



**CLAMMED  
BY MY  
STALKER**

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LENA LITTLE**

# **CLAIMED BY MY STALKER**

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CLAIMED: BOOK 7

LENA LITTLE

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## PREVIEW

Who is this man? And how does he seem to hold so much power over me?

I wake to find a tall, muscular man standing over me.

Is this heaven or a prison?

I came to Italy to escape a stalker but now it looks like I've landed in the hands of another dangerous man.

He says he's an honest businessman but the mansion he lives in tells a different story.

Is this man my savior or my downfall?

But it might be too late because I've already fallen head over heels.

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## CARRIE

I open my eyes to a large muscular figure staring down at me. Snapping them back shut I hope it's just a dream, an apparition. I flutter them open, and the figure remains above me, but it's hard to capture his face in the poorly lit place.

My limbs seems to be moving fine, thus I know I'm not experiencing sleep paralysis.

*Could he be an angel?*

After all, I am supposed to be dead. The last thing I recall is being caught up in a shootout between strange men in suits. It had nothing to do with me, I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Me and everyone else on the right lane of the bridge.

The cabbie who picked me up from the airport told me it was a good idea to get out of the car and lay flat on the asphalt road. I listened to him, after all, I was a stranger in a strange city and he seemed to know how to get through shootouts.

I barely got out of the car when I hit the floor with a loud bang and felt a sharp pain at my side as I stared at the clear blue sky. I wanted to mutter a prayer at that moment but I couldn't find the words.

Remaining still on the bed for what seems like forever, I reminisce the life I've lived. It was a good one with no regrets but if I had a chance to do it all over again there's one thing I'd

want to do, one last time...or more accurately *for the first time* in my twenty-two years.

I never did *it*.

I have been waiting for the right person, the right time.

My eyes pry back open, immediately darting around where I catch sight of the figure...who's drawing closer.

This time his face is a bit more in focus, the sound of his soft but sharp breaths audible.

What is he? A doctor?

There's a faint citrus scent in the air, hospitals smell nothing like this.

"Who are you?" I finally whisper.

The figure stops abruptly before he tries to lower his palm on my forehead and hesitates.

"Am I dead?" I question aloud, whispering yet again.

Looking up, I see I'm lying in a large canopy bed. It's exactly the kind of furniture I'd imagined heaven will have. A Renaissance painting stares back at me from a distance, until all of a sudden it starts to look like something other than a Renaissance painting.

Dazed, I stare at the huge luxury canopy bed I'm snuggled in, the type I've only seen in movies. The room is spacious despite the large extravagant furniture. No room had reason to be this big I think to myself. It says a lot about the type of building I find myself in.

I still have the urge to take a closer look at the painting on the wall. In my confusion and curiosity I try to raise myself up but a sharp pain jolts me back to bed.

*What's happening?*

I've heard there's no pain in heaven, so what's going on with me?

I try again. The man grips my shoulders as I struggle to raise myself from the bed yet again.

“Your wound isn’t healed yet,” he says sternly.

*He speaks.*

His grip is as stern as his voice, cold and gentle at the same time. A breeze flutters a curtain and in a millisecond, I can see his face. An unforgettable face with olive skin, deep-set dark eyes, short hair, and a beard that makes him look like a tough guy. Despite the low light, I know he must realize how much I’m staring. I tear my eyes away from his face but they return just as quickly.

The man is staring keenly at me too, as if he’s challenging me to a staring contest at this point. There’s something about the way he looks at me, a look that tells me he’s got me all figured out, or at least he thinks he does. The seriousness of his expression leaves no room to be challenged.

The breeze sways the curtain once more and I get an even better look at his face, the image sending a chill down my spine.

“You should rest for a few more days. You’re in no condition to get up and wander about,” he says again. “I’ll make sure everything you need gets to you.”

“What are you? A King?”

He shrugs.

“Still, you can’t tell me to stay bedridden.”

“I’m only looking out for you,” he says with a half smile.

I scoff. “Why are you doing that? Who are you anyway?”

He looks past me like I didn’t just ask him some serious questions. “The bullet hardly grazed your side, it could have been worse.” His Italian accent has such a musical tune, a song to my ears. I could listen to it all day.

Without warning he stops talking, much to my disappointment, and finally places his palm on my forehead, feeling my temperature. Another chill goes down my spine at the sensation of his warm hand on my troubled head.

“Look, I appreciate the help but obviously you’re no doctor. I should be in a hospital, receiving proper treatment.”

“You’ve gotten all the proper treatment you need.”

“I don’t believe you, I still feel terrible.”

“You will heal from a bullet wound in a day or two. Besides, if you go to the hospital the doctor is going to ask questions he has no business knowing the answer to. A foreign girl who’s been shot is going to have a lot of people asking things.”

I shoot him a suspicious look. “I don’t know why I got shot. Do you? If a doctor wants to know why I have a bullet wound, I would be happy to help. I want the perpetrators brought to justice.”

“Trust me, that’s only going to make things worse...”

“Who pulled the trigger?”

He doesn’t answer that.

“Who got the bullet out?” I ask.

“As I said, you were only grazed by it.”

“So, you brought me here to get treated by a quack? I could sue you for that, do you have a license to practice?”

He suppresses a chuckle. “I’m not a doctor Carrie”

“Then who is?” I exclaim. Exerting my voice sends a few coughs from my throat. That’s when I realize he called me by my name. “Carrie? Did you just call me Carrie? How do you know my name?”

What else does this man know about me?

I’ve always been wary of strangers due to past experiences but something about him is almost forcing me to let my guard down. I stare at him intensely as my heart rate increases. From the corner of my eye I can see the door, closed but it’s hard to tell if it’s locked. Besides, I can’t run away even if I want to. Not in this condition.

“I looked through your passport, and saw your details in it. It is one of the few things I recovered from your bag. You can go

ahead and sue me, but you are going to have to do that in good health.”

Despite having never seen this man before there’s a sense of familiarity I can’t put my finger on. It feels like I’ve known him all my life but there’s no point asking him if we’ve met before because I know we haven’t.

“Why do I have a feeling you had something to do with me being shot? Did you pull the trigger and bring me here instead of a hospital because you felt guilty and wanted to stay out of trouble?” I blurt out.

“Whoa, you got me,” he responds mockingly with his hands raised in resignation. Without a follow-up statement, he gets up and proceeds to change my drip bag.

This man either owes me an apology or I owe him a thank you for saving my life. It is one for the other and the difference between them is an uncrossable valley.

A middle-aged woman in an apron strolls in carrying a tray of pills, syringes, bandages, and a glass of water. Her presence relieves me to now know the door has been unlocked the whole time.

“*Stupefacente!* She’s awake, thank goodness!”

“Rosa will attend to all your needs in my absence, I presume you’re more comfortable with a woman nursing you. I’ll leave you to get treated,” he says. I sense him hesitate for a moment before heading for the door.

A part of me wishes he’d stick around some more. Leaving me in the care of another stranger frightens me. He’s no more than a stranger himself, but in the brief time we’ve spent together I strangely sense I can trust him.

Walking out the door, he shuts it gently behind him.

“How do you feel today, miss?” the woman inquires.

“I feel like a bullet grazed my side. I feel like there’s a rave going on inside my head.”

“It will get better, I brought you some painkillers...”

I sigh. "I take it you're my doctor, or nurse, or whatever. How long have I been here? What's today's date?" A sharper pain at my side sends my body back to a horizontal position on the bed.

"I'm no doctor. I'm just a maid in the Conte house," The woman replies.

But I don't know any Contes, and I can't fathom why I'm here and not in a hospital. The woman also looks like she won't give me the kind of information I need anyway.

"I need to use the phone. I promised to call my parents."

"I'll relay your request to the master," is all she says.

"You don't need to, he's not here. It's just a phone call."

"Still, you're going to have to ask the master."

"You could just lend me yours,. The master doesn't have to know you know." I take her hand gently and place it in mine. "You know, woman to woman."

She shrugs my hand away and it's evident that she isn't having it. "There are rules, miss. If you need anything you're going to have to ask appropriately. It's just what we do."

I remain silent during the rest of the drug administration and watch her leave, finally finding myself alone.

Pushing my body up again, I groan in pain as I feel the skin in my side rip. I clamp my teeth on my lower lip to stop myself from screaming. Limping around the room I look for my possessions, my handbag or luggage, anything I can grab. Who knows...I might find a way to leave whatever this place is called.

As I force myself out the door, I collide with someone as hard as a brick wall. I look up at whoever it is and find the strange handsome man from minutes ago staring back at me.

"Going somewhere?" he asks with an expression that tells me he isn't surprised one bit.

"Yes, I mean... No, I was just taking a look around."

His face changes to one of slight displeasure. It amazes me how someone can look so vicious yet gentle at the same time.

“I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Carlo, Carlo Conte,” he says with an outstretched hand.

I shake the hand slightly, my eyes hovering around trying to avoid his intense gaze. “I haven’t seen all of it but I can tell you have a beautiful house, Mr. Conte. Something passed down in the family?”

“Please, call me Carlo. I built the house myself, supervised everything from the building plan to the window finishing. I wanted to create a safe place for my people and family.”

Carlo Conte doesn’t strike me as much of a family man, but the look in his eyes shows he means every word he’s saying. “I don’t see your wife and kids around though, perhaps you’ll introduce me later?” I look around the place frantically, my way of getting him to reveal how much of a family man he really is. There’s a ring on his finger but the red-eyed skull on it makes it too sinister to be a wedding band.

Carlo doesn’t reply, instead he gives a half smile and stares forward.

“You’re not a man of many words, are you?”

“I like to listen more than I like to speak,” is all he says.

I run my fingers through the embroidered tapestry on the wall. “You look like you’re swimming in money, Carlo.”

Carlo shrugs. “Business has been good.”

I give him a look that seems to ask what business he has.

