me, but other days, I just wished for a break from the symptoms.

Matteo, my ever-vigilant protector, had brought in a trusted doctor to check on me regularly. He insisted on not taking any chances with my health, especially after the unsettling message we had received.

Truthfully, after learning that my parents' accident might not have been an accident, I grew increasingly fearful of going out.

The doctor's visits were a welcome relief. It was comforting to have a professional assure me that everything was progressing as it should.

Matteo, always present during these visits, would hold my hand, a reassuring presence amidst the uncertainty.

While the pregnancy had brought challenges, it also brought a sense of closeness between Matteo and me.

Living with Matteo had turned out to be surprisingly wonderful. Sure, our journey together had begun on a rocky path filled with secrets and uncertainties, but as time passed, the rough edges seemed to smoothen out. We settled into a rhythm that felt remarkably normal, considering the circumstances.

For one, Matteo's protectiveness had transformed into a comforting presence. He was always there when I needed him, ready to address concerns or fears about my pregnancy or our safety.

His unwavering support made me feel cherished and secure. Our interactions had evolved, too. There was a growing sense of closeness between us.

We'd share meals, sometimes cooking together in the kitchen, and setting the table or choosing a recipe became moments of intimacy. We were weaving our lives together, one day at a time.

I noticed that Matteo's schedule seemed to be less hectic than before. In the early days, he would often be away, dealing with whatever, but now, he made a conscious effort to spend more time at home.

He evidently wanted to be there for me, especially as my pregnancy progressed.

Our evenings were filled with conversations that spanned a wide range of topics. We talked about our pasts, our dreams, and our fears.

Matteo shared stories from his childhood, and I was captivated by his tales of growing up in a world so different from mine.

I also learned more about his family and the dynamics within the Mafia. It

was a side of him he had kept hidden from me initially, but now he seemed more open to sharing.

We discussed his plans for the future and how he aimed to rebuild his family's legacy positively.

There were moments of laughter and playfulness, too. We'd sometimes indulge in movie nights, cuddling on the couch as we watched everything from classic films to cheesy romantic comedies.

During those times, I could see Matteo's softer side, which made my heart swell with affection.

Our relationship had come a long way from its turbulent beginnings, and I couldn't deny that some part of me was starting to love him.

It was a complicated feeling, one that was entangled with fear and uncertainty, but I found moments of solace and even happiness, and I hoped that it meant something real was growing between us.

I couldn't deny that some part of me was starting to love him. It wasn't just the adrenaline-pumping moments of danger that brought us closer; it was the quieter, everyday moments we shared.

His sense of humor, how he'd listen to my thoughts and ideas, and his genuine interest in my well-being all brought us together.

We even had our little rituals, like watching a movie together on quiet nights or the way he'd always leave a cup of tea on the bedside table when he knew I had trouble sleeping.

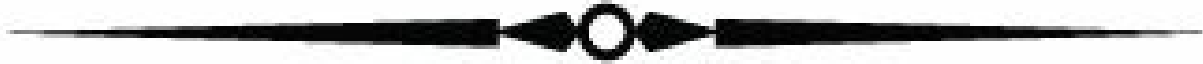
These big and small gestures made me appreciate the man beneath the tough exterior.

And, of course, there were the nights when we'd lie in bed, talking about anything and everything until sleep finally claimed us.

Those moments when he'd share bits of his past and his dreams for the future

made me feel like I truly knew him.

Yes, living with Matteo was great, even amid the chaos, danger, and unfavorable circumstances that had brought us together.



My fingers danced over the keyboard as I delved into the digital labyrinth, seeking any information about my parents' deaths.

My initial attempt had been to trace the mysterious number from the threatening message. However, the digital trail grew cold quickly, indicating it was likely a burner phone – a dead-end for now.

So, I shifted my focus to another avenue I was well-versed in: hacking into the police files to unearth the reports on the accident that had taken my parents' lives.

I hadn't shared my intentions with Matteo despite his offer to help. It wasn't that I didn't trust him; it was simply because I knew he wouldn't approve.

Matteo had made it clear that my well-being and that of our unborn child were his utmost priority. Anything that added stress or danger to our lives was a no-go in his book.

But my parents' deaths were a part of me. How could I not try to uncover the truth? What kind of daughter would I be if I didn't take matters into my own hands and seek justice for them?

So, there I sat, hacking my way into the records, when I heard the front door creak open. I initially thought Matteo had returned from his business matters, but then I heard my name being called. Surprised, I turned towards the entrance of the room.

To my amazement, it wasn't Matteo who stood there but Keisha, my best friend. A wide smile broke across my face as I rushed over to her, wrapping my arms around her tightly. It was an unexpected but heartwarming surprise.

"Keisha! What are you doing here?" I exclaimed, my voice filled with delight and curiosity.

She chuckled, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Well, our dear Matteo thought you needed a little company. He picked me up and dropped me here. He said he didn't want you to be lonely and figured a dose of normalcy with your best friend might do you good."

My eyes widened in astonishment. Matteo had arranged for Keisha to come over. It was an unexpected and incredibly thoughtful gesture from him.

My heart warmed at the realization that he cared enough to ensure I had people around me who mattered.

"That's... sweet of him," I managed to say, touched by his consideration.

Keisha's playful comment about Matteo's unexpected soft side brought laughter to the room. "Yeah, who would've thought the big, tough mafia boss had a soft side?" she said with a chuckle. "But hey, I'm not complaining. It's been too long since we had a girl's night in, Soph."

I couldn't help but laugh at her remark. Keisha always had a way of lightening the mood. "You're telling me," I replied, still smiling. "It's been quite the adjustment."

Keisha leaned forward, her eyes filled with curiosity. "So, how's living with him been, Soph?"

I leaned back, thinking for a moment. "It's been... surprisingly good. At first, it was a bit rocky, but Matteo's been considerate and been helping out a lot."

Keisha nodded, her expression knowing. "I figured as much. You always had a way of making people want to be better, Soph."

I couldn't help but blush at her compliment. "Thanks, Keisha. And yeah, you know about his... occupation, right?"

She nodded. "You told me about it during one of our phone calls. How's that part of it?"

I sighed, thinking about the complexities of Matteo's life. "It's... complicated, to say the least. It bothers me sometimes, but he's also doing everything he can to protect me and the baby. So, there's that."

Keisha's eyes sparkled with interest. "Speaking of the baby, how's little Junior faring?"

I smiled, my hand instinctively going to my belly. "Junior's been active, especially in the evenings. It's a comforting feeling, in a strange way."

Keisha grinned. "That's amazing, Soph. I can't wait to meet the little one."

Our conversation flowed naturally as if we had never been apart.

As Keisha and I settled into a comfortable rhythm of conversation, it felt like no time had passed since we last saw each other. We chatted about our lives, sharing stories and updates on what had been happening.

Eventually, I finally mustered the courage to bring up the message I'd received and the painful truth about my parents' deaths. It was a conversation I'd been dreading, but Keisha deserved to know.

"Keisha," I began hesitantly, "I got a message a while back. It was... threatening, and it mentioned something about my parents' deaths not being an accident."

Keisha's eyes widened, concern and curiosity mixing in her gaze. "What? Sophia, that's terrible. What did the message say?"

I swallowed hard, my voice quivering slightly as I recounted the message. The chilling words seemed even more ominous as I spoke them aloud.

"It said, 'Your parents' deaths were a chilling reminder of how they died. It

wasn't an accident, but it was... accidental in a way. You've suffered for nothing, dear. All those struggles, the shunning, the hardships you endured were pointless."

Keisha's concern deepened as she listened to my words. "I understand your fear, Sophia. It's a chilling message, to say the least." She leaned in, her voice lowering to a whisper. "And Matteo... he's helping you with this?"

I nodded, appreciating her understanding. "Yes, he is. He's determined to discover the truth behind my parents' deaths."

Keisha sat back, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Well, having a powerful ally like Matteo on your side can be a game-changer. If anyone can uncover the truth, it's him."

I agreed, feeling a sense of gratitude for Matteo's unwavering support. "You're right, Keisha. I hope we can get to the bottom of this mystery soon."

Our conversation then shifted to lighter topics as Keisha shared her stories and experiences from work and life. It was a relief to momentarily set aside the heavy burden of my parents' unsolved past.

As the evening wore on, we reminisced about old times and laughed at inside jokes, just like we used to. I couldn't help but appreciate Keisha's sense of normalcy and comfort, especially during these uncertain times.

Chapter 34

Matteo

One morning, after two months had passed, the soft tendrils of dawn's light crept into the room as Sophia, and I sat down for breakfast. The atmosphere was unusually calm, a rare moment of respite in our turbulent lives.

Sipping our coffee, I couldn't help but appreciate the simple pleasure of sharing this quiet morning with her.

But beneath the facade of normalcy, questions lingered, and Sophia's curious gaze bore into me. She was determined to understand my world's intricacies and peel back the layers of the mafia's history.

"Matteo," her voice, soft but probing, broke the morning silence, "I've been thinking... what kind of grudge did Francisco hold against your father? Why would he want to take control of the family business so badly?"

Her inquiry hung in the air, and I realized it was time to offer her an unvarnished glimpse into the tangled web of our family's past. I set my coffee cup down, the clink against the saucer punctuating the weight of the conversation.

"It's complicated," I began, my gaze drifting to the table as though the

answers lay hidden within the wood grains. " Francisco was supposed to become the Don before my father. He's older, and by tradition, he should have been the one to lead our family."

Sophia nodded attentively, her eyes fixed on me.

"But my grandfather saw something in my father, something that made him believe he was the right choice," I continued. "I don't know exactly why my grandfather made that decision. Maybe it was a gut feeling, or perhaps he saw qualities in my father that he thought Francisco lacked. Now, with how hellbent Francisco is on reverting to the old ways, I think I can understand why my grandfather didn't choose him."

"The old ways?" Sophia questioned.

I nodded, sipping my coffee as I continued. "The old ways... they refer to the methods and activities our mafia families used to engage in, especially back in the day. It's everything from dealing drugs and illicit substances to controlling arms trafficking. These were some of the ways the families amassed wealth and power in the past."

Sophia's eyes widened at the revelation. "So, your father wanted to take the family in a different direction, away from these... illegal activities?"

"Yes," I affirmed. "He wanted to make our family more respectable, to distance us from the criminal elements."

A hint of nostalgia crept into my voice as I remembered my father's unwavering determination. "He envisioned a future where our family would be known for prosperity, not just fear. But, unfortunately, not everyone shared that vision."

Sophia's gaze remained fixed on me, her curiosity unabated. "And Francisco?"

"Francisco was adamant about returning to the old ways," I explained, a tinge

of frustration seeping into my words. "He believes it's the only path to maintaining our family's dominance, and he's willing to do anything to get there, even if it means tearing our family apart. To him, power is everything. That's all he cares about."

The memories of countless arguments and power struggles loomed as I continued my tale.

"Anyway, Francisco was deeply hurt by my grandfather's decision. No matter how much my father tried to make amends, offered him a place by his side as a second in command, Francisco felt slighted like he'd been robbed of what was rightfully his, even though it wasn't my father's fault."

I paused, reflecting on those tumultuous years. "So, he left. It was quite a relief, even if my father wished he hadn't left. There was peace after he departed, no constant arguing.

Gradually, my father stopped feeling guilty, believing that if Francisco wanted to get what he desired, he had to work for it and not complain and get angry when it wasn't handed to him on a silver platter.

I paused and reflected before continuing, "A few years passed before he suddenly came back with a new attitude. He decided to follow my father, apologized for his previous behavior, and accepted the position of being my father's second in command."

Engrossed in the story, Sophia questioned, "So, everything was resolved between them then?"

I shook my head, a tinge of sadness creeping into my voice. "No, not really. There was a rift between them. Their relationship was no longer smooth. It became awkward. Of course, that rift grew wider when Francisco started neglecting his duties. There were periods when he'd disappear for days, causing arguments between my father and him again. We learned the truth

about his constant disappearances only after my father died. Francisco had been building a force of his own and making alliances with some of our enemies. He came storming in when I was supposed to become the Don.”

Sophia listened intently, her expression a mix of curiosity and concern. When I finished, her brows furrowed as she processed the information. "So, you had no choice but to surrender to his surprise attack?"

I nodded, acknowledging the grim reality of that situation. "Yes, we had no choice. But luckily, even though Francisco became the Don, he couldn't gain control of the company.

It generates a significant amount of revenue that funds the mafia. Perhaps that's why he's so desperate to expand into drug trafficking. He no longer wants to lower his head when asking me for money."

Sophia's let out a soft sigh. "It's all about power and control. Even within your own family."

I held onto my cup of coffee, inhaling the steam as my mind wandered to the past. Memories of family disputes, power struggles, and the weight of responsibility washed over me.

It was a world that demanded sacrifices, and I had made my share.

Lost in my thoughts, I sat at the breakfast table, the morning sunlight streaming through the window. It was one of those rare moments of tranquility in our turbulent lives.

My phone vibrated on the table, snapping me back to the present. I picked it up and saw a message from Leo.

As Sophia stood up to clear our empty plates, I gave her a thankful nod before turning my attention to my phone.

The message confirmed that Francisco was responsible for her parents' death. However, Leo was still delving deeper to uncover the motive behind this

gruesome act.

I sat at the breakfast table, my phone screen casting a soft glow on my face. My eyes wandered to the kitchen, where Sophia was in her world, cheerfully humming while she tackled the morning dishes.

The sunlight streaming through the window gave her an almost ethereal glow, a moment of serenity in our otherwise tumultuous lives.

The message from Leo confirmed what we had all believed, but it was only part of the story. The motive behind his ruthless act remained a puzzle.

Yet, as I watched Sophia occupied in her task, I couldn't bring myself to shatter her temporary peace.

I knew, eventually, I'd have to tell her the full truth. When I dug up the motive behind Francisco's deeds, that'd be the time, but for now, I silently promised to let her enjoy these tranquil moments in her small bubble of ignorance.

I didn't know how long I had been thinking, but Sophia, ever perceptive, noticed my distant expression and approached me with concern.

She gently touched my shoulder, leaning closer to see if I was alright. "Hey," she asked, "what's been bothering you?"

I leaned back in my chair, my fingers lightly drumming on the table as I contemplated her question. A small, knowing smirk tugged at the corner of my lips as I appreciated her attentiveness.

"Looks like someone has been observing me," I teased, my gaze locked onto hers.

