

THE DON'S

LEGAL EAGLE'S BABY

AMBER ROW

The Don's Legal Eagle's Baby

An Enemies to Lovers Mafia Romance

Amber Row

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Epilogue

Sneak Peek

Chapter 1

Emilio

I gripped the wheel tightly as the roar of gunfire echoed off the buildings, raining bullets down on my black 2022 Bugatti La Voiture Noire. However, there was no damage left behind because it was bulletproof.

The chaos was palpable, but it was a situation I had been in before, more times than I cared for. Although my day job was CEO of Royalty Rentals, I, Emilio Fiore, was, after all, a scion of one of the most successful mafia families by blood.

My fingers danced across the steering wheel, the vehicle responding smoothly to my every touch. The car I drove was no ordinary luxury sports car.

It was a marvel of engineering inspired by James Bond, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and custom modifications designed to outmaneuver even the most determined pursuers.

The Mancini gang was relentless, a formidable force in their own right, though they couldn't compare to the Fiore family.

The feud with the Mancini gang wasn't just about power; it was rooted in betrayal that had festered over time, which fueled a rivalry stretching back to when I was a child.

I couldn't fault the Mancinis for their anger. The animosity was all because of my father. I didn't possess the complete narrative of the betrayal, but I had overheard a conversation between my father and uncle one day, enough to know that my father was at the heart of this enmity. I was not surprised.

I knew firsthand just what kind of man my father, Mathias Fiore, was; while he was my blood, he was no hero.

It was frustrating to be tangled in this web of hatred due to circumstances not of my own making. I didn't care for this feud, for the bitterness it carried. Yet, because we were his sons, my older brother and I became prime targets in their vendetta. It was ridiculous.

Although I couldn't hold the Mancinis solely responsible, I refused to be a sacrificial lamb to atone for my father's actions. My mind raced as I deftly navigated the streets, weaving in and out of traffic. The adrenaline surged through my veins, heightening my senses and sharpening my reflexes.

The street erupted with gunfire, the sharp cracks of bullets filling the air. I could see the flashes of the muzzle from the pursuing vehicles.

Bullets pierced my back-left tire. I quickly hit another button on my car panel, and the tire instantly inflated.

“Let’s see how they like this,” I couldn’t stop from grinning as I flipped the switch on the steering wheel with my right thumb. Fifty sharp, two-inch spikes were released from the back bumper, with two sensor grenades that activated once a vehicle drove near them.

The car directly behind me exploded, lifting at least 10 ft in the air before crashing down on the other vehicle behind it.

Instinctively, I accelerated, pushing the car to its limits. As I skillfully maneuvered through a sharp turn, the streets became a blur of lights, momentarily leaving the Mancini gang disoriented.

Amidst the chaos, pedestrians screamed and scattered, desperately trying to escape the line of fire. Innocent drivers in their cars honked frantically, swerving left and right in a panic, the terror of the situation evident on their faces.

I accessed my car’s advanced communication system, alerting my second-in-command and coordinating my escape.

Royalty Rentals was merely a façade, a legitimate business I had carefully crafted to cover my true operations. Dealing with luxury cars was indeed a legitimate venture that had propelled me into billionaire status, yet it wasn’t where my true purpose lay.

My vehicles were more than luxurious. However, the general public remained blissfully unaware of this. The special vehicles with their hidden modifications were my private project, known only to a select few—my trusted men and a handful of workers who had proven their loyalty.

The pursuit intensified with the rival gang closing in. I could hear the engines roaring behind me, their menacing presence a reminder of the stakes at play. It was a game of power, a contest of wills, and I had no intention of losing.

Another hail of bullets erupted, the sharp staccato of gunfire shattering a shopfront window. The pursuit continued, the tension escalating with every passing moment.

I made a split-second decision, utilizing a hidden mechanism to deploy a smokescreen. Thick, billowing clouds enveloped the pursuing vehicles, obscuring their vision and buying me a few precious seconds.

I seized the opportunity to take an unexpected route, relying on the advanced GPS and the map displayed on the screen in my car.

Entering a concealed path hidden behind a seemingly innocuous storefront, known only to a select few, I traversed through the narrow back alley. With a few taps on the control panel, I activated the vehicle's holographic feature.

This feature scans every vehicle within a 100-yard radius and temporarily produces a hologram of any vehicle of my choosing. This hologram replaces my car's exterior with such realism no pursuer can tell the difference from any other car on the street.

The sleek sports car disappeared, replaced by a typical sedan with a different color and license plate. The lights dimmed, and any distinctive features disappeared, rendering the car

unrecognizable. If my life weren't at stake, I would be exhilarated to test my vehicle's ability in the field.

I exited the hidden passage through another camouflaged front and slipped onto a narrow road that joined the traffic on a main street.

The transformation was complete. I was now driving just another vehicle on the busy city streets, lost in the sea of cars.

My pursuers, no longer able to identify me, were left bewildered and unable to continue the chase.

I activated the communication system within my car, contacting my right-hand man. "Enzo, have you taken care of the CCTVs?" I inquired with urgency.

It wouldn't do to have the police on my tail. The chaos caused by such a chase would already have caught their attention. Part of me wished for my pursuers to face the law if only to trouble them for a short while.

The Mancinis' influence reached far enough to bury the incident in no time. However, I couldn't afford the risk of exposure, given the highly sensitive technology that embodied my vehicle.

"Yes, Emilio," came the reassuring response. "All footage has been wiped. There won't be any traces leading back to us."

Satisfied, I navigated back to the Royalty Rentals facility, bypassing the multi-story car park. Instead, I approached a narrow, blocked lane known only to a select group of insiders. I stopped my car, where a blue light, emitted by specialized

sensors discreetly embedded into the surrounding walls of the closed passageway, scanned my vehicle meticulously.

The advanced identification procedure ensured that specific markers embedded in my vehicle communicated with the security system, verifying its credentials before approving access.

After a moment, the barrier lifted, the passageway opening up into a vast, well-designed chamber.

The space was a testament to engineering and sophistication, a sanctuary for a fleet of high-performance vehicles just like the one I was driving—no small feat at 37.

I parked my car in a free spot and got out. Walking on the pristine floor with its polished surface that reflected the vehicles, I enjoyed the spacious feeling it gave the room. I parked my car in a free spot and got out.

Standing 6'3 with a powerful build, thick arms crossed in front of his chest in his typical calm demeanor, Enzo waited, ready to greet me. He raised an eyebrow at me, a gesture of both amusement and skepticism. "You alright?" he inquired, concern evident in his voice.

"Of course," I replied confidently, shooting a proud look at my resilient vehicle. They couldn't lay a finger on it.

He rolled his eyes in a playful response, and I returned the gesture, a typical exchange between us.

Enzo was the embodiment of loyalty. He had been by my side since childhood, and we had forged a bond that ran deeper

than blood. But besides his unwavering commitment, he also had a playful, mischievous side that added a lightness to our often serious dealings. Despite our differing professional roles and the responsibilities that came with each, our relationship was anything but rigid. We were best friends, and I trusted him more than I trusted my own brother.

“So, where are the Mancinis now?” I asked, curious about the outcome of the chase.

Returning to the station he had left, I joined him at his expansive computer network and noticed a screen displaying various angles of CCTV recordings with time and date stamps.

“Once they lost you, they backed off and vanished,” he explained, taking a seat.

“And what about the police?” I asked.

“They made a swift exit before the police arrived,” Enzo assured me.

“Any idea where they might have gone?” I questioned.

Enzo turned to me, arching an eyebrow. I adopted an innocent expression.

“Can’t I be curious about where my pursuers disappeared to?” I asked, feigning casual interest.

He wore an unimpressed expression.

“I thought you wanted to stay clear of the whole mafia entanglement,” Enzo noted, a hint of suspicion in his gray eyes.

I sighed, dropping the pretense.

“You know I do, but when they persistently come after me, I need to send a strong message to keep them at bay,” I confessed. “I’m tired of getting dragged into these pointless situations. Besides the inconvenience and challenge of maintaining a regular work schedule, it’s become really taxing just knowing that an angry horde is out for my blood.”

The exhaustion in my voice betrayed my frustration. These relentless pursuits were taking a toll on my well-being and peace of mind.

Enzo looked at me with curiosity and concern. “So, what’s your plan?” he inquired.

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted, feeling the weight of uncertainty.

Enzo scoffed, exasperated.

“And yet, you’re so eager to find out where they are,” he remarked, shaking his head.

Ignoring his comment, I asked once more, “Do you know where they are?”

He sighed, giving in. “They went to the club, the Red Serpent,” he finally revealed.

Chapter 2

Griselda

The law firm of Joe and Burrows was always bustling with activity. The office, with its large windows that let in plenty of sunlight, felt bright and inviting. The walls painted a calming shade of beige, were adorned with framed law degrees and awards.

Desks were neatly arranged in rows, each supplied with a computer and a phone and showcasing stacks of paperwork. The chairs were the ergonomic kind, ensuring comfort during the long hours spent working.

There was a steady hum of conversation between lawyers and assistants discussing cases or collaborating on projects. Joe and Burrows was a good place to work with the people in the office, comprised of a mix of ages and personalities.

The morning had already unfurled its demands - messages and emails popping up on my computer screen, a relentless reminder that everything was considered urgent. The Johnson trial was just three days away - time was of the essence.

“Griselda, the Johnson trial is kicking off soon. You got your game plan ready?” Liam, a fellow attorney, asked with a hint of concern in his voice.

The Johnson case was a battle we couldn’t afford to lose. I proposed a last-minute strategy session, rallying the team to do a rundown of every argument that formed part of our client’s defense.

Soon, we were seated in the conference room with our collective brainpower focused on the trial. To us, the courtroom was a realm where our words could shape lives and destinies. And we were determined to approach each case with a unique blend of legal expertise and empathy.

My team consisted of four people, each with their unique roles and expertise. First, there was Matthew, our meticulous researcher and analyst. He had an eye for detail that often unearthed critical evidence.

Sophia, the strategist of the group, had an uncanny ability to see the big picture, which helped us formulate our legal approach. Third was Dave, our brilliant paralegal, who handled all the paperwork and ensured the smooth flow of the legal process.

Lastly, there was Luca, the youngest and most energetic, always willing to chase down a lead so we could finally connect the dots.

Together, we made up a formidable team.

Back in my office, post-meeting, the fast-paced race continued. It was the kind of day where every ticking second seemed to bring a new wave of tasks and demands, showing no signs of abating.

Amidst this frenzied pace, my phone buzzed, alerting me to a message from my boss, Mr. Gilbert. The message was brief but conveyed a clear directive: “Please come to my office.”

Mr. Gilbert wasn't my favorite person in the office, to say the least. His approach was blunt, and he often displayed a tendency to ogle female colleagues. Despite this, I plastered on a fake smile and knocked on his office door, waiting for his invitation to enter.

“Griselda, have a seat,” Mr. Gilbert gestured toward the chair in front of his desk.

It was one of those cold, leather chairs that felt unnerving to sit in. I obliged, trying to hide my discomfort. Without any preamble, he got to the point.

“We're switching you to another case,” he stated, his tone carrying a brusque finality.

It was almost as if he enjoyed the discomfort news like this caused. My mind raced, protesting against this sudden change.

“But we've invested a lot of time preparing for the Johnson trial. It's starting in three days,” I protested, trying to reason with him.

Mr. Gilbert was unmoved, showing no signs of empathy for the dedicated, hard work our team had put in to prepare for the

Johnson trial.

He explained that he had another case in mind for me, one he considered more suitable. He handed over a file, and as I skimmed through its contents, I could hardly suppress a feeling of incredulity.

The case involved a dispute over a neighbor's noisy dog—it felt like a trivial matter compared to the complex legal battles I was accustomed to.

“You can't be serious,” I blurted out, my frustration getting the better of me.

Mr. Gilbert fixed me with a stern gaze, a warning in his eyes.

“Watch your tone, Griselda,” he cautioned, reminding me of the hierarchy and the boundaries within the office.

I took a deep breath, suppressing my anger, and offered a swift apology. My mind was still grappling with the sudden change and the absurdity of the case I was being assigned.

“May I ask why I'm being taken off the Johnson trial when there are only three days left?” I asked, my voice measured but carrying a hint of frustration.

Mr. Gilbert leaned back in his chair, his expression serious.

“This case needs attention, and I believe you can handle it effectively,” he replied.

It was a diplomatic answer, but it did little to appease my irritation.

Disbelief bubbled up within me, threatening to spill over. A case regarding a noisy neighbor's dog needed my legal expertise; was my boss insane? I took several deep breaths, struggling to contain my frustration. I could feel Mr. Gilbert's eyes on me, seemingly amused by my agitated state.

Summoning my best professional demeanor, I pushed through my exasperation and inquired, "If I'm being reassigned, may I at least know who will be taking over the Johnson case?"

Mr. Gilbert's gaze remained unwavering, his expression almost smug.

"That isn't something you need to concern yourself with, Griselda. Just focus on the new case," he dismissed me as if my involvement or investment in the previous case was inconsequential.

It took every ounce of self-control not to voice my exasperation. With a tight-lipped smile, I acknowledged his directive and excused myself from his office. As I closed the door behind me, frustration gnawed at my insides.

I couldn't shake off my bewilderment. I couldn't understand how a case involving a neighbor's barking dog took precedence over a trial that could significantly impact someone's life.

It was a blatant misuse of my skills and expertise. I didn't mean to brag, but I knew I was a damn good lawyer. My courtroom skills were honed, and my legal knowledge was expansive. I had won several complex cases. Being relegated to a petty dispute was not only senseless but also demeaning.

With a heavy heart, I made my way towards the room where my team was stationed. They needed to hear the news from me directly. As I approached, I overheard snippets of their conversation, laced with frustration and anger.

They were discussing being pulled from the Johnson case. It caught me off guard; how did they already know?

I walked into the room, a mix of surprise and concern on my face.

“You guys already know?” I asked.

Matthew sighed, “Yeah.”

Their faces mirrored the disappointment that sat heavily in my chest. I felt the need to gather the fragments of this shattered news and understand how it had been disseminated so quickly.

“How did you find out?” I asked, my voice tinged with frustration.

Sophia, her expression twisted in contempt, responded first. “Carmella was here not too long ago.”

“Carmella?” I asked in disbelief. The name left a sour taste in my mouth.

Sophia’s tone grew sharper as she continued recounting Carmella’s boastful visit. “Yes. She strutted in here with that infuriatingly smug grin plastered on her face, and she bragged about taking over the Johnson case.”

Fury surged through me. Carmella was a fellow lawyer in the firm, but any amicable pretense had evaporated long ago. It

was an open secret that she seemed to land the best cases due to her questionable relationship with the boss.

Dave chimed in, his words dripping with sarcasm, “Oh, I thought she was ‘occupied’ with another ‘big’ case.”

His air quotes hung mockingly, highlighting the injustice we all sensed.

“Why does she even bother stealing cases she isn’t competent to handle?” Luca’s frustration boiled over, his disbelief evident in his voice. “What’s the point?”

The sentiment echoed through the room.

I rolled my eyes, a mix of exasperation and resignation. “Carmella seems to believe it’s her life’s mission to outshine everyone, skills be damned.”

We were a group of professionals grappling with the reality that competence often took a back seat to other ‘considerations’. With nothing important left to do, we all decided to call it a day and left Joe and Burrows’ law firm early.

As the afternoon drifted into a frustrating evening, I made my way home. This time of day, the traffic wasn’t so heavy yet, and my trusted Nissan Altima brought me to my apartment faster than usual.

My apartment, a cozy space nestled amidst the vibrant city, was my sanctuary. I opted for a short, deep blue, body-hugging gown. A touch of makeup, a slight tousle of my hair, and I was ready to immerse myself in a night out.

I left my apartment and locked the door. The thrum of my Nissan sounded pleasant to my ears as I set off into the city's neon embrace.

The Red Serpent was a lively spot in the city. Its neon sign, shaped like a twisting red snake, lit up the street in a fiery glow. There was a line of patrons waiting outside for their turn to experience the vibrant night within.

As I made my way inside, the atmosphere hit me. The lighting was low, giving the club a sultry ambiance. The main stage, right at the center, was lit with a deep red spotlight, grabbing everyone's attention. The DJ was up high, overlooking the dance floor, and the beat of the music was infectious.