“I own a fast food franchise, Bella Pizza. Perhaps you’ve heard of it”

I let out a gasp. I know Bella Pizza more than I want to, or so I thought. It was one of my favorite places to eat after a long day, with its several locations that stretch across the States through the borders to Mexico and Italy. There’s even been rumors that they wanted to expand to the United Kingdom. Bella Pizza is a big franchise, one I could never imagine one man was solely behind, but still, this looks like too much



money for an honest businessman. Even the President wouldn't live in such opulence.

This is Italy after all, and I only have to put two and two together. Bella Pizza could be a cover for something illegal, drugs, firearms, contraband, could be anything.

Carlo Conte looks far from the average honest businessman. Of course, I know better than to judge him for whatever unorthodox way he lives his life. But if I had to take a guess my money would be on Carlo being involved in drugs, maybe the sale of illegal arms and weapons, or perhaps he runs an organ harvesting ring.

A part of me is curious, dying to know every tiny detail about this man, another part wants to keep him a mystery, to keep living in a bubble for my sanity. This is the part of me that doesn't want to accept I could fall for such a man, we are two extreme ends of a pole, yet I keep getting drawn in his direction.

"Is there anything you'd like to know about me?" I ask.

"Not exactly."

His reply makes me wonder if I'm not interesting or intriguing enough to him. "I'm a stranger in Italy who wound up in your home, surely you must be curious."

"I have you all figured out already."

I decide to tease him further. "No you don't. You just met me. You're not worried I have affiliations with the FBI, DEA, or something?"

"Why would I be? I don't do anything illegal."

I wonder if he ran a background check on me. He appears to be a calculated, careful man. If I was a fed, spy, or anyone out to jeopardize his dealings I probably wouldn't have made it this far.

Our eyes meet and I don't know if it's all in my head but it feels like we've reached a mutual understanding. No words, just a telepathic sort of communication simply by looking at each other.

“I’m not going to be kept prisoner here, am I?”

“Of course not, you’re free to leave whenever you want.”

He says those words like he doesn’t mean them. Here he is, granting me my freedom but he sounds domineering at the same time.

“Good, because I’ll be out of your hair in no time,” I say quickly.

“Since this is new terrain, I imagine you’ll need a job and a place to stay until you get back on your feet?”

Carlo is right. It seems most of my valuables were left behind at the scene of the shooting. I never recovered my suitcase from the cab. My credit card and most of my clothes are missing. I can’t exactly pay for a night in a motel until I have my finances sorted out. I could really use some help.

“Are you going to give me a job at Bella Pizza?” I ask.

“No, I’m looking to hire a personal data broker.”

I have never heard of such a job. “Whose data do I get to sell?”

“Just Consumers at Bella Pizza”

“That sounds illegal.”

“Trust me, it’s not. Think of it as a marketing role.”

It surprises me that he knows I’m into marketing, as it was my major in college. Perhaps he doesn’t. I edge closer to him. “To what end? A pizza place doesn’t need to sell its consumer’s data to thrive, nor should they.”

He edges closer to me until our noses almost touch. “Stick around and find out.”

Who is this man? And how does he seem to hold so much power over me? My heart skips and I wonder what it would feel like if our lips collided. My face flushes and I look away embarrassed.

“I’d like to borrow your phone. I promised my parents I’d call them when I’m settled.”

He reaches into his pocket and hands me a mobile phone. “I’ll leave you to rest, but think about what my job offer.”

He marches out of the room leaving me alone once again. I decide to take a better look around. Pushing the double doors open I find myself on a terrace with a breathtaking view. Italy is the place I’ve always dreamed of. It helps that I have roots in this town. According to the story I’ve been told, my grandparents are from here, but my father went against their wishes and married an American woman, forever changing the trajectory of our family.

The other part of this city has narrow streets with storybook buildings stacked against each other, painted in bright contrasting colors. The ocean view, although distant and out of reach, is breathtaking still.

I have a lot of questions. The most pressing is if I’m really free to leave this huge mansion on my own accord. The second is just how sincere is this ‘job offer’ and what ‘work’ is really entailed.

More importantly than those two unclosed loops in my mind is the question he still hasn’t answered...why he saved me, from what exactly, and of what use am I to him? Why go through all that trouble for a strange unlucky girl he met by accident? I know he was involved in the shootout and despite all the red flags, I find myself drawn to him.

Breathing in the cool evening air, I dial my dad’s number on the mobile phone. It rings for a few seconds, then I hear the familiar voice.

“Dad, it’s Carrie.”



CARLO

I take a whiff of my Campari as Enzo gives me the week's report. It's been a long and hectic one. Most weeks were like that but I hadn't seen one like this in a while. I'm not complaining, there was a rainbow after the storm. The highlight of it was her. I recall the way my heart stopped when I saw her fall to the floor, torn between losing my cool and common sense in front of my men and running to grab her amidst the flying bullets.

The shootout at the bridge was a result of a small rift with Giovanni's men. Giovanni and I were on good terms till Bruno turned him against me. The thought of Bruno only makes my blood boil, that man has bought me nothing but loss and pain.

A loud bang at the gate interrupts the briefing. Enzo grabs his radio and speaks into it.

"What's the situation?" Enzo inquires.

"It's Bruno, he and his men have just breached the front gates," a panting man exclaims over the radio.

I snap my fingers and my men comply, aiming their guns at the only place Bruno would walk in through. I know he isn't going to come down from the open roof, his weary body can't afford him such stunts.

I hear footsteps approaching, *Bruno*. I can smell his cologne from a mile away. I exchange a knowing look with Enzo who speaks into his walkie again. No doubt Bruno has breached all the security, it's up to me to face him myself. Outside, I hear

kicks, grunts, and the agonizing moan of one of the men I pay and feed to secure my home.

*Amateurs.*

The door bursts open to Bruno striding in, his buttons half done as usual exposing a chest full of so much hair, he could be likened to an ape. His usual grin shows a pair of gold teeth, these grandiose accessories make him appear sinister and repulsive, which is only a representation of everything he is.

I hate Bruno's guts, he walks around revealing his chest as if to dare anyone to place a bullet in it. He flashes his gold teeth around like I wasn't the one that knocked the ingrown ones out.

Bruno and I weren't always foes, we were childhood friends despite the feud between our families, a naïve young me thought we could set our family's differences aside and be buddies. With maturity comes clarity as to how the world really is. He must have thought we could get along too but it didn't take long for him to reveal his true colors.

I sit up in my chair swirling my drink around. "Bruno, I wasn't expecting you"

Bruno wags his finger at me. "I don't need an invitation to my Fratello's house." He snatches the Campari bottle off the table before me and takes a long gulp.

"You know, I was passing by, thought it would be rude of me not to stop by. Besides, I brought a gift. I think you'll find this very interesting." He snaps his fingers, and one of his men comes forward with a flat rectangular box adorned with a red ribbon. Enzo gives me a look of alarm but I assure him with a slight smirk.

He wouldn't try anything funny or dangerous, I can always see through Bruno's faux bravado. Bruno is the kind of man who wants to live more than anyone else. He's selfish. Unlike me, he doesn't value the lives of his men, that's why he'd never get loyalty by a length's arm pole.

I know he wouldn't launch an explosive two meters away from himself. Bruno has always been a coward, wearing the

mask of a leader. I'm one of the few that knows he doesn't have it in him, the reason he is always on the verge of running his family business into the ground.

Bruno stifles a laugh. "What is that look? Do you think I brought a bomb?"

Bruno always knows what I'm thinking, being an old friend has given him that advantage. He takes another gulp of my drink and chuckles. "The air is so thick, let's put an end to this suspense shall we?"

He signals to the man with the box who comes forward and flips it open.

An array of severed fingers lay on white satin, all ten of it. The blood had seeped into the satin making giving it a mix of white and darkened pink. The skin had turned a darkened shade of blue.

I fold my arms, waiting for Bruno to tell me what a set of severed fingers has anything to do with me.

"I was at Giovanni's last night."

My eyes widen a bit, refusing to believe the fingers belong to the great Giovanni. In a scuffle, Giovanni would strangle him with only one of his hands, not releasing his grip until he chokes the life out of him.

"Oh he's alive, I made sure of it, but his hands?" he clicks his tongue a couple of times and shakes his head sympathetically.

"You piece of shit," I mutter under my breath.

Giovanni trusted him, turned on me because of him, chose to do business with him, and severed all ties with me and this was how Bruno chose to act. Bruno grows more sinister and ugly with every passing second I stare at him.

I have always put off killing him off because of old times but this is the last straw. Bruno has to go.

"I made up my mind when he offered me 30%. It's the most insulting deal I've ever gotten, my late father would be turning in his grave knowing I belittled myself like that. I hear you

took 30% with no objections when you and he were partners. That's too bad, you don't know your worth Carlo."

Bruno talks too much, it is always torture to hear him blabber away nonsense. I decide I've heard enough. I give Enzo a nod and he responds by cocking his gun at him, the rest of my men follow suit and I run my hand over the Glock 19 at my side.

"Aw come on, what do you think you're doing? Avenging Giovanni?" Bruno's hysterical laughter echoes through my courtyard.

"My story with Giovanni ended the moment he cut ties with me." I take slow heavy steps toward Bruno, trying not to let my emotions get the better of me. "If you wanted to kill him, you would have brought his head, not his fingers."

I calculate what it would cost to put a bullet through Bruno's head at that moment. His men would retaliate no doubt, a shootout would ensue, about six of my men could wind up dead, half a dozen lives in exchange for his. Is it worth it? Enzo might survive, he always knows how to, but his emotions can get the better of him and he could wind up getting shot trying to protect me.

Another option is to grab Bruno and order his men to drop their weapons. I know this plan is riskier than the first, there is no telling what reckless Bruno will do after he gets out of a hostage situation. I don't want to start a fight there, putting the lives of my people at such risk.

There is someone else I have to protect, I can't risk her life trying to get rid of this monster. She is all that matters.