Sophia rolled her eyes in an endearing, playful manner. "Well, it's hard not to notice when you've been staring into thin air for the past ten minutes."

Chuckling softly, I acknowledged her astute assessment. "Alright, alright, you've got me there."

Her warm smile reassured me as I leaned closer, our faces coming within mere inches of each other. "Well, you see," I continued, my voice softening, "I've been thinking..."

Sophia raised a curious eyebrow, her interest piqued. "Thinking about what, Mr. De Luca?"

Leaning closer, our conversation intimate, I locked my gaze onto hers. My hand found its way to rest gently atop hers, our fingers interlacing. "How about a date? Just you and me."

Sophia's expressive eyes widened in surprise at my proposal, her lips parting slightly. "A date? But what about the threats and everything?"

I offered a reassuring smile as my hand stayed over hers, comforting her. "I'll handle everything, Sophia," I assured her. Leaning in just a bit more, "Besides, I think you could use a change of scenery and fresh air," I added. "What do you say?"

Surprise and curiosity danced in her eyes as she considered my offer. After a moment, her expression softened, and she gave me a nod filled with gratitude and newfound resolve. "You know what, Matteo? I think I'd love that."

Chapter 35

Sophia

I stood before the mirror, my room scattered with discarded clothing options. Keisha's face illuminated my phone screen as we went through my wardrobe via video call.

"Maybe the red blouse with those black pants?" Keisha suggested, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

I hesitated momentarily, then reluctantly tried on the red blouse with the black pants. I twirled around, examining myself in the mirror.

Keisha's eyes narrowed, and I could practically hear her sigh. "Sophia, you look amazing in that outfit! Seriously, how many more clothes are you going to try on?"

I grimaced, fully aware of my indecisiveness. "I just want it to be perfect, you know? It's been so long since I've been on a real date."

Keisha rolled her eyes playfully. "Soph, you could wear a potato sack, and Matteo would still think you're the most beautiful woman in the world. You're overthinking this."

I glanced at the growing pile of rejected outfits on my bed, feeling

exasperated. "I know, I know. I just want everything to go smoothly."

Keisha chuckled with an eye roll. "Alright, last try. How about that blue dress you wore to my birthday last year?"

I sighed and nodded. It was a lovely dress, and it had been one of Keisha's favorites. As I slipped into it, I saw Keisha's eyes light up with approval.

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "You look stunning, Soph. Now, I promise, this is the one. No more wardrobe changes."

I grinned, thankful for Keisha's patience. "Thanks, Keisha. You're the best."

We finished choosing accessories and makeup, and as I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I couldn't help but feel a sense of confidence and excitement. Tonight was going to be special.

However, the thought of my growing belly still lingered in the back of my mind. "Do you think this dress makes me look fat?" I asked, glancing at my profile nervously. I was seven months pregnant, and my baby bump was very noticeable.

Keisha rolled her eyes, her patience wearing thin with my insecurities. "Soph, trust me, you look beautiful, and that baby bump makes you glow. So stop worrying about looking fat."

I sighed, realizing I was probably overthinking it once again. "You're right, Keisha. Thanks for being here with me through all this."

She smiled warmly. "Of course, Soph. Now, you're all set for your date with Matteo. Enjoy every moment!"

As I ended the video call with Keisha, she couldn't resist one last cheeky remark, accompanied by an exaggerated wink and a mischievous grin. "You better make sure that dress stays on all night, Sophia! Have fun!"

I chuckled, shaking my head at her playful nature. "Oh, Keisha, you're something else."

Just as I hung up, there was a knock on the door. My heart skipped a beat, knowing who was waiting on the other side. I hurriedly reached the door and swung it open, revealing Matteo standing there, looking effortlessly handsome.

His attire was a perfect blend of casual and formal. A crisp white shirt accentuated his tanned skin, and the top buttons were undone, exposing a hint of his collarbones.

He wore dark jeans that fit him perfectly, emphasizing his lean physique. With his well-groomed stubble and tousled hair, he looked devastatingly handsome.

I couldn't help but feel a flutter in my chest as my eyes took in his appearance. "Matteo," I greeted him with a soft smile.

He returned the smile, his eyes gleaming warmly as he looked at me. "Sophia, you look incredible."

A blush crept onto my cheeks as I glanced at the blue dress Keisha had helped me pick out. "Thank you. You look pretty amazing yourself," I replied, slightly breathless.

Matteo chuckled a hint of self-assuredness in his demeanor. "Shall we?" he asked, extending his arm for me to take.

I nodded, sliding my arm through his, our bodies blending together effortlessly. As we exited the mansion and entered the car already waiting out front, I couldn't help but feel excitement for the evening ahead.

With Matteo by my side and the promise of a special night, I was ready to enjoy every moment.



Under the soft glow of streetlights, Matteo and I walked hand in hand toward the restaurant he had chosen for our dinner date.

The city was alive around us, bustling with people and the distant hum of traffic. The night air was pleasantly cool, and I couldn't help but think how it felt like a scene from a romantic movie.

The hostess greeted us warmly as we entered the restaurant and led us to a cozy corner booth. The ambiance was perfect, with dimmed lighting and soft jazz music playing in the background.

We settled into our seats, and I couldn't help but notice how Matteo's eyes never left mine. There was an intensity in his gaze that made my heart race, yet it was also filled with a tenderness that made me feel cherished.

We perused the menu, sharing light conversations about our favorite dishes. Matteo ordered a bottle of wine, and as we waited for our food, he reached across the table to take my hand in his, his thumb gently caressing my knuckles.

"I've been looking forward to this evening," he confessed, his voice low and intimate.

I smiled, my cheeks tinged with a hint of blush. "Me too."

As our dinner arrived, we savored each bite, occasionally sharing the tastes of our dishes. The food was exquisite, and our date continued with laughter and playful banter.

Matteo and I shared stories of our most embarrassing moments, each tale trying to outdo the other.

As I recounted a particularly amusing incident from my school days, Matteo couldn't help but laugh, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Sophia, you were a handful, weren't you?"

I grinned, feeling the warmth of his laughter wash over me. "You have no idea, Matteo. But I can't be the only one with embarrassing stories. Come on, your turn."

He leaned in closer, his gaze intense but playful. "Alright, but you have to promise not to judge me."

"Scout's honor," I replied, crossing my heart with my fingers.

Matteo chuckled, then began to tell a story involving a mishap during a family gathering that had left everyone in stitches.

His animated gestures and expressive storytelling had me in fits of laughter, and I couldn't help but admire how charismatic and charming he could be.

Throughout the evening, our conversation flowed effortlessly from one topic to another.

We discussed our favorite movies, shared our opinions on the latest tech gadgets, and even delved into the age-old debate of cats versus dogs.

As we finished dessert, Matteo leaned in closer, his voice lowering to a seductive whisper. "You know, Sophia, this has been an incredible evening, but there's something I've been dying to do since we got here."

I raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "Oh? What's that?"

Without a word, Matteo gently slid his fingers beneath the table, intertwining them with mine. His touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I couldn't deny the fluttering sensation in my stomach.

Leaning even closer, he spoke softly, his lips brushing against my ear. "Dance with me."

My heart skipped a beat as he stood up and extended his hand. The restaurant's ambiance had shifted to a more romantic mood, with soft music playing in the background.

I took his hand, allowing him to lead me to a small, improvised dance floor

near our table. As the soft, romantic melody filled the restaurant, Matteo and I swayed together in perfect harmony.

Our bodies moved gracefully, the music guiding us, and it felt like time stood still.

His eyes, locked onto mine, held an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. Slowly, he drew me closer, our bodies pressed tightly together. I could feel his chest's gentle rise and fall, matching our dance's rhythm.

Our lips met in a sweet and passionate kiss when he lowered his head. Our mouths moved together, a gentle exploration of each other's warmth. His lips were soft, and the taste of him was a heady mix of desire and promise.

The world outside faded away as we lost ourselves in that kiss, our breaths mingling. When we finally pulled away, our smiles mirrored our joy.

Our dance continued. Matteo's eyes never left mine, and as we danced, I felt the world around us fade away, leaving only the two of us lost in the moment.

As the song ended, we slowed our dance, our foreheads gently touching. I felt an overwhelming affection for the man before me in that intimate moment.

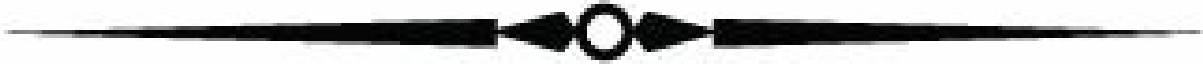
The restaurant buzzed around us with the clinking of cutlery and the murmur of conversations, but in our little cocoon of shared glances and smiles, it felt like we were the only ones in the room.

Matteo's eyes held mixed emotions, including desire, which he did not try to conceal. His voice, low and inviting, broke the silence. "Should we head back home?"

I bit my lower lip, a soft, anticipatory thrill coursing me. "Yes," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

We lingered for a moment, aware that the night was far from over, and the heated atmosphere of the restaurant only seemed to heighten the tension between us.

With fingers still entwined, we rose from our table, ready to continue the evening's adventure beyond the restaurant's confines. In that heated gaze, I couldn't help but think that Keisha's joking wish about keeping my dress on throughout the night was not going to be fulfilled.



As we stepped into the cozy embrace of his home, Matteo, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, disappeared into the kitchen. He returned moments later, holding a tub of ice cream and a single spoon.

I raised an eyebrow, feigning innocence. "Dessert?"

He chuckled, his smile playful. "Why not?"

With a casual shrug of his shoulders, he opened the tub of ice cream and scooped a generous portion onto the spoon before putting it in his mouth.

My eyes focused on how his lips wrapped out the spoon and how his throat bobbed as he swallowed the delicious, cold treat. Scooping another portion of ice cream onto the spoon, he held it out to me.

Matteo's eyes sparked, and his mouth curved in a smirk. It wasn't until he raised an eyebrow in urging that I opened for him.

"*Brava ragazza (Good girl),*" Matteo murmured in Italian as he slid his spoon into my mouth.

Even though I couldn't understand what he said, his praise was evident in how he looked at me, which stirred something within me.

A sense of pleasure and pride washed over me, making me desire to earn his praise again. At that moment, I was willing to do anything to see that approval in his eyes again.

So, I focused on licking the ice cream from Matteo's spoon. As I did, a realization dawned on me – that spoon had been inside his mouth.

My eyes took on a sultry, half-lidded look as I dragged my tongue along the cold metal, searching for his lingering taste.

When Matteo withdrew the spoon from my lips, a small dribble of ice cream escaped from the corner of my mouth.

His thumb moved swiftly to wipe it away, the touch of his finger gentle against my skin. My eyes widened in surprise as he brought his thumb to his mouth and sensually sucked it clean, grinning at my reaction.

"You gaze at me like you're perpetually on the brink of surrendering, ready to kneel and beg for whatever I desire," Matteo murmured, finally addressing the unspoken question between us.

His intense blue eyes locked onto mine, their weighty allure accentuated by his heavy-lidded expression. "You look at me like you're desperate to be my good girl."

Oh.

Oh.

Good girl. Was that what he had called me in Italian?

Despite the cool night air, a surge of heat coursed through my body. Matteo's words had hit the mark – I wanted him to take control and be his good girl.

Matteo's grin widened as he carefully set aside the empty ice cream container and gently retrieved my spoon, placing it inside.

I could only gaze up at him, my mind buzzing with desire as he closed the distance between us.

He gently pressed me back against the refrigerator, being mindful of my baby bump as his strong chest formed a barrier around me.

His fingers caressed my chin, tilting my face to meet his. Simultaneously, his

other arm wrapped around my lower back, pulling me snugly against his muscular frame.

A gasp escaped my lips as I felt the undeniable bulge in his jeans pressing against my stomach. Matteo's eyes darkened and fell to my mouth again, intensifying our electric anticipation.

My lips tingled with an undeniable craving for his kiss, and I couldn't help but emit a needy whimper.

Matteo hummed, the vibration sending shivers down my spine and a pulsing heat straight to my pussy.

His lips curled into a slight grin, sending my desire soaring. With his head tilted, he peered at me through those long, dark lashes.

The sight of him, so striking and commanding, asking if I wanted to be his, felt almost overwhelming.

It took a moment for my body to catch up with my racing thoughts, and I finally managed a jerky nod, my chin still nestled in his firm hold.

"Please," I whispered, my voice barely more than a breath.

Matteo's grin stretched wider across his face, but there was no time to appreciate it because he leaned down, brushing his lips against mine in a gentle, teasing kiss.

When he began to withdraw, I couldn't restrain myself. I rose on my toes, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt, and chased after his mouth.

Matteo's chuckle was abruptly cut off as he responded, kissing me with a renewed passion.

Initially cool from the ice cream, his lips warmed as they glided over mine. His tongue gently probed the seam of my lips, seeking entry, and I eagerly parted them, relishing in the combined taste of the ice cream we had just shared and something uniquely Matteo.

My hands found their way into his hair, fingers tangling in the dark locks as our kiss deepened.

The sounds escaping my lips seemed to drive Matteo wild, urging him to kiss me with an increasing hunger.

It was as if he was determined to draw every pleasurable moan straight from the depths of my being. Our lips collided and melded in a passionate dance.

As Matteo's lips claimed mine, his hands embarked on an exploration of my body. They roamed freely, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples through the fabric, eliciting fervent cries devoured by his insistent kisses.

His touch seemed to coax out every gasp and moan, which he drank down with an almost greedy fervor.

Matteo's hands ventured lower, and as they gripped my soft ass, pulling me closer to his steely form, I couldn't help but cry out in pleasure.

There was not an inch of space left between us; our bodies pressed together with an intensity that left no room for escape.

I wrapped my arms around Matteo's shoulders, flushing against his. Rising onto my tiptoes, I guided one leg to cradle his undeniable hardness and began to move sensuously against him.

Through the fabric of my dress, I could feel the undeniable pressure of his arousal pressing against my aching, drenched pussy. Each movement sent electric waves of desire coursing through me.

Matteo abruptly pulled his mouth from mine, leaving a trail of heated kisses along my jaw. His groan sounded like I was torturing him rather than driving him wild with my movements.

His voice, a husky whisper in my ear, nearly got lost amidst my gasping breaths and the cacophony of my racing heart.

But I heard every word, and his intoxicatingly filthy praise only fueled my

desire. I intensified my grinding against him, seeking pleasure from his strong body.