The club had a modern, artsy vibe. The walls were decorated with colorful abstracts, and the seating was plush and inviting, beckoning guests to sit and enjoy the show. The dancers on the stage moved gracefully, their movements drawing everyone into the rhythm.

I made my way to the bar, seeking a moment of respite in a glass. I ordered a 'Berry Fizz Bliss,' a refreshing non-alcoholic concoction the Red Serpent was known for. Sipping my drink, I took in the atmosphere — the pulsating music, the lively chatter, and the energetic dancers moving to the rhythm.

Amidst the crowd, a figure caught my eye. Dark, tousled hair framed a strong jawline and intense features.

As the beat vibrated through my body, I found myself captivated, unable to look away from this alluring man.

Dressed casually, he exuded an air of effortless style as he sat at a secluded table in the corner, sipping on his drink.

As I finished checking him out, my eyes trailed upward, only to end up meeting his gaze. In that dark corner, his intense eyes locked onto mine. His magnetic gaze drew me in.

I couldn't look away, and neither could he.

Chapter 3

Emilio

I perched myself on a high stool at the bar, the lively ambiance of the club buzzing around me. The music pounded through the air, reverberating in my bones. The red lights and the energetic crowd created an electrifying atmosphere.

Ordering a non-alcoholic drink to maintain my wits, I moved locations to observe from a more secluded spot, opting for an unnoticeable corner that afforded me a good vantage point of the club. As I settled into a seat, I scanned the room.

Enzo had told me that my pursuers had arrived here after giving up the chase. I had waited until the night before coming here. After all, it would have been stupid to show up right after they had chased – and lost - me.

The plan was simple. I did not come to engage them here; rather, I intended to observe and gather them. But as time ticked away and my patience wore thin, I contemplated giving up. It seemed the Mancini crew were a no-show, and frustration gnawed at me. Should I cut my losses and leave?

Then, out of the blue, I spotted one of them, a known face from previous encounters. My car's scans and some strategic surveillance had familiarized me with quite a few Mancini members. He was scouring the club with intent eyes. Who was he looking for? Another member?

The bulky man walked through a door that was located on the side of the club. I didn't know where it led. It was tempting to follow, but barging in would be the end of my undercover game. So, I stayed put. He wasn't going to stay there.

My gaze wandered among the crowd, hoping to spot any signs of the Mancini family themselves. However, unexpectedly, my attention was snared by a captivating figure at the bar. Brown hair flowed elegantly over nude shoulders, pointing to a trim waist hugged by a cobalt blue dress.. She gazed at me.

When our eyes met, it felt as if time had frozen. The intensity of that brief gaze, which made time seem to stretch, awakened curiosity and interest in me. When her eyes finally moved away, a part of me wished they would return. I could see that I wasn't the only one who was interested.

I turned my attention back to the door Mancini's man had disappeared through. Rising from my seat, I made my way to the bar, strategically placing myself beside her. At this angle, I could still keep an eye on the door while presenting an opportunity to engage her in conversation.

Sitting next to her, her aloofness didn't deter me. If anything, it piqued my interest further. She exuded self-assurance.

“It’s quite a lively place, isn’t it?” I remarked, attempting to initiate a conversation.

“Yes, it is.” A brief response. She wasn’t one for small talk, but her reluctance only fueled my desire to unravel her mystery.

I continued, undeterred by her cool reception. “I’m Emilio. What about you?”

“Griselda,” she replied. Her eyes briefly met mine before drifting away.

Griselda—simple and to the point. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman. It suited her. I leaned back, giving her space.

“So, Griselda,” I started, trying to keep the conversation light, “do you come here often?”

She looked up from her drink, and this time, her expression softened a bit.

“Not really,” she said, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “Just needed a break from the usual routine.”

“Ah, I can relate to that,” I replied, relieved that she was opening up a bit. I wondered what had made her act so coldly before. “Work can be quite demanding sometimes.”

Griselda nodded, her gaze thoughtful. “You’re right. How about you? What keeps you occupied?”

“Business ventures, mostly,” I replied, opting for a more general response. “I’m passionate about what I do.”

As the night progressed and various topics came under discussion, conversation flowed easily between us. When last had either of us enjoyed a real vacation? , Which were our dream destinations if time and money were of no concern?

We even shared our love for Italian cuisine, staying away from anything too personal. One topic led naturally into another, and Griselda's guarded demeanor began to fade away. It felt as if I was watching the gradual unfurling of a beautiful mystery.

"So, Griselda," I started, circling back to our professional lives, "what keeps you busy during the day?"

"I'm a lawyer," she replied, a glint of passion lighting up her hazel eyes.

"Ah, a guardian of justice," I quipped, the irony not lost on me. There was a glaring yet unspoken truth—her path was on the side of justice, while mine - well - it had its complexities.

Griselda revealed her passion for law and her dedication to her work. Her core belief that she could impact the lives of her clients for the better caused her hazel eyes to glow with a certain light.

The faint dimples that appeared when she smiled and the way her nose crinkled slightly were all details that drew me in. "Your turn," she prompted, genuinely interested.

"I'm the CEO of Royalty Rentals," I admitted, silently bracing for her reaction. The same one every other woman who discovered my status gave me. A broader, faker smile and eyes were suddenly lighting up with dollar signs.

Instead, a burst of laughter escaped her, and it was as if the atmosphere of the club echoed the joyful sound. I could sense a tinge of disbelief in her laughter, almost like she couldn't fathom me holding such a position. It pricked my pride, but the genuine joy in her laughter was endearing.

"Royalty Rentals? Seriously?" she giggled, shaking her head incredulously.

"Absolutely," I confirmed, a smirk playing on my lips. Her skepticism was strangely charming, and I found myself captivated once more.

"Wow, well, you must have quite a choice of cars then," she remarked, still chuckling.

Leaning casually against the counter, facing her directly, I replied, "Oh, you have no idea."

There was a playful edge to our conversation, yet we both exercised caution. I didn't dwell much on her not believing me. It didn't matter.

"What's your color?" she asked me.

"Favorite color? Well, that's an unexpected turn," I remarked, surprised and intrigued by her sudden change of topic. "But I'd say midnight blue. It's mysterious and elegant. How about you, Griselda?"

Her smile broadened, mischief dancing in her eyes. "Emerald green, for sure. It's vibrant and full of life. They say it's the color of ambition, you know."

I leaned in a bit closer as our playfulness gained momentum. “Ambition, huh? I can see that in your eyes. A woman who knows what she wants.”

Griselda’s laughter filled the air, a delightful sound that made my heart race. “You’ve got a way with words, Emilio. But don’t think you can distract me that easily.”

“Distraction is an art, Griselda,” I murmured, our faces mere inches apart. “And I’m an artist.”

She chuckled softly, her breath mingling with mine. “An artist, huh? Show me what else you can create.”

Our lips hovered impossibly close, a tantalizing promise of something electric, when suddenly, my peripheral vision caught a flicker of movement. It was as if the universe had conspired to yank me away from this moment.

I pulled back, my eyes darting to the side. There, emerging from the door through which he had left earlier, stood. Panic surged within me because, for a moment, I had almost forgotten why I was here.

Griselda, confusion etched across her features, leaned back, her eyes scanning mine for answers. “Is something wrong? Did I misread the vibe?”

I wanted to tell her it wasn’t her, that it was anything but her, but words escaped me at what happened next.

Mancini’s thug looked around the club and ended up catching sight of me by sheer accident. Our eyes locked, and in that instant, recognition and dread flashed across both our faces.

Time seemed to slow as we stared at each other, and I knew that I couldn't let this chance slip away.

Without a second thought, the guy bolted, his burly frame vanishing into the chaotic depths of the club.

My instincts kicked in, and I lunged after him, my apologies to Griselda lost in the blaring music and the cacophony of voices.

My world narrowed down to a singular objective, which was to capture Mancini's mafioso and gather whatever information I could.

As I maneuvered through the pulsing crowd, dodging dancers and revelers, I couldn't help but wonder how this abrupt departure would appear to Griselda. From almost kissing her to running away like a lunatic, it didn't paint a complementary picture. Not at all.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, my senses hyper-aware as I tried to close the distance between me and my elusive target.

The Mancini family's relentless pursuit of me had turned into a deadly game of cat and mouse, and this club was the latest battleground. The thug made a hurried exit through an alternative door, leaving me with a whirlwind of thoughts.

What were his intentions? Was this an attempt to lure me into a trap?

Racing thoughts and rising panic vied for control, urging me towards rash decisions. I raced through the labyrinthine alleys outside the club, shadows cloaking my movements. My breath

was ragged, and my mind raced. My thoughts churned, contemplating the tangled web of possibilities.

As I chased after the mafioso, my mind raced with thoughts of the beautiful woman I had left behind in the club. Griselda had captivated me in a way I hadn't expected, and the memory of her lingered.

I hoped I would see her again.

Chapter 4

Griselda

The sudden departure of Emilio hit me like a shock wave. For a fleeting moment, I had thought we were about to share a kiss but that moment was shattered abruptly.

My heart raced, echoing the tempo of the music. Confusion and disbelief coursed through me. What had just happened? One moment, we were so close, and the next, he was gone.

Did he find me repulsive? Was there something wrong with me? I discreetly checked my breath, even though I knew it was fine.

I replayed the moment in my mind, hoping to find a clue that would explain his abrupt departure. Our eyes had met, the atmosphere charged with a hint of desire. I had leaned in, expecting the brush of his lips against mine, but there was nothing. No connection. No soft warmth. Nothing.

When I opened my eyes, I had been met with the sight of Emilio's sudden urgency, his focus elsewhere. It was as if he

had been transported from the moment we shared to a different reality. The jarring shift left me bewildered.

Had I misread the situation?

He had insisted it wasn't because of me, but his actions spoke otherwise. Being dismissed like that, especially after what happened at work this morning, nipped at my confidence.

Feeling a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment, I finished my drink quickly. The pulsating energy of the club no longer held its appeal.

Instead, it seemed to magnify the awkwardness of the situation. The thought of so many eyes witnessing that peculiar moment made my cheeks flush, urging me to escape the crowded space.



The warm water cascaded over me, washing away the remnants of the night. I stood there, lost in thought. The events of the night kept playing like a persistent loop in my mind.

Emilio's sudden exit was confusing, to say the least. Was it something I said or did? He had reassured me, but actions spoke louder than words. Doubt and frustration gnawed at me, battling with the attraction I had felt toward him.

After toweling off and changing into fresh clothes, I sat on my bed, running a hand through my still-damp hair. The scene at the club replayed in my mind. The way his eyes had briefly

locked with mine, the almost kiss that never happened—then why hadn't he kissed me?!

In an attempt to distract myself, I opened a book, trying to lose myself in its pages, but my mind kept drifting back to Emilio. His enigmatic aura and his charming smile.

Frustrated, I set the book aside and laid down on my bed. Eventually, exhaustion took its toll, pulling me into a restless slumber.

Dreams were woven with flashes of Emilio, the sound of music from the club, and the sensation of an almost-kiss.



The next morning, I sat at my desk in the office, purposefully ignoring the file my boss had handed me the previous day. It was an insult, an assignment beneath my abilities, so I decided to hand it over to a younger lawyer. It would be a learning experience for them, at least.

Engrossed in reviewing other cases, the door suddenly swung open, startling me. Without the courtesy of a knock or even a warning, Carmella barged in.

My already sour mood, fueled by the memory of Emilio from the previous night, worsened at the sight of her. Carmella's insufferable presence barged into my space without a shred of consideration. It felt like the universe was conspiring to challenge my patience.

As she stood there, smugness dancing in her eyes, I could feel my pulse quicken. The urge to express my annoyance and frustration was almost more than I could bear.

“Excuse me, do you not know how to knock?” I asked, my irritation palpable.

Carmella, seemingly taken aback, responded with an affronted look. “Oh, I didn’t think it was necessary.”

“It is necessary,” I shot back, my patience wearing thin. “This is not your office. You can’t just barge in whenever you please.”

Her eyes narrowed, condescension lacing her voice. “I just wanted to talk about the Johnson case.”

“I don’t see anything to talk about,” I shot back, my patience with Carmella wearing thin.

“Oh, there certainly is,” Carmella continued, disregarding my obvious disinterest. Before I could retort that I had no intention of listening, she pressed on, “In fact, the reason I’m here is because, well, now that I’m handling the case, I need to collect your group’s findings on it.”

I was astounded. Carmella’s shamelessness never failed to amaze me.

“Collect our findings?” I repeated with disbelief creeping into my tone.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her audacity. “You must be joking. First, you swoop in to take over the case, and now you want our hard-earned research, too?”

Carmella shrugged nonchalantly, her arrogance on full display. “I didn’t ‘take over’ the case. I just mentioned to Mr. Gilbert that I’d be up for something challenging. Next thing I know, he hands me the Johnson case.”

“Challenging?” I snorted.

It was ironic, almost laughable. Carmella, seeking a challenging case? The very idea seemed like a poorly written joke. How could she handle the complexity of the Johnson case when she struggled with the ones she currently managed? Her misguided sense of her abilities was truly something to behold.

Several times, Carmella had come dangerously close to derailing her cases if not for the heroic efforts of her team, who often worked overtime.

I leaned back in my chair, contemplating the absurdity of it all. I couldn’t help but think about all the times she had stumbled over cases, seeking help from others, trying to hitch her wagon to someone more competent. The notion of her tackling a case of this magnitude was almost comical.

Carmella was about ambition without substance, appearances over character.

“Since you believe you’re so capable of handling such a challenging case, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble analyzing it, researching all there is to find out and coming up with a brilliant strategy,” I responded, my tone laced with sarcasm.

I wasn’t about to let her plunder my team’s hard work.

She was taken aback, her disbelief evident.

“What did you say?” she stammered, her eyes wide.

“I didn’t know you were deaf,” I shot back, my patience all but evaporated.

“And will you be able to handle the consequences if you don’t hand over your trial preparation?” Carmella snapped, her frustration clear.

I held my ground, my gaze unwavering. “If you have nothing useful to contribute, then I suggest you leave my office.”

Carmella glared at me, and with a huff, she stormed out, almost bumping into Sophia. Sophia entered my office, looking startled by Carmella’s sudden and fiery departure.

“What’s her problem?” Sophia muttered, clearly bewildered.

I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of Sophia, a reliable ally in the face of such audacity.

“She wanted our trial preparation files,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

Sophia’s eyes widened, and she exclaimed loudly, “Is she insane?”

“Seems that way,” I replied, chuckling at Sophia’s immediate, incredulous reaction.

“Why on earth would we hand over our work to her?” Sophia continued, her disbelief turning into annoyance.

“Did I hand over the work to Carmella?” I asked rhetorically, facing Sophia squarely.

Sophia looked at me, momentarily uncertain, but then a small victorious smile tugged at her lips as she realized the answer.

“Of course not,” she responded, her tone filled with satisfaction.

I nodded, confirming her assumption. “Exactly.”

Sophia sighed in relief, her annoyance dissipating, but I knew this wasn't the end of it.

“I don't think Carmella will let it slide,” I added, anticipating the trouble that might follow.

Sophia's face dropped in annoyance, mirroring my sentiments. “Of course she won't. She'll probably go complain to the boss.”

“Let her,” I said with a shrug.

“But what if the boss demands we hand it over to her?” Sophia asked, concern creasing her brow.

“We can't hand over something that doesn't exist,” I replied matter-of-factly.

My plan was straightforward: pretend we had already purged our findings on the Johnson case. Since we were no longer actively working on it, there was no reason to keep the information, let alone hand it over to someone as undeserving as Carmella. Absolutely not.

A glint of realization flickered across Sophia's eyes, and then she smirked. “Devious, Griselda. I didn't know you had it in you.”

I laughed and shrugged. “Desperate times call for inventive measures.”

I leaned back in my chair, feeling a strange mix of triumph and frustration. “If the boss didn’t want Johnson’s case to be messed up, then he shouldn’t have taken it from us and handed it over to Carmella,” I stated, voicing my exasperation.

“Let’s get back to work,” I suggested, trying to shift our focus away from Carmella and her antics.