"Carlo!" Bruno yells, waving the Campari bottle in my face and spilling the contents on me. "Snap yourself back to the present, don't tell me Giovanni's situation has you all in your feelings already, I never mistook you for a..."

His voice trails away as the evil sneer on his face fades. Bruno isn't looking at me anymore, the death stare he often gave me had also vanished. Murmurs ring across his men, distracted by something behind me. I turn around abruptly wondering why



Rosa had to bring my pills at such a heated and critical moment.

I nearly jump out of my skin at seeing Carrie standing by a pillar, wide-eyed and disoriented. Here I am delaying getting rid of Bruno because she is in close vicinity, and now she makes it worse by walking into the danger zone. An unspeakable fear grips me.

The light courtyard breeze sways her blonde hair into her face and her dress from side to side. All eyes remain on her. I feel an anger rise in my throat, angry that these unworthy men could behold Carrie, her blonde hair, and honey-brown eyes that seem to pierce through your skin. The thought of the lustful things occupying their minds makes me clench my fist, the idea of these men ogling her sends an angry rush of blood to my head, and even in my anger, I find myself as mesmerized as the other men.

“Take her away, Enzo,” I order.

“Wait, wait, not so fast,” Bruno yells. “Take her where? I haven’t gotten the chance to introduce myself to the lady.”

I want to yell at Bruno to back off from her but that would only be revealing how much I care for her. That would be endangering her. I don’t want to risk it, evil and scheming Bruno would get ideas. The last thing I want is for Carrie to get caught up in this mess.

Enzo ignores Bruno and tries to usher Carrie away, but Bruno isn’t having it.

“You’ve grown some balls Enzo, if you don’t watch it I’ll cut them off”

I hate the look in Bruno’s eyes. He looks like he’s just seen something he fancies, something he wants for himself. Bruno steps forward, his eyes still glued on Carrie.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asks with a shaky voice  
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“You have done absolutely nothing wrong, my lady. Carlo and I were about to start one of our fights but your presence has

calmed my temper. Call me Bruno.” He takes her hand and kisses the back of her palm.

I squeeze the piece of paper I have in my palm, turning it into an irredeemable ball. I remember telling Carrie not to leave the main house. How am I supposed to protect her when she won’t even listen to my simple instructions?

Rosa is supposed to keep her in check in my absence, the old hag is probably somewhere in the compound gossiping with the other maids. Someone will have to answer why Carrie came strolling into the courtyard when I instructed everyone to keep their eyes on her and keep her in check. Someone has to be held responsible, meanwhile, I have to throw Bruno out.

“You should return now Carrie, I’ll have Enzo attend to whatever you need, Bruno was just leaving anyway.”

Bruno throws his head back and laughs, his gold teeth twinkling in the afternoon sun. “Carlo has had too much to drink, please forgive his manners. I have so many questions as to why you’re here. Surely he’s not keeping you, prisoner, for some debt you and your family owe?”

“I’ll see you to the door, Bruno,” I grit out.

Bruno ignores me and keeps talking to Carrie, her hand still in his. “I’m a philanthropist myself, I have a lot of experience helping people regain their freedom from tyrannical figures.”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken, Mr. Bruno. I’m here of my own accord,” Carrie says.

“He surely isn’t treating you like you have rights, if I didn’t know any better I’d say he owns you.” Bruno goes on.

“How dare he?” I mutter to myself.

I clap repeatedly. “Okay, playtime is over, let’s wrap this up. Somebody get Bruno out of my sight.”

Bruno takes out his gun before Enzo can get to him. “Get back,” he orders.

The sight of a gun makes Carrie pale. She takes a few steps backward, panting heavily.

“What is it about this girl that’s got you so wound up? Who is she anyway?”

The last thing I want is bullets flying while Carrie is present, I have to handle this another way. I signal Enzo to back down.

— — —

Bruno left the house in a foul mood. I know I’ll be seeing him more often than I want to, Carrie on the other hand could be in danger. Bruno will try to find out everything he can about her.

Rosa walks up to me with pleading eyes. “I left for barely a minute and she was gone. She vanished, I looked everywhere for her, I didn’t realize she wandered all the way down to the...”

I ignore Rosa for her own good. If I decide to react, she will be fired or worse.

I burst into Carrie’s room, Rosa remains behind the door, peeping and whispering excuses.

“Leave us,” I thunder.

The woman scampers away.

I turn to Carrie and can barely hide my annoyance. “I told you not to leave the main house,” I say with a stern look.

“I got lost trying to find the kitchen”

“That’s not an excuse, you shouldn’t have wandered out of Rosa’s sight.”

”You don’t expect me to stay cooped up in the room forever, living in Rosa’s shadow, besides she has a lot on her plate already. I thought hovering over me was a chore.” She gives an unbothered shrug.

“It’s what I pay her to do, it’s not in your place to care about whether she likes her duties or not. I could fire her right now and it would be your fault.”

At first, she gives me a look that suggests she knows I’m bluffing but her expression changes to one of fear, Carrie looks at me with pleading eyes. “I’m the one at fault here, if anyone

should have to be fired, it's me. I'm sorry." Her eyes well, her lips tremble and I wish I hadn't been so hard on her.

She starts to sob. I stretch out my arms and she melts in them, smuggling in as I envelop her small frame.

I take the strands of hair that keep getting into her face and tuck them behind her ear. For some reason I can't explain my hands remain behind there, on her ears. She doesn't shrug or shake me off. I wonder how she'd react if I touched other parts of her. I can feel the rhythm of her soft breaths against my chest. The beating of my heart intensifies revealing how tense I feel. I wonder if she can hear it too.

I turn her around gently and trace my hand from her earlobe to her neck, she responds with a slight shiver. Without thinking, my mouth moves to the base of her neck that leads to her shoulder, and I kiss it lightly. Her whimpers drive me crazy. Taking it a step further, I turn her back to face me and pull her in by the waist, her chest bumps into mine with a gasp.

I bend over to place a light kiss on her cheek, I pull backward and search her face and eyes, trying to read her emotions. I need to know if she wants this too. I'm crazy about her, but her consent is important to me as well.

Carrie's face is flushed. She looks down to avert my gaze and fiddles with her fingers. I decide to try my luck again and cup her face, raising it up to look at me.

"Do you want this?" I rasp.

"Yes," she whispers.

I position her head to align our mouths and draw closer. I invade her lips, maintaining a slow and steady pace. A shiver runs down my spine. I have waited my whole life for this, I can't get enough of her. A moan threatens to erupt from me but I hold it back, I don't want to appear that needy and vulnerable to her.

I cup her face and pull her closer, giving her gentle bites and nibbling on her lips. Her hands grip my forearms tightly. Carrie quivers and her knees buckle bringing an end to our kiss. I'm quick to grab her before she falls. Both of us are

breathing hard, mine more audible than hers. We hold on to each other still, our hearts still racing and our faces flushed.

Carrie wraps her hands around my torso and places her head on my chest. We stand in silence taking in the cool evening air from the open terrace. I stare at the sunset view from the distance, every view on this terrace is more beautiful than the last. One of the most beautiful views in the house.



**T**here's a traitor in my circle. I had suspected it all along, right from when Bruno knew I was going to take the seaport and when word got out that deals were being made in the Accona desert.

What about when the DEA raided my pepperoni storage? They found nothing because my suppliers were running late, a stroke of sheer luck, the cops could only do such a thing based on intel. The question is, who is the snitch? It has to be someone in my house. Someone who knows my every move.

There is certain information some of my men don't ever get to hear about. I have a policy, if you're not involved, it's best to stay ignorant. Only those vital to a plan are let in on what it entails.

I TAKE a quick look at the men around me, regarding each of them as suspects. Enzo is out of the question, he stuck with me longer than the rest and would lay down his life for me, I'm sure of it. Luca... Luca talks too much for a man but he isn't a snitch. He could talk non-stop for hours without letting any single useful piece of information out in his rantings. Once the cops kept him for 24 hours using every psychology trick in their book to get him to talk. They didn't get anything useful out of Luca till my lawyer showed up for him.

A hand stretches out to hand an inventory request form for my signature, I proofread the document and my eyes wander to the waiting hand. I recognize Jake's hand from the scar that

stretches across his palm. Jake has mutism, but that would not stop him from giving out information he shouldn't. I picked Jake up off the streets as a seventeen-year-old illegal immigrant, and it's still no indication that he wouldn't turn his back on me after everything I've done.

My eyes linger on him as I hand the documents back to him.

"There's a situation," Enzo says. "Bruno's men have been sighted on our turf again and this time, they're selling coke."

I'm not surprised by the news, it's only a matter of time before Bruno throws another of his tantrums. Since he is done with Giovanni, I have become his next target.

Enzo looks at me intensely waiting for my reply.

I heave a big sigh and stay silent. I was hoping to spend my day indoors today, sort out paperwork, spend some time with Carrie...

Enzo interrupts my thoughts. "What are you going to do about Bruno?"

"What I should have done a long time ago. Are his men still there?"

"Yes, it's been 36 hours and it doesn't look like they'll be leaving anytime soon. They're all out in the open, no fear, nothing sneaky."

I know it's time to instill that fear.

"Bruno is trying to get my attention, this time, I'm going to give it to him."

"What's the plan?" Enzo asks.

I don't answer his question. This time I'm keeping my plan to myself, there's a snitch in my circle and I'm going to be mysterious ol' Carlo until I find out who it is and cut his tongue out of his mouth.

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THE CHILDREN'S park is where my men traded our product, one of the safest places to do such business. The sound of swings, laughter, excited screams, and the scoldings of parents drowns whatever you have to say there. Not everyone watching the children play is a parent or a guardian, some are just there to do business.

Enzo pulls the car over by the park. "That's them." He nods at two men holding balloons, one is wearing a flat cap and the other has a ridiculous pink bandana over his bald head, well disguised as fathers' in the park.

"We have to draw them out," I say.

"Are you planning to get rid of them?"

I don't answer the question.