"God, yes, *principessa (princess)*," Matteo murmured, his tone dripping with arousal. His hands on my hips steadied me, ensuring I remained pressed against his bulge as I continued my fervent movements.

His lips traced a fiery path down my neck, marking my skin with heated kisses that left tingling sensations in their wake.

My body was a whirlwind of pleasure and desperation, and in that moment, I couldn't control the words that tumbled from my lips.

"Feels so good," I husked, a blissful moan intermingling with my attempt to keep my voice low.

A warmth spread across his face, his azure eyes turning molten. "*Brava ragazza (Good girl)*," he rumbled in his deep, soothing voice. "Thank you for being honest with me."

Matteo leaned closer, planting a tender kiss on my lips, so sweet it nearly brought tears to my eyes. But then he drew back, his desire taking over, evident in the intensity of his gaze.

"Touch my cock, *principessa (princess)*," he urged, his voice low and dripping with desire. "Feel how hard you've made me."

Relief washed over me, and I returned his smile, my heart pounding with anticipation. Without hesitation, I slid my hand between our bodies, palming his bulge through the fabric of his jeans.

Matteo rested his head against the fridge door behind me, a guttural groan escaping his lips as I took him in my hand.

He twitched and quivered under my touch, and I couldn't help but moan softly, feeling a potent mixture of power and awe at how I could elicit such a response from him.

Before consciously deciding, I sank to my knees on the cold kitchen floor. Matteo took a step back to give me space, and a look of amazement danced across his features.

But I wasn't about to let him be the only one surprised. I couldn't help but smirk, basking in how Matteo appeared both captivated and half-wild, as though he wanted to join me in this unexpected moment of desire.

As my knees met the unforgiving tile, a small wince escaped me at the chill. Sensing my discomfort, Matteo swiftly removed his shirt, crumpled it into a makeshift cushion, and handed it to me.

I thanked him with a grateful smile, though my eyes couldn't resist a slow, appreciative journey down his muscular chest. I tucked his shirt beneath my knees, relishing its comforting softness, and shifted my attention to the thick bulge in Matteo's jeans.

My fingers curled around the hem of his jeans, and I tantalizingly pulled them down, unveiling inch after glorious inch of his impressive length.

He was substantial, with prominent veins tracing down his shaft, leading to a broad, well-defined tip. When his cock sprang free, I took it in my hand, gently stroking him with teasing intent.

A soft smacking sound above me drew my focus away from Matteo's arousal. He had braced a hand against the fridge; his head slightly bowed as his gaze remained fixated on me.

When our eyes met, I couldn't help but smile, a mischievous glint. Playfully, I stuck out my tongue, tracing it along the sensitive ridge beneath the underside of his erect member while maintaining an unwavering connection through our locked gazes.

A stifled groan escaped him, a mere rumble in his chest, and his eyes fluttered closed briefly. They soon snapped open when I enveloped the broad

head of his manhood with my eager lips and began to suck gently.

Matteo's eyes blazed with an intensity that left no room for doubt. "You're gonna drive me wild with that mouth, *principessa*," he rasped, his voice laced with tightly controlled desire. His fingers, the ones not entangled in my hair, rested gently against the crown of my head.

His praise elicited a smile from me, as much as I could muster with him filling my mouth, and I willingly took him deeper.

Matteo's fingers flexed against my head, a reassuring grip rather than a forceful one.

"Fuck," he growled from above, his eyes narrowing as he watched his impressive length disappear into my mouth. "So damn gorgeous with those lips wrapped around my cock."

His whispered compliments fueled my passion. My tongue trailed the throbbing veins along his shaft as I bobbed rhythmically, each descent taking him further into the wet warmth of my mouth.

With each passing moment, I became messier, drool spilling past my lips and dribbling down my chin.

But I welcomed it all, relishing in the raw intimacy of having Matteo in my mouth after months of longing and fantasizing about worshipping him.

Above me, Matteo grunted and groaned softly, barely holding onto his self-control. My hands found their place on his thighs, fingers lightly digging into the taut muscles beneath his skin.

As I pushed my head down, engulfing his length even deeper, an unexpected gag surged through me, my throat clamping around him. Matteo's entire body twitched, his thighs tensing beneath my touch.

Matteo's hand clutched my hair at the back of my head, pulling me off his throbbing manhood. I gasped for much-needed air as he towered over me,

supporting me against the fridge door.

His face bore the evidence of his struggle, etched in strained lines. "You almost made me cum, princess," he ground out through clenched teeth.

The muscles of his arms and shoulders bulged as if he were still fighting to restrain his release.

A mischievous grin spread across my face. "Isn't that the whole idea?" I replied in a playful tone, my voice dripping with teasing.

Matteo's response was a primal growl, instantly captured by my lips as he kissed me fiercely. It was a collision of teeth and tongues, a passionate devouring that left me breathless and craving more.

When he finally broke the kiss, my chest heaved with each labored breath, and I found myself utterly intoxicated by his intensity.

"I'm not some selfish prick, princess," he declared, swiftly turning me around so my front was pressed against the kitchen counter next to the fridge.

With a deft hand, he lifted my dress over my ass and pulled my underwear down, his fingers deftly finding my drenched slit and plunging two inside me with a delicious roughness. I was so wet that he entered me easily, a testament to my desire.

"I'm not the only one getting pleasure tonight," he purred, his filthy promise hanging in the air. Matteo bent me over the counter, gripping my hips firmly and adjusting me onto my tiptoes for the perfect angle.

Then, he spread my feet apart, his fingers still working in and out of me with an irresistible rhythm.

Lying there, I could only gasp as Matteo deftly maneuvered me into position, his fingers working my needy pussy with an assertive rhythm.

Behind me, Matteo withdrew his fingers from my drenched pussy and positioned himself, teasing the head of his cock through my slick folds.

The distinctive sound of him licking my arousal from his fingers reached my ears, and I couldn't help but turn my head slightly, catching a glimpse of his sensual act.

I buried my face in the crook of my elbow, stifling a lascivious moan against my arm as the anticipation of his entry heightened.

Matteo placed the head of his cock at my entrance, pushing inside with a deliberate slowness. The first thrust was an unhurried dance, giving me ample time to accommodate his substantial girth.

Each inch felt like a revelation, as if he was unraveling and reassembling me into the perfect form of his good girl.

His impressive length seemed to steal the very breath from my lungs, leaving me gasping and yielding to his desires.

"So good, princess," Matteo murmured when fully buried within me. His large cock filled me to perfection, and a breathy moan escaped my lips as I pressed my cheek against the cool countertop.

"Taking my cock so well, such a good girl," he continued, his voice almost a purr.

A shiver coursed down my spine, his words weaving a spell around my heart and mind, melting me further into the countertop beneath him.

All I could do was arch my hips, silently pleading for whatever he desired to do with my body.

Matteo was determined to relish this moment, each withdrawal of his cock nearly slipping free before he thrust back inside with force, causing me to gasp for air.

"Fuck," he huskily cursed, leaning over my back and planting kisses on my shoulder blades, his beard grazing my soft skin. "You feel so incredible, *principessa* (princess)," he moaned.

"Yes," I whispered hoarsely, a quiet moan escaping my lips.

Matteo groaned deeply, quickening the pace of his thrusts, my pussy clenching around his cock.

His hand trailed down my spine, making me shiver before landing a soft spank on my ass, attempting to keep our sounds to a minimum.

Unable to contain myself any longer, I sobbed as the rhythmic slap of his hips against my ass resonated loudly in the otherwise silent kitchen.

"*Brava ragazza (good girl)*," he murmured, hoisting me up so my back was against his chest.

His hand moved away momentarily to kiss me passionately, his tongue entwined with mine, keeping in rhythm with his thrusts inside my pussy.

As he withdrew from our kiss, his hand returned to cover my mouth while his lips nibbled at my neck, his voice a sultry whisper in my ear.

I eagerly nodded, turning my head to meet Matteo's gaze. His affectionate grin was heartwarming as he planted a kiss at the base of my neck, where my pulse raced wildly beneath my skin.

"That's my *brava ragazza (good girl)*," he rumbled, his hips grinding against mine as he continued his relentless pace.

My eyes threatened to roll back as I yearned for Matteo to climax. Heeding his command, I eagerly moved my hand between my thighs and the countertop, furiously stimulating my clit while Matteo pounded into me from behind.

It didn't take long before I screamed into his palm, succumbing to the overwhelming pleasure.

Feeling my pussy clenching around him, Matteo thrust harder, chasing his release. With only a few more strokes, he drove deep inside me, burying his face in my neck, groaning his climax against my skin.

I felt him pulsating deep within my pussy, his warmth coating my insides, sending shivers through me. He continued with shallow thrusts, prolonging both of our orgasms.

When I whimpered at the overstimulation, he stopped, sagging against me.

I braced myself with my hands on the counter, gazing at his larger hands resting over mine, his thumbs gently brushing my pinkies as I caught my breath.

Turning my head to meet Matteo's eyes, I grinned wearily. "Won't have any trouble sleeping after that," I quipped lightly.

Matteo chuckled, cupping my chin and drawing me in for a kiss. He kissed me tenderly as he withdrew his cock from my pussy, swallowing the little whimper that escaped my lips at the loss of him.

Then, he adjusted my lingerie and tucked himself back into his pants. After fixing our disheveled clothing, he turned me in his arms, planting another kiss before pulling back and gazing down at me. His smiling face radiated affection as he looked into my eyes.

With one last peck to my lips, Matteo picked me up in his thick arms, and I couldn't help but let out a contented sigh as he carried me to the bathroom.

I was exhausted; every muscle in my body felt heavy, and the warmth of his touch was like a soothing balm.

He insisted on caring for me, running a warm washcloth delicately between my thighs. His tenderness made me feel cherished despite my weariness, and I appreciated every gentle gesture.

After I was cleaned up and refreshed, he carried me to his room, my tiredness becoming more pronounced with each step. He tucked me into bed with loving care that melted my heart.

I slid under the covers, feeling the softness of the sheets against my skin, and

I couldn't help but yawn.

Matteo joined me on the bed, sliding behind me, his strong arm wrapping around my waist. I snuggled closer to him, seeking the comfort of his presence.

The day had been emotionally and physically draining, and I was grateful to have him by my side.

As exhaustion washed over me like a gentle wave, I closed my eyes, feeling the steady rhythm of his breathing against my back.

At that moment, I only wanted to be enveloped in his warmth, forget about the world's troubles, and rest.

Matteo's lips brushed softly against my neck, and his warm breath tickled my skin as he whispered, "I love you, Sophia."

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. His words hung in the air, heavy with sincerity and emotion.

My heart raced, and a strange mixture of elation and fear coursed through me. It was what I had longed to hear, yet when faced with the reality of it, I froze. Panic welled up inside me, and I desperately tried to push away the fear that gripped me. Why couldn't I say it back? I loved him, of that there was no doubt. So, why had the words lodged in my throat, refusing to come out?

Closing my eyes, I pretended not to have heard his confession. I feared that if I spoke now, I might say something I wasn't ready to reveal, but as I lay there, I couldn't escape the whirlwind of thoughts that churned in my mind.

Why did I hesitate? Was it because of the threats looming over us, the dangers that were part and parcel of Matteo's world?

My heart ached with the weight of my unspoken feelings. I wanted to tell him, to scream it to the world, but something held me back even though I knew I loved him,

So, I lay there, pretending to sleep, grappling with my emotions as Matteo's warm presence enveloped me.

Chapter 36

Matteo

The early morning sun cast long shadows across my office, but its warmth did little to ease the chill that had settled in my bones.

I sat at my desk, surrounded by the trappings of power and success, but all I could think of was her.

Sophia.

The previous night had been perfect. We'd laughed, we'd danced, we'd kissed, and it had felt like we were the only two people in the world.

I'd gazed into her eyes, my heart pounding, and I'd said those three words that had been on my tongue for an eternity.

"I love you."

And then I'd waited for her response, for those words to echo back to me, to fill the air with their sweet affirmation. But they never came.

I'd tried not to let it affect me, not to let it bring me down. After all, we were both adults, and feelings had their timeline, their rhythm.

Maybe she wasn't ready to say it, or perhaps she had her reasons. Reasons I couldn't fathom.

I'd thought we were on the same frequency, that what we had was deep and real. She clearly cared about me and had strong feelings for me, just as I did for her.

But last night, when I had bared my soul and laid my heart on the line, I'd been met with silence.

I raked a hand through my hair, frustration gnawing at me. Was it something I'd said or done? Had I misread the signals between us?

I'd woken up early, barely able to sleep properly, my mind consumed by thoughts of her and the unspoken words that hung between us. I couldn't shake the unease and doubt that had crept into my heart.

Despite the turmoil in my mind, I'd made an effort. I'd prepared breakfast for her, trying to keep things as normal as possible.

And then I'd called Antonio, asking him to watch over her, to ensure she was safe and cared for, while I left early and came to my office.

But sitting here now, surrounded by the demands of my work, I found it impossible to concentrate. My thoughts kept circling back to her, us, and those three little words that had gone unanswered.

I knew I had to be patient, that love was a complex and intricate dance, but as I stared out the window, I couldn't help the hurt feelings that simmered beneath the surface.

This waiting game was a delicate balance, but I was willing to tread the path, no matter how uncertain it seemed.

Just as I was lost in my thoughts, my phone started ringing. I picked it up, and it was Leo on the line. His voice was firm, asking to know where I was.

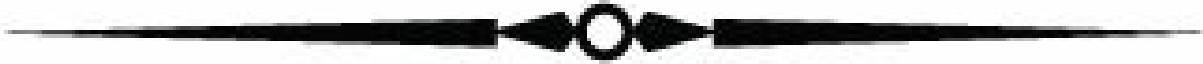
"Matteo, where are you?" Leo's tone held a sense of purpose.

"I'm in my office," I replied, my curiosity piqued by the determination in his tone. "What's going on, Leo?"

Leo wasted no time. "I've finally uncovered the reason why Francisco killed Sophia's parents. It's a piece of crucial information, and I'm on my way to you now."

The call ended, leaving me with a sense of anticipation and resolution I hadn't felt in a long time.

Finally, after all these years, answers were within reach. The truth had remained elusive for so long, and now, it was on the verge of being unveiled. My feelings were a mix of relief and apprehension as I entertained the thought that Sophia's parents might have been involved in something dangerous.



I continued to wait, my mind racing with a thousand questions and my heart heavy with anticipation. The minutes stretched into what felt like hours as I looked out the window, wondering when Leo would arrive to share the long-awaited revelations.