As we immersed ourselves in our tasks, I made a conscious effort to ignore the memories of Emilio that fluttered to the forefront of my mind without any warning.

Why couldn’t I forget him?!

I had work to do, and cases to handle, and dwelling on him would only complicate matters. So, whenever his image or the fleeting moments at the club flashed in my mind, I’d firmly shove them aside, pretending he didn’t exist.

Was there a point in thinking about a man who ran – well, more like sprinted – to get away from me?

No.

Chapter 5

Emilio

Silently, I trailed my target through the barely lit streets, careful not to alert him to my presence. He seemed convinced that he had successfully evaded me, and that was precisely what I wanted him to believe.

I followed him until he reached an old Chinese restaurant. The building had an air of faded grandeur about it, its exterior adorned with peeling paint and weathered wood.

The neon sign that once proudly displayed the restaurant's name had flickering letters, barely lighting up the darkened street. A few Chinese characters were still visible, hinting at its former identity.

The atmosphere seemed somber, almost mysterious, giving me an eerie feeling. It was the kind of establishment that had witnessed decades of stories, its walls echoing whispers of secrets long kept.

I positioned myself behind a car parked across the street, providing me with a clear view of the entrance and enough

distance to avoid detection. The street was nearly empty, the only sounds coming from the distant hum of traffic and the occasional rustle of leaves in the night breeze.

My curiosity was piqued as I huddled in the shadows, peering through the dim light. What business did the mafioso have here? Why this shabby Chinese place? Was it a rendezvous point? Or is it a front for their shady deals?

I decided against confronting him right away. By staying put and observing without tipping him off, I could gather additional intel. Waiting to see what this was all about could prove even more useful.

Mancini's man knocked on a door, and after a few moments, it creaked open. The dim light made it hard to see details, but it revealed a person who appeared tall and well-built. Mancini thug stepped inside, and the door closed.

My mind raced, debating whether to venture closer for a better look. However, the fact that he had to knock and wait indicated this was more than a casual visit. It was prudent to tread carefully and not alert them to my presence.

As I contemplated my next move, I noticed a faint glow in one of the windows of the restaurant. Shadows danced, hinting at activity inside. My curiosity burned brighter.

Minutes felt like hours as I kept my watch on that door, anxiety building with each passing moment. The dim light from the windows flickered, casting eerie shadows on the deserted street.

I found myself caught in a whirlwind of thoughts, second-guessing my decision to tail the Mancini member. Should I have been more direct, confronting him right there on the street? But no, that could have easily turned into a messy situation.

Time dragged on, and my patience wore thin. Doubt started to creep in. Was there any point in waiting around like this? I couldn't hear what was happening inside. Perhaps they were aware of my presence and were intentionally stalling, or maybe their meeting was taking longer than expected.

I glanced around, suddenly hyper-aware of my surroundings. Were there prying eyes observing me from the shadows? But the street remained empty, devoid of any obvious threat. If they had discovered me, then they would have made their move already.

I tried to shift my weight to get some circulation going in my stiff, hunched legs. Without invitation, my mind wandered to the woman I had left at the bar, Griselda. I couldn't shake the image of her bewildered expression at my abrupt departure.

I wondered just how much she felt offended by my unexplained exit. Despite the urgency of the situation meriting my actions, a flicker of regret tugged at me for the way our interaction had been cut short.

Despite my typically guarded nature, I had found myself at ease with her, revealing more to her than I had intended. It was unusual for me to be so captivated by someone in such a short period.

For the first time in a long while, I had let my guard down, even mentioning that I was the CEO of Royalty Rentals. Of course, she hadn't believed me. The irony of that thought made me chuckle.

I contemplated how she would react if she discovered that I hadn't been lying. Would it shatter the image she had built of me? I smirked at the notion, envisioning the surprise on her face.

Griselda had an air of strength and independence. She also seemed like she wasn't someone who was easily swayed. The idea of her finding out that I had been telling the truth intrigued me.

My surveillance of the old building persisted, but Griselda's image refused to fade from my thoughts as a peculiar thought crossed my mind.

What if Griselda were to discover my true identity, that I was entangled with the very criminal world she might be fighting against in her capacity as a lawyer? Would she be horrified? Would she attempt to bring me to justice?

The absurdity of the idea couldn't help but draw a wry smile from my lips.

Griselda's fiery spirit, her tenacity, and, yes, her playfulness all intrigued me. It was as if a collision between our two worlds had formed an unexpected connection.

The notion of her trying to put me behind bars was almost hilarious. I couldn't help but chuckle at the mental image of

her passionately arguing her case in a courtroom, determined to see me behind bars.

But beneath the amusement lay a genuine curiosity about how Griselda would react. Would she confront me directly? Or would she choose a more calculated approach, digging deeper into my life to uncover the truth?

Her resourcefulness and intelligence were evident in the brief time we had spent together, leaving no doubt in my mind that she could be a formidable adversary if she put her mind to it.

The thought of our paths crossing in such a conflicting manner held a strange allure. I couldn't deny that I was drawn to her.

I shook my head and refocused. I was here for a reason, but it seemed I should abandon my post and rethink my strategy. Standing up slowly from behind the parked car, I shook out my legs, relief flooding through my calves.

But just as I was about to retreat, the night erupted with panicked shouts and desperate pleas. Curiosity overtook my caution, and I quickly returned to my hiding spot, peering intently at the Chinese restaurant.

In the dim light that spilled onto the street, I could see Mancini's man being dragged out of the restaurant, a man at each limb. Four of them, each gripping the struggling man with an iron grip.

What the fuck was going on? I shifted around the car so I could get a closer look.

The mafioso's face contorted in fear and desperation. He was begging for his life, a torrent of words that were barely comprehensible in his panicked state.

A knot tightened in my stomach as I watched, torn between my goal and a moral dilemma. Should I stay hidden, let this unfold, gather intel, and use it to my advantage later? Should I intervene? The conflicting desires warred within me.

Fear painted the man's face as he dangled helplessly, his limbs restrained by the iron grip of his assailants.

“Mi dispiace! (I'm sorry!)” he pleaded in Italian, his voice tinged with a genuine sense of terror. *“Mi dispiace! Non sapevo che sarebbe stato qui. Per favore, risparmiami la vita. Non abbasserò di nuovo la guardia. (I'm sorry! I didn't know he would be here. Please spare my life. I won't let my guard down again.)”*

Their response was callous and ruthless. With a callous indifference that made my blood run cold, they let him drop to the ground. The impact echoed through the quiet area, a sickening thud that made me wince involuntarily. The man scrambled to his knees, still begging for mercy.

I couldn't fathom the turn of events. Wasn't he one of them? Why had he come here only to face what seemed like an execution?

He prostrated himself, forehead touching the ground.

The four menacing figures stared down at him, their faces hidden in the darkness. I still couldn't see who they were.

Just then, the door of the Chinese restaurant creaked open, and a lone figure emerged. It didn't take long for me to realize this man was different. His posture exuded power and authority. The way he moved, unhurried and confident, spoke of someone accustomed to being in control.

Questions ricocheted in my mind like stray bullets in the darkness. Who was this man, and what power did he hold within the Mancini organization? My gaze remained fixed on the unfolding drama.

The mafioso, now seemingly resigned to his fate, raised his head as the authoritative figure drew closer. The figure crouched, bringing himself to the same level as the trembling man. Their words were too muffled for me to comprehend, but the fear etched on the man's face spoke volumes.

"Non sapevo davvero che sarebbe stato lì. Non è mai venuto al club prima (I really didn't know he would be there. He has never come to the club before)," the man stammered, his words desperately seeking mercy. His trembling voice betrayed his terror.

Were they talking about me?

The figure lingered, listening to the man's plea before straightening up and giving a silent signal to the four guards. As if puppets were responding to their master's command, they moved, and my heart pounded at what happened next.

The man on the ground, driven by desperation, began crawling forward, hoping for mercy, but the guards, cold and merciless, showed no compassion.

One of them raised a gun and fired a bullet that tore through the man's thigh. The wail of agony that escaped him pierced through the air, and I wondered if someone had heard from afar.

I winced.

The man fell, writhing in agony with blood pooling beneath him, staining the pavement a dark, gruesome shade.

A second shot shattered the air, and this time, it found its mark in the man's head. His burly body is now still. His life was extinguished in an instant.

My stomach churned at the violence I had just witnessed. This was the reality of the criminal underworld, and this was why I wanted out.

I remained frozen in my hiding spot as the five men walked back into the building. The leader then paused and glanced around, making me duck lower behind the car. I stayed like that, not wanting to risk drawing attention. When the door closed behind them, I cautiously peered around the car.

The men were gone, but the lifeless body of the executed Mancini mafioso remained. Had they intended to leave him there?

Questions bounced around in my mind like a ceaseless storm. Was this an internal strife within the Mancini family, or was there another faction involved? Was the man I had followed a traitor? And if so, to whom - the Mancini family or this mysterious group?

Employing great caution, I left the scene and made my way back to where I had parked my car.

With the possibility that there was another gang involved with the Mancini family that we didn't know about, it looked like things were about to become more serious than I had thought.

Chapter 6

Griselda

Two days had passed since that peculiar encounter with Emilio, and I couldn't shake the memory of it. There was an inexplicable allure to his presence, a magnetic force that kept drawing my thoughts back to that night.

Despite his infuriating and abrupt exit, I found myself wanting to meet him again, if only to give him a piece of my mind.

I did the most embarrassing thing a woman in my shoes could do and went to the club each night. It was as if an invisible thread pulled me there, hoping to catch another glimpse of him.

Or perhaps, deep down, I just hoped to understand why he had left so abruptly and confirm his parting words that it wasn't because of me.

Visiting the place three days in a row hadn't made it lose its charm. The lively chatter, the rhythmic pulse of music, and the clinking of glasses created a vibrant ambiance. Each visit fueled a blend of curiosity and frustration within me.

I told myself that I was here for other reasons - to unwind after work but, inevitably, my eyes would scan the crowd, hoping to spot that face that had etched itself into my memory.

It was a perplexing attraction. First, I was drawn into a conversation I did not seek, then unexpectedly enjoyed said conversation. Perhaps it was the way he carried himself with a certain grace. There was something to him that I couldn't ignore.

He had stood me up in the most perplexing and rude manner, and yet, something about him made me want to know more. It made me wish we could at least have shared that kiss before whatever made him jump up and run.

As I sat at the bar, nursing a drink and pretending to be engrossed in my phone, my thoughts wandered back to our playful banter. Was he really the CEO of Royalty Rentals? What had he intended to achieve with such a joke? Was he hiding something beneath his cool composure?

Minutes ticked by as I observed each newcomer, hoping to spot that familiar face, but time played its own game. I chastised myself for becoming so fixated on a stranger, a man I knew nothing about.

A new arrival took a chair at the bar. My heart quickened, and I glanced in that direction. But it wasn't him. It's just another face lost in the crowd. Disappointed, I sighed, a strange mix of emotions swirling within me. It seemed absurd to be affected this way, and yet, here I was.

Perhaps fate would decide in my favor to bring us face to face again, and this time, I wouldn't let him slip away so easily.



The following evening, I found myself back at the club again. I didn't even bother ordering a drink this time. My sole focus was on the door, desperately hoping Emilio would walk through it. I felt absurd, weak, desperate. I was practically stalking the club for a man I wasn't familiar with.

What if he never showed up? Was this how I would continue, coming here on the off chance that he might?

An hour passed, and there was still no sign of him. Doubt crept into my mind. Was I bordering on insanity, fixating on this man I barely knew? I didn't even have a certainty that he frequented this club. It was like chasing a mirage in a desert with no assurance that there would ever be water.

Self-awareness tugged at me. I couldn't let myself spiral into this obsession. Yet, despite my logical reasoning, my heart kept longing for that chance encounter once more.

I had never felt this drawn to a person before.

I let out a sigh, grappling with my thoughts. It was probably time to release the grip this intrigue had on me. However, just as I was contemplating this, a bartender approached and set a drink on my table.

Pulled from my thoughts, I looked up, perplexed, wondering who had ordered it for me. The bartender nodded towards a

man across the room, a knowing smile playing on his lips, revealing that he was the sender.

My heart did a little flutter, a glimmer of excitement sparking within me. Could it be Emilio attempting to make amends for abruptly ending our previous encounter? I turned my head, hope flickering in my eyes, but my hopes were quickly dashed as I saw a stranger grinning at me, evidently reveling in my anticipation.

Disappointment washed over me, suddenly filling my limbs with lead.

Offering a polite smile, I expressed my gratitude to the bartender but politely declined the drink. The stranger's grin waned, his enthusiasm deflated by my rejection.

He wasn't unattractive, sporting blonde hair, but my interest was elsewhere. Captured by a man I might or might not see again. I shifted my gaze, attempting to shake off the awkwardness and disappointment that now hung in the air.

Feeling disheartened, I decided to leave. Patience was dwindling, and this pathetic waiting for Emilio was leading me nowhere.



The next day, I found myself back at the bar for the fifth, and what I swore to myself would be the last time I came here to seek Emilio. If I didn't see him today, then I would take it our paths weren't meant to cross.

As I settled into my usual spot, I ordered a non-alcoholic drink since I had brought my car and waited. When my drink arrived, I focused on its amber liquid, the ice clinking softly against the glass. Tonight, the ambiance of the club did little to soothe my nerves.

Time dragged on, each tick of the clock amplifying my growing impatience. I glanced around, hoping that maybe, just maybe, he'd make an appearance, but as the minutes morphed into an hour, I decided that I couldn't do it anymore.

The bartender approached with a friendly smile, inquiring if I'd like another drink. With a polite decline, I explained that I was about to leave.

Just as I was about to make my exit, a voice broke through the chatter. "Leaving so soon?"

Startled, I turned to see the blonde stranger from last night. There was a casual yet confident demeanor about him. Smiling politely, I explained.

"I was waiting for someone, but I guess they're a no-show," I shared, my eyes momentarily meeting his. He slid into the seat beside me, leaning casually against the counter.

"Well, who would leave a beautiful woman like you all alone?" he remarked, attempting to flirt.

I let out a dry chuckle, trying to keep the situation light.

"Maybe something urgent came up," I replied, inching to stand.

However, before I could make my move, his grip on my wrist tightened, effectively halting me. I glanced at where his hand held mine, then up at him, feeling uncomfortable and annoyed.

This man seemed unfazed by his intrusive gesture, pressing me to stay and join him for a drink. My patience was already worn thin. With as much self-control as I could muster, I gently removed my hand from his grasp, making it clear that I wasn't interested.

"Thank you, but I'm not looking to have a drink," I said firmly, hoping he'd respect my boundaries.

"I insist," he expressed with a tone in his voice that made me more uncomfortable.

I shook my head with finality.

"No, really. Thank you, but I'm leaving," I said, standing up with determination.

As I turned away from him and walked toward the exit, I felt a mixture of relief and frustration. Relief because I had managed to extricate myself from this stranger's relentless advances.

Frustration because I had placed myself in this vulnerable position by showing up here night after night, all on my own, chasing some elusive enigma.

However, before I could even exit the club to get to my Nissan Altima, the blonde stranger reappeared, abruptly blocking my retreat. Anger simmered in his eyes as he looked down at me, his towering figure even more imposing now that we were both standing.

“What is your problem?” He demanded, seemingly offended by my rejection.

Caught off guard with my irritation boiling over, I fired back, “What’s *your* problem?”

I’d made my stance clear to him multiple times. Yet the blonde stranger seemed to think that I was merely playing hard to get.

“I’ve already told you I’m not interested. How many times do I have to repeat myself?” I exclaimed, my tone sharper this time.

Just then, a firm voice cut through the tension. “I believe she already said she wasn’t interested.”

I turned, my eyes widening in both surprise and relief.

There stood Emilio.

The blonde stranger turned, too, and for the first time, I realized how much taller Emilio was compared to most men.

Emilio’s appearance, though welcome, ignited conflicting feelings within me. A flutter of delight at finally seeing him again warred with my annoyance at being in this situation in the first place.

If he hadn’t just upped and left, if he had stayed, maybe share his contact details, I wouldn’t have had to stoop so low, waiting here, five evenings in a row, like a besotted

My attention shifted back to the blonde stranger, who seemed taken aback by Emilio’s interruption.