I recognize the red fiat parked a few cars away from ours. One of Bruno's. He has always had poor taste in vehicles.

I switch to the driver's seat, rev up the car engine and violently reverse into the red fiat. The car alarm goes off getting everyone's attention at the park. Bruno's men shout and swear at us as they take hurried steps to the deliberate accident. Parents cover the ears of their children as the men advance toward us.

I keep the engine steady and switch the gear.

The one with the cap barely gets a chance to knock on the tinted windows as I speed off. The cursing intensifies as he chases our car for a bit, then stops with his hand on his knees, panting heavily. From the rear mirror, I can see the other man starting up the fiat ready to chase us down.

Enzo stares at me confused. "They're going to call for backup, and it's just us two."

"These wimps don't scare me," I reply. These are the amateurs of Bruno's workers, the bottom of the employment chain.

I drive fast enough to get away from them but steady enough to let them catch up with us. The man behind the wheels, the bald one with the ridiculous pink bandana zooms in on us,

trying to crash into my headlights but I swerve abruptly to the other lane.

The one with the cap pulls out a gun and points it at us. Enzo pulls one out too. "Watch your head," he warns. A bullet hits a window in the backseat. I drive on lowering my head as Enzo shoots back at the duo.

Two more vehicles join us on the lane, the infamous backup is finally here.

"You're wasting my bullets Enzo," I yell. Perhaps his head isn't in the right place but all he's done since he pulled out his gun is shoot like he's trying out a weapon for the first time. One of the backups corners us at the other side of the rather narrow lane, edging closer and bumping side mirrors. Impatient, I slam the door open making a dent in the car next to me and shoot at both visible tires. The vehicle swerves off the road into the forest, Enzo takes a cue from me and does the same.

"Be prepared to jump," I tell Enzo.

With one functional vehicle left behind us, I step on the accelerator letting the driver do the same, then I pull up sideways right into the middle of the road and jump out of the car. It's too late for the incoming car to come to an effective halt, it rams into our car at full speed. The crash sends glass and scraps flying in several directions. Something sharp slashes me on the shoulder. I pull out my pistol and walk in the direction of the crash.

The man behind the wheel doesn't look like he's going to make it. The broken windscreen has done a number on him, anyone that bleeds that much and fast won't survive the next couple of minutes, not without pressure.

I decide to save my bullets for the others. I find Enzo sitting by the side of the road panting hard. It doesn't take long to spot the others, we find the man with the pink bandana dead and his partner struggling to free himself from the crumpled car. I'm not sure if he's going to survive the ordeal but one thing I'm sure of is that he'll never get to walk again. I catch a

bone sticking out of his mangled leg and decide to put an end to his misery, one headshot is all it takes, fast and painless.

I hurry along the road with Enzo still far off behind me, slowing me down. It's only a matter of time before the cops arrive and I don't want to leave any stone unturned. I find the other two trying to flee, their car rammed into a tree after swerving into the forest. I aim at the one farther off and with one eye closed, I pull the trigger. The bullet hits my target in the back, and he goes somersaulting across the forest. The last man standing is hardly running, there's no way he can, not with that limp. I walk steadily toward him and succeed in catching up with him.

"Don't shoot!" he screams. "Don't shoot, I beg of you." He raises his hands. "I surrender, what do you want? The drugs?" He takes out bags of product from his pocket. "Information? I'll tell you anything you want."

But I'm not buying anything he says, I aim the gun at him but then I hesitate. The trembling man opens an eye slowly, then the other.

"I need you to give Bruno a message," I say.

"Anything, I'll tell him anything you want," he cries hysterically and clutches at my feet.

"Bad idea Carlo," Enzo says behind me.

"Enzo, what took you so long?" I ask, but he ignores my question.

"You should finish him, no use sending him back to Bruno as a messenger."

The man seems to strongly disagree with Enzo. His eyes flare up angrily and he points his index finger at Enzo but before he gets to say a word, Enzo shoots him right between the eyes.

I give Enzo a disapproving stare, Enzo never kills unless I tell him to, and only in exceptions like self-defense. This man wasn't posing any harm and I needed him to give Bruno a message.

How dare he?

The sirens of several police cars ring in the air as they speed to the crashes, in the late afternoon sun Enzo appears different to me, it's not because he disobeyed my instructions, there's a certain air about him this time.

---

I WAKE UP TO A THUNDERSTORM, followed by shouts. I peep out of the window and find Rosa and another maid trying to take shelter. The rain has been constant this week which is unusual. Italy has seen very low levels of rainfall in previous years, this year has been different in all ramifications. I close my eyes and inhale the rainy scent in the air.

My room leads to other parts of my suite which include a lounge, a monitor room, and a study which leads to my hidden chamber. The latter is off limits to everyone but me, not even Rosa dares take a peep in while she's regulating the cleaning. My study is often cleaned by myself and being a busy man means it doesn't get cleaned very often.

I stroll into the monitor room. The first thing I check amidst the ongoing chaos on the screen is Carrie, through the monitor, I find her in her room pacing back and forth and talking to herself. Clearly disturbed but physically fine.

I've always watched Carrie. I spent most of my days at her bedside after I brought her in unconscious. But I can't always be there in person so I installed cameras in her bedroom, excluding the bathroom because a girl needs her privacy. The mobile phone I gave to her has a tracking device in it, again, for safety reasons. I can't bear to lose her for anything in the world.

---

I pull up in the driveway of a fast food restaurant. While Enzo gives our orders.

“Anything else you'd like?” he asks.

“The new milkshake on their menu will do.”

Bella Pizza sells the best milkshake in town, and other states too, until I heard about the newly introduced one on the menu here.

“Vanilla milkshake coming through,” the attendant announces.

I drive off after the restaurant to a four-lane road, the traffic light halts us. There, I receive an incoming call from a strange number. I hear Bruno’s nasty laugh at the receiving end.

“Enjoying that milkshake, huh?”

I almost choke on my drink, looking through the side mirrors for a sign of him.

I give Enzo a knowing look, he instantly knows who it is.

“You could have died five seconds ago Carlo, my hitman just asked for my approval to take a shot.”

“Why did you change your mind?”

“The blondie, her name is Carrie, isn’t it? Are you using her to get to me because I have to admit Carlo, it’s working.”

“You stay away from her.”

Bruno stifles a laugh. “That’s not for you to decide, but consider yourself lucky Carlo. You did a number on my men and ruined three of my cars. I’ve been in a foul mood all week because of you. You’ll pay for killing my men, but thanks to her I’ve changed my mind, you won’t be paying with your life. I’m going to take away the thing that’s most dear to you.”

I can’t tell what he’s talking about, but I hope he knows nothing about the kinds of things I hold dear. I hope he isn’t talking about Carrie.

“If you’re confused, you’ll find out what it is soon, by that time my words will be clearer.” With that, he hangs up.

I clench my fist almost crushing the phone in it.

“Everything okay?” Enzo asks.

I speed off, honking furiously at the cars in my way. I’m determined to put an end to Bruno even if it’s the last thing I do. Bruno’s existence continues to be a pain to me. I’m not

one to take his threats seriously but I fear he wants to take Carrie away from me. I take Carrie very seriously and will not sit back and watch any harm come to her.

As for Carrie, it's about time I talk to her about what she's done.

— — —

I find her on her room terrace. I know she can tell I'm standing right beside her, but she doesn't say a word and keeps her eyes in the distance. It's hard to tell if she's fixated on the sunset or is staring into space, lost in thought. I clear my throat to get her attention, yet she doesn't move.

I know it's up to me to say something now. "It's Carlo"

"I know," she replies. "Are you here to scold me?"

"What did you do?"

"I was trying to save your life..."

"...What did you do?"

She shrugs. "Nothing much, we just talked, I pleaded for your life, that day you and Enzo came home covered in dust, I knew he was going to come after you."

I give an exasperated sigh. "I told you to stay out of it"

"I was just trying to help, you were clearly in danger," she argues.

"You think you have what it takes to save me from danger?" My voice is starting to rise. I take a mental note to keep myself in check, Carrie is the last person I ever want to yell at. A slight frown is plastered on her face, my words clearly hurt her feelings. I shouldn't have said that. I attempt to take her hand but hesitate. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that"

"No, you're right. What can a little powerless thing like me do to save anyone? I can't even move from the airport to a motel in Italy without getting shot. You're absolutely right."

Carrie doesn't know the power she carries within her, it's the type that transcends the use of guns or fists. The type that

makes murderous men forget their quests and fall to the spell of her beauty.

“It would kill me to see you get hurt in any way, it would destroy me to see you getting hurt because of me. Carrie, I don’t want you getting caught up in any of this, not with Bruno, or anyone else I meet, friend or foe.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t want you saying things in resignation. I want to know that there really aren’t any hard feelings between us.”

She smiles at me, a genuine one, and a warmth spreads across my body.

“I got you something.” I gesture to the room. “Want to come in and see?”

She tries to smile but suppresses it and gives a light shrug. “Sure.”

I make her sit in front of the dressing table and raise her silky blonde hair into a bun. I reveal a black box and retrieve a choker from it, then I place the choker around her slender neck and clasp it at the back. Carrie runs her finger over the choker, tracing the pearls and letters spelling out her name.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers. “Thank You”

This is me branding her as my property, the choker is a symbol. She is mine now, even if she knows it or not.

Carrie stands on her toes and wraps her hands around my neck. She breaks the hug when her feet start to hurt, but I draw her to me and place my mouth on hers. Our tongues intertwine as she gasps for air in my mouth. I grab Carrie’s ass and squeeze lightly, an act she finds pleasurable, I can tell from her heightened moans.

I break the kiss abruptly much to her disappointment, mine too but there’s something I want to do more. I bend her over the arm of the chair and spank her ass, Carrie freezes. Despite her shock, she seems turned on by my actions. I give her another spank, harder than the first and I hear her suck in air through her teeth.