Just when my patience was wearing thin, there was a knock at my office door. I turned my attention toward it, and Leo walked in, wearing a serious expression that hinted at the gravity of the information he carried.

Leo's presence alone brought a sense of closure and resolve. He wasted no time and got straight to the point. "Matteo, I've found the reason behind Francisco's actions. It was a case of mistaken identity."

I leaned forward, my gaze fixed on Leo. "Mistaken identity? *Cosa intendi (What do you mean)?*"

Leo continued, "The intended target was the owner of a certain vehicle, who had wronged Francisco in some way. However, the car had been sold, and Sophia's parents, unfortunately, became the victims due to this mix-up."

As the truth sank in, a mixture of emotions flooded through me. Relief that it wasn't a personal vendetta against Sophia's family, sadness for the innocent lives lost, and anger at the senseless violence that had disrupted our lives for so long.

"Leo," I asked, seeking clarification, "so, the person Francisco initially intended to target, *dov'è lui adesso (where is he now)?*"

"It appears that the intended victim had made a hasty exit from the country long before the unfortunate incident with Sophia's parents occurred. He sold the car to get the money to flee the country. Francisco's plan went awry due to that unexpected turn of events."

As Leo explained the situation, I couldn't help but feel a mix of shock and disbelief. The idea that Sophia's parents had been tragically taken from her, not because they were the intended targets, but simply because they were driving the wrong car - a level of senselessness that left me speechless.

I could only imagine the weight of this revelation on Sophia's shoulders when the truth eventually reached her. It was a burden no one should bear, and I knew it would shatter her in ways I couldn't fathom.

"Leo," I finally managed to say, my voice tinged with gratitude and helplessness. "Thank you for uncovering this."

Leo, always practical, leaned forward slightly, asking, "What's your next move, Matteo?"

I leaned back in my chair, my mind already set on a course of action. "I've reached out to those loyal to my father, and they've pledged their allegiance to me."

I've also formed alliances with a few other mafia families who've grown weary of Francisco's heavy-handed approach. It's time to reclaim what's rightfully ours."

Leo nodded, his expression serious as he acknowledged the challenges ahead. "It won't be easy, Matteo. You'll need to be careful."

I leaned forward, emphasizing the importance of caution. "I know, Leo. That's why I haven't made any hasty moves against Francisco yet, despite knowing he's still deeply involved in the drug trade and our first batch was apprehended by the police. I'm waiting for the right opportunity to strike."

I continued, explaining my strategy. "I've appointed several people to constantly track Francisco's movements and locations to see if we can gather any valuable information.

We need to be patient and methodical, ensuring we can dismantle his empire effectively when the time comes."

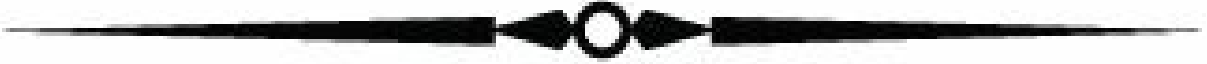
As we spoke of battles and alliances, I couldn't help but think of the one battle that awaited me on a more personal front: revealing the painful truth to Sophia, a truth that would change everything she knew about her parents' tragic fate.

Leo leaned back, his gaze fixed on me with newfound respect. "You've grown into a formidable leader, Matteo. With the truth and a well-thought-out plan on your side, I believe you have a good chance of reclaiming what's rightfully yours."

He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a proud smile. "*Tuo padre sarebbe orgoglioso di te (Your father would be proud of you).*"

Hearing Leo say my father would be proud of me made my eyes glisten with unshed tears.

"*Grazie (Thank you), Leo.*"



I entered our home, the weight of the truth I carried heavy on my shoulders, casting a shadow over everything else. The earlier sting of hearing my "I love you" go unreciprocated had been replaced by a far more pressing concern.

As I stepped inside, I saw Sophia gracefully descending the staircase. Her smile, as always, lit up the room, and I couldn't help but mirror it for a brief moment. But as quickly as it appeared, my smile faded.

"Matteo," she began playfully, her voice filled with a hint of complaint, "why did you leave me all alone? But I have to admit, that delicious meal you made certainly brightened my day."

I sighed, realizing I needed to tell her the truth, and there was no easy way to do it. I gently took her hand, leading her towards the living room. Once there, I pressed her shoulders down, guiding her to sit.

Sophia's concern was evident in her eyes as she looked up at me. "Matteo, what's wrong?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

I hesitated for a moment, struggling to find the right words. Finally, I spoke, my voice laced with regret, "Sophia, I learned the truth about your parent's death."

"What?"

She sat up straight, her expression changing, fear and anticipation etching lines on her face. Her eyes locked onto mine, and she urgently implored, "What really happened to them?"

I moved closer, my strong hands enveloping hers in a comforting gesture. I could feel her trembling. Taking a deep breath, I began.

"The deaths of your parents, Sophia," I started, my voice gentle yet laden with the weight of the truth, "they were not planned, but at the same time, it was planned. It was a mix-up."

I watched as her eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "A mix-up?" she repeated, trying to wrap her head around the idea. "What do you mean?"

I continued to hold her hands, my eyes never leaving hers. "The person originally intended to be the target had sold his car, the car your parents were driving that fateful day. It was a case of mistaken identity, Sophia."

She blinked, her expression shifting from disbelief to sorrow. "My parents... it was all a mistake?" she whispered, her voice quivering.

I watched her struggle to process the truth, wishing I could bear her pain instead. She opened her mouth to form the next question, the word hanging heavy on her lips.

"Who..." she began, her voice barely a whisper.

I moved closer to her, concern etched across my features. "Sophia, are you okay?" I asked, my voice filled with worry.

She repeated her question, a bit louder this time, her desperation growing.

"Who's behind their deaths?"

I sighed, resigned to share the painful truth. I met her gaze with a heavy heart.

"Francisco."

Chapter 37

Sophia

I sat on the edge of my bed, my gaze locked onto the wall before me. Matteo's words reverberated in my mind, a never-ending loop I couldn't escape.

The truth he had just revealed about my parents' deaths left me in disbelief. My fingers absentmindedly traced the wallpaper patterns as my thoughts swirled in a chaotic maelstrom.

My parents had been taken from me due to a mistake. A mix-up. It was a truth that I couldn't fully comprehend.

I couldn't wrap my head around my parents having met their end because of a blunder.

A sense of disbelief washed over me. Weren't the mafia supposed to be meticulous and thorough in everything they did?

How could such a grave mistake happen in their world? Why did it have to lead to my parents' death?

I couldn't cry. My tears had disappeared as if they had abandoned me. All I could do was stare blankly, my mind a whirlwind of questions without

answers.

After Matteo had spoken Francisco's name, I had stood up abruptly, with a deep need to distance myself from the overwhelming reality.

Matteo had reached out, his presence a source of comfort, but I had to ask for space.

"Please, Matteo," I had requested, my voice trembling with mixed emotions. "I need some time alone."

Since then, I have been secluded in my room. My numbness slowly transformed into insuppressible anger.

I couldn't believe it. How could Francisco be so ruthless, ruining lives without a second thought? I struggled to accept this bewildering truth.

The sound of the door opening caught my attention, but I refused to turn and look.

As someone sat beside me, causing the bed to dip, I felt Matteo's presence without needing to see him. He spoke, his voice filled with determination.

"Sophia," he said gently, "I promise you, I'll make sure Francisco pays for this. He won't escape the consequences of his actions."

His words eased some of my anger, and I could sense his sincerity in the way he spoke.

Matteo leaned in and planted a tender kiss on the crown of my head before rising to leave.

"I have something important to attend to, and won't return until late at night. If you need anything, ask Antonio."

I heard the door close behind me, and I sighed. I flopped onto my bed, burying my head in the pillow's softness.

In that quiet solitude, memories of my parents came rushing back like an old film reel playing in my mind.

I remembered how they used to take me to the park on weekends, pushing me on the swings with laughter echoing around us.

My mother's eyes would sparkle with mischief as she chased me around the playground, her laughter contagious.

Then, it was my father's turn to carry me on his shoulders, making me feel on top of the world.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, we'd gather around the dining table, our favorite home-cooked meal filling the air with mouthwatering aromas.

The lively conversations, the shared jokes, the feeling of togetherness - those moments were etched deep into my heart.

Bedtime was a magical affair. My mother would sit on the edge of my bed, her soft voice weaving tales of princesses and dragons, heroes and adventures.

Her words transported me to far-off lands where anything was possible. My father would come in next, tucking me in with a smile, ensuring I felt safe and loved.

And then there were the bike rides. My father's strong, reassuring presence as he taught me to ride for the first time.

His hands steady on my back, guiding me until I could pedal. The wind in my hair and the exhilaration of freedom were pure joy.

As I lay there, lost in the warmth of my memories, I drifted to a time when I was older, on the cusp of adulthood.

My parents had always been my biggest cheerleaders. They attended every school play and every parent-teacher meeting and celebrated each of my achievements, no matter how small.

I could still hear their applause and see the pride in their eyes as I stood on the stage, receiving my high school diploma.

The summer before I left for college was a time I cherished. We spent lazy afternoons at the beach, building sandcastles and collecting seashells.

They had driven me to my university, my father's strong arms loading my belongings into the car and my mother's tearful smile masking her worry.

They reassured me that this was the beginning of a new chapter in my life, one they believed I would conquer.

Late-night phone calls and care packages kept us connected, and their words of wisdom guided me through the challenges of adulthood.

My parents had always encouraged me to follow my dreams to reach for the stars, and they believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

I blinked away tears as I remembered the last time I saw them, the day before their tragic accident.

We had shared a family dinner, laughing and talking about my college plans and the adventures ahead.

They hugged me tightly that night, whispering their love and hopes for my future.

I was almost drifting into a peaceful slumber, carried away by the comforting memories of my parents.

It had been a long day, emotionally exhausting, and my body craved sleep. My eyelids drooped, and I let myself surrender to the embrace of rest.

But sleep was like a wisp of smoke slipping through my fingers. It was as if my mind was on high alert, sensitive to the slightest disturbance, and that disturbance came with a jolt, ripping me from the edge of sleep.

Outside my room, the world had transformed into chaos. The night, once serene, now echoed with shouts, urgent and agitated.

Gunshots punctuated the air, each a sharp reminder that peace was fleeting.

My heart raced, anxiety and fear coursing through my veins like an electric

current. What the fuck was going on?!

Ignoring the trembling in my hands, I rushed to the window, my fingers fumbling with the curtain.

Pulling it back just enough to peek outside, I was met with a sight that sent my heart into a frantic rhythm.

In the courtyard below, shadows moved with lethal intent. Men in dark attire, barely distinguishable from the obsidian night, clashed in a fierce, chaotic ballet.

Matteo's loyal soldiers, their faces shrouded in determination, were locked in a brutal battle with faceless intruders, their forms obscured by darkness.

Weapons flashed ominously in the night, and muffled curses and grunts of exertion mingled with the night's chorus.

Questions flooded my mind. Who were these intruders? What had brought them to our doorstep? Why had the tranquility of the night been shattered so violently?

My thoughts spiraled into a whirlwind of worry and dread, my breaths coming rapidly.

Suddenly, my room was flooded with harsh, artificial light as the door was violently flung open.

My initial instinct was relief, assuming it was Matteo coming to rescue me from this waking nightmare.

However, as I turned to face the intruder, my relief evaporated into a chilling realization.

Before me stood a man whose features were unknown to me due to the black mask covering most of his face, leaving only his eyes, a sinister smile curling his lips.

He radiated a menacing aura that sent a shiver racing down my spine.

"You must be the girl the Don was talking about," he sneered.

Panic surged within me, my voice shaking with anger and fear. "Who the hell are you?!" I yelled, my hands trembling uncontrollably.

Ignoring my distress, he continued advancing, his grin growing more malevolent. "Don't worry, sweetheart," he taunted, "I just want to take you somewhere, somewhere where someone important is waiting for you."

My voice quivered as I stammered, "Who?"

The man's grin widened, revealing predatory intent that sent icy tendrils of dread creeping through my veins. "Francisco," he replied, his tone laced with sinister glee.

My blood ran cold at the mention of that name.

Fear clawed at my throat, and I screamed, my voice raw with terror, as he reached out to grab me, but just as his outstretched hand was mere inches from my trembling form, a deafening gunshot shattered the oppressive silence of my room.

A spray of crimson erupted from the intruder's head, painting the room in a grotesque tableau of red.

His lifeless body crumpled to the floor, his eyes staring vacantly into nothingness.

I gasped, my heart pounding like a drum in my chest and my limbs quaking with fear and adrenaline.

My gaze darted to the doorway, where Antonio stood, his features carved from stone, a smoking gun in his hand. His eyes met mine.

During the chaos and terror, the undeniable fact remained—I was seven months pregnant, and every heartbeat of this nightmarish ordeal threatened not only my life but the life of my unborn child.

"We have to go," He gestured urgently for me to follow him.

As I followed Antonio down the dimly lit corridor, the sounds of the battle outside grew louder, the desperate cries of Matteo's men mingling with the clash of steel and the discharge of firearms.

I couldn't help but wonder what had triggered this violent incursion into our lives, and the dread of the unknown hung heavy over me.

Matteo's once serene and elegant mansion had turned into a nightmare. The grandeur was tainted by the violent battle within its walls.

Dead bodies were strewn about, blood staining the opulent furnishings and marbled floors, creating a grim tableau of destruction.

As Antonio guided me through this harrowing scene, gun in hand, I couldn't help but shudder.

The intruders lay lifeless, their vacant eyes a haunting testament to the brutal struggle that had unfolded.

"Where's Matteo?" I demanded with panic and worry clutching at my chest. My voice quivered as I scanned the chaotic surroundings.

Fear gnawed at my mind. What if something had happened to him? What if I missed my chance to tell him how I felt?

Antonio frowned, clearly picking up on my distress. He spoke in a reassuring tone, "Don't worry, Sophia. Matteo is in a meeting right now, and he's safe. You don't need to worry about him at this moment."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. I was relieved.

Antonio moved with purpose, his every step cautious and deliberate while leading me toward an alternative exit, far from the front door.

As we reached a hidden passage that led to an escape route, we stepped outside, and the cool night air hit me like a splash of reality.

The chaos inside Matteo's house seemed distant, but it still echoed in my mind.