I seized the opportunity to gain the upper hand and said firmly, “Excuse me, I really must go.”

I edged past him and towards Emilio, who was still standing there, his gaze steady and reassuring. Despite the odd circumstances, a feeling of safety washed over me as I approached him, my frustration from earlier beginning to subside.

Emilio took my hand, leading me out of the club and towards his vehicle. As we stepped into the dimly lit parking lot, my eyes widened at the sight of his stunning car.

It was a sleek, midnight black Mercedes-AMG GT, the embodiment of elegance and power. The moonlight glinted off its polished surface. I stood there, captivated by the sheer beauty.

However, when I turned my gaze to Emilio, ready to express my awe over his vehicle, he wore a smirk that hinted at pride over his car. Remembering my irritation, I quickly shifted my focus away from the car and directed my annoyance at him.

“You know,” I began, letting the events of that night fuel my anger, “I expected a bit more courtesy. After your abrupt departure, you left me hanging back there.”

I was surprised to see Emilio’s expression shift, his smirk disappearing as he looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his tone carrying remorse. “I saw someone I had been searching for for a long time, and I

couldn't afford to let them slip away. It was a matter of urgency."

Taken aback by his apology, it was hard to maintain my anger when faced with such sincerity. I sighed, allowing some of the tension to escape my shoulders.

"Alright," I relented a little. "But a heads up would have been nice."

Emilio nodded, understanding in his eyes. "I agree, and I should have handled it better. Let me make it up to you."

The fact that he acknowledged his mistake made it easier for me to let go of my frustration. Besides, the anger seemed trivial now, standing here with him under the moonlit night.

"How?", I asked, curiosity mingled with excitement.

Emilio smiled, pretending to ponder for a moment, before finally saying, "Dinner. You, me, and dinner."

I raised an eyebrow, caught off guard but undeniably flattered. I couldn't deny I was looking forward to it.

"Where?" I inquired, my anticipation growing.

"There's a hotel nearby," he replied, his smile still playing on his lips.

The mention of the hotel brought a specific one to my mind.

Lumière Heights Hotel.

My eyes widened at the thought. That place was known to be extravagantly expensive.

“That place is crazy expensive,” I blurted out, a bit surprised by the suggestion.

Emilio chuckled, and he opened the passenger side door, motioning for me to get in. I hesitated for a moment, still trying to process the idea. Was he serious? With a mix of apprehension and excitement, I stepped into the car, wondering what this unexpected turn of events might bring.

As we drove to the hotel, I couldn't help but admire the interior of Emilio's Mercedes-AMG GT. The sleek, black leather seats and polished dashboard oozed luxury. The car purred with power as we smoothly navigated through the city streets.

When we arrived at Lumière Heights Hotel, my astonishment only deepened. The hotel stood tall and grand, exuding an air of opulence. The exterior was adorned with intricate architectural details, and the lobby, with its chandeliers and marble floors, was nothing short of magnificent.

Emilio swiftly booked a room, pulling out a black card. I had a flash of memory where he mentioned being the CEO of Royalty Rentals. Perhaps he wasn't joking.

I followed him, feeling a mix of excitement and a tinge of jealousy at the thought that others might have experienced this level of treatment from him before.

He led the way with a confident stride, clearly familiar with the hotel. Now and then, he'd look back at me, making sure I was keeping up. His commanding presence was both

intimidating and intriguing. As we ascended in the elevator, the air felt charged with anticipation.

We reached our floor, and Emilio guided me to the room, smoothly unlocking the door and ushering me inside. The room was just as luxurious as the rest of the hotel. The soft lighting, plush furnishings, and the inviting bed all hinted at a night of comfort and indulgence.

I couldn't help but let my curiosity get the best of me.

"You seem familiar with this place," I remarked, trying to keep my tone light.

He smiled with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "I've been here a few times."

Jealousy flared again, but I pushed it down. This was a night I hadn't expected, and I didn't want to spoil it. Emilio noticed my expression.'

Leaning slightly closer, he asked with a playful smile, "Are you jealous?"

I scoffed, trying to deny it, "Please, as if..."

I moved to sit at the round table in the room, and Emilio followed, taking the chair opposite me. He continued to stare at me, his gaze intense and unwavering. It sent shivers down my spine.

He broke the silence, "You're the first woman I've brought here."

His revelation hung in the air, charged with meaning. The intimacy of the moment was palpable, pulling me in. I looked at him, finding only honesty in his eyes.

The atmosphere seemed to thicken with the magnetic pull between us. I swallowed.

Emilio moved closer, his hand reaching out to gently brush a strand of hair from my face. The touch was electrifying, sending a wave of exhilaration through me. I met his gaze, feeling a sudden surge of courage and longing.

“You have no idea how attractive you are,” he whispered, his voice low and husky.

I smiled, a mix of nervousness and excitement coursing through me. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

We were drawn by the desire in each other’s eyes, the space between us disappearing.

Our lips met in a fiery kiss, an explosion of pent-up passion and undeniable chemistry.

Chapter 7

Emilio

I heard the sound of her chair moving back and watched as she stood and rounded the table. Time slowed as she settled onto my lap.

“How about we forget about dinner and start with dessert?” she whispered against my cheek, her breath warm and voice raspy. I moaned in agreement, hands coming up to rest against her back, cradling her to me.

“I like that idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned up and caught her lips against mine, hungrier for her than I had ever been. I kissed her with fervor, groaning at the eagerness with which she returned the kiss, her tongue greedily pushing its way into my mouth like she couldn't get enough of this either. God, she tasted amazing.

I wanted more.

Her little breathless moans and the pleasant weight of her in my lap were driving me mad. I groaned against her mouth, hands sliding down to cup her ass.

We kissed and kissed and kissed, learning each other's mouths, uncovering, exploring, searching, but one particular sound she emitted low in her throat, and the little squirm against my straining jeans was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Swiftly, I picked her up, standing and depositing her on the top of the table.

"Emilio," she whimpered, tugging me to her by my shirt.

I stepped between her legs and kissed her furiously. I kissed my way down the creamy skin of her throat and tugged up her shirt, grumbling when I inconveniently had to pull away from her to yank it over her head, but the smooth mounds above her bra made it worth it.

I buried my face in her cleavage, kissing and gently biting, and felt her nails drag pleasantly up and down my back.

"I want you," I panted, blinded by my arousal, my white-hot desire for her, and months of dreaming about a woman's touch. And not just any woman.

Her.

Griselda.

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly, pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it aside, her hands eager but careful as she reverently mapped the scars on my chest and torso.

I leaned her backward onto the table, giving her a hungry, needy kiss. Something, maybe a phone book, toppled to the floor. I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was her.

She felt incredible beneath me, petite, warm, wanting—a perfect fit inside a perfect frame. I trailed my hands down her bare sides to the waistband of her pants, fumbling with the button that flew off. I pushed her pants and thong down her soft, surprisingly muscular yet delicate calves and over her ankles.

I bent and pressed a kiss to her stomach, then dropped to my knees between her legs. I could easily worship this woman.

“Emilio?” she asked, breathing labored and eyes wide.

“I'm having my dessert.”

I tasted her like I was tasting my last meal, or perhaps my first, mouth greedy and devouring. I hooked her leg over my shoulder and slid two fingers inside of her fluttering depths while tongue and lips attacked her clit.

Every whimper, every moan, every delightful noise that filled the room spurred me on, bringing her higher and higher until she was tugging my hair and gasping my name in ecstasy. I coaxed her back down and grinned up at her.

Griselda was loud.

“Emilio,” she panted, staring up at me.

I watched as she propped herself on her elbows and stared down at me with dark, lusty eyes, her chest heaving. I didn't even need to be told anything to understand what she wanted.

Grunting, I shifted to my feet and scooped her up, depositing her on the king-sized mattress. I smiled hungrily down at her, appreciating the sight before me.

Her hair was mussed, skin flushed, cunt dripping wet, and those eyes again, peering right back up at me with desire.

She sat up and unhooked her bra. I watched appreciatively as her breasts spilled into view, her nipples rosy and stout.

As I fumbled with my belt, her hands quickly replaced mine at my fly, unzipping my jeans like she was on a mission.

“Someone’s impatient,” I murmured, tangling a hand in her hair as she tugged me closer, and the edge of the bed knocked into my knees.

“Just eager for my dessert.”

She shoved my jeans and underwear down, my erection springing free, and kissed her way down my abdomen. I shuddered and tangled a hand in her hair, gripping it tightly, and then, her sweet little hand wrapped around my cock, and her even sweeter lips were sucking my tip.

“Oh fuck,” I groaned as she slid me deeper into her mouth.

She took such good care of me, coaxing me with her mouth, hand so gentle and careful not to take me too far too fast.

“Okay baby, that feels so good, but...” I tenderly urged her back, chest heaving.

The disappointed look on her face was so damn cute, but any more of her talented mouth and I would explode. Hands

shaking, I stroked the hair out of her face and urged her back against the mattress, lips finding hers in a fiery kiss.

“Emilio,” she panted, wrapping her arms around me.

Taking myself in hand, I slowly slid into her with a groan, marveling at the way our bodies fit together. She was so warm and tight and perfect as she stretched to accommodate me.

My stomach fluttered with the excitement of finally getting to experience this with her. I’d be lying to myself if I hadn’t thought about what she felt like. Nothing, however, came close to the reality.

She was so responsive, squirming beneath me, body spasming around my cock with every thrust, her little moans and whimpers, and the sound of her panting filling the room.

I sped up, my movements firm and fast, lifting her hips and angling to drive into her sweet spot. My calloused fingers found her swollen clit and didn’t hold back.

“Emilio!” she cried out, body arching towards me.

“You like that?” I rasped, panting hard.

She whimpered and nodded, hands gripping the sheets so tightly her knuckles were white.

“Say it.”

“I like it,” she whined, eyes rolling back. “Fuck, you feel so good. More. Please, more. Fuck me,” She begged.

Grunting, I pulled out and firmly flipped her until she was on her hands and knees before roughly entering her from behind.

She choked back an elated cry. “Yes!”

I drove into her hard and fast, and I reached around her stomach and rubbed her clit raw, giving her ass a firm, resounding slap.

Griselda screamed and grabbed the headboard, cumming hard, a tight, hot, rapid flood that left her limp and trembling. It was too much and just enough.

“Fuck! Griselda !” I grabbed her hips with both hands and stilled, emptying into her with a low roar.

I collapsed on top of her, spent, the room echoing with our joint panting and the racing of my heartbeat in my ear.

I finally gathered up the strength to push off of her and lower myself next to her on the bed, reaching over to stroke her creamy back.

“You okay?” I murmured gently.

She rolled over to face me and slid close, burying her face in my neck and curling into my body.

“I’m better than okay,” she murmured against my skin. “You?”

“Feeling like the luckiest bastard in the world.”

I felt her smile into my throat and kissed the top of her sweaty head, sighing contently. I lay in silence for several minutes, just trying to catch my breath, and basked in the feeling of relief.

“You’re, uh... pretty vocal, huh?” I teased after a bit. She stroked a hand through her hair. “Surprised we didn’t get a

knock from management.”

She smirked up at me and wrinkled her nose, poking my side.

“And whose fault is that?”

“I guess I can live with the blame.” I chuckled and bent down to kiss her slowly.

She deepened the kiss, urging me onto my back before climbing on top of me, her hair falling around her face. I groaned, holding her close, my hands covering the entire expanse of her back.

“You asked for more.” I shrugged.

“I did. You got the message.”

She reached down between us, fingertips brushing my now flaccid, sticky cock.

“I’ll let you rest for a little bit, but I’m putting you to work at least two more times tonight, so rest up quickly,” she ordered, wetting her lips and grinning down at me like a woman with a plan.

I didn’t like anyone telling me what to do, but I could make an exception for her.

Later.

I groaned and squeezed her breasts, then grabbed her by the hips and tugged her over my face. She gasped.

“Emilio? What happened to resting?”

I dragged my tongue up her slit, causing her to shudder, my fingertips bruising her hips. I buried my nose against her wet

cunt. I heard no further complaints from her.



The shrill ring of my phone shattered the stillness of the early morning, dragging me from the depths of slumber. Confused for a moment about my surroundings, I cast a quick look at the clock—4 a.m. It took a few more seconds for me to recall the events of the night and realize where I was.

Glancing at Griselda, still fast asleep beside me, I carefully retrieved the buzzing device. The missed call notification stared back at me, accompanied by a text message from my father, requesting me to meet him at my earliest convenience.

I was slightly alarmed. I hadn't been summoned like this in a long time, especially not at such a time.

I sighed. I had to leave. Now.

I didn't want to disturb Griselda, so I slid out of bed carefully, reaching for my clothes. No time for that second round I had promised her. As I dressed, I couldn't help but wonder what Griselda's reaction would be upon waking up to an empty bed.

Would she be disappointed, hurt, or perhaps angry?

I felt a pang of guilt. Leaving in a hurry like this was not fair to her, especially since this would be the second time. She deserved an explanation, a chance to understand why I had to go so abruptly – then and now. I ran my hand through my hair.

I wished things could be different so that I could share my world with her openly. But the reality was harsh. My

involvement in the mafia came with a host of dangers and secrets that I couldn't expose her to.

I couldn't bear the thought of her being caught in the crossfire or becoming a target because of our connection, not to mention the moral and ethical struggle she would have as a lawyer.

With a heavy heart, I made my way out.

One last look at her peaceful form, and I tiptoed out of the room, the door clicking shut softly behind me.

Chapter 8

Griselda

The soft morning light spilled into the room, gently waking me from the depths of slumber. As I stirred, a mix of warmth and the lingering scent of the night before reminded me of the intense passion we had shared.

I reached out, expecting to find Emilio beside me, but my hand met only rumpled sheets and space. Confusion settled in. Where was he? I called out his name, half-hoping he was in the bathroom or perhaps preparing breakfast, but there was no response. My voice seemed to echo in the quiet room.

Concern began to rise within me, and I pulled the sheets around me as I left the bed. The search for Emilio began in earnest, my footsteps echoing in the room as I called his name once more. I searched the suite, from the lavish bathroom to the sleek living area, but he was nowhere to be found.

The realization that he was gone, seemingly without a trace, hit me like a wave. My heart sank, disappointment seeping into my veins. Why would he leave without a word, especially

after our passionate night? The empty silence of the room seemed to mock my unanswered questions.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I played over the events of the night in my mind. Had I missed something? Had he hinted at leaving? Nothing came to mind, leaving me with a perplexing sense of loss. Emilio's departure felt like a puzzle, missing a crucial piece.

My emotions swirled within me like a tempest. There was no doubt that I was hurt by his sudden departure once again. Despite knowing Emilio for such a short time, I was strongly attracted to him.

Thoughts raced through my mind as I questioned myself. Was I just another conquest? Did he have no intention of staying, of building something meaningful beyond that one night? The doubts gnawed at me, and it felt like my heart was at war with itself.

Annoyance washed over me, too. He could have at least left a message or a way to contact him, but no. It seemed Emilio had left with as much mystery as when he arrived. This time, there was no person he could claim to recognize, no emergency to explain his absence.

Hurt coursed pierced my chest. If he wasn't interested, why did he bother in the first place? How did I let myself fall for his tricks? I berated myself, feeling like a fool.

With a deep breath, I made up my mind: I wouldn't allow him to occupy any more of my thoughts. If he could walk away from me twice without a word, then I certainly wouldn't stick

around for a third time. I stood up, feeling the stickiness on my skin from our passionate night. A reminder that we hadn't even cleaned up afterward.

As I walked toward the bathroom, my steps slowed down. The reality of our unprotected encounter hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath.

We hadn't used protection.

It was an oversight—a moment of passion that now carried potential consequences. I felt a surge of anxiety, wondering if I should seek medical advice or take some precautions. Regret churned within me, mingling with the hurt and frustration. How could I let myself be so reckless? But dwelling on it wouldn't help.

Gathering my thoughts, I steeled myself. As I stepped into the bathroom, I made a vow to learn from this experience. I wouldn't trust anyone so easily after this.

I couldn't believe that I had let desire cloud my judgment.