“You’ll do as I say now Carrie, no more snooping around, no more following me around and you’ll stay away from Bruno”

“Y-yes,” she replies with a gasp.

“You’re never going to see Bruno again.”

“I’m never going to see....” her words get cut short with another smack on her ass.

“Finish the sentence,” I order.

“I’m never going to see Bruno again.” The part about Bruno is merely affirming. Carrie is never going to see Bruno ever again, I am going to make sure of that. It is a done deal, all that is left is for me to implement it.

“You’re mine now, every inch of you.”

“Every inch of me... I’m all yours,” she says amidst sobs of ecstasy.

I stroke her hair lightly. “Good Girl.”





## CARRIE

**I**t's been five days since I found myself in this strange place and four days since things got heated between Carlo and me. I stand in front of the wide mirror and check my side where the bullet had grazed me. The wound is starting to heal, and all I feel is a slight pain when I touch it.

I shiver as memories of the metal piercing my skin rush through me, becoming unconscious was more of the shock and the sight of blood than the bullet wound.

I recall falling on the floor, inhaling dust, and feeling the sharp stones bruise my skin. My parents were relieved to find out I'm fine in Italy. I left out the part about getting shot, which would have had them flying into town without hesitation. Giving them a reason to come will defeat my purpose of coming here.

I needed to be free from their grip, experience a new environment, and give my obnoxious stalker nothing to trace.

Another reason I'm here is that I'm trying to trace my lineage. I succeeded in getting a tourist visa and took a one-way flight out of the U.S. with the last of my savings. Life was terrible in the U.S., I was prepared to leave at all costs even if it killed me. At the end of the day, coming here almost got me killed. Still, it would be a better fate than what I experienced back home, that's just how desperate I have become.

Carlo's job barely gives me anything to do, I have a feeling he gave me the strange offer just to keep me on a large payroll, keep me under his roof and around him. I still wonder why he

cares so much, whatever it is he feels about me seems too good to be true.

I walk to the large kitchen. It took me wandering into a tussle with Bruno to get the directions right. It's a big house, and most of the hallways and turns look the same to me. Of course, I'm bound to get lost sometimes. I find Rosa and another maid using the pasta machine, the maid rolls the dough vigorously as she has somewhere else to be, Rosa, in turn, sends the flattened dough into the machine. I look around the kitchen which is devoid of servants and kitchen staff like I expected.

"Is it just you two?"

Rosa jumps at the sound of my voice, with fatigue, and exasperation on her expression. "We make do with the little staff we have. You're not supposed to be..."

"...Here, I know."

"If you're hungry..."

"I'm not, I was just looking around." Thanks to me, Rosa has gotten into more trouble than she has in her entire career working as a maid with the Conte family.

I find their silence uncomfortable, the air is tense, and nobody will fill me in on anything that happens anymore, not even Rosa. She has become more distant and formal with me since the day I wandered away from the main house. That one act put her in a bit of trouble with Carlo. She constantly avoided my eyes and changes the subject whenever I asked a question about Carlo, his business or men. The few questions she answers are short and lacking in detail.

ENZO FINDS me wandering the premises. "Where are you going?" he asks coolly. "I had to find you with the surveillance."

I don't like the way Enzo looks at me. His gaze always makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong, it's a judgy suspicious look. Beneath his square-shaped sunglasses, I just know that look is there.

“Nowhere in particular, but now that I think about it, I’d like to see Carlo.”

“He’s not in,” he replies dismissively.

“Alright then, I’ll wait for him in his room or whatever.”

Enzo stops me with a hand, he withdraws his hand quickly like he just touched something hot. “His chambers are out of bounds...”

“What?”

“Even to you....” he adds.

“I’m sure Carlo would make an exception for me.” I flutter my eyes and twirl my hair with my fingers.

Enzo will not budge. “You’re not to go into his room or roam that part of the house. I’ll tell you where to find him, come with me.” He starts walking ahead, stops, and turns around when he realizes I’m not following him.

Reluctant, I take slow calculated steps after him, I’m not prepared to run after him trying to match his hurried way of walking, instead, he’ll have to be the one compromising.

— — —

Enzo pulls up by a pond with shrubs growing around it.

“Why am I here?” I ask confused.

“Carlo’s orders,” he replies.

I can tell already that it’s useless to get an explanation out of Enzo, all he does is give short unsatisfactory replies and stare at me behind his sunglasses. He is exactly what I imagine a mindless robot to be. I step out of the car and watch him drive away.

“Should I be worried?” I mutter to myself. I’m not carrying any money, I didn’t even have my phone on me when he dragged me all the way here. I walk towards the pond looking around for any sign of Carlo, as I get closer, I find him standing by a rowboat wearing a hat, and shorts that reveal his hairy legs.

“What took you so long? I’ve been waiting.” He gestures to me. “Come on.”

Without a word, I take his waiting hand. He leads me into a rowboat by the marshy shore. The boat wobbles a bit and I fight the urge not to scream. When Carlo gets in with me, my fears ease away.

Whatever happens, I know he’ll save me.

I stare at him intensely. “I wonder what else you have hidden under your sleeve.”

Carlo grins at me without a word.

“Aren’t you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“And ruin the surprise? No way!”

He rows us out to a lily pad area with scores of geese. Carlo brings out a handful of corn from a bag at his side and throws it to the birds. The geese cackle loudly trying to get as much corn as they can.

“Would you like to try?” he asks.

I nod eagerly and receive a handful of corn from him, I split it into two and throw it in two directions laughing as the geese flap around splashing a great deal of water on us.

Across the other side of the shore, there’s a tent set up and a group of people standing by. At first, I’m a bit confused until I see a cello with a person positioned behind it and then I start to get an idea of what I’m getting into.

Carlo helps me off the boat and leads me to the setup. The crew of four gives us a low polite bow. “Carrie, they’ll be entertaining us with music, anything you’d like them to play?”

I think long and hard. “I’ve always liked Pachelbel.”

“Say no more miss,” one of the musicians says with a grin.

The band begins with canon in D. I turn around to find Carlo stretching out a bouquet of sunflowers. I take a few involuntary steps backward startled by the gesture.

“Scared of sunflowers now?”

“N..No... I... I love them!” I stutter. “How did you know these were my favorite flowers”

“I didn’t,” Carlo replies with a wink.

I clutch the flowers close to my chest sniffing them every chance I get. For the first time, I look above and see we’re surrounded by pine trees in an almost perfect circle. Carlo is starting a fire and setting a skewer right above it. He takes out a big slab of red meat and slams it on a polished surface. I try to grab a knob of garlic but he beats me to it. With fascination, I watch Carlo crush the cluster of garlic in one knife press, he gathers the pulpy parts and throws them into a bowl, discarding the shells.

“Let me take care of this,” he says.

The private orchestra switches to Clair De Lune in an upbeat tempo.

I tug at Carlo’s shirt. “Dance with me”

“You don’t want to see me dance,” he says warily.

“Of course, I do, how bad could it be?” I take his herb-stained hand and try to sway with him. I should have listened to his warning. I haven’t seen a dancer as rigid as Carlo, and unable to hold my laughter in anymore, I break off the dance and cover my mouth with my palm laughing uncontrollably as he stares at me in embarrassment.

— — —

Carlo and I spend the night in a cabin nearby, according to him, he owns the land and several other acres of it that lay beyond. It’s nothing like the cabins I’m used to, the luxury timber cabin stands strong and sturdy well hidden behind a group of oak trees.

I snuggle up against him with my eyes on the wide screen before us. A few times, I feel him staring at me, even with my eyes still glued to the screen. As much as I appear fixated on the movie, so much is going on in my mind, the smell of his cologne and the heat from his body make it so hard to concentrate.

I decide to bring up something, perhaps that will keep my mind in check. “Enzo told me your room is off limits... to me.”

“He isn’t wrong?”

I glance up at him. “What could you possibly be hiding in there?”

Carlo shrugs. “You know... Confidential material.”

I remain silent and try to pretend to stay focused on the movie.

He holds my chin and raises my face up. “Hey, you can always call me whenever you need me.” Our eyes stay glued to each other. I feel a heat rise in my body and I know it has nothing to do with the fireplace. He breaks eye contact and his eyes settle on my lips. I give in and throw myself at him. Our mouths collide violently, biting each other’s lips and exchanging labored breaths, finally letting out all that pent-up sexual energy.

He pins me down till I lay on my back on the couch, writhing against his rock-hard body pressed against me as we kiss. Carlo presses his body further against mine till I can feel his hardened member against my thigh.

He tries to take off my dress but it gets stuck somewhere along my jawline. Together we struggle to get the piece of clothing past my head and just when I’m about to suggest he rip it off, the dress slides past my hair. I let out an embarrassed giggle as I unclasp my bra exposing my full and perky breasts.

His eyes ravage my laid-out body on the couch.

“God! You’re so beautiful.” He sighs. Carlo closes his eyes and places his head between my breasts, nibbling lightly and inhaling the scent of my skin. I’ve never seen him that enthralled with anything, and it just happens to be me.

His tongue rolls over a nipple, then his mouth envelopes the entire mound, sucking on it greedily.

“Carlo?” I call out.

Deep in his lustful drunken state, he doesn’t respond. My breast leaves his mouth with a loud pop, and the look I see in

his eyes throws me off balance. I have never seen anyone look at me that way before, not with such desire and intensity.

“Carlo, there’s something I think you should know.”

He looks at me expectantly but I can’t find the words. I look down and start to fiddle with my fingers. Carlo interrupts me by taking my hand and placing it into his.

“I’m listening”

“I... I... Umm....” I find it embarrassing to speak about it, but he deserves to know. I didn’t realize that saying such a simple thing could be so exhausting. “I’ve never done this before,” I blurt out.

Carlo doesn’t look in the least surprised by my confession.

“You knew?” I ask. “You knew all this time that I was a ....”

“Virgin, yes. And I’m glad you’re choosing to do this with me. I won’t take it for granted, I promise.”