Antonio halted and turned to me, his expression grave. "Sophia, listen carefully," he began. "When I tell you to run, head straight to the car parked just outside. Do you understand?"

I nodded, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and determination. I knew I had to trust Antonio; he was my lifeline in this nightmarish situation.

Antonio rushed ahead, his footsteps quick and determined as he fired shots at the incoming intruders, creating a chaotic symphony of gunfire.

I barely had time to admire his skill as he shouted, "Run!"

Without hesitation, I sprinted forward. The garden was a labyrinth of manicured hedges and ornate statues, but I followed the path to the waiting black car.

The moonlight cast eerie shadows, making it difficult to see clearly, but my fear-fueled adrenaline propelled me forward.

As I reached the car, a strong hand clamped onto my arm like a vice, yanking me backward with surprising force.

Panic surged within me as I struggled against the unseen assailant.

With my hand trembling, I managed to land a punch square on his jaw, causing him to stagger.

But my heart raced, not just for my safety, but for the precious life growing within me.

I couldn't forget that I was seven months pregnant, and every move I made was fraught with concern for my unborn child.

The fear of harm to my baby intensified my determination to break free and ensure our safety.

The man's grip tightened, and I knew I had to act decisively. With all the strength I could muster, I delivered a swift knee kick to his crotch area. He doubled over in agonizing pain, releasing his hold on me.

As I stumbled away from him, a gunshot echoed through the night, and the man collapsed.

My heart pounded as I turned to see Antonio sprinting toward me. He shouted for me to run, and I needed no further urging.

I dashed towards the waiting black car, the garden layout blurred by my adrenaline-fueled sprint.

Gunshots echoed behind me, but I didn't dare look back until I reached the car.

Sliding into the passenger's seat, I was relieved to find Antonio following closely behind.

He wasted no time, starting the car and zooming away from Matteo's mansion, putting distance between us and the nightmarish scene.

Gunshots echoed behind us, but I didn't dare look back. All that mattered was escaping this nightmare with Antonio by my side as the fear for my unborn child still gnawed at me.

As we sped away from the chaos, I couldn't help but notice a dark stain on Antonio's shirt sleeve. My concern flared, and I gestured towards his arm, my voice tinged with worry.

"You're bleeding," I exclaimed.

Antonio spared a glance at his injured arm and then back at the road, his expression unwavering.

"It's just a scratch," he replied calmly. "I'll tend to it when we reach a safe place."

I bit my lip, still concerned, but said nothing as the adrenaline wore off, and I slumped in my seat.

As much as I wanted to know what the fuck had happened, I kept quiet, processing the fact that I had almost died today.

Chapter 38

Matteo

After leaving Sophia in her room, I went downstairs and out of the house. Antonio was waiting by the car, and I approached him with a sense of urgency.

"Antonio," I said firmly, "I need you to stay here and watch over Sophia."

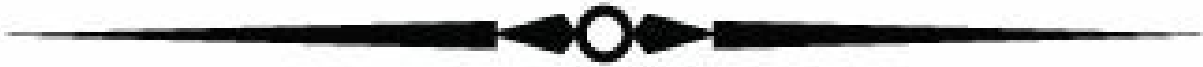
Antonio, always vigilant and loyal, looked concerned. "Don Matteo, are you sure? You're heading to the meeting, and I don't like the feeling I have about this."

I sighed, my instincts telling me that something was amiss. "I can't shake the feeling that this meeting might be a trap," I admitted. "That's why I need you here, protecting Sophia and our unborn child."

Antonio leaned against the car, his expression conflicted. "If you believe it's a trap, Don Matteo, shouldn't I be by your side?"

I patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Preserving the lives of Sophia and our child is my top priority, Antonio. Besides, I need you to keep an eye on things here."

Reluctantly, Antonio acquiesced, and I entered the car. As I drove toward the De Luca household, where the meeting would occur, my thoughts spun. What was my uncle calling this meeting for? What was the true purpose behind it? My unease gnawed at me, and I couldn't help but wonder if my instincts would be right.



I arrived at the De Luca household, a sprawling mansion that oozed opulence and grandeur. The mansion was a testament to the De Luca family's wealth and power, imposing structure and meticulously manicured gardens. Francisco's men were scattered throughout the compound, indicating tight security. As I made my way inside, the interior of the mansion was no less impressive. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting a warm, golden glow across the marble floors. The room where the meeting was to take place was vast, with a long, ornate table. I could see that other heads of various mafia families had already arrived, their cars parked in the courtyard. The room was divided, with Francisco's allies seated on one side of the table. These allies were a motley crew of individuals with agendas and ambitions. Some were old allies of my father's father, while others were new faces in the ever-shifting landscape of power and influence.

My allies were on the opposite side of the table, loyal to me and my vision for the family.

As I took my seat among them, I greeted them warmly, acknowledging their unwavering support, but when I turned my attention to the other side of the table, where my enemies were seated, my greeting was noticeably cooler, laced with a thinly veiled tension.

The room was a powder keg of rivalries and alliances, and I couldn't help but wonder what this meeting would bring.

As we settled into our respective seats, the tension in the room was palpable.

It was a strange feeling to be back in this house where I was supposed to live with Sophia and our child, but Francisco's presence had made that impossible.

Suddenly, the grand doors at the end of the room swung open, and Francisco De Luca made his grand entrance. He strode in with self-assured arrogance, eyes scanning the room as if he owned every inch of it.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he greeted with a smirk, his hands outstretched in a show of false camaraderie.

The response to his greeting was mixed. Some heads nodded curtly, while others remained stone-faced.

Francisco wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter. "Gentlemen, I've called this meeting to discuss the direction of our families. It's time we returned to the old ways, the ways that made our families strong. Drug dealing, weapon dealing, and the businesses that built our empire. It's time we reclaim our power."

His words hung in the air, met with a mixture of silence and muttered disagreements.

I could see the fault lines forming among the families from my seat. Some

nodded in agreement, drawn by the promise of wealth and influence. Others, like me, wore expressions of distaste and disbelief.

One of the younger heads couldn't contain his frustration, his hand waving animatedly as he retorted, "You want to drag us back into the shadows, Francisco? To risk everything we've built for the sake of illegal enterprises? This is madness!"

The room erupted into a cacophony of voices, arguments breaking out like wildfire. Francisco's allies defended his proposal while his enemies, myself included, vehemently opposed it.

I leaned back in my chair, my expression cool and composed. This meeting was bound to be a powder keg, and the spark had already been lit.

Amidst the chaos of the heated arguments, one of the heads, a man known for his candor, couldn't help but make a pointed remark. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on Francisco.

"You know, if Matteo were the Don, he would never have proposed such a ridiculous notion," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The statement drew a mixed response from the room. Some nodded in agreement, while others shook their heads, refusing to entertain the idea.

For my part, I remained silent, my gaze locked onto Francisco's. It was a battle of wills, a silent exchange that spoke volumes. Neither of us was willing to back down, and in that moment, the room seemed to hold its breath.

Francisco's face twisted in a frown, but it was soon replaced by a sinister smirk that sent a shiver down my spine. It was a smirk that spoke of hidden agendas and treacherous intentions.

As the argument raged on, voices grew louder, and tempers flared. Francisco's supporters passionately argued for a bold shift in strategy,

advocating for drug dealing and other illicit activities.

"We need to seize opportunities while they're available," one supporter of Francisco urged. "It's time we regain our dominance in these lucrative enterprises."

Another echoed these sentiments, "We've been too passive for too long. We must return to the old ways to maintain our power."

My allies vehemently opposed these proposals, advocating for a continued focus on legitimate business ventures and maintaining their family's reputation.

"Why should we throw away years of peace and prosperity to return to such despicable ways?" one of Matteo's loyal supporters argued. "Our family's honor and reputation are at stake here. We can't compromise our values."

Another chimed in, "We've thrived through legitimate means. There's no need to resort to criminal activities. It's a path that leads to ruin."

Francisco's voice cut through the room like a jagged knife. His displeasure was clear, and he made sure everyone knew it. "I didn't call this meeting for the heads to disrespect me so blatantly," he stated with a cold stare.

Then, with that infuriating smirk, he turned the spotlight on me. "Matteo," he said, his words dripping with innuendo, "don't you have something important to attend to?"

My heart raced, and for a moment, panic threatened to consume me. My phone vibrated, and I quickly checked my phone. Antonio had sent me a message about the house being attacked, but he and Sophia were safe.

Relief surged through me, and I couldn't help but conceal my emotions behind a mask of practiced indifference as I turned to face Francisco.

"Should you have other matters to attend to, Francisco," I retorted, my tone cool and composed, "there's no need to use me as an excuse."

The room seemed to hold its breath, the precarious balance of power swaying in the uneasy silence.

As my words lingered, Francisco's phone rang, and he picked it up, his eyes locked onto mine throughout the conversation.

Nobody could hear the other end, but the room sensed his growing displeasure from his terse responses.

Francisco finally broke the uneasy silence, his dissatisfaction evident in his tone. "My apologies, Matteo. I had assumed you had something important to attend to," he remarked with a trace of irritation.

I maintained my composure, refusing to reveal the boiling anger beneath the surface. The room remained still, a silent witness to our strained exchange.

Sensing the tension in the air, Francisco decided to wrap up the meeting. "Well, gentlemen, it seems I have an important matter to address," he announced, his gaze briefly flicking towards me. It was a not-so-subtle challenge, a reminder that he still held some sway.

The heads of the families began to disperse, with a few grumbling their dissatisfaction about how Francisco had wasted their time, and I couldn't help but narrow my eyes at Francisco's words.

Time was running out, and I couldn't afford to wait any longer. Sophia had been fortunate today, but she might not be next time. I needed to act swiftly.

Chapter 39

Sophia

Seated in the spacious apartment Antonio and I had found refuge in, I couldn't shake off the burning anger that gnawed at me.

Antonio's rugged frame perched on the couch was engrossed in a flurry of phone calls and text messages. His unwavering dedication to keeping us safe was reassuring, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Francisco, who had already taken so much from me, had now ordered an attack on our home. The audacity of his actions was infuriating. First, the murder of my parents, and now, an attempt on my life.

Antonio had explained that Matteo was meeting with that same man. I couldn't help but worry about his safety. Antonio had assured me Matteo would be fine. Still, my concern lingered like a storm cloud.

Sitting before me was a laptop I had found in the apartment. It beckoned, a silent promise of information and potential retribution. I was on a personal mission I hadn't shared with Matteo.

Revenge was a dish best served cold, and I intended to make Francisco pay for all the pain he had caused.

The night stretched, and the dim light from the laptop cast an eerie glow in the spacious apartment.

My fingers danced across the keyboard with practiced precision, every click and keystroke an intimate interaction with the digital world. Antonio sat nearby, oblivious to what I was doing.

I had a singular goal – to bring Francisco to justice and make him pay for the pain he inflicted upon my life.

The audacity of the man, first taking my parents from me and then ordering an attack on me, fueled a burning rage within. Revenge was a dish best served digitally, and I was the chef.

The laptop hummed with purpose as lines of code scrolled across the screen. Firewalls and encryptions were mere obstacles to be conquered, and I relished the challenge.

Each layer of security was a puzzle waiting to be solved, a digital lock to be picked.

As the night wore on, I navigated through confidential files, traced illicit financial transactions, and uncovered connections that would send shockwaves through the criminal underworld.

The information I gathered was like pieces of a puzzle, slowly revealing Francisco's empire.

My fingers flew across the keyboard, navigating through encrypted files and secured servers. It was a dangerous game, one that required finesse and precision.

But I was no longer the innocent girl he had once targeted. I had evolved into something far more formidable – a force to be reckoned with.

I delved into records of drug shipments, tracing their origins and destinations. I downloaded incriminating documents, capturing the sordid details of his

illicit activities.

Each piece of evidence was a puzzle in the grand design of justice.

I encrypted the data with a few keystrokes and prepared to release it to the authorities. The police needed to see the extent of Francisco's criminal empire to understand the depth of his corruption.

I was their unlikely informant, a digital vigilante seeking to bring a malevolent kingpin to his knees.

The moment of truth arrived as I initiated the transfer of information. The evidence flowed through encrypted channels, invisible to prying eyes. It was a digital avalanche that would bury Francisco.

I watched the progress bars fill, knowing that the authorities were one step closer to pursuing Francisco with each passing second.

As the final piece of evidence was securely transmitted, I leaned back in my chair, my exhaustion tempered by a profound satisfaction.

My work was done for now. The police would take it from here.

With a weary smile, I shut down the laptop and slept.



The soft morning light filtered through the windows, gently coaxing me out of slumber. The events of the past few days' weighed heavily on my mind as I began my morning routine.

Dressing in haste, I couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency, a constant reminder that danger lurked just beyond the horizon.

As I made my way to the living room, my steps quickened with the hope that I would find Matteo there.

However, my heart sank as I approached the living room, and the muffled voices grew clearer. It wasn't Matteo I found but Leo, a man who had become an unexpected pillar of support in my life.

Matteo saw him as a close confidante, a trusted friend, and even called him an uncle.

Leo sat on one of the couches, engrossed in conversation with Antonio, who stood nearby. Their hushed tones and furrowed brows hinted at the gravity of their discussion.

I felt like an intruder, a silent observer in a conversation not meant for my ears.

"Sophia," Leo greeted me as he noticed my approach. His usually warm and reassuring eyes now held a hint of concern.

He had seen me, from the shadows, transform from a frightened girl eager to avoid Matteo to someone who had fallen in love with him, and I couldn't help but wonder where Matteo was at the moment.

"Leo," I replied, my voice laced with uncertainty. "What's happening?"

Antonio, too, turned his attention to me. His usually composed demeanor now masked a deeper concern. "There have been some developments, Sophia," he began carefully. "We need to ensure your safety."

Leo nodded in agreement. "Your safety is our top priority, Sophia. We won't let any harm come to you."

Their words hung in the air, casting a shadow over the room. It was clear that something significant had occurred and demanded immediate action.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, my voice trembling with fear and confusion. Leo and Antonio exchanged a hesitant glance, their expressions heavy with the weight of the truth they were about to reveal.

Finally, Leo cleared his throat and spoke, "Sophia, Matteo has made a

decision. He's chosen to go to war with Francisco."

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt a rush of shock and disbelief. "War? But... but why?" I exclaimed, unable to comprehend the gravity of what they were telling me.