The hot water cascaded over my skin, and I scrubbed meticulously as if trying to wash away every essence of Emilio. Was I being spiteful? No. I believed I was being reasonable. Why would I want to keep any trace of a man who abandoned me twice in a week?

As the steam and my frustration dissipated, I stepped out of the shower and began to dress, his scent on my clothes drawing me in like a siren's call. I shook it off. Standing in

front of the mirror, staring at my reflection, I vowed I wouldn't let anyone take advantage of my emotions again.

As I went about locating my shoes, loud knocking echoed from the door adjacent to mine. My movements slowed with curiosity. The banging persisted, growing louder. I frowned, wondering when hotel management would step in to address the disturbance.

A voice in the corridor was speaking in Italian. My mother, being of Italian descent, had made sure I grew up with the language, although my proficiency wasn't that of a native speaker. The angry voice demanded entry.

"Apri questa porta!" (Open this door!)

The occupant of the room responded, but their words were too muffled for me to discern. The situation seemed to escalate as the pounding became more insistent. Then it stopped, likely because the door had been opened, and a third voice joined the fray.

I halted in my search, the unexpected drama unfolding next door having caught my attention. It was unusual for such a disturbance to occur in a place that prided itself on luxury and service.

As the heated exchange continued, my ears caught something intriguing—the new voice had shifted to English, with a distinct American accent. A male voice, now demanding to know who the other person was. My eyebrows lifted in slight surprise. Was this some mix-up?

The man speaking in Italian persisted, demanding to know the whereabouts of Emilio. My heart skipped a beat. Emilio? Did I hear that correctly? Was this about the same Emilio who had shared a passionate night with me just hours ago? I strained to hear more.

The occupant of the room, clearly agitated, shouted back, demanding to know who had banged on his door and who this Emilio person was. The realization hit me—it couldn't be a coincidence. Was Emilio in some trouble from last night, or was it a mix-up involving the room next door?

My mind raced, and I debated whether I should intervene or at least inquire further. I stood and approached the wall that separated our rooms, intending to knock on the connecting door and offer my assistance or at least gather more information.

Then I hesitated. What if it wasn't related to the Emilio I had spent the night with? What if this was some private matter I had no business involving myself in?

My respect for personal boundaries wrestled with my inner curiosity. Just as I was about to knock on the door, a sharp cry sounded from the other side. Startled, I drew back, my heart racing in panic. My mind was suddenly bombarded with possible scenarios, none of them comforting.

Another voice joined the fray, recognizable as the companion of the first Italian man.

Their demand was clear—they wanted to know where Emilio was. The pieces started to fit together. The Emilio they were

searching for, was the same person I had shared this room with. Was that why he had left without a word? Was he in danger?

Questions swirled in my mind, blending with worry and a sense of indignation.

“Why didn’t he tell me?” I whispered to myself, feeling a mix of frustration and concern for this confounding man.

I had opened up to him, mentioning my profession as a lawyer. If he was in some trouble, I could have helped.

As the commotion escalated next door, my worry intensified. More cries of pain and grunting sounded through the wall, leaving me feeling helpless and torn. The occupant of the room pleaded for them to stop, claiming he did not know who Emilio was.

I didn’t know what to do.

Should I call for help? Should I intervene? My mind raced, but I knew one thing—I couldn’t stay idle, not while there was someone in distress and potentially in danger just a wall away.

With my heartbeat pounding in my ears, I determined to head toward the escalating chaos. A loud bang echoed from next door, then silence. My hands flew to my mouth, and a gasp of horror caught in my throat, fear seizing me as I retreated to the bed. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard—a gunshot.

Time seemed to freeze in those dreadful moments. Silence descended, stretching into an eerie void, and my mind whirred

with a thousand thoughts. Did they kill the man? Who were these men, and why were they after Emilio?

Oh my gosh! Did they want to kill Emilio?!

Panic gripped my throat as I struggled to make sense of what was happening. The idea of rushing out and confronting armed men felt not just dangerous but foolhardy. I sank on the edge of the bed. I was no detective, no action hero. Fear rendered me immobile as I suddenly realized I was in perilous proximity to at least one killer.

My imagination ran wild, conjuring up vivid pictures of bloodstained walls, helpless victims, and the cold brutality of the perpetrators. What if they decided to move to my room next?

Should I call the police? The hotel management? But what if they found out I had overheard everything? What if they decided to silence any witnesses?

I forced myself to take deep breaths, trying to steady my racing heart. I reached for my phone on the nightstand, preparing to dial for help. Pounding started on the door to my room with the same ferocity as before, and the dreaded words were shouted again.

“Apri questa porta!” (Open this door!)

My heart raced even faster, if that was possible. I froze in horror, clutching the phone with trembling hands. I prayed, hoped, that if I stayed utterly silent, they would think the room was empty and move on.

I closed my eyes and bunched up on the bed with my arms around my legs. The pounding and shouting continued. The sound of my breath was loud to my ears.

Would they burst in?

Finally, after what felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes, the shouting stopped. The banging ceased, and their footsteps retreated. I stayed curled up on the bed, listening intently, afraid they might return.

When I dared to open my eyes and move, I felt like a survivor emerging from a battlefield. Trembling, I sat up, still holding my phone. My hands were clammy, and my heart still pounded, but the immediate threat seemed to have passed.

Now, the agonizing question remained—what should I do next?

Was it safe to leave the room, or should I remain hidden and call for help?

Chapter 9

Emilio

It was a typical day at Royalty Rentals. Proposals from potential collaborators lay on my desk but my mind was distracted. It kept wandering to the events of the previous night—vivid memories of what Griselda and I had shared kept replaying in my thoughts.

Her face flushed with desire, her moans echoing in my ears... everything about her held an allure to me.

The more I tried to concentrate on the proposals, the more my thoughts drifted back to her. I couldn't pinpoint what it was about her that drew me in so powerfully. Was it her confidence, her laughter, or simply the chemistry we shared that night? Whatever it was, it had left me fighting with the desire to see her again.

However, reality set in when I remembered that I had left in the middle of the night without a word. How would she feel about that? Would she even want to see me again? A part of me wanted to reach out to her to clear the air and express my

genuine interest, but the target painted on my back stopped me.

I sighed, trying to shake off these distracting thoughts and focus on the business at hand. I dragged the proposals closer to me and began to sift through them, considering the potential benefits and risks of each partnership.

A knock on the door pulled my attention away.

“Come in!”

The door opened, and Enzo walked in. His usually composed demeanor was replaced by a semi-worried expression, instantly setting off an alarm in my mind.

“What’s going on?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

Enzo took a deep breath as if trying to find the right words.

“We have a problem,” he began, walking in and sitting opposite me. “Earlier today, after you had already left the hotel,” he began, “soldiers of the Mancini family showed up looking for you.”

My heart skipped a beat. Mancini soldiers were looking for me? In a public building? That was not a good sign.

“What do you mean, looking for me?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady despite my rising concern.

“They were searching for you. Banging on doors. Getting aggressive.” Enzo explained. “However, when it became obvious that you were no longer there, they left.”

I leaned back in my chair, absorbing this news. Why wouldn't they leave me alone? Was I the only member of the Fiore family? It was honestly ridiculous at this point.

In a strange twist of fate, I found myself feeling fortunate for the urgent summons from my father, who had pulled me from the hotel in the early morning hours. Even though I didn't want him to know, he had caught wind of the Mancini gang having pursued me a couple of days ago, and that prompted his call.

"However," Enzo continued, his voice tense, "there was a casualty. One of the occupants in the room adjacent to yours was shot."

Suddenly, my thoughts drifted to Griselda.

Fuck!

Griselda had been in the hotel! Was she safe?

Enzo's words hit me like a ton of bricks. A casualty!

Panic coursed through my veins as I thought about Griselda, the girl I had left alone in that very hotel. My mind raced with horrifying possibilities. Was she caught in the crossfire? Was she hurt? Was she even alive?

"Who was shot?" I asked with panic.

"A man whose room was next door to where you stayed," Enzo replied, confused at my reaction.

"What about Griselda? Is she okay? Is she safe?"

Enzo's eyes widened in surprise. "Griselda? Who is she?"

“The woman I was with last night in the hotel,” I replied, my anxiety making my words rushed.

Realization flickered in Enzo’s eyes, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. He was clearly taken aback and surprised by my urgency and concern for someone he knew nothing about. He was trying to grasp the sudden revelation.

“You were with a woman last night? Emilio, you’ve got to explain. Who is Griselda?” he pressed.

My frustration flickered, ready to burst out, but I knew I couldn’t fault Enzo for his confusion. This situation was unusual, and I had never been the type to worry about a woman’s safety before, let alone with such desperation.

Because of my ties to the mafia, I had grown accustomed to a certain way of life. Committed relationships weren’t something I pursued; only occasional encounters to satisfy my desires.

However, explaining all of this to Enzo so that he could comprehend this sudden change in me would have to wait. Griselda’s safety was paramount, and it took precedence over everything else.

I took a breath, quelling my impatience, and spoke firmly, “I will explain everything later, Enzo. Right now, please do what I asked. Find Griselda. Confirm she’s safe.”

Enzo nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. He knew when to let matters rest for a while. “Alright, Emilio. I’ll get on it immediately.”

“We need to find her. Make sure she’s safe,” I urged again, emphasizing the urgency of the situation. We couldn’t afford to waste any time.

“I’ll do everything I can,” Enzo assured, now fully grasping how serious I was.

He turned and walked towards the door, but before he could leave, I added one more thing. “Enzo, please... Let me know as soon as you find anything about Griselda. I need to know that she’s okay.”

As the day went on, my focus shifted between my responsibilities at Royalty Rentals and my lingering worry for Griselda. I knew I had to find a way to quicken my exit from the mafia life.

Guilt gnawed at me for the person who had lost their life in the crossfire. I had never intended for an innocent person to be caught up in my world. This was the reason why I wanted to extricate myself from the criminal underworld.

I came to a resolute decision. I would confront my father’s past, face the dangers head-on, and ensure that innocent lives were protected. That was easier said than done, but I had to find a way to sever the ties that bound me to this life, to create a future where people like Griselda wouldn’t have to be afraid of my shadows.

My thoughts kept circling back to the night when I had followed that Mancini mafioso to the old Chinese restaurant—that night had revealed a potential faction within the Mancini family.

I could somehow provide this information to my father. Perhaps it would give us a lead to follow, but revealing to my father about that night's events was no simple task.

My hands clenched into fists.



I stood in front of my father, the Don of the Fiore family.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy. The Fiore family house exuded an air of grandiosity and history, bearing witness to generations of our lineage.

Mathias Fiore was seated on a plush, large sofa, radiating a commanding aura despite his age. His robust body carried the signs of years of life experience, and his face, adorned with slight wrinkles, bore a look of seasoned authority. His hair, a distinguished shade of white, added to his charisma.

People often saw him as a charming man, but to me, the scars on my body spoke otherwise.

I had left this house and the shadows of my family's legacy behind as soon as I could. The grandeur of the mansion couldn't erase the painful memories that lingered within its walls. A place with a rich history, it was also a place that had witnessed power struggles, betrayals, and violence.

Beside my father stood my uncle, Luigi Fiore, a formidable figure in his own right. He shared the familial features but had a head of black hair with traces of gray and a taller, slender frame that contrasted my father's stocky form.

For nearly 15 minutes, I had been standing here, waiting for him to acknowledge me. This was how he treated me, a blend of disdain and indifference. My father's behavior had always been a mystery to me. Why he harbored such resentment or indifference remained a secret.

The longer I stood in that room, the more I regretted coming here, but my purpose demanded it. Leaving the mafia world behind wouldn't ensure my safety; the Mancini family and, likely, my father would relentlessly pursue me.

I had learned that escaping the clutches of this life was no easy feat, and my father's reach extended far beyond the boundaries of our criminal empire.

Mathias Fiore, the imposing Don of the Fiore family, finally looked up from his drink, his sharp eyes piercing through me. I maintained my composure, refusing to display even a flicker of weakness. He despised vulnerability, a lesson I had learned the hard way several years ago.

“What is it that you wish to tell me, Emilio?” he inquired with an air of detachment.

I took a deep breath, preparing to recount the events at the Chinese restaurant and the potential rift within the Mancini family. However, I knew that revealing the truth—that this had already occurred several nights ago—could put me in a precarious position. I needed to present the information as if it were recent.

“Just earlier tonight,” I began carefully, crafting the narrative to suit my purpose, “I was at a Chinese restaurant, tailing a

member of the Mancini family. I observed a violent incident unfold - an ambush resulting in an execution. The individual was carried out onto the street and shot by the same people he had gone to meet.”

My father’s eyes sharpened, and beside him, my uncle wore a similar expression, revealing their shared concern for the implications of this revelation.

“*Dimmi tutto.* (Tell me everything.)” He demanded. I detailed the events of that night, and the tension in the room rose as I spoke.

After a contemplative silence, my father finally spoke. “*Queste sono davvero informazioni preziose, Emilio,* (This is indeed valuable information, Emilio,)” he acknowledged, his gaze shifting from me to my uncle and back.

I nodded, glad that they believed me. However, my satisfaction was short-lived as my father’s stern voice filled the room once again.

“*Ma avresti dovuto agire in modo più deciso,* (But you should have acted more decisively,)” he reprimanded. “*Se fossi riuscito a catturare quell’uomo, avremmo potuto interrogarlo e ricavare informazioni più cruciali.* (If you had managed to capture the man, we could have interrogated him and extracted more crucial information.)”

My heart sank as I anticipated what was coming. My father never let a mistake slide, regardless of the circumstances. He turned to my uncle, a silent command passing between them. My uncle’s face was blank as he looked at me.

“Emilio,” the man who called himself my father said with a disappointed tone, “*Il tuo fallimento non può essere trascurato. Bisogna imparare una lezione.* (Your failure cannot be overlooked. A lesson must be learned.)”

I had known this was coming. I stood still, steeling myself for the punishment. It was a familiar ritual - one that reminded me of the reason why I despised my father.

As my uncle went to retrieve the whip, the silence in the room amplified my impending punishment, and I felt like I was suffocating. Despite my experiences with the punishments, I was never unfazed by them.

My father tilted his head, signaling for me to proceed.

I began unbuttoning my shirt, exposing my bare back to the chilly room.

By the time my shirt was off, my uncle had returned with the whip, which was designed to cause the most pain and leave lasting scars. Its strands were made of leather soaked in a mixture of salt and vinegar, meant to sting and lacerate the skin with each strike. Just the sight of it was enough to make my gut revolt.

As my uncle stepped forward, I went on my knees.

“I hope you will do better.” My father said.

My uncle raised the whip and brought it down with a loud crack.

Chapter 10

Griselda

“So, let me get this straight. You met a total hunk, had a wild night, and then woke up to an empty bed?” Avery, my best friend since high school, chimed her excitement through the phone, the pitch of her voice rising with incredulity.

Avery was the one friend I trusted the most, the person who had been there for me through thick and thin, and I needed her wisdom now more than ever.

I let out a sigh, a mix of frustration and bewilderment. “Yes, that’s the gist of it.”

Her laughter crackled through the phone. “Griselda, your life is like a rollercoaster. Drama, suspense, and just a sprinkle of romance.”

“More like a rollercoaster I didn’t sign up for,” I replied, chuckling along.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Avery asked, her tone turning serious. “Are you going to try and find Emilio after he ditched you twice?”

I hesitated. “I’m not sure. It’s all so complicated. Plus, there’s the danger element.”

Avery picked up on my resolve. “Okay, promise me you’ll keep me updated. Now, what happened after the police arrived?”

“After I gave my statement, the police said they would investigate,” I explained. “They asked a few questions about the men and what I had witnessed, but obviously, I didn’t see anything.”

Emilio’s sudden disappearance after our night together left me pondering. Was he involved with those menacing men, or was it mere coincidence that danger seemed to follow him? My mind was a whirlpool of questions, and the uncertainty was maddening.

Avery, on the other end of the line, knew me well. She sensed my reservations and pushed gently for more. “Griselda, talk to me. I can hear the doubts in your voice.”

“It’s just... I’ve been trying to piece it all together,” I confessed. “Emilio, those gangsters, the gunshot—it’s like a puzzle missing too many pieces.”

“I get that, but we can’t leave it scattered,” Avery prodded.