I’m more concerned about how he knows. I never mentioned or implied it to him, was I that much of an amateur during our make-out session?

“But... how did you??”

“Shhh...” he places a finger on my lips and shuts me up further with a mindblowing kiss. Carlo breaks the kiss for a second to take off his shirt. I spread my legs apart, raise them up and grip the band of his shorts with my toes. Carlo chuckles a bit into my mouth as I pull his shorts down. I stare down to take in as much of him as I can.

Carlo is a hairy man, hairier than I thought he would be, his legs, chest, and arms all have visible strands of it, but down there is devoid of any. His cock looks a bit on the bigger side too, not that I have any experience to know what is big or not. I don’t know whether to be worried about what’s coming or excited.

I reach out and wrap my hand around his cock feeling his girth. I’m fascinated by how warm it feels in my hand and the clear drops of precome that rolls off the tip. I trace the liquid



up with my tongue, settling my mouth on his tip and sucking it off lightly.

Carlo moans and bucks his hip against my mouth, I guess I'm doing something right. I ease my mouth further onto his cock wondering if I can take it all in. I manage to take in about three-quarters, and Carlo draws my head further in making me gag. I pull out abruptly with a trail of spittle, my eyes water as I gasp for air.

"I don't think I can do this," I gasp.

"Here, let me show you."

Carlo guides my hand to the base of his shaft, making me jerk him off slowly. My mouth returns to the top and I swallow as much as I can take. I moan over his cock as I bob up and down greedily.

"Less teeth, more spit," he says. His baritone voice sounds so firm and strict, the tone sends a shiver of excitement up my spine.

I comply and drool all over his cock making it glisten in the warm light of the cabin, his hand gently bumps my head while I sucked. I feel his body stiffening, he interrupts the act and switches our position.

"Your turn."

Slowly, he inserts a finger into my gushing pussy, teases it around the entrance, and flicks my nub while at it. He brings it to my mouth and makes me suck off his coated finger. Carlo takes the finger in and out in a rhythmic movement and fucks my mouth with his finger.

He parts my legs and draws me forward by the waist. This time his finger doesn't go in, his mouth does. I squirm and moan involuntarily as his tongue probes my pussy. My legs start to quake and I can feel tears building up in my eyes. I reach down and run my fingers through Carlo's hair, pressing his face further into me and bucking my hips to meet the flicks of his tongue. The feeling is indescribable and I find myself sobbing in pleasure. But just when it's starting to feel too good, Carlo withdraws his mouth from my core.

I try to say something but all that escapes my lips are pants and gasps. I stare at Carlo like he took something precious from me, but there's a mischievous glint in his eye.

He begins kissing me all over my body. I have never felt this turned on, my pussy throbs with such intensity, I want to straddle him and ride into oblivion. I can see he's taking his time with the foreplay but it's starting to drive me crazy. If I get any degree hornier than this, I think I'll explode.

"Ugh! Fuck me already," I groan in frustration.

My words appear to shock him.

I bite my lower lip and part my legs, giving him an invitation to. "Please, please..." My patience is reaching its stretching point and I'm one more light kiss away from screaming.

"You asked for it," he replies.

Straddling me, he teases my entrance with the tip of his cock and rubs it lightly against my clit. Carlo slaps me lightly on my ass, and draws his length along the crack of my cheeks, he stops and poises the tip of his cock at my asshole. I tremble frightened he is going to slide it in my ass instead.

Carlo gives me a mischievous grin and slides slowly into my pussy. I hold my breath, the act unexpected. He was teasing me for so long that I didn't see him penetrating anytime soon. He pushes in little by little.

"Breathe with me," he says.

I resume breathing, matching his until our breaths become one, Carlo pushes his cock further in until I feel him hit a wall, my face urges him to keep going. He forces it in and I shriek at the sudden pain. He strokes my face comforting me as I wait out the pain. I'm disturbed to find out how much the pain turns me on even more.

"Don't stop now," I tell him, "don't be gentle either, I can take it."

Carlo keeps going until his cock is buried to its full length. He begins thrusting and invading my mouth, filling my throat with his tongue and thrusting it in and out. I clutch his arms

like my life depends on it, my legs wave like antennas in the air. It's the most real thing I've ever felt. His deep strokes warm my insides, his girth stretching my virgin hole.

It's late into the night. The sounds of crickets chirping and the flowing of water in the nearby spring drown the sound of my soft muffled moans. I see sparks in the air, lost in the moment while my body reacts to every stroke, and touch. Carlo has the manual to my body, he knows exactly where to touch, and how much pressure to apply. I never expected my first time to feel this good.

His balls slap against my ass with every forward thrust. He lets out a primal grunt and I grip him even tighter afraid he's going to pull out. I begin to meet his thrusts to get him as deep as I can. My fingernails graze down his back, and I feel the aged scars there.

He increases his pace, and I squirm beneath him.

"Take me, Carlo. I'm all yours. I'm yours forever, use me as you want." I can't believe myself as I blurt out the words. This isn't me, I believe in my own autonomy, at least I used to, but now here I am, begging him to take any way he wants.

He thrusts in and out of me slowly, somewhat carefully, his breathing growing heavier with every second, and suddenly his body starts to stiffen.

"I'm close, I'm so close," he says between gasps.

Carlo shoots his seed into me filling me up and lubricating me further, but he doesn't stop fucking me. The spurts stop, his cock softens a bit inside me, and eventually, he slides it out. I can feel a stream of his come and my juices flow down between my ass crack. He collapses next to me, breathing hard, leaving me sore and sated. We face each other, each too tired to say anything, the couch can barely take us both so he makes me lay on him. I rest my head on his chest, feeling the pound of his heart.



CARLO

**T**he time is 6:00 AM, and I've assembled all my men together, all twenty-two of them. Their murmurs are starting to get to me, it hasn't been a good couple of days. Having to contend with Jake's death and finding out from the autopsy that he died from ingesting BellaDonna, traces of alcohol were also found in him. Jake had a habit of stealing drinks from my cellar.

To confirm my suspicions, I discreetly sent some bottles to get tested in a lab with traces of BellaDonna found in two of five bottles. The two were my favorites.

I suspected Jake to be the traitor amongst my men, and now I feel guilty that I ever felt that way about him.

I hit the nearest table with a baton repeatedly to get my men's attention, the murmurs die down instantly. I close my eyes and rub my fingers against my temple, apart from my aching heart, my head is also threatening to split open.

"Do you know why I gathered you all here?"

The looks on their faces reveal they know nothing.

"Jake's death has made me realize how much I have gambled with my life. He died a thief, he died a hero, he took my place in death."

I search each of their faces, but still, they know nothing.

I beckon to Rosa who comes in with the bottles retrieved from my cellar.

“Anyone want a drink?”

They all murmur in approval.

“What if I told you half of these drinks have been poisoned with BellaDonna?”

The room goes silent.

“Would you still take it?” I ask. “All of a sudden, no one wants a drink anymore?” I grab a bottle of Campari and pass it to Enzo standing behind me. “Open this up Enzo.”

Enzo opens it up and passes it back to me.

“There is a traitor among us, a snitch, a murderer.” I wave a hand at them “Don’t worry, I know who he is and I’m going to fish him out. Put an end to all of this.”

I walk past each of them, looking them in the face as they avert my gaze, all twenty-two of them. There is one more person I haven’t looked at; Enzo. That’s because, unlike the others, he didn’t form a line, he was right behind me, where he’s always been, guarding me, helping me, being my shadow.

I turn around to face Enzo and fire a shot in his leg.

The assembled men are too stunned to speak, Rosa stares at me like I’m out of my mind. Enzo clutches his bleeding leg and stares at me with clenched teeth. His eyes are unapologetic, emotionless. I tip the open bottle of Campari and spill the contents over him.

“Why did you do it, Enzo? It took me this long to realize it was you because I wasn’t ready to admit it. I tried very hard to believe you would never do such a thing.”

He bows his head without a word waiting for me to take the last shot. Enzo isn’t a man of many words, I know his body language more than anybody else’s and I know at this moment that he’s ready to die. No explanations or pleading for his life.

I close my eyes and clutch my chest, I’m experiencing a heartache, a literal one.

I aim the gun at his head and pull the trigger, it’s the loudest I’ve ever heard and even after it’s over it doesn’t seem to stop

echoing.

I walk over his body, my footsteps on something I guess to be his brain matter.

“Somebody clean this up,” I yell.

They all seem to be in more shock than me, everyone that knew me would swear I couldn't hurt Enzo, I didn't know I was capable of putting a bullet through his head either. I try not to think much about it for fear that I will bend.

“Dismissed!” I yell at the others.

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PUTTING Enzo down flipped something in me, something I can't explain. He received a call after his death, the voice relayed a message, something about the boss wanting to know if the plan worked.

I had the call traced, the precise location was one of Bruno's warehouses. Bruno crosses my mind and I get an insatiable urge to get more blood on my hands. No backup, no escorts, no plan, just an urge to pound his head in till his skull breaks and his brain spills on the floor like Enzo's.

I storm out of my study and walk out of the house staying out of sight. I don't want to be sighted by Carrie, not now, not like this, she's the last person I want to see me like this.

Heading towards my garage, I snatch one of the car keys from Luca and walk past him without a word. He looks like he wants to ask where I'm headed but the words fail him, the poor lad is still in shock from seeing Enzo killed in such a manner. I still have the gun in my trembling hand, I can feel their fear as if it's my own.

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I RETURN that night drenched in the blood of my enemy. I spend the next few hours in the shower trying to get the essence and smell off me. I throw my blood-soaked clothes

into the fireplace and watch them burn. I mourn the death of Enzo and the love I had for him. I would have opened a drink to celebrate Bruno's demise but most of my drinks are compromised.

Restless and disturbed, I take a stroll to Carrie's room. I find her fast asleep, breathing lightly as her body heaves beneath the covers. I crawl up the sinking bed and snuggle up next to her.