Antonio stepped forward, his gaze steady but filled with concern. "The attack on you, Sophia," he explained, his voice gentle. "It pushed Matteo to make a move as quickly as possible. He couldn't wait any longer."

I couldn't contain my worry and frustration as I questioned them. "Why aren't you with Matteo?" I demanded, my voice quivering with concern. "You two should be by his side."

Antonio and Leo exchanged a knowing look, and Antonio spoke with a gentle but firm tone, "Matteo assigned us to watch over you, Sophia. He wants to make sure you're safe, no matter what."

The conflicting emotions swirled within me. On one hand, I was touched by Matteo's enduring care for me, even during such a perilous situation. On the other hand, I couldn't help but be angry at his sacrificial act.

Feeling overwhelmed, I sank onto the couch, my hands trembling. Leo approached me, his calming presence a soothing balm to my frayed nerves.

He handed me a glass of water, and I took it gratefully, sipping slowly to steady my racing heart.

"Calm down, Sophia," Leo urged, his voice filled with reassurance. "Matteo's a strong man who knows what he's doing. We're here to protect you, just as he wanted."

I nodded. Deep down, my worry for Matteo gnawed at my heart. All I could do was trust in him and his choices, even if it meant staying behind while he faced the dangers ahead.

I couldn't help but think of Matteo, somewhere out there, facing danger. My

heart ached with worry.

“Besides, Matteo might not even need to risk his life.”

Leo's words sparked hope, and I looked up at him. "What do you mean?" I asked.

He leaned forward, his eyes locking onto mine with a knowing gaze, though I chose to act oblivious.

"The police recently received an anonymous file containing detailed information about Francisco's illegal activities," he explained. "It's as if someone wants to expose his crimes to the world."

I furrowed my brow, trying to process this unexpected turn of events. "But who would do such a thing?" I wondered aloud.

Antonio, who had been quietly observing the conversation, said, "Sometimes, in this world, alliances shift, and even the most trusted allies can become adversaries. Someone might have a score to settle with Francisco."

I maintained my innocence, ignoring their knowing gazes fixed upon me. As Leo and Antonio continued their discussion, I sipped the glass of water they had offered.

I hoped everything would be alright.

Chapter 40

Matteo

As I stood among my allies, the weight of the impending battle bore down on me. The decision to confront my uncle, Francisco, had been long overdue.

It was a gamble, a high-stakes move that would either solidify my position as the true Don or bring about my downfall. But I was convinced that I had what it took to succeed.

We huddled in the dimly lit room, our faces masked by determination and resolve. The air was thick with tension, but I could see the fire in my comrades' eyes, reflecting the unyielding loyalty they held for me.

"We need a precise plan of attack," I began, my voice steady. "We can't afford any missteps. We'll strike swiftly, catching them off guard."

My allies nodded in agreement, their expressions unwavering. Antonio, my trusted right-hand man, stepped forward.

"We've got eyes on their movements. They're confident we won't make a move so soon after the meeting. It's our advantage."

As we continued strategizing, every word and plan etched into our minds, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope.

With this battle, I would protect my family, honor the memory of Sophia's parents, and pave the way for a future where the mafia could finally break free from its dark past.

It was a fight I couldn't afford to lose.

We were ready to move with our plans in place, and our resolve steeled. Exiting the dimly lit room, my allies and I entered the crisp night air, the darkness cloaking our intentions.

Our convoy of blacked-out vehicles moved silently through the winding streets, navigating the city like shadows. Each passing moment brought us closer to the confrontation that had been brewing for too long.

As we approached the De Luca mansion, I couldn't help but reflect on the twisted irony of the situation.

This had been my family's home, the place where I was supposed to build a life with Sophia and our child. But Francisco's presence had tainted it beyond repair.

The mansion loomed ahead, its imposing façade a stark reminder of my uncle's power. His allies and enemies were gathered inside, each with their agenda and loyalties divided.

As we stopped outside the mansion's gates, I knew there was no turning back. This was the moment I had been preparing for, the culmination of years of planning and waiting.

With a determined nod to my allies, we exited the vehicles and approached the imposing entrance, ready to confront the darkness. We were ready to move with our plans in place, and our resolve steeled.

The night exploded into a chaotic frenzy as we stormed the mansion. Gunfire echoed through the once-peaceful air, and the mansion's elegant halls were transformed into a warzone.

My allies and I moved with calculated precision. Every step and shot was a strategic move in this deadly dance.

Bullets zipped past us, shattering windows and leaving their mark on the mansion's walls. In return, we unleashed a relentless barrage, swiftly dealing with any opposition that dared to challenge us.

The grand entrance of the mansion, once a symbol of opulence, now bore battle scars.

My heart raced with a potent mix of adrenaline and determination as we pressed deeper into the mansion.

The path ahead was perilous, but our resolve to confront Francisco and end his reign of tyranny remained unshaken. The stakes were sky-high, and justice was tantalizingly close.

Amidst the chaos, my thoughts briefly drifted to Sophia, my beloved. I wondered if she had any inkling of the tempest raging within these walls.

But there was no room for doubt or hesitation; our mission was clear—to reclaim our family's legacy and restore honor to our name.

However, one perplexing detail nibbled at the back of my mind. Francisco's men were more prepared than I had anticipated. This was meant to be a surprise attack, catching them off guard.

Yet, they appeared ready, as though they had foreseen our assault. However, there was no time for me to stop and wonder. I could only press forward.

The mansion's hallways echoed with the staccato rhythm of gunfire. I was picking off Francisco's men one by one with deadly accuracy. Their bullets seemed to move slowly, and I skillfully avoided them.

In close quarters, I was a force to be reckoned with. I deflected punches with the grace of a martial artist, responding with well-placed blows that stunned my opponents.

My trusty blade was an extension of my arm, finding its target with precision and ending threats in silence.

My senses were finely tuned to the chaos around me. I sidestepped sneak attacks and turned ambushes into opportunities.

With each foe I dispatched, I inched closer to the mansion's core, where the showdown awaited until I made it through the doors.

However, as I stood there, flanked by my allies, facing off against Francisco and his armed henchmen in the grand foyer of the mansion, I couldn't help but feel a sense of astonishment.

We had planned for the element of surprise, yet we were outnumbered and at a standstill.

Francisco wore a sardonic smile as he aimed his gun squarely at me, his eyes glinting maliciously. My gaze bore into his with seething anger, but I remained silent, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of a response.

"Did you think you could outsmart me, Matteo?" he taunted, his voice dripping with mockery. His words hung in the air, a challenge that stoked the fire of my rage.

I clenched my jaw, muscles tensing with fury, but I held my tongue. The situation was clear, painfully obvious. Someone among our ranks had betrayed us.

My eyes darted to my supposed allies, suspicion coursing me as I tried to identify the turncoat.

Interrupting the tense standoff, Francisco lowered his gun with disdain, his lips curving into a twisted grin. "Enough of these childish games," he declared, his voice dripping with condescension.

My guard remained high, but my attention shifted, my eyes narrowing as I scrutinized the faces of those who had stood with us. Which one had betrayed

our cause?

I needed to find out, but before I could act on my suspicion, a single gunshot shattered the silence.

The searing pain in my leg was unbearable, and I collapsed to the floor with a harsh, involuntary grunt. Francisco's men moved swiftly, closing in on me as I writhed in agony on one leg.

It felt like every nerve ending in my body was on fire. I clenched my teeth, trying to suppress the guttural cries threatening to escape.

Francisco approached, his footsteps echoing ominously as he loomed over me. With a twisted sense of triumph, he uttered his chilling ultimatum, "Don't worry, Matteo. I won't let you die. Not until you sign over the company to me."

Francisco then ordered his men to deal with the traitors. "Get rid of the traitors," he commanded.

"Wait, you can't do this to me. I helped you get him." I heard one of my allies say as he stepped out of the group.

I looked up to see no other than Antone Moretti. We have known each other for years. Both of our fathers were close when they were alive. So he was the traitor.

Everyone around him hissed as he continued to plead for his life.

"Look, I could be useful to your still," he continued, but Francisco quickly put his hand up, silencing the pathetic traitor.

"You did your job and are no longer useful. Besides, you're a rat. If you are willing to betray a friend you have known for years, why would I want someone like you in my organization?"

With that, Francisco looked at his men and nodded his head.

Gunshots immediately filled the air as his loyal henchmen followed his

orders. The room descended into chaos as the violent echoes reverberated through the grand foyer.

I could hear the panicked shouts of my allies and the desperate pleas of those who had once stood by my side.

But I was in no position to look around, to assess the rapidly unfolding carnage. I was immediately hauled off the ground, my captors showing no mercy or concern for my injured leg.

The pain intensified with every jolt of movement, but I clenched my jaw and refused to cry out.

Desperation surged within me, and I struggled against their iron grip. A fierce blow to the back of my head abruptly extinguished my resistance as I fought to break free.

Darkness closed in, and my consciousness slipped away. Sophia was the last person that crossed my mind before I passed out.

Chapter 41

Sophia

I was hunched over the laptop, desperately trying to distract my mind from the relentless worry that had taken root within me. Each passing minute without news from Matteo felt like an eternity.

The clicking of keys and the soft glow of the screen were my feeble attempts to fend off the creeping fear.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and I jumped in my seat. It was Leo, his usually composed demeanor shattered, replaced by a raw worry etched across his face.

He had been pacing back and forth, the unease palpable in his every step.

I didn't need to ask the question that hung heavy in the air. Leo spoke before I could find my voice, his words carrying the weight of a terrible truth.

"I've received word from the survivors," he began, his voice tight with tension. "There was a traitor among us, Sophia. That's why Francisco and his men were so well-prepared."

My heart plummeted at the revelation, dread sinking its claws into my chest. I had feared as much, but hearing it confirmed was a brutal blow.

My mind raced with a flurry of questions, but one, in particular, clawed its way to the forefront.

"Matteo," I choked out, my voice wavering. "Do they know where he is?"

Leo's expression darkened, his gaze heavy with sorrow. "They say Francisco has him. He's holding Matteo captive."

It was as if the world had crumbled beneath my feet, leaving me in despair. The man I loved was in the hands of a man who sought nothing but power and revenge.

I felt a rush of emotions—fear, anger, and panic. We needed to act swiftly to rescue Matteo from the clutches of that madman.

My voice trembled with urgency as I spoke, "We have to rescue Matteo now!"

Leo and Antonio rushed to my side, concern etched across their faces. They saw the pallor in my cheeks, the desperation in my eyes. I waved them away, my voice rising with frustration.

"What the hell are we still doing here?" I shouted. "Every moment we waste, Matteo's life is in danger. We need to move now!"

Leo and Antonio tried their best to calm me down, their voices reassuring as they promised that we would do everything possible to rescue Matteo, but their assurances weren't making me feel better.

I felt a shift deep within me in my heightened state of anxiety. It started with a sudden, searing pain low in my abdomen, and I gasped, my hand instinctively moving to cradle the spot where the pain seemed to have originated.

The room seemed to spin as the pain intensified, making my breaths come in short, panicked bursts. I knew what this was, even before the full weight of the situation hit me.

Contractions. My baby wasn't supposed to arrive for weeks, but here I was, caught in the grip of labor during this chaos.

And then it happened—a gush of warm fluid between my legs, followed by a pool of water forming on the floor beneath me. My water had broken.

Panic surged within me as I realized our baby was determined to enter the world early in unexpected circumstances.

Leo and Antonio's eyes widened with alarm as they saw the pain across my face. There was no time to think, no time to call for help.

The world around me blurred into a whirlwind of fear and uncertainty as the contractions intensified, signaling that our child's arrival was imminent.

I was gently brought down to the ground, my body wracked with pain as I felt the undeniable urge to push.

Amidst the haze of pain and fear, I could vaguely hear Leo and Antonio's urgent and determined voices as they quickly sprang into action.

Antonio was on the phone with the trusted doctor, the one who had been overseeing my pregnancy. I could hear snippets of their conversation, Antonio relaying my condition, the doctor's instructions, and what they needed to prepare.

I was consumed by pain but could still hear Antonio's and Leo's voices. Antonio's concern was palpable as he turned to Leo, a sense of urgency in his words.

"Leo, we have to take her to the hospital. It's unsafe here, especially with the baby coming so early."

Leo's expression reflected the worry that gnawed at my insides. "But is it safe to go to the hospital after what's happened to Matteo?" he questioned.

Antonio's eyes met Leo's. "I understand the risks, Leo, but we don't have a choice. The baby is premature, and we can't provide the care Sophia needs

here. The hospital has the equipment to monitor both of them."

Leo nodded with a heavy heart, his agreement tinged with worry. I didn't fully understand what they were saying, nor did I care. What I cared about at the moment was getting this child out of me.

Together, they helped me to my feet, their support a lifeline during the pain. We descended the seemingly endless elevator ride to the ground floor and emerged outside.

Leo's car became a refuge, and I eased myself into the backseat, clutching my aching belly. Antonio took the driver's seat, and the car roared to life as we sped toward the hospital.

The hospital loomed ahead, its entrance bathed in the harsh glow of fluorescent lights. As we pulled up to the entrance, I could feel the tension in the air, a palpable mix of fear and anticipation.

Antonio quickly parked the car, and with Leo's help, I gingerly exited the vehicle, each step sending a jolt of pain through my body.

We hurried through the automatic sliding doors, and the sterile scent of the hospital washed over me, starkly contrasting the chaos we had left behind.

Inside, the hospital staff was already prepared for my arrival. Dr. Hernandez, the skilled obstetrician overseeing my pregnancy, was waiting. She greeted us with a reassuring smile and immediately guided me to a wheelchair.

Once seated, I was swiftly wheeled through the hospital's familiar corridors and elevators. I felt a sense of relief knowing that we were in a place equipped to handle the complexities of premature birth, especially one tied to the secretive world of the mafia.

In the delivery room, the atmosphere was calm and controlled. Dr. Hernandez confidently led the medical team, her years of experience shining through.

Nurses efficiently prepared the necessary equipment while Antonio and Leo

remained by the door, keeping their eyes on the doctor and nurses.

As the contractions intensified, Dr. Hernandez guided me through each stage of labor with a calm and reassuring demeanor.

I focused on her instructions, knowing that she was not only an expert but also someone trusted by Matteo for these delicate situations.

Time seemed to fly by as I worked through the pain, and soon enough, my baby arrived—a delicate, precious baby girl. The cries of my premature baby filled the room, a chorus of hope amid the shadows of our reality.