“The police were called, but they arrived too late. The men were already gone, and the man they shot... he didn’t make it,” I said, recalling the chaotic scene.

Avery’s sharp intuition caught on. “You didn’t tell them about Emilio, did you?”

I hesitated between loyalty and caution. “No, I didn’t. There’s just something... off about this whole thing, Ave. I can’t explain it.”

A frustrated sigh came from Avery’s end, making it evident that she disagreed with my choice. “Griselda, you can’t keep information from the police. You’re a lawyer! Besides, you don’t know who he is. He might be dangerous.”

I fell silent, unable to provide an immediate response. It was frustrating, truly. It was highly likely that he was involved in something illegal, and despite my profession as a lawyer, I was still attracted to him and even avoided mentioning his name.

Avery’s voice softened. “Are you sure they didn’t see you?”

“I’m pretty sure. I stayed in the room and kept quiet to make them think that it was unoccupied,” I tried to reassure her, but the memory sent a shiver down my spine.

“That’s a movie plot waiting to unfold,” Avery mused. “But seriously, Griselda, you don’t want to get tangled up in something dangerous.”

“He’s just... different,” I finally said, struggling to put my feelings into words. “I can’t explain it. The way he apologized, his sincerity. Despite the danger, there’s something about him that intrigues me.”

“But it’s not your job to figure it out!” Avery argued, her frustration clear. “Let the police handle it. That’s what they’re there for.”

“You’re right, I just... I can’t explain it,” I sighed.

Avery paused, trying to understand my perspective. “Alright, just promise me you’ll be cautious. Promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

“I promise,” I said. “I’ll be careful.”

“That’s all I ask,” Avery replied, her voice softening with concern. “Please prioritize your safety.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. “I will. Thanks, Ave.”

Avery lightened the moment with a touch of humor. “You know, I’m starting to think I’m your personal guardian angel. Where would you be without me?”

I chuckled, appreciating her ability to add levity to any situation. “Lost, probably. I’d be endlessly wandering through life’s maze.”

As our laughter filled my office, a sudden knock on my door pulled my attention away. I turned, and my laughter died down as I saw Dave standing there, a grave expression on his face.

Avery, perceptive as ever, picked up on the change. “Hey, what’s going on? Everything okay?”

I sighed, realizing I had to go. “I need to go, Ave. One of my coworkers just entered my office.”

“Alright. Take care and update me, okay?”

“Absolutely. Talk to you later.” I hung up the call and turned to face Dave, who looked frustrated.

A resigned sigh escaped him. His expression held a mix of worry and sympathy, making my anxiety spike.

“Dave, what’s wrong?” I asked, my voice laced with apprehension.

He hesitated for a moment, choosing his words carefully.

“Griselda, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the boss is asking for you,” he replied, his tone serious and almost apologetic. My heart sank. The heaviness in Dave’s voice was infectious.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I managed.

He offered a sympathetic smile. “I hope everything turns out well.”

I forced a weak smile in return, appreciative of his concern.

As I walked toward Mr. Gilbert’s office, each step felt heavier. I arrived at his door, knocked, and entered when he told me to come in. To my dismay, Carmella was standing beside the boss with a smug grin on her face. I immediately knew what she was up to, and my apprehensions intensified.

Mr. Gilbert wasted no time. “Griselda, I need your group’s research on the Johnson case.”

My suspicions were confirmed, and my eyes flicked briefly to Carmella. Suppressing my frustration, I maintained a professional demeanor. “Could I ask why you need it?”

Mr. Gilbert raised an eyebrow, looking unamused by my inquiry. “Since when did you start questioning me, Griselda?”

Just get it.”

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I nodded and apologized.

“I apologize, Mr. Gilbert. However, Mr. Gilbert, I must inform you that our group no longer possesses the research. After being reassigned, we deemed it unnecessary to keep the files, and it seems there was a mix-up during the transition, resulting in the unintentional disposal of the materials, following the company’s standard protocol for such cases.”

His face twisted in disbelief and annoyance. “Disposed of it accidentally? Are you telling me you accidentally got rid of important research materials?”

I met his gaze evenly, maintaining my facade. “Unfortunately, yes. It was a regrettable mistake given the circumstances.”

Carmella chimed in, her voice laced with sarcasm. “Seems like they had better things to do than handle critical research.”

I could see the disapproval in Mr. Gilbert’s gaze, but I didn’t care. “I stand by the decision, Mr. Gilbert. It was done according to protocol.”

He scoffed, clearly frustrated. “This is not the kind of mistake I expect from someone in your position.”

“Maybe some extra training would do her good, teach her about the importance of project research,” Carmella interjected.

I tried to ignore her words, my attention fixed on Mr. Gilbert. “I assure you, Mr. Gilbert, this will not happen again.”

He leaned back in his chair, an expression of frustration on his face. “Oh, it won’t happen again for a while, Griselda. You’re being suspended.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. “Suspended? What do you mean?”

Carmella looked all too pleased with herself. She must have been the one to push for this.

He shrugged casually, his tone indifferent. “Exactly what I said. You’re suspended. Your actions led to the Johnson trial’s failure. Carmella lost an advantage because your team carelessly got rid of important research.”

I couldn’t believe the audacity of his accusations. “How can you suspend me for that? What about my team?”

Mr. Gilbert remained unmoved. “Your team will join Carmella’s. It’s only fair that they help rectify the situation by assisting her in winning the case. It’s a lesson they need to learn after erroneously disposing of critical documents.”

Fury bubbled up inside me. “They are my team. You can’t just —”

He cut me off, his voice stern with warning. “Watch your tone, Griselda. This is your reprimand, and it’s only temporary. If you continue to question me, that suspension might turn into expulsion.”

I felt trapped, boiling helplessly in this unfairness, and Carmella’s smug satisfaction only added to my indignation.

Although my heart felt heavy, I refused to lower my head or slump my shoulders, so I turned away from Mr. Gilbert's office and walked back to my own with purposeful strides. My team was already gathered in my office, looking at me with expectant gazes. Matthew spoke first, concern furrowing his brows.

"Griselda, what happened in there?"

I offered a sad smile, trying to feign nonchalance. "Oh, just a brief holiday, guys. I've been suspended."

Their faces twisted in disbelief, then anger.

"What! Suspended for what?" Sophia demanded, her eyes wide with shock.

I shrugged with a false casualness, fighting back the frustration.

"Disposing of essential research is a big no-no." The bitterness seeped through my words.

There was a collective eruption of indignation in my office. Angry protests filled the air as my team voiced their outrage. It warmed my heart to see how much they cared about me.

I went on to explain Mr. Gilbert's verdict of how they were to join Carmella's team and assist in winning the case. The shock that rippled across their faces mirrored my disbelief at the absurdity of the situation.

"No way!" Matthew, always the honest one, interjected with anger and disbelief.

Sophia exclaimed, “But Griselda, the research wasn’t even destroyed. We still have it.”

Matthew and Dave exchanged incredulous glances, and Luca was bewildered. He looked around at all of us and asked the question that was on our minds, “Should we hand over the research, then?”

Guilt bore down on me. I felt responsible for this mess. “I... I’m so sorry, guys. If only I had put my pride aside and given Carmella the research...”

My team’s disapproval was swift, their voices ringing with support. “Griselda, it’s not your fault. We all agreed not to hand it over. We didn’t want Carmella to get her hands on our hard work and take the credit.”

Their unwavering solidarity lifted my spirits. We were in this together, and we would find a way to fight against this injustice, even if it meant going against our boss’s orders. With a resigned chuckle, I headed over to my desk. Their bewildered expressions were almost comical.

I smiled at them and said, “Well, it looks like we’ve got some packing to do. Care to lend a hand?”

Luca, with anger in his eyes, spoke up, “We won’t make things easy for Carmella, Griselda. She’s not going to get away with this.”

However, I shook my head. “I understand, but let’s not give the boss a reason to fire all of us. For now, we’ll play along. It

doesn't mean we won't find a way to get back at her eventually."

Regardless of what happened, I knew I would miss my team. They had become more than just colleagues; they were my friends, my allies.

"Take care," I said to each of them as they filed out of the room.

"Take care, Griselda," Luca replied, and one by one, they echoed his sentiment.

Though Carmella may have won this round, it would be the last time.

Chapter 11

Emilio

I lay on my bed, feeling the familiar sting and burn across my back.

Andrea, my doctor and a trusted friend, worked diligently at my bedside. As he applied a salve to ease the pain and minimize the scarring, the familiar scent of the ointment mingled with the sterile air of the penthouse.

In this vast room, a haunting silence enveloped us, broken only by Andrea's voice. He spoke with a hint of anguish, asking the question that danced on the edges of everyone's minds but remained unspoken.

“How long are you going to endure this, Emilio? How long will you continue to bear the whip from your father?”

I flinched slightly at his words, not from the pain on my back but from the truth they carried. The icy coldness of the salve slowly replaced the fiery sensation, and my thoughts drifted to my father.

My back was a tapestry of scars, each one telling a different story of my father's wrath. It wasn't the first time I'd been whipped, and unfortunately, it wouldn't be the last. My allegiance to the family was a double-edged sword, a life of privilege tainted by the cruel expectations that came with it.

Andrea, a witness to my suffering and a confidant in my life, muttered his disapproval. "What kind of father inflicts such pain on his blood?"

I remained silent, allowing the words to hang in the air. The truth was, I didn't have an answer. The world I was a part of had its twisted logic, its warped sense of family loyalty. Breaking free from those chains was a constant battle between my duty and my desire for a life beyond the shadows.

As Andrea continued to work on my back, the pain began to ebb, allowing a sigh of relief to escape my lips.

"I've made up my mind," I confessed quietly to Andrea. "I plan to leave the mafia life behind, but I can't do it just yet. The Mancinis pose a significant threat, and I need to ensure they're dealt with before I can truly break free. Otherwise, they won't stop coming after me."

"Finally," Andrea whispered heavily, expressing both relief and concern.

"Credi che tuo padre ti permetterà semplicemente di andartene, Emilio? (Do you think your father will allow you to leave, Emilio?)" Andrea's voice was tinged with doubt. "Considering the lengths he's gone to, I don't believe he'll let

you walk away easily. At this point, I even fear that he won't let you live."

A thick, heavy silence hung in the air, the weight of Andrea's words settling over me. The truth was undeniable. My father was not a man to be trifled with, and escaping the mafia would be an uphill battle.

As the bedroom door creaked open, I turned my head, hissing in pain as I moved too quickly, tugging at my wounds. Andrea gave a disapproving tut, chastising me to calm down, as it was just Enzo. Enzo and

Andrea exchanged greetings, but I couldn't see them clearly as my face was turned towards the wall. Slowly, I rotated my head, being careful not to aggravate my injuries.

Seeing Enzo, I recalled what I had sent him to do and wasted no time in asking for any news. Enzo, though, appeared visibly irritated, questioning why I couldn't worry about myself first. Not in the mood for an argument, I called his name again.

Enzo rolled his eyes. "She's safe."

A different sort of relief washed over me compared to when Andrea had applied the salve to my back. Andrea's hands stopped moving on my wounds. "She? Who is she?"

Oh. They still had no idea about her.

Enzo chimed in, his tone dry, "Yeah, I'm clueless too."

I took a deep breath and began to recount my recent encounters with Griselda.

They must have seen the worry etched on my face because Enzo asked, “You’re still worried about her, aren’t you?”

I nodded silently. The burden of worry hadn’t fully lifted because I knew what my rival, Crino Mancini, was capable of. The Mancini family was relentless, and they would stop at nothing to get what they wanted.

Andrea added, “Wow, Emilio, you must like who Griselda is.”

A smile tugged at my lips.

Enzo leaned against the door frame and asked, “So, what’s your plan?”

I sighed, considering the best course of action.

“She needs to be warned of the dangers lurking around her. We might even have to devise a strategy to keep her safe. Perhaps I could arrange a discreet meeting and ensure she understood the gravity of the situation.”

Andrea snorted from the bedside table, shaking his head. “*Non puoi essere serio* (You can’t be serious),” he said incredulously.

I frowned, “What do you mean?”

Andrea removed his glasses and started cleaning them vigorously while he raised an eyebrow and gave me a pointed look. “Would she even want to see you after you left her alone twice?”

He had a point. I had no idea what her reaction would be. But despite that, I couldn’t shake off the worry, the nagging feeling

that I needed to protect her.

“I don’t care,” I stated firmly.

Enzo glanced at Andrea, who was putting on his glasses, then back at me. “Well, if that’s what you want, we’ll figure out a way to make it happen.”

I nodded, grateful for their support.

I needed to see Griselda again to make sure she was safe and perhaps, just perhaps, find a way to explain everything to her. I just hoped she would understand.



Recovery wasn’t a spa day. My back was far from fully healed, but hey, I’ve been through worse. Pain was an old companion that I knew to manage well enough. Painkillers were my best friends.

Andrea had done what he could. He patched me up and advised me to rest even though he knew how fruitless it was, but the game never stopped. He had headed back to his private hospital after he was done with me, prescribing the necessary medications.

Meanwhile, Enzo was off on his mission, digging into Griselda’s life. Turns out, she’d been slapped with a suspension recently. Learning the ridiculous reason made it a double blow. But I couldn’t help also to see it as an opportunity.

Griselda's suspension could potentially pave the way for my plans. Besides, I was pretty sure I could offer her a way better gig than what she had before.

The idea of our upcoming meetup filled me with both excitement and curiosity. How she'd react to me was anyone's guess, but that unpredictability was what had me eager for the encounter.



In my secret laboratory, the same place I had come to after being pursued by Mancini associates days ago, I was engrossed in blueprints for my latest vehicle design.

This particular design was all about installing an advanced surveillance feature in my vehicles, one that would allow them to record conversations from a distance away discreetly.

The concept was simple. I wanted to create a system that could capture audio data from the surroundings without raising suspicion. It would involve strategically placed microphones and a cutting-edge signal processing unit to filter and enhance the audio recordings.

I couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement as I imagined the potential applications of this technology. But, of course, there was still much work to be done before it became a reality.

Precision engineering, rigorous testing, and flawless execution were essential to ensure that this surveillance system would operate flawlessly under the most challenging circumstances.

As I examined the intricate details of the blueprint, my mind buzzed with possibilities. My mind went to the old Chinese restaurant. Back then, I couldn't hear anything, but if I left my car nearby, everything said would be heard. However, this was only if they were outside.

I frowned.

And in walked Enzo. He didn't seem surprised to find me here, even though I was supposed to be resting. He looked at me and immediately voiced his concern, "You know, Andrea's going to throw a fit if he sees you tinkering around like this."

I chuckled, shaking my head.

"When does Andrea not complain?" I replied, flipping through the pages in my hands.

"This felt different, Emilio. More serious," he said, eyeing me with a mixture of worry and frustration.

He knew how stubborn I could be.

I shrugged, downplaying the seriousness. "I'm just looking at some blueprints, Enzo. Not exactly a full body workout."

I smirked at him, placing the blueprint down. "*Se sento dolore, fidati di me, sarai il primo a saperlo.* (If I feel any pain, trust me, you'll be the first to know.)"

"We both know you're lying." Enzo snorted, crossing his arms and rolling his eyes.

I returned the gesture. He was right. But admitting pain was like admitting defeat, and that wasn't something I readily did.

It was a terrible mentality, but that was how I had been brought up, and it was how I achieved success with my innovative specialized vehicle engineering. It wasn't easy to get rid of such a brainwashed mentality, though I was trying.

He leaned against a worktable, studying me intently. "*Dovresti ascoltare Andrea.* (You should listen to Andrea.)"

I chuckled, conceding a bit. "Yeah, I know. I'll ease up. Promise."

Enzo shook his head, exasperated but also slightly amused. "You better. We've got enough enemies. We don't need you on that list."

Despite Enzo's aloof demeanor, I couldn't deny the concern in his eyes. Enzo had been there for me through thick and thin. No matter how he acted, he cared for me.

"Anyway," Enzo said, "I came here because of Griselda. I've got some intel on her movements today."

My eyebrows lifted in anticipation. "Really? What have you got?"

"She's going to visit her mother today," Enzo informed me.

My curiosity piqued. "Where does her mother live?"