Peace envelopes me and despite all the inhuman things I did hours ago, I'm starting to feel a little bit human again. It's the Carrie effect. I haven't had a good night's sleep since I received Jake's autopsy but finally, I feel some peace with Carrie in my arms.

Just when I'm starting to give in to sleep, I hear a loud gasp from her.

I spring awake and it seems like I almost have a heart attack. Carrie lets out a shrill scream, when I grab her arm, she struggles to break free and tries to jump out of bed.

"It's okay. Shhh, it's just me." I assure her

"Carlo?" She looks astonished to see me next to her. "How... When did you get here?"

"Not too long ago."

She tries to regulate her breath despite the rapid rising of her chest, but I find her still shaking.

"Are we alone? It's that feeling again."

"Did you have a nightmare?" I ask.

"Not a nightmare, a feeling. It's that feeling I get when I think I'm being watched. Leaving the States was supposed to be a fresh start but I've felt this way for a long time. I know you probably think I'm crazy and it's all in my head but it's real."

"I believe you."

"Carlo?" she whispers. "Do you think it's possible I was followed from America? Even after the shootout, perhaps I was traced here?"



“No way, this is the safest place you’ll find yourself in this town.”

“But....”

“You’re safe with me, anyone that tries to get to you will have to go through me.”

Her tense muscles relax and she heaves a heavy sigh. I position her comfortably on the bed, grip her shoulders and give them a light squeeze, I begin to massage and knead them. I feel her tense muscles relax, she gives a deep satisfactory sigh and arches her neck to the side.

“That feels great,” she murmurs.

“You know what else would feel great?” I whisper in her ears.

She flinches at the sound of my voice in her ears and giggles.

“What?”

“Me snuggled deep inside you.”

Through the low light, I see her complexion flush and goosebumps spread all over her body.

“I haven’t seen you in two days,” she observes. There’s a tone of disappointment in her voice.

“Work called, it’s been a hectic week,” I explain. How can I let her know that I spent the past few days investigating Jake’s death, killing Enzo who I found to be behind his death, and killing Bruno who happened to be the mastermind behind it all. I apply more pressure on her shoulder hoping she won’t probe me any further about the last two days.

“Follow me.”

I lead her across the hall to the topmost floor of the building. My room is in the left wing, but the right wing is a place even several of my men have never been to before. I unlock a dark stuffy room and turn on the lights. Carrie stops in her tracks, a look of total shock on her face.

“What is this?”

“This is where I torture people when I have to,” I explain.

“When you have to?” She looks at me fearfully.

“As much as I try not to be this person, there are times I have to choose between these methods and getting myself killed. Three people have died in the past few days Carrie, and I was responsible for two of those deaths. I had a choice but I’d be risking my life if I didn’t make those decisions.” I find a spot on a torture bench and sit on it. “I know you think I’m a monster...”

Carrie sits right next to me and draws me in for a hug. “I’ve never thought of you as a monster, you’re still my angel, the angel I saw looking out for me when I woke up from what I thought was my death.”

I try not to laugh at her words, I return her embrace, weighing her down till her back touches the bench. I’ve lived a lonely life watching my friends turn to foes, having to choose between their lives and mine. Carrie is my hope for the future, with her in my life, it doesn’t look so lonely and bleak anymore.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking Carlo?”

“And what would that be?” I ask.

“Why don’t you get yourself smuggled deep inside me? Right here?” she says with a sly wink.

I like the idea, even though I’m a bit worried that it’s coming from her. What is it about a torture chamber that makes her want to have sex in it?

“Are you sure about this Carrie?”

“Yes,” she purrs.

“How about we take this a notch further then?” I bind her hands together with my belt and hook it up against the head of the torture bench.

“This may hurt a little, but I promise I’ll try to be gentle,” I whisper. “If you can’t take it, you know what to do.”

Carrie nods in response and then thinks about it for a moment. “Safe word?” she asks, as I rip off her silk shirt to reveal her perky tits.

“What do you want it to be?”

She thinks about it and says, “Orange”

“Why Orange?” I ask with a laugh.

“It’s a color that makes me feel... you know, safe.”

I straddle her on the bench and squeeze her breasts lightly, then I clamp my lips around her nipple and swirl my tongue around it. I lick her breasts down to her navel, tasting her salty skin. Unsatisfied, I move further down to her pussy. I could smell her arousal through her panties, driving me crazy. Hooking my fingers in her underwear I ripped them off and kissed her swollen lips. Her thighs tighten around my head each time, I press my tongue into her glistening pussy, and I feel her muscles clamp around my tongue as I edge further in. My mouth and mustache are coated in her juices. I begin to lap at her eagerly, swallowing the streams of her arousal.

“Oh God, Oh my God!” she cries.

Her eyes roll back and her body twitches as a leg-shaking orgasm washes over her. She arches her back and lets out a guttural scream. I unhook her and Carrie lies limp on the torture bench with her mouth open, staring blankly at the ceiling.

I strip myself down, raise her recovering body so that her ass is angled upwards, then swirl my tongue around her puckered hole. Carrie jumps, startled. We exchange looks, mine is hungry and mischievous, and hers is one of a little uncertainty.

“Let’s do it,” she says.

I walk over to a drawer and take out a bottle of olive oil.

“What’s that?” She inquires.

“It’s not lube, but it will work just fine.”

I grip her waist and pour a generous amount of the oil over her forbidden hole and let it drip down her ass. I hear Carrie hold her breath.

“You should breathe, it’s easier that way.”

I edge my cock into her ass slowly and carefully, the oil makes it easier to slide it in, no friction, and barely any resistance. The tip slides in, so I push until the thickest part of my girth is in. I can hear her breathing increase the farther in I go. Half of my length is lodged in Carrie's tight ass, and the feeling is already indescribable. I fear I won't last the next two minutes. I begin with a slow steady rhythm until an insatiable lust consumes me.

I raise her bubble ass up and strike it at intervals as I fuck her roughly. Carrie covers her mouth with her hand to conceal her screams. I reach for her torn silk panties and stuff them in her mouth to contain her cries, they turn to muffled screams soon after. The sound of her ass cheeks slapping against me fills the room, and I continue to slam into her.

I try to conceal how vocal I'm becoming but I can't help my moans and groans. I'm not in control of my body, I have no control whatsoever. I'm overwhelmed with how tightly her forbidden hole grips me, how snug it feels. Her sphincter tightens up around me, I groan aloud and give a final thrust as I begin to empty my balls inside her.

I draw her head closer and take the stuffed panties out of her mouth. Carrie lets out a loud gasp for air. We stay silent, nothing can be heard in the room except the sound of our panting breaths. The torture room suddenly doesn't look the same anymore.



## CARRIE

**T**he story of my stalker started in Virginia back home in the U.S., I've felt like I have been followed and watched my whole life. Perhaps that is an overstatement but it started when I was in high school. A seventeen-year-old naïve girl, oblivious to the world around her. I was old enough to know I was being stalked and most likely in danger.

As for my stalker, I have just never found out who, I received anonymous presents on my birthday and on valentine's day since I turned eighteen. My parents didn't think it was a big deal.

"You have a secret admirer Carrie, you should be glad," my mother would say.

I had gone to the police every year to report this anonymous stalker, they investigated once when a female cop told everyone she thought I was telling the truth. I never saw the female cop again, the next time I asked about her whereabouts, I was told she was transferred to another city. The cops found nothing and in all my subsequent visits I was labeled as crazy.

This person knows every tiny detail about me, it used to fuel my panic even more. I had to leave and get away from that life, even if it meant changing my name and identity.

I glance at the left wing of the topmost floor and recall Enzo telling me it's out of bounds to me, Enzo isn't here this time to stop me, and neither is the big man himself because he has some urgent things to attend to this morning.

I find Carlo's lounge empty but squeaky clean, nothing dangerous or sensitive in sight. This bedroom is pretty much the same as his private lounge. As I make to leave, I notice a door that leads further somewhere, and my curiosity takes the better of me.

I open the door of what appears to be a private study, again it's one of the most boring and mundane ones I have ever seen, but just when I'm about to give up on this rabbit hole I see another door.

I almost change my mind about this particular door, but I surge forward giving it just a light shove. My intention is to peep in and turn around putting an end to my quest in Carlo's forbidden place. This place is nothing like the other parts I have been to, there's a cluster of pictures on the wall, and below that is a medium-sized wooden box filled to the brim. One of the pictures looks familiar. I make to close the door but change my mind.

"Wait a minute, I know that picture," I mutter to myself.

I barge into the room, flipping all the light switches on the wall. In the light I realize it's a picture of me riding my first bike, to my horror and astonishment, the other pictures are ones of me at several points in my life, even pictures I don't own, pictures taken secretly, without my consent or knowledge. The items in the box are all mine, things I have either lost or thrown away, an old toy, a hairbrush I threw out several years ago...

I grab a framed picture of myself on my sixteenth birthday. My hands tremble as I clutch onto the framed picture as panic starts to set in, the room starts to spin and I feel the urge to throw up my breakfast. My body starts to feel hot, I hang on to a chair but only end up falling over with it on me.

Despite my weak state, I'm determined to leave before Carlo returns and finds me. I crawl to the door with all my strength fighting the sickness that's taken over me.

Everything is finally starting to make sense, finding myself in his home, his accommodating attitude. I should have realized

it sooner. I know I have to go, but where? I've only known this place, and I've been too reliant on him.





CARLO

**E**veryone goes silent whenever I pass by, it's been like that since I got rid of Enzo. They all look at me differently, part ways for me like I'm going to snap and kill someone else. I killed Enzo for a reason, a good one, it was going to be either him or me, why can't everyone else see it that way?

Carrie is the only one that seems to understand why I had to take such a drastic step, Enzo had to go. She didn't judge me for that decision and I know she means it. Enzo's spot has been unoccupied for several days now, but after everything I have been through, I know better than to get someone else to replace him. Enzo's job position is too dangerous for me to sustain, it gives whoever is occupying it too much power and access to me.