As the medical team carefully attended to my newborn baby girl, their movements were deliberate and gentle. The room seemed to hush in reverence for the delicate life that had just entered the world.

Dr. Hernandez and her team assessed my baby's vital signs, including heart rate, breathing, and oxygen levels. Their experienced hands cradled our little one, providing warmth and comfort.

Next to my hospital bed, an incubator had been prepared in advance, its temperature and humidity carefully regulated to mimic the protective environment of the womb.

Our baby was carefully placed inside, surrounded by a clear plastic chamber that shielded her from potential infection and helped maintain a stable temperature.

I watched with a mixture of hope and anxiety, my heart aching to hold our child but knowing that the best place for her right now was in the capable hands of the medical team.

Antonio and Leo stood by the incubator, their eyes fixed on my daughter, who was also the daughter of their leader.

Dr. Hernandez took a moment to reassure us, explaining that while our baby had arrived earlier than expected, they were showing good signs of resilience.

She emphasized the importance of time and patience in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), where my baby would receive round-the-clock monitoring and care.

The medical team continued to work diligently, connecting our baby to monitors and gently administering the necessary treatments.

I couldn't help but marvel at their dedication, expertise, and efforts in giving our baby the best possible chance at a healthy life.

Lying in the hospital bed, I couldn't shake the whirlwind of emotions that had accompanied the premature birth of our baby. I was filled with a mixture of exhaustion and relief.

As I gazed down at the tiny, fragile form of my baby, who had arrived almost two months earlier than expected, my heart swelled with a love I had never known. I couldn't help but marvel at the miracle of life.

Leo's voice was filled with genuine warmth as he spoke, a rare smile gracing his usually composed features. "You know, Sophia, Matteo would be overjoyed to see his daughter."

I turned my gaze toward Leo, my heart touched by his words. His smile was infectious, and it was impossible not to respond with a small smile of my own. Even Antonio, who was often serious, wore a faint but heartfelt smile.

Leo's words were a soothing balm to my heart, and for a moment, I allowed myself to be enveloped in the happy moment.

The thought of Matteo's joy at seeing our daughter brought a fleeting smile to my face, mirroring the gentle expressions of both Leo and Antonio.

But as quickly as that warmth had washed over me, it faded. My smile dwindled as the memory of Matteo's situation resurfaced.

At that moment, anger burned within me, stoked by the audacity of Francisco's actions. He sought to take from me the two most precious things

in this world—Matteo and our newborn daughter.

I made a silent vow deep within my heart. Francisco might have taken Matteo from me for now, but I would bring him down, no matter the cost.

Chapter 42

Matteo

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a small room. The room was pitch-black, illuminated only by a feeble, distant light seeping through a tiny window, the glass covered to obscure any view of the outside world.

My head throbbed with a persistent ache, and the dull awareness of pain radiated from various parts of my body.

The restraints that bound me were cold, cutting into my wrists and ankles. I tugged at them, testing their strength, but they held firm. Panic gnawed at the edges of my mind, but I swallowed it.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I began to take stock of my surroundings. The room lacked any furniture or decoration except for the harsh, unyielding walls that seemed to close in on me.

It didn't take long for my captor to make his presence known. The sound of a heavy door creaking open sliced through the silence, and a sliver of blinding light pierced the darkness.

Francisco entered, flanked by his hulking henchmen.

A cruel smile twisted his lips as he sauntered forward, and I could feel the weight of his malevolent intent in the air. I knew then that I was in for a rough time.

“Are you ready to have fun?” Francisco grinned.



The room was a grim chamber of despair, shrouded in oppressive darkness. I was barely conscious, my battered body a canvas of agony.

My head throbbed from the relentless blows I had endured, and my vision swayed in and out of focus.

Francisco, the architect of my torment, smiled wickedly as he approached, his malevolent intent palpable. His henchmen had done their work well, delivering heavy blows that left my face swollen and bloodied.

Bruises adorned my torso like a grotesque tapestry, each reminding me of the brutality I had suffered.

But the physical pain, excruciating as it was, paled compared to the mental anguish.

Francisco reveled in psychological torment, his taunts and threats slicing through my battered psyche. He seemed to relish the power he held over me.

As he slid the document before me, my trembling hands struggled to hold it.

My vision blurred. I could barely register the words on the document before me as my head throbbed from the relentless blows I had suffered.

With his cruel smile and haunting presence, Francisco spoke in a tone that sent shivers down my spine.

"If you sign this, Matteo," he hissed, "all of this will stop. Your precious Sophia and child will be safe from harm, and you can return to your life."

I couldn't believe a word he said. I had seen the depths of his treachery, his willingness to harm even his own family.

Through swollen lips, I spat at him, "*Bastardo!* I will never believe the word of a deranged man who can even kill his brother."

For a brief moment, surprise flickered across Francisco's features. His malevolent smile wavered before returning, broader and more sinister than before.

"Ah, Matteo, you always had a knack for finding inconvenient truths. It matters not. My actions were necessary."

He went on to reveal the chilling motive behind his heinous acts. "Your father, my brother, refused to do what was necessary. He refused to let the mafia dominate this city. Instead, he weakened us and allowed us to wither. I had to eliminate him to restore the honor and glory of our family."

Listening to Francisco's warped logic filled me with a deep horror. The man was a madman, a zealot who believed his reign of terror was a twisted form of redemption.

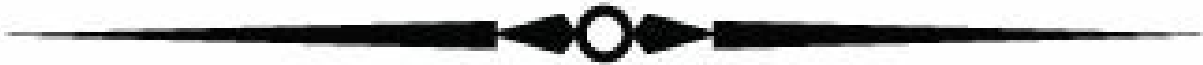
I couldn't hold back my words. "You've brought shame to the mafia, not honor."

My defiance seemed to enrage Francisco. With a snarl, he punched my battered body, the pain intensifying with each blow, before leaving with his men. I could hear his voice as he ordered his men not to feed me.

I let out a weak laugh that turned into a coughing fit. No matter what Francisco did, I would never hand over the company to him. He was insane.

As the darkness closed in again, I knew my ordeal was far from over. Francisco's madness was a force that could not be reasoned with, and I braced

myself for whatever horrors his deranged mind had concocted.



I had not tasted food or drink the second day in this wretched place. My body felt like it had been through a meat grinder, each bruise and ache a painful reminder of the relentless beating I endured the day before.

The hunger gnawed at my empty stomach. A dull ache mirrored the more acute pain in my battered flesh.

I tried to shift, to find some modicum of comfort on my unforgiving surface, but every movement sent waves of agony radiating through me.

My limbs felt heavy and unresponsive as if they belonged to someone else, a marionette controlled by the puppeteer of pain.

The thirst was equally tormenting, a dryness that parched my throat and left my tongue clinging to the roof of my mouth.

It was a cruel irony that I needed sustenance more than ever in this weakness, yet it remained agonizingly out of reach.

As the hours dragged on, I could only hope that someone, somewhere, would intervene and that this nightmarish ordeal would end.

But in the darkness of my confinement, the minutes stretched into hours, and the pain became an ever-present companion.

Francisco's return brought with it a glimmer of hope, albeit cruel. In his hand, he carried a bottle of water, a lifeline in this parched torment. But I knew better than to expect mercy from this man.

He approached, that sinister smile playing on his lips, and offered me the bottle. "Sign the documents, Matteo," he cooed, his voice laced with false

sweetness. "End this suffering for both of us."

I couldn't contain the derisive laughter that bubbled from my parched throat. "You truly are delusional," I sneered, my voice dripping with disdain. "I'd sooner rot in this hellhole than give you what you want."

For a moment, I thought my words had struck a nerve, but Francisco's twisted determination prevailed.

With a sudden, violent motion, he grabbed a fistful of my hair, forcing my head back and making me meet his malevolent gaze.

Our eyes locked in a battle of wills, and I felt the sting of his slap as he responded to my defiance with a sickening act.

But I refused to break. Instead, I drew upon every ounce of contempt and defiance I could muster and spat squarely in his face.

Pain erupted like a blazing firework inside my skull as Francisco mercilessly slammed my head against the solid wall. For a fleeting moment, stars danced before my eyes, a cruel mockery of the night sky I so dearly missed.

As Francisco leaned in, his voice dripped with menace, and his whispered words sent a shiver down my battered spine.

"You'll regret that, Matteo," he hissed, his promise of more torment hanging in the air like a malevolent specter.

When Francisco finally left, the relief that washed over me was a brief respite amid this unending nightmare. But my momentary reprieve was shattered when the two familiar figures from the previous day entered the room.

Their grim faces told me everything I needed to know - I was in for another brutal beating.

Before their fists and feet could rain down upon my battered body, I found solace in thoughts of Sophia, the woman I loved and the unborn child we both cherished.

They were the anchors that kept me from sinking into despair. I hoped that Antonio and Leo were keeping her safe.



Time lost its grip on me in the dim and empty room. I couldn't tell if it had been hours, days, or an eternity since my captivity began.

What I was sure of, however, was the relentless pain that had become my unwelcome companion, a constant reminder of my suffering.

My body, a canvas of aches and bruises, revolted against every move I made. Sitting was a torment, breathing an ordeal in itself. It felt like I had been in this grim place for far too long.

Then, like a distant echo, I registered the sounds—yells and gunshots. They cut through the oppressive silence, stirring hope and apprehension within me. Who could it be? Were Leo and Antonio mounting a rescue, or was it another player in this dangerous game?

The sounds drew closer, each echo resonating through the dimly lit room. My heart raced in anticipation as the footsteps hurriedly approached my location, their rhythm growing louder until they stopped abruptly outside the door.

With a creak, the door was yanked open, and I barely had a chance to raise my head before I was enveloped in a fierce embrace.

Leo and Antonio, like guardian angels, had come to my rescue. They lifted me gently, swiftly removing me from the wretched state of bondage.

Weak and swaying, I leaned heavily on their supporting arms. Antonio's eyes bore into mine, filled with concern, as they guided me away from my cell.

Leo's voice, laced with relief, cut through the shadows as he remarked, "You look like shit, Matteo."

A raspy chuckle escaped my parched lips, and I managed a feeble grin. At that moment, I was just happy to get out of here finally.

Slurred and feeble, my voice escaped my parched lips as I tried to ask what was happening. Leo and Antonio, their voices laced with concern, immediately hushed me.

"Matteo, don't talk," Leo urged, his tone firm but filled with worry.

"Yeah, just rest for now," Antonio added, his voice gentle yet tinged with anxiety.

I could barely keep my eyes open, and the world around me became a hazy blur. As they guided me into a car, I felt their supporting arms around me, and the engine roared to life.

The gentle vibrations of the vehicle in motion were strangely soothing.

As consciousness slipped further away, I struggled to stay awake, but the exhaustion was overwhelming. The last thing I heard before succumbing to unconsciousness was Antonio's voice, filled with concern. "Hang in there, Matteo."

Chapter 43

Sophia

Three days had passed since our daughter's birth, and we were back in the comforting embrace of our apartment. The hospital stay had been brief, thanks to the reassuring strength of our little one's vitals.

There was no need for the incubator; we were allowed to bring her home.

The nursery, swiftly crafted by Leo and Antonio during my absence, provided a warm and welcoming space for our new addition.

It was equipped with all the necessities, from a crib to a changing table, everything a newborn could require.

Sitting beside the crib, I balanced my laptop on my lap, glancing occasionally at our peacefully sleeping daughter.

Soft, tender light bathed the room, creating an atmosphere of serenity that felt like a sanctuary amid the chaos that had shaken our lives.

With one hand resting lightly on the crib, I continued my work on the laptop. I was working on finding out Francisco's location because where Francisco was, Matteo had to be.

Leo and Antonio had already gone to check out the De Luca family house where Francisco was residing, but the building was completely devoid of life. Three days had passed, and I was worried about Matteo's condition. Undoubtedly, Francisco would do anything to get what he wanted. I truly hoped Matteo was okay and still alive; otherwise, I didn't know what to do.

Amid the nursery's serene ambiance, bathed in the gentle glow of the soft lighting, I hunched over my laptop, a picture of unwavering focus.

With one hand resting lightly on the crib, I continued my work, each keystroke taking me deeper into the labyrinthine world of cyberspace.

The search for Francisco's location was no simple task, but I was armed with determination and the digital arsenal that I had acquired over the years.

My fingers danced across the keyboard as I navigated the intricate web of encrypted messages, clandestine forums, and hidden connections Francisco had used to obscure his presence.

But I was not to be deterred. I employed every cybersecurity trick in the book, masking my digital tracks with virtual private networks (VPNs) and anonymous browsers. My pursuit had to remain covert; no trace could lead back to me.

As I meticulously sifted through the data, a critical lead emerged, hidden within the depths of an email thread. The email contained a cryptic mention of a safe house, a location that Francisco had taken great pains to protect.

Yet, even the most careful criminals left behind a trail, and I was determined to follow it.

With precision, I unraveled the breadcrumb trail that led to Francisco's hideout. I used the available information to triangulate the location, a seemingly abandoned warehouse on the city's outskirts.

In the realm of shadows and secrets, this was where Francisco thought he was

safe.

A small, triumphant smile played on my lips as I made this discovery. His hideout was no longer a safe place for him anymore.

With excitement and anticipation, I closed my laptop and hurried to my feet. I rushed from the bedroom to the living room, my steps fueled by adrenaline and concern for Matteo.

Leo and Antonio were already there, their expressions a blend of anticipation and worry.

Breathing heavily, I showed them my laptop screen, pointing to the triangulated location of Francisco's hideout.

"I've found him. I know where Matteo is," I announced urgently.

Leo, focused and resolute, spoke up. "Good work, Sophia. I'll call the police and have them raid that place immediately."

Antonio, his determination matching Leo's, added, "I'm going with Leo. We'll bring Matteo back."

I couldn't help but worry. "Please, be careful, both of you."

Leo reassured me, "We will. But you, Sophia, you just gave birth. Be careful."

They rushed off to execute the plan, leaving me with a racing heart and a sense of helplessness. I could only wait, hope, and pray for Matteo's safe return.



As I paced the nursery floor, my anxious eyes never strayed from our precious bundle of joy, sleeping soundly in her crib.

My daughter, a beacon of innocence in this world of chaos and uncertainty, had a calming effect on me, but it did little to quell the relentless worry gnawing at my heart.

I couldn't stay still and stop my mind from racing with thoughts of Matteo. Had they found him? Was he safe? The minutes stretched into agonizing hours as I grappled with the uncertainty.