"In the next city," Enzo replied, "about an hour and thirty minutes away. How do you plan to see her?" he continued with a hint of amusement in his tone. "Wait outside her apartment like a stalker, or are you going to her mother's house?"

I shook my head at both suggestions, ignoring his attempts to provoke me. If I waited outside her place, she might be alarmed, and that wouldn't help my cause.

On the other hand, if I showed up at her mother's house uninvited...there was no need to continue along that train of thought. I needed a way to approach her that would give her the space to listen to what I had to say.

"When does she plan on leaving?" I asked.

I needed to get the timing right.

"Around 12," Enzo informed me.

I wasn't even surprised that he knew what time she was leaving. Enzo was a guru with technology. He had probably tapped into her phone.

I glanced at the time on my phone. It was 10:13 a.m.

"I need Griselda's car to develop a problem," I said, looking directly at Enzo, knowing he'd catch my drift.

He nodded slowly, with an eyebrow and the corner of his lip gently tugging upward. "And why is that? What's your plan?"

"My plan will be implemented after she visits her mother," I said.

Enzo laughed. "What? Are you going to offer her a ride home?" He shook his head. "*So che sei più intelligente di così.* (I know you're smarter than this.)"

I turned to face Enzo with a sly expression. "Oh, I'm not going to offer her a ride. You are."

Enzo stopped laughing.

“*Che cosa?* (What?)”

“To be precise...” The words were out of my mouth before I could second-guess them, “You’re going to kidnap her.”

Chapter 12

Griselda

Life had a funny way of playing tricks on me as if it had declared open season on my peace of mind. Not only had I recently been suspended from my job, but now my trusty car, my faithful Nissan Altima, had decided to join the rebellion against me.

The darn thing had been working perfectly fine yesterday, so why in the world was it refusing to start today?

I stood there, staring at my car in frustration. It was a reasonable car, not a luxury, but reliable. It had been my faithful companion for years, yet here it was, betraying me when I needed it most.

My mother, bless her heart, lived nearly two hours away from me. Why couldn't she move closer? But, no, she was as stubborn as they come, insisting on staying in her little haven. I sighed at the added inconvenience.

I contemplated calling the mechanics later, but that wouldn't help me right now. I glanced at my phone, weighing my

options. Taking the bus to the next city was the most practical choice at this point. The last time I'd set foot on a bus seemed like a different decade. My car had made me feel independent, and I had come to rely on it more than I'd realized.

Rescheduling my meetup with my mother was not an option. We had already postponed countless plans while I was knee-deep in the Johnson case. She had been so patient with my hectic work schedule that I couldn't let her down now.

Sighing once more, I hailed a taxi that quickly whisked me to the nearest bus station.

The station was crowded with people bustling in all directions. I bought a ticket, found my seat and settled in, leaning back and closing my eyes briefly. I had hoped to collect my thoughts somewhat during the drive to my mom's place. Now, the bus ride would grant me some reprieve, a chance to sort my scattered ideas.

I sat near the back, looking out the window at the passing scenery. The gentle hum of the engine and the rhythmic motion of the bus lulled my mind into wandering, and it inevitably drifted to Emilio. I cursed silently, frustrated that even when I hadn't seen him for a couple of days, I couldn't stop thinking about him. His image, it seemed, had been etched into every corner of my mind.

I remembered the night at the hotel and the intense connection between us. But then, my thoughts veered to the scars I had glimpsed on his body. Scars that told a story of pain and

struggle, scars I had chosen to ignore in the fervor of the moment.

My mind tagged this as another clue. What was Emilio involved in? What kind of life did he lead? My thoughts started to dance around the possibilities. My legal mind couldn't help considering different crimes he might be a part of – drug trafficking? Extortion? – and the consequences that could follow based on my knowledge of the law.

But why would he be in the midst of such things? The man I had met didn't seem to fit the stereotype of a criminal mastermind. My thoughts raced, painting a picture of a complex man caught in a web of dangerous dealings. But my imagination could only go so far; I needed answers, real ones.

Despite my apprehensions, my thoughts couldn't help but linger on him. His sincerity when he apologized, the fact he didn't play up his position at Royalty Rentals, his kisses...

I blushed at the thought, my core tingling. There was no denying the magnetic pull that seemed to draw me closer to a man whose life and secrets remained shrouded in darkness. The scars, both seen and unseen, seemed to tell a tale that begged to be unraveled.

As the bus rumbled on, the landscape outside shifting, I continued to scroll mindlessly on my phone.



Taking a taxi, I finally arrived at my mother's house. It was a charming standalone house with a quaint garden at the front. The garden was adorned with vibrant flowers, a testament to my mother's fondness for gardening.

I could see geraniums, daisies, and a few sunflowers swaying gently in the breeze. Her herbs in flowerpots grew opulently on the porch.

I skipped up the three steps and found myself standing in front of the familiar door. I knocked, and it soon swung open, revealing my mother. She was shorter than me, a few gray strands gracing her braided hair, which she wore behind her back.

A wide smile brightened her face as she stepped forward to engulf me in a warm hug. Her embrace was comforting, and being here made me realize how much I had missed it.

"Griselda, it's so wonderful to see you," she greeted me with affection.

I felt a surge of warmth and reciprocated the hug. "It's great to see you too, Mom."

She ushered me inside, and I followed her to the kitchen. The enticing aroma of homemade lasagna filled the air, making my stomach growl in response. She began setting the table, and I made my way to the sink to wash my hands.

"Where's your car, dear?" she asked with concern.

"It decided not to start this morning," I replied, unable to keep the frustration from creeping into my voice.

“Really? Is it not a good car? Do you need to change it?” she inquired, trying to make sense of the situation.

“It’s perfectly fine,” I responded, my frustration growing. “I don’t understand what happened this morning. It was working perfectly yesterday.”

I sat down at the table, taking in the fragrance of the lasagna. It looked just as delicious as I remembered, with layers of pasta, rich tomato sauce, fresh herbs from her flowerpots, and gooey melted cheese. The aroma alone was enough to make my mouth water.

My mother joined me at the table, setting a plate of lasagna in front of me. It was piping hot, the steam still rising from it, and the cheese on top was perfectly golden. I couldn’t help but appreciate the effort and love she put into her cooking.

“Have you taken the car to the mechanic?” she inquired.

“Not yet. I didn’t want to be late, so I’ll take it later.” I replied as I picked up my fork, unable to resist the temptation any longer.

I took a bite of the lasagna, and it was as heavenly as I remembered. The pasta layers were tender, the tomato sauce had a delightful tang, and the cheese... oh, the cheese melted on my tongue, releasing its creamy, savory goodness.

I couldn’t help but moan in delight. “Mom, this is incredible. I’ve missed your cooking so much.”

She smiled warmly, clearly pleased with my reaction. “I’m glad you like it, dear. It’s been a while since you’ve been able

to visit.”

I nodded between bites, savoring every mouthful. “Yeah, work had been keeping me busy. Speaking of which, I got suspended recently.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she accidentally dropped her fork, the clatter of metal against porcelain echoing through the room.

“Suspended? What happened?” Her concern was palpable.

I sighed, attempting to condense the tangled mess into an understandable story. “It’s a long story, Mom. But it’s a bit of a mess right now.”

My mother leaned forward, her gaze intense. “Start talking. The sooner you do, the sooner you’ll finish.”

And so, I began to narrate the entire ordeal. With every word, I felt a mix of frustration and relief, frustration at the situation but relief at finally sharing the burden with my mother.

By the time I finished, I had already polished off my food and was on to my second serving. I watched as my mother’s expression shifted from shock to anger and finally to disapproval. It was satisfying to see her react this way. It made me feel like I wasn’t overreacting.

“Those people,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Such disgusting actions, and Mr. Gilbert... he should be ashamed of himself.”

I chuckled despite the seriousness of the situation. “Tell me about it.”

“Why are you still working there?” she asked with her brows furrowed.

I sighed, considering the question carefully.

“Actually, Mr. Gilbert wasn’t my boss before. It was Mr. Adams, but I don’t know what happened. Suddenly, Mr. Gilbert became the CEO of the law firm. I’ve been thinking of leaving for a while, especially after what happened, but I wanted to finish the Johnson case. It’s a massive case, and I wanted to see it through. But now...” I trailed off, shrugging helplessly as I took another bite of lasagna.

My mother frowned, reaching across the table to gently pat my hand. “You’ve worked hard, Griselda. Sometimes, it’s necessary to take a step back and reevaluate things.”

“I know,” I admitted, offering a weak smile. “I just needed to get this off my chest.”

Before the mood could sour, my mother smiled and placed a hand over mine. She leaned in, her tone sneakily playful. “Hurry up, dear. I’ve also made your favorite dessert.”

My eyes widened in pleasant surprise. “No way!”

She chuckled, nodding her head mischievously. “Yes, way.”

With an excited gasp, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of happiness. My mom always knew how to lighten the mood and bring a smile to my face.

As she stood up and made her way to the fridge, I couldn’t wait to find out what she had prepared. I watched eagerly as

she retrieved a dish and brought it to the table. It was tiramisu, the classic Italian dessert that she always made perfectly.

The tiramisu looked divine. The layers of creamy mascarpone cheese, coffee-soaked ladyfingers, and a dusting of cocoa powder created an irresistible visual, making my mouth water.

She placed a generous portion in front of me, and I couldn't wait to dig in. It was heavenly, and with every bite, I felt the stress of the day fade away.

As we enjoyed the dessert, the conversation shifted to lighter topics, and for a moment, everything felt normal. Time seemed to slip by until it was finally time to leave. My mom packed some tiramisu for me to enjoy at home, and as we stood by the door, she offered to drive me back. Although I was grateful, I declined, not wanting to tire her, especially when she would be driving all the way back on her own.

We embraced one last time, her hug lingering for a moment longer.

Stepping down the small set of stairs, I turned back with an afterthought - Fiore, Emilio's last name..

"Do you know anyone with the last name Fiore?" I asked.

The reaction was immediate - a frozen expression, widened eyes, and a smile that faltered. Something was off. The response came too quickly, too neatly, and the denial too strong—a reaction I had seen on so many clients.

"No," she replied, her smile returning, a bit too forced, "I don't know anyone with that surname."

Before I could push further, she turned back inside, an uncharacteristic haste in her movements. The door closed with a noticeable bang, and I was left standing outside by myself.

What the fuck?

Time seemed to stand still for a moment as I processed the strange encounter. It was obvious that she was lying, but why? Why did she have such a reaction? Looking at the closed door, I knew there was no point in trying to pry the answers from her.

I stepped onto the pavement and hailed a taxi. It pulled over, and I got in, stealing one last glance at my mom's house. There was a lingering worry in my mind.

"Bus stop," I told the driver, who responded with a nonchalant hum.

Something caught my eye in the rearview mirror. The driver was wearing sunglasses. It was strange, but I brushed off the oddity, assuming he had his reasons.

As we drove through the city, my attention shifted between my phone and the passing scenes outside. Thoughts danced between my mother's peculiar reaction and Emilio's mysterious life. However, my concern flared up when I noticed we'd been driving much longer than expected.

I looked out the window and realized we were on the highway. Panic surged, and I turned to the driver. "Excuse me, this isn't the way to the bus stop. Where are you going?"

The driver remained silent, unmoved by my question. My heart pounded, the unease growing. “Hey, this is not the way to the bus stop. Where are you taking me?”

But he drove on as if he couldn’t hear me. Anxiety knotted my stomach. What was going on?

I fumbled for my phone, intent on calling the police. But before my trembling fingers could dial the emergency number, the driver calmly pressed a button near the radio, and my phone abruptly powered down. It was as if he had some control over it.

My breath caught, and I felt an icy stab of fear. What the hell was happening?

“What did you do?” I demanded, my voice shaking with both anger and fear. “Why did you turn off my phone?”

He stayed silent, and his eyes focused on the road ahead. When he finally spoke, his voice was apologetic, almost sympathetic. “I’m sorry. Please, try to stay calm.”

Stay calm? How the fuck was I supposed to stay calm when I was being kidnapped? I wanted to scream. The doors were locked, and the windows looked impenetrable.

I was trapped.

My heart was racing, thudding against my chest like a panicked animal trying to escape.

“Let me go!” I yelled, my voice rising almost to a shriek. “Where are you taking me?”

Removing his sunglasses revealing a face that did not fit the current circumstance, he spoke almost apologetically, “I’m Enzo.” I had an incredulous look on my face. Was that name supposed to mean something to me?

I looked at him more carefully. He was a handsome man with short black hair and warm, gray eyes. But I was fairly certain that I hadn’t met him before.

He cleared his throat, attempting a reassuring tone. “I’m a close friend of Emilio’s, and I’m taking you to him.”

Emilio!

Well, that name I knew, but why was Emilio orchestrating all this? Why this elaborate charade of a taxi ride? Why didn’t he reach out directly? If he could send a taxi straight to my mother’s one town over from where we met, surely he could get his hands on my phone number?

I shook my head in disbelief. More and more questions kept piling up around this disconcerting man. I needed answers, and this Enzo guy apparently held the key to unlocking at least some of this unnerving mystery.

“Emilio?” I repeated, the name rolling off my tongue with a mix of apprehension and intrigue.

“*Sì*. (Yes.)” Enzo confirmed in a calm voice.

“And who are you to Emilio?” I pressed, my voice tinged with both frustration and genuine curiosity. “Why couldn’t he just talk to me directly?”

Enzo offered a wry smile as if understanding my confusion and frustration. “Emilio believes you wouldn’t listen to him if he approached you directly. This... unconventional approach was his idea.”

I was torn between anger and a strange sense of curiosity. Emilio had gone to such lengths to speak to me? It was baffling and infuriating at the same time. My emotions were in a mess, and I didn’t know what to make of it.

All I knew was that I needed answers, and I was about to get them, one way or another.

Chapter 13

Emilio

My penthouse had never felt so confining, so stifling before. I paced back and forth in the grand living room, my footsteps echoing off the sleek, polished marble floor. Nervous energy coursed through me, crackling like an electric current.

Enzo had delivered the message that he had Griselda with him. The thought sent a surge of anticipation through me, a flicker of relief that she was safe, but then quickly turned into dread.

How would she react? What would she say when she saw me? After all, this whole charade was my idea. I had no way of predicting how she'd take it. Would she be furious, feeling threatened and deceived? Would she succumb to fear once I revealed to her all of what was happening?

The clock on the wall seemed to be mocking me, its hands inching forward at an agonizingly slow pace. I ran a hand through my hair, tugging at the locks in a futile attempt to calm my nerves.

I had rehearsed what I would say and how I would explain everything, but now that the moment was here, my carefully crafted words seemed to desert me.

What if she won't listen? What if she refuses to give me a chance to explain? The very thought twisted my gut into knots. I couldn't bear the idea of losing her trust, of seeing disappointment in her eyes, of having her turn away from me.

The sound of the door opening made me freeze in my tracks. I turned towards it, my heart in my throat. Enzo walked in, and for a moment, I held my breath. Then I saw her. Griselda, standing there, looking both pained and upset.

My eyes zeroed in on her, making everything else fade into the background. The soft glow of the room's lights highlighted her features, painting her with a gentle warmth.

She was here.

It had been several days since I had last seen her, but it felt like it had been years. I took a step forward, my feet almost moving of their own accord.

She turned towards me, and our eyes locked. Her hazel gaze held a mixture of emotions— surprise, apprehension, maybe even a flicker of relief, but most of all, anger.

It was a whirlwind of feelings, and I didn't know where to start.

“Griselda,” I began, my voice barely above a whisper, the tumult within me a stark contrast to the hushed tones. “I... I know this is a lot to take in, and I understand if you're angry.”

Her expression twisted with a mixture of confusion, frustration, and perhaps disbelief.

And then, without warning, her hand swung, and the sharp sting of her palm meeting my cheek jolted through me.

Stunned silence filled the room, freezing the air.

Enzo's face shifted, his eyes burning with a protective fervor, but I held out a hand. I knew he wanted to retaliate, to defend me, but I shook my head subtly, signaling for him to hold back. This was something I had anticipated, something I had braced myself for.

I met Griselda's gaze, her eyes flashing with fire. The throbbing sensation in my cheek was nothing compared to the ache in my heart, realizing the pain I had caused her. The breach of trust must have driven her to act out.