I don't want anyone having that much hold on me ever again, anyone except Carrie. Speaking of Carrie, I hold tightly to the two opera tickets I have secured for us both. I can't wait to see the look on her face when I hand it over to her.

Rosa comes running towards me. "Carrie, the girl, I can't find her. She's nowhere here," she cries hysterically.

I stop in my tracks, my brows knitting in a frown.

"What do you mean she's nowhere? If she's nowhere here, find out where she is!"

I spend the next hour with Rosa searching the building, rummaging through her closet and other places she keeps her things. Most of her things are still intact, I notice the choker I

gave her is gone too, still, it's evident Carrie's disappearance isn't planned. I refuse to believe she would leave of her own accord, Carrie likes it here with me, everything that happened between us is as real as it could be. That's what I tell myself at least.

Bruno is out of the picture, and I can't think of anyone else that would take her from me. I stop to think about anyone I missed, is there another enemy I don't know about?

"Unless..."

I make a run to my study. My heart drops when I find the door half open and a broken picture frame on the ground. I refuse to tell myself it's over with her recent discovery, all I have to do is make her understand. Yes, it's nothing that I can't handle. All I have to do is find her.

Carrie didn't leave with her traveling documents. She wouldn't leave for the airport, not without her passport and money.

I know a guy that gets people in and out of Italy without any hassle, illegal immigrants, prisoners on death row, people trying to fake their deaths, he asks no questions and receives payment in cash or kind. I stop in my tracks trying to think of something Carrie could trade for a trip back to America then it hits me, the pearl studded choker, those were real pearls, and if she bargained well, it can get her more than a trip back home. I wonder if Carrie knows how much the choker is worth, I hope she doesn't.

I put a call through, he answers before the phone gets a chance to ring,

"I'm looking for a girl."

"I'm no finder, wrong number!"

"Wait a minute." I try to sustain the conversation. "I know she came to you, blonde hair, average height, probably gave you a pearl studded choker as payment."

The receiver sighs. "If you know that much then you'll know I don't reveal my clients under any circumstance."

I try to make him understand. “She’s not in danger, I just need to find her.” There is no proof of my words, all I have is blind hope that he will believe.

“I’m hanging up now. Goodbye,” he says before the line goes dead.

I kick the curb repeatedly in frustration and return to my car. I’m at a loss for what to do which isn’t like me. I know I’m not thinking straight, the realization that Carrie left me has me confused and destabilized.

An idea occurs, and I realize that I know the route they’re going to take. I’ve used that same route several times to get goods to my clients when I couldn’t use Bella Pizza’s transport system. Without thinking about it any further, I rev my engine and speed off.

I find a few cars along the border, all looking generic, it’s hard to tell which one she’s in. Two of them have tinted windows. One of the plates however looks forged. I have no time to punch the digits in and verify, all I have is a hunch, a feeling. The plate number looks too perfect to be real anyway.

Trusting this hunch, I overtake the car and pull up in front of it. The driver curses at me but that’s the least of my problems. I head to the car and yank the door open searching for her face.

“Carlo?” I hear the familiar voice.

The annoyed man behind the wheels is putting a call through to someone, informing them of the situation but all I care about is Carrie. She won’t even look me in the eye. She’s hurt, angry too.

“Carrie, I need to talk to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you, just let me go.”

“It’s not...”

She stares at me angrily. “It’s not what I think...?”

It is exactly what she thinks, I stalked her all those years back in the U.S., found a way to crawl into her life, and make her

fall in love with me. “I’ve been a creep, a liar... I won’t lie about that, Just give me a chance to explain why.”

Another vehicle joins us, it’s occupied by two men, security agents for the secret travel company. I could fight them away but it’s the wrong time to be a brute.

It’s up to Carrie to choose who she wants to go with, me or them. She looks at me with sad eyes, there’s still some longing in them, and my heart aches at how much I hurt her with my deception. She turns her face away from me again. “Goodbye Carlo,” she says.

I watch the car drive off into the distance. It stops, then drives off again. In the foggy distance, I see her take steady steps toward me. I blink a few times to confirm Carrie is returning to me, my heart racing.

I take hurried steps to meet her halfway.

“I’m ready to listen,” she says when I’m within earshot.

Carrie and I sit in my car, she listens as she watches the cars drive through the fog at very few intervals.

“The Conte and the Amelio family ran a wine business almost a century ago. But their relationship ran deep, Gustavo Conte and Teddy Amelio were more than just business partners, they stuck together more than most brothers,” I explain. I glance at Carrie for a second, I can’t tell what she’s thinking or feeling.

I assume she wants me to go on. “Gustavo and Teddy didn’t want their alliance to end with their deaths, so they betrothed their children Francesca and Andrea.”

Carrie glances at me this time, her eyes widening.

“Andrea didn’t want Francesca for a wife, he was in love with an American girl instead.”

“I know that story....” she says.

“I bet you don’t know the rest of it,” I continue. “Instead of their children, Gustavo and Teddy betrothed their unborn grandchildren. It was up to Andrea to honor the arrangement since he couldn’t stick with his.”

“My father barely keeps his promises,” she adds.

“I figured that out. It took me several years to find you. Like fate would have it, I found you when you were eighteen.”

“That was when the gifts started, it was when I knew I was being watched.”

“I’ve been keeping tabs on you ever since,” I admit.

“How would you explain me winding up in your house after my arrival in Italy?”

“As I said, I always kept tabs. And at that time you fell in danger. I knew I had to rescue you.”

I don’t know if any of this is working, trying to make her understand.

“I’m worried things are never going to be the same between us. I shouldn’t have found that shrine, I was much happier thinking...”

“Things don’t have to change between us.”

“It’s not that simple” she argues.

“I’ll make it simple, please come back to me,” I plead.

I pull out a box without hesitation and open it to reveal a giant diamond ring. It’s a ring I have had all along, since I learned of us being betrothed, knowing she was the only one for me.

“I’ve waited to give this to you all these years.” I confess  
“Marry me, Carrie.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “I hate what you did but I... I still love you. I’m crazy about you so much it scares me.”

The tears are flowing freely now, she stretches her hand out to me. I take this chance and slide the ring onto her finger. I draw Carrie closer to me, kissing her tears away and whispering how much I love her. Tears well up in my eyes too.

## **EPILOGUE**

## CARRIE

**I**t's been a year since I married the man I love. A gold band on my wrist bears the initials "CC". I unclasp it and place it on a table before heading to the nursery to pick up my crying baby. He has a gold allergy. I discovered this the hard way, and made a mental note not to own another gram of gold after the gold band.

Eight-month-old Gustavo murmurs lightly as I rock him to sleep. Gustavo didn't sound like a name that matches my baby's appearance but Carlo wanted to name his first son after his grandfather. I wipe off a stream of drool I find at the side of his mouth. He has most of his father's features; olive skin, short hair, and a pair of huge black eyes.

An explosion outside rattles the window frame and car alarms ring outside.

Gustavo's eyes jolt open, he stares around frantically and bursts into tears.

"Shhh, go back to sleep." I try to quiet him down. He is always sensitive to noise, Carlo has done his best to soundproof several parts of the house without concealing the window but most times, the impacts of these explosions break a glass or two, not to mention the aftermath is something we have to contend with.

Today's aftermath is the constant singing of those sirens.

Carlo walks into the bedroom, his clothes and face covered in soot and his hands covered in blood, he heads for the



bathroom and soon I hear nothing but the sound of running water at high pressure for the next few minutes.

The sound has perhaps done the trick for Gustavo, he starts to drift back to sleep again.

Carlo emerges from the bathroom, looking squeaky clean except for his clothes.

“Landmine?” I ask.

He nods in the affirmative. “Yes, I’ve taken care of it.”

He kisses me on the forehead and leaves almost as fast as he came in.

## **EXTENDED EPILOGUE**

“**D**rop your weapon!” I yell.  
The children gasp.

“Marco dropped his weapon for the woman he loves.” I make a mock gesture of surrender. “He never knew if his brother would keep his word by letting her go. It was all that mattered to him. His brother gave him a wicked smile...”

“Ohh, he’s going to shoot!” Maria screams.

“Quiet! Let her finish the story,” Robert snaps.

The curious eyes look at me expectantly. “Marco hears a bullet go off, but to his surprise, his brother hits the floor. Behind his wicked scheming brother is a man in a cop uniform holding a smoking gun.”

“So, what happens next?” Maria inquires.

“That’s the end of the story Maria.”

“Tell us another story” she yells.

“Not today, it’s past your bedtime,” I reply.

The children yell in protest but that doesn’t stop me from sending them to bed, I file them in a single row; Gustavo, Nico, Robert, Romeo, and Maria. Maria leads the way for her brothers grumbling aloud.

I sigh in contentment after making sure their doors are secure. Holding a firefly lamp, I walk down the poorly lit hallway to

my bedroom where Carlo is waiting for me. He always finds it difficult to sleep without me by his side.

“What took you so long?” he asks.

“I just told two bedtime stories instead of one. Maria was going to make me tell another, but I’ll run out of stories at this rate.”

Carlo throws his head back and laughs. After pulling the sheets over me, he kisses me down from my neck to my navel.

“Carlo, we have a big day tomorrow,” I protest. These days, we can make love for hours. Also, I have become more insatiable than him. Most times, I wear him out. Midnight is approaching and we both have to be up early before dawn. If I decide to give in to him, we won’t get any sleep.

He slumps back on the pillow in mock resignation kneading my soft stomach.

My body has changed considerably over the years, not so much after Gustavo but Robert’s birth had Carlo changing my entire wardrobe because I couldn’t fit into any of my clothes anymore, not even my briefs. I suggested using his private gym but he wouldn’t hear of it. He told me I was perfect despite the soft belly and arm folds that had developed and that he loved me even more for giving him the family he always hoped for.

*The End.* Thanks for reading!

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