Then, the shrill ring of my phone shattered the tense silence, and I rushed to pick it up, my heart pounding in my chest. The caller ID flashed Antonio's name, and I answered tremblingly.

"Antonio, please tell me you have news," I implored, my voice laced with desperation.

His words were a lifeline in the darkness. "We've rescued Matteo, Sophia. We're taking him to the hospital."

Relief washed over me like a tidal wave, but it was quickly followed by a new wave of worry. "Is he okay?" I asked, my voice quivering with fear.

Antonio hesitated for a moment, his reply measured. "He's not in the best shape, but he'll be okay. I promise."

I couldn't help but clutch the phone tighter as if doing so would bring Matteo back to me faster. "When can I see him? When can I be with him?"

Antonio reassured me, "I'm coming to pick you up, Sophia. We'll be at the hospital soon. Just hold on a little longer."

With renewed hope and a grateful heart, I hung up the phone and turned my gaze back to my slumbering daughter. We were one step closer to being a family again; that thought was enough to keep me going.

Tears rose as I stood there, watching my little angel sleep so peacefully. I leaned over her crib, my voice barely above a whisper, and spoke to her as if she could understand.

"Daddy's been rescued," I whispered, my voice trembling with tears of happiness. "He's going to be okay, and he'll be home with us soon."

Chapter 44

Matteo

As I slowly stirred from unconsciousness, my world materialized in a hazy, fragmented fashion. The muted sounds of hospital machinery and distant voices seeped into my awareness, slowly pulling me back from the abyss of darkness.

My eyelids felt heavy, like lead, as I struggled to open them. The harsh, sterile light of the hospital room pierced through the slits in my vision, forcing me to squint. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and then I saw her.

Sophia.

She was there, right beside me, her eyes filled with an intensity that seemed to pierce through my soul. Her presence was a balm to my disoriented mind, grounding me in the reality of the moment.

Her voice, soft and trembling with emotion, reached my ears. "Matteo," she said, her voice filled with relief, love, and perhaps a hint of reproach.

"I love you," she declared, the words carrying a weight and significance that resonated deep within me.

In that instant, my heart swelled with a profound sense of emotion. It was as if the world had fallen away, leaving only Sophia and me in our private universe.

Her love enveloped me like a warm embrace, and I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed.

Tears welled in my eyes, and though I was disoriented and weak, I managed a soft chuckle in response to her declaration. "I'm sorry," I murmured, my voice hoarse and barely audible. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Sophia's words, love, and presence were a soothing balm to my battered body and soul.

As I slowly approached, my gaze shifted downward, and my brow furrowed in confusion. Sophia's stomach, swollen with our unborn child's weight, was now flat. It was a startling sight, and I couldn't hide my surprise.

My reaction didn't go unnoticed, and Sophia's sweet and melodic laughter filled the room. It was a sound I hadn't realized how much I'd missed.

"What's so funny?" I croaked, my throat still rough from whatever ordeal I had been through.

Sophia leaned in closer, her hand gently cupping my cheek. "Our baby is just fine, Matteo. She's sleeping peacefully in her crib."

Relief washed over me like a soothing balm. Sophia filled me in on everything that had transpired in the past few days, the rescue mission and the fact that our daughter was now safely with us.

My eyes shifted to the crib on the other side of the hospital bed, and when I saw her for the first time, my heart swelled with emotions I couldn't put into words.

I had imagined this moment a thousand times during Sophia's pregnancy, but the reality was infinitely more profound.

With Sophia's gentle assistance, our precious baby girl was placed into my waiting arms. It was a moment of pure magic.

I cradled her fragile form, marveling at the delicate features, the tuft of dark hair, and the tiny fingers wrapped around my thumb.

Tears welled in my eyes as I looked down at our daughter, overwhelmed by the love and protectiveness that surged within me.

In that instant, as our daughter slept peacefully in my arms, I knew that my family was my greatest treasure, and I would do anything to keep them safe and happy.

I looked down at our sleeping daughter, a profound sense of responsibility and love filling every corner of my being. Sophia's words about not naming her yet tugged at my heartstrings.

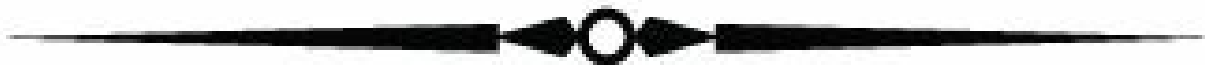
I knew then that I wanted to be a part of this decision, to choose a name that would forever be associated with our family.

I met Sophia's eyes, a warm smile playing on my lips. "What's her name?" I asked, curiosity and excitement in my voice.

Sophia's face lit up with a radiant smile as she shook her head gently. "I haven't named her yet," she admitted, her voice soft and filled with emotion. "I wanted to wait for you, Matteo."

I smiled and looked at our daughter. "Isabella," I said, the name coming to me naturally. "How about Isabella?"

Sophia's eyes shimmered with tears as she nodded. "Isabella," she repeated, her voice quivering with joy. "It's perfect."



Recovering and stepping back into the realm of business, things took an interesting turn. The chaos within the family during Francisco's reign needed to be tamed, and I wasn't one to shy away from making a statement.

Those who had grown too unruly faced swift consequences, a reminder that order was being restored. This was achieved with the aid of Leo and Antonio, who warned me against risking my life after I had recovered.

As for Francisco, he escaped on the night that I was rescued, but I had placed a contract on his head, and there was no escaping. I would make sure that Francisco paid for all that he did.

But amid the gritty demands of the underworld, I discovered a different kind of strength in the presence of Sophia and our daughter, Isabella.

On one sunny day, Keisha visited, her excitement infectious as she held Isabella in her arms. Isabella had grown, and Keisha couldn't contain her delight.

She showered our daughter with affection and adoration, and it warmed my heart to see a friend so captivated by our child.

As I watched Isabella in Keisha's arms, I felt a profound gratitude, filling my heart with warmth. I couldn't wait any longer.

Turning to Sophia, a wave of determination surged through me, and I sank to one knee, my gaze locked with hers, and from the depths of my soul, I asked the question that had been echoing in my heart.

"Sophia," I began, my voice steady and resolute, "I've seen the darkest corners of life and the brightest moments of love with you. You and Isabella are my everything, and I can't imagine a future without you by my side."

Her eyes widened, shimmering with tears of joy as she realized what was happening. My heart swelled with emotion as I continued, "Sophia, will you marry me?"

Her ecstatic smile illuminated the room as she nodded vigorously, her voice choked with emotion. "Yes, Matteo, a thousand times, yes!"

With relief and happiness, I slipped the ring onto her finger, sealing our promise before I stood up and pulled her into my arms.

I felt like all the pain I had endured was worth it for this moment.

Epilogue

Francisco

I had always considered myself a master of escape, a shadow slipping through the fingers of those who sought to catch me. But now, as I traversed the unfamiliar streets of Bali, I couldn't escape the feeling that my luck was running out.

The contract on my head had been issued by Matteo, the very man I had once thought I could control, and it had turned the criminal underworld into a frenzy.

Every corner I turned, every face I saw, I wondered if it was the one that would lead me to my demise.

In the endless game of survival, my cunning and resourcefulness kept me one step ahead of those hunting me down.

Whether it was slipping through crowded marketplaces or disappearing into the labyrinthine alleys, I relied on my instincts to stay alive.

It was ironic. I had once seen myself as the savior of the mafia, the one who would lead us to a brighter future.

But now, branded as a fugitive, I was hunted by those I had once sought to

elevate. Ungrateful people, I mused bitterly.

Matteo, the man who had taken my place, was a fool. He did not understand the intricate web of power and influence I had woven. It didn't matter that I was hiding; I would return and reclaim what was rightfully mine.

Each day in the shadows, I plotted my resurgence, gathering assets and allies. They might believe they had seen the last of Francisco, but they would soon discover that I was a force to be reckoned with. No matter the obstacles, I would come out the victor.

They called me a fool. They always had. But they would see. They would see that they had made a grave mistake, choosing to repay my kindness with ingratitude.

My father, a fool. My brother, a fool. My nephew is a fool. All of them were fools and blind to the path I had set for them, a path toward prosperity and power.

In the depths of my exile, I plotted. I plotted to return, not as a prodigal son seeking forgiveness, but as a conqueror, a man who would teach them all a lesson they would never forget.

They would learn the value of the opportunities I had offered, opportunities they had squandered.

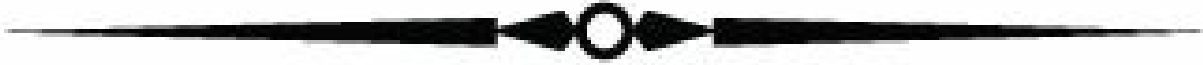
I would show them the way, the right path they should embark upon, and they would follow it, not out of choice, but out of necessity.

I would make them see that I was the one who held the keys to their future, the future they had forsaken in their blindness.

It was only a matter of time before they realized their errors, and when they did, they would come to understand the true extent of my power and influence.

They would beg for my guidance, and I would grant it, not out of kindness

but out of the sweet satisfaction of proving them all wrong.



The hotel room was bathed in a soft, sultry glow from the dimly lit chandeliers, casting an air of seduction over the plush surroundings.

The allure of the setting was not lost on me, and I couldn't resist the temptation it presented. I had booked this room, expecting a night of pleasure and indulgence.

My eyes lit up when a beautiful woman with curves in the right places entered the room. She was a vision of enchantment, her body a masterpiece that defied description.

Her beauty was mesmerizing, a siren's call that drew me closer with each step. I could hardly believe my luck, as her sultry smile promised a night of passion.

I licked my lips.

As we entered the bedroom, the anticipation hung thick in the air. She wasted no time seducing me, her fiery spirit evident in how she pushed me onto the luxurious bed.

I was intrigued by her feisty demeanor; it was a quality I found undeniably enticing.

Her fingers trailed tantalizingly over my body, igniting a fire within me. Every touch was electric, sending shockwaves of desire through my veins. I was intoxicated by her presence, lost in the whirlwind of our encounter.

But then, she whispered something that sent a jolt of panic coursing through my veins.

“You will pay for your crime.”

My eyes widened in fear, and I tried to push her way, but it was too late.

Her wrist flicked with a graceful flourish, and a small, gleaming blade instantly materialized. Horror washed over me as the cold steel slid against my throat.

A searing pain shot through me as the sharp blade grazed my skin. It felt like a white-hot poker being dragged across my flesh.

Blood erupted from the wound, spurting out in rhythmic pulses that painted the bed's white sheets red. My attempts to speak or scream only resulted in gurgles and desperate, futile gasps for air.

I clutched at my ravaged throat with trembling hands, hoping to staunch the relentless torrent of blood, but it was a feeble effort. Blood oozed through my fingers, slippery and warm as if mocking my helplessness.

My vision began to swim in a haze of crimson, and the room spun around me. Every heartbeat, every fading moment, brought with it an unbearable agony.

The pain was beyond anything I had ever imagined, a symphony of torment orchestrated by my treacherous desires.

She stepped away from the bed, her body arranged with the grace of a true predator. Her voice dripped with satisfaction as she delivered my fate.

“This is your punishment.”

My vision darkened as the world faded away. In my final moments, those were the last words I heard as I lamented at the bitter irony of my demise—brought about by my insatiable weakness for beauty. This weakness ultimately led to my downfall.



Matteo

A pleasant buzz in the pocket of my suit alerted me to an incoming call. With a swift motion, I retrieved my phone and answered.

A composed female voice spoke on the other end, delivering the news I had been waiting for.

"The job has been completed," she declared.

"Good," I responded, satisfaction lacing my tone.

Just as I was about to end the call, another voice chimed in from the couch, a voice that never failed to bring a smile to my face. It was Sophia.

"Matteo, can you come over? We need to decide which venue for our wedding is better."

The contrast between the two conversations was stark, but it filled me with a sense of contentment.

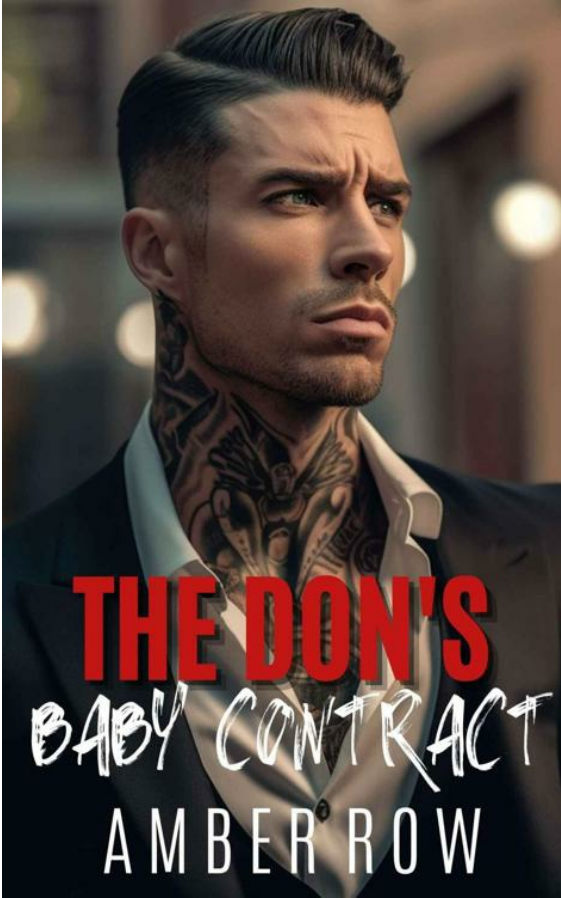
I hung up the call with the person on the other end and made my way to Sophia, the smile on my face growing broader with every step.

Everything was finally falling into place, and I couldn't wait to start this new chapter of our lives together.

The End

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The Don's Baby Contract



Tap Picture

I betrayed him and yet he still saved me.

Now I owe him more than I can afford to pay.

Nico Allotini is not someone you mess with.

His chiseled body was touched by the divine,
but he's no angel.

With more power than I ever dreamed,
He's no longer the gentle lover I betrayed four years ago.
He's the brutal mafia boss, nicknamed "The Undertaker,"
with a reputation for taking what he's owed.

But then he saves me from certain death,
I owe him more than I can afford to pay.

Until he offers me a contract.

A dangerous, sinful contract.

One that will make me his and only his.

He needs an heir and wants to possess me
in ways I shouldn't consider.

But if it protects my family, how can I refuse?

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