My hand gently touched the spot where her slap had landed, and my fingers cool against the lingering warmth on my cheek.

"I deserved that," I admitted, my voice calm.

Griselda took a step back, her surprise at her actions apparent. Her features contorted as if struggling with the aftermath of her impulsive act.

"I... I'm sorry," she stammered, regret filling her eyes. "I just —"

"It's okay," I interrupted gently. "I expected this reaction. I understand your anger."

My calm demeanor seemed to ease some of her worry. But behind that understanding, I felt the weight of the moment. This was a test, a crucible that would define what lay ahead for us. I had made a choice, and now it was up to Griselda to decide if she could accept it.

“I need you to know that every step I took, every decision I made, was to protect you,” I explained, my tone sincere, the honesty of my words laid bare.

“I know it was a breach of trust, and I can’t apologize enough for that. But, Griselda, you have become very precious to me, and that drove me to do whatever it took to keep you safe.”

She listened, her eyes searching mine. It was a fragile moment, the outcome uncertain. My heart beat erratically, the anticipation clawing at my chest.

Finally, she nodded, a slight easing of her tensed shoulders evident.

“I need time to process all of this,” she admitted, her voice wavering. “But I’m willing to hear you out.”

Relief washed over me as Griselda’s initial anger seemed to dissipate, replaced by a more measured, albeit cautious, stance.

“I understand why you’re upset. This situation is far from ideal, and I regret that you had to be dragged into it.” I apologized again.

Griselda remained wary, her eyes still holding a glint of suspicion.

“There were men who came to the hotel looking for me,” I proceeded cautiously. She gave the slightest nod, acknowledging my words. “They won’t hesitate to harm anyone close to me.” I watched her carefully, gauging her reaction.

She seemed to digest this information, her expression composed. “So, you’re worried that they’ll come after me?”

“Yes,” I affirmed.

“But why didn’t you just talk to me about it?” she challenged, seeking understanding.

I sighed, realizing the depth of her frustration of not knowing what was going on.

“Why now?” she pressed.

I shook my head, knowing that there was still so much at risk.

“I’m telling you now because I was afraid you might be in danger,” I confessed, my voice heavy with regret. “I was also afraid that if I approached you directly, you wouldn’t want to listen. This way, you had no choice but to hear me out.”

Griselda looked at me, a mixture of emotions playing across her face. It was an incredibly difficult situation, and I wish I could have handled it differently but at this moment, being honest was the only choice I had left.

She still didn’t speak, so I pressed on. “It was a difficult decision, and I acted on instinct, but now, I promise to be honest with you and tell you everything.”

Griselda looked at me warily, her eyes searching mine for sincerity.

“The truth?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I’ll tell you everything: no more secrets, no more half-truths. I want you to know that I genuinely care for you, and I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“Alright,” she said in a cautious tone.

I gestured for her to sit on the couch, and I took a seat across from her, gathering my thoughts.

Enzo lingered nearby, clearly still wary, but I signaled that it was fine for him to leave. He shot me one last concerned look before closing the door behind him.

Griselda was leaning forward slightly, her eyes locked onto mine. I took a deep breath, my gaze steady as I began to unveil the truth.

“I truly am part of the mafia,” I stated plainly, watching her reaction.

Her face contorted into a mix of disbelief and shock, and her mouth opened slightly as if to speak, but no words came out. I continued, wanting to explain as best as I could.

“I belong to the Fiore family, one of the strongest mafia families. We’re engaged in a long-standing feud with the Mancini family, a rivalry that has lasted for decades.”

She took a moment, processing the information. I could see the disbelief in her eyes.

“Your father...?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded solemnly. “My father is the current don, the head of the Fiore family. I’m the youngest son, with an older brother who is the heir to the family legacy.”

I could see her struggling to grasp the reality of what she was hearing, and I braced myself for her reaction. Her eyes bore into mine, and she leaned forward.

“I could get you arrested,” she threatened.

I understood her anger and fear, but I couldn’t help but chuckle bitterly.

“You could try, Griselda,” I said, “but the harsh reality is that it would be a futile endeavor.”

Hearing her threaten to have me arrested felt like I had been stabbed in my already wounded heart. I had known that the truth wouldn’t be easy for her to accept, but her words cut deeper than I had anticipated.

Her gaze turned sharp, anger now battling with curiosity.

“Why?” she demanded.

I sighed, choosing my words carefully. “Because my family, the Fiore family, has connections and power that reach far beyond what you can imagine. We have people in law enforcement, in the judicial system, and even in politics.

Attempting to expose me would not only endanger your own life but also those of your loved ones.”

“You’ll hurt those I care about?”

“No,” I answered truthfully. “But my father will.”

She blinked. The gravity of my words seemed to hit her, and her shoulders slumped in reluctant defeat.

As I grappled with the pain and sadness, I wondered whether there was a future for us. Would we be able to build a relationship? Griselda’s voice interrupted my thoughts, breaking through the heavy silence.

“What happens now?” she asked with resignation.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered my resolve and looked at her earnestly.

“I want you to stay with me for the time being,” I said, my voice gentle but firm.

“What?” she exclaimed with incredulity evident in her eyes.

“What about my job, my mom, my friends?”

I explained, “We’ll sort everything out. You can call your mom and your friends and come up with an excuse. As for your job, you were suspended. There is no need for you to worry about it.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Will I no longer have my privacy?” she demanded.

I softened. “I’m sorry, it’s just... I’m trying to look out for you, Griselda,” Putting as much sincerity into my voice as

possible, I implored, “It’s the best way to keep you safe.”

She sighed with reluctant acceptance. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Chapter 14

Griselda

Relief flooded me as Emilio permitted me to make the necessary calls.

My trembling fingers tapped on the screen of my phone as I dialed my mother's number, my heartbeat echoing in my ears as I waited for her to pick up.

"Hey, Mom," I greeted when she picked up, attempting to pretend as if nothing was wrong. "I wanted to let you know that I've decided to go on a little holiday to clear my mind. So, I won't be able to make our usual meetups for a while."

There was a pregnant pause on the other end, a beat of silence that felt like an eternity. I could almost envision the concern furrowing on her brow, hear it in the slight catch of her breath.

"Is everything alright, sweetie?" she inquired, her worry palpable even through the phone.

"Yes, Mom, I'm okay," I reassured her, my voice a conscious attempt to sound composed. "I just need some time for myself

to clear my head. You know, the situation at work, maybe considering my next steps.” My excuse came in handy.

My mind raced back to the moment at my mother’s house when I mentioned the name ‘Fiore.’ She tried to keep her reaction subtle, but it was distinct, a flicker of recognition and unease. Did she somehow know about their mafia affiliations? How could she? It was a question I couldn’t voice, not with Emilio right there.

“Alright, just be careful and take care of yourself,” she implored.

Emilio, during the conversation, remained a silent observer. I could sense his watchful gaze and feel his concern for me, but I didn’t want to see it. It was because of him I was in this situation after all.

Next was Avery. The phone rang a few times before she answered. “Hey, Griselda. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” I replied, attempting to mask the tremor in my voice. “I decided to take a break after what happened at work. You know, since I’m already suspended, I might as well enjoy a little downtime.”

Avery’s skepticism was evident. “Are you sure everything is alright?”

“Yeah. I just got back from visiting my mom, and I told her what happened with my boss and Carmella. We spoke for a while, and I decided to clear my head.” I quickly repeated the same excuse.

“Alright, if you say so. Just promise me you’ll have some fun too. Send me tons of pictures!”

“I promise,” I chuckled in an attempt to ease her worry. “I’ll keep you updated. Take care, Ave.”

“You too, Griselda. Love you.” I echoed the sentiment before ending the call. Tears prick behind my eyes.

After ending the calls, I looked up to see Emilio’s steady gaze on me. I wanted to be angry at him, to let frustration consume me, but there was something in his eyes that kept my emotions in check. Was it empathy? Regret? I couldn’t tell.

“So, where will I be staying?” I asked, blinking hard. “And what about my things?”

“We’ll pick up your things tomorrow,” he assured me, leading me through his luxurious penthouse.

The sleek modern design and the expansive views of the city left me momentarily breathless. It was a testament to Emilio’s wealth and status, a fact that stirred a mix of awe and resentment within me.

My mind couldn’t help but make a bitter remark, wondering if this affluence was predominantly built on the foundation of his illegal business dealings.

Emilio caught the flicker of skepticism in my eyes, the doubt woven into my expression. A subtle pang of sadness flickered across his features before he concealed it behind a neutral mask. I felt an unexpected wave of guilt, unsure why I was feeling bad for upsetting him.

Still, I couldn't help but voice my lingering suspicion.

“So, is all this... Royalty Rentals, a front for your other activities?” The words held a sharp edge, reflecting my internal conflict.

Emilio paused, glancing at me with deep emotion in his eyes.

“Whether you believe me or not, and I understand why you would doubt me, Royalty Rentals is a legitimate venture, and I genuinely am the CEO. Everything I've told you is the truth,” he responded earnestly.

His words seemed sincere, and for a fleeting moment, I wanted to believe him.

Emilio stopped in front of a lavish door and turned the handle, revealing the space where I would be staying during my unplanned 'holiday'. As the door swung open, I stood there in stunned silence, captivated by the opulence before me.

The room was spacious and elegantly designed. Large windows revealed a breathtaking view of the city below. A king-sized bed with pristine white sheets was placed at the center, and adjacent to the bed was a luxurious en-suite bathroom equipped with modern fixtures and a shower enclosure.

As if this wasn't already impressive enough, my eyes widened as I ventured further. A walk-in closet awaited me, stocked with an array of clothes in various sizes. I glanced back at Emilio with confusion.

He explained, "I prepared some clothes here for you. I wasn't sure of your size or preference so I got a variety of clothes in different sizes just to be sure."

Despite my efforts to be neutral toward him, my heart couldn't help but flutter at his considerate gesture.

"Thank you," I managed, my voice sounding slightly awkward.

"You can freshen up if you'd like. I'll be around if you need anything," he offered, stepping out of the room to give me space, and leaving me to process everything that had happened and that I had listened to.

Heaving a sigh, I allowed myself to fall back onto the plush bed, reveling in its softness. My thoughts, however, were far from relaxed. Emilio's revelations were still fresh in my mind.

The truth about Emilio's involvement with the mafia was like a jolt to my senses. It made me dizzy, and the implications were overwhelming. I couldn't help but think about the scars I had glimpsed on his body during our intimate encounter.

Images flashed through my mind - a world of crime, danger, and a life tainted with bloodshed. How many lives had he destroyed, or worse, taken?

My breath hitched at the thought. Could he have...? The idea was unsettling. The very notion that he was capable of such acts shook me to the core. The truth was that the criminal world came with inevitable casualties, and lives were extinguished for power, control, or even as a means to an end.

I sincerely hoped, deep in my heart, that Emilio's hands were clean. Despite the shock and anger, there was still a part of me that cared for him deeply.

If it turned out that he had taken lives, my decision was firm - regardless of the safety he wanted for me, I would sever all ties with him. No amount of danger could justify being with a murderer.

After making up my mind, I freshened up and changed into a set of the clothes provided. As I made my way back to the main area, I found Emilio engrossed in his phone at the island counter. He looked up as he heard my footsteps approaching, setting his phone aside.

"Hungry?" he offered, gesturing towards the kitchen.

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts.

"I have a lot of questions," I replied calmly.

Emilio nodded, accepting my request. "Of course. Feel free to ask anything, and I'll answer truthfully."

As we sat down, I couldn't help but bring up the tiramisu my mother had packed for me. "My mother packed tiramisu," I mentioned, pointing to the dessert on the counter. "We could enjoy this while we talk."

Emilio's eyes lit up at the suggestion.

"That sounds wonderful," he replied, a genuine smile touching his lips.

I swiftly prepared the dessert, slicing it into portions and serving it on plates. We settled back in our seats, each with a plate of tiramisu in front of us.

Emilio's face transformed with pleasure as he took the first bite, savoring the tiramisu. The expression of delight made me proud, glad that my mother's culinary talents were appreciated.

"This is amazing," he exclaimed. "Your mom's cooking is truly something else."

I smiled back, appreciating his compliment. "She's always had a knack for making desserts. Tiramisu is one of her specialties."

However, I knew we couldn't delay the difficult questions that needed answering so swiftly. I got to the point and asked him the question that had been lingering at the front of my mind.

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

My directness made him choke on the dessert.

He coughed, clearing his throat before replying, "No."

I looked at him skeptically. I had hoped for that answer, but given the environment he was involved in, it was hard to believe. Could someone keep their hands clean in such a dark world, especially as the son of the mafia's leader?

My disbelief was evident, and Emilio sighed, sensing my doubt. He assured me, "I know it's hard to believe, but I'm telling the truth. I've never killed anyone."

I pressed on, asking how that was possible.

“I’ve never been interested in the mafia world, despite my family ties,” Emilio explained.

His response caught me by surprise and left me stunned. I never imagined he wasn’t interested in the world of the mafia, especially given his family ties. The contrast between his appearance and the reality was disconcerting.

He chuckled bitterly at my bewildered expression.

“Is it that hard to believe?” he asked, the bitterness still lingering in his tone.

I cleared my throat, attempting to process his words.

“I just... I didn’t expect this. With your family... it just seemed inevitable. Why don’t you leave, then?” I blurted out, despite knowing that it wasn’t as simple as that.

Emilio let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “It’s not that simple. Leaving the mafia is a lot more complicated than you think.”

“But as the son of the leader, shouldn’t it be easier for you? Won’t your father understand?” I pressed, not fully understanding the intricacies of his situation.

Emilio’s laughter lost its bitterness and became almost incredulous. “You have no idea,” he said. “My father is precisely the one who won’t let me go so easily.”

I could feel the tension as he spoke about his father. It hinted that their relationship was strained and complicated. Despite

not being the heir to the mafia family, it seemed his father was adamant about keeping him involved.

It made me wonder why his father was pushing him into the mafia world when clearly he didn't want to be a part of it.

“That’s why I built Royalty Rentals,” Emilio explained, his voice carrying a mix of determination and exhaustion. “It’s a legitimate business, entirely separate from the mafia, a way to claim something just for myself, apart from my family’s dark heritage.”

He let out a heavy sigh, the weight of his words palpable in the air.

“But leaving the mafia isn’t a straightforward choice. Even if I were to walk away, peace wouldn’t come. The Mancini family would keep coming after me. They see me as a means to hurt my father. I’m worn out by the relentless attacks, and before I can confront my father and break free from the family, I have to deal with the Mancinis. It’s the only path to achieve any semblance of peace.”

As I listened to Emilio, I felt a surge of empathy for him.

“What caused the feud between your family and the Mancini family?” The words stumbled out of my mouth.

Emilio’s eyes clouded with a complex mix of emotions, memories perhaps that he was forced to revisit.

“It was a betrayal perpetrated by my family. The Mancinis have been seeking retribution ever since,” he said.

My heart sank at his words, already dreading the answer to the question that I was about to ask. I hesitated, the words catching in my throat, “Who betrayed the Mancini family?”

Emilio met my gaze. “It was my father.”

Chapter 15

Emilio

“It was my father,” I admitted, watching Griselda’s face pale in shock.

Her features contorted in disbelief, mirroring the very reaction I had when I first learned of this years ago. I remembered that moment vividly — overhearing my father and uncle arguing.



FLASHBACK

I was chilling outside by the pond, just messing around with the fish, when a buzz from my phone made me jump. It was my older brother, Carlo, basically telling me, “Dude, you’re gonna be in big trouble.”

I checked the time and cursed under my breath. It was way past midnight. I knew I was in for it. My old man didn’t mess around when it came to curfew. Breaking it was like signing up for a punishment deluxe.

I jumped up, brushing off the dirt, and panic-fueled adrenaline made me extra careful. I had to get to my room without anyone noticing. Each step felt like I was diffusing a bomb—slow and nerve-wracking. I peeked around corners, making sure no one was around before I moved on.

I climbed up the stairs, and every creak felt like it echoed through the whole house. My room was on this floor—thankfully, away from my older brother.

He's a nice guy and all, but having your own space is the dream. Still, luck had a funny way of messing with you. My haven was just a door away from my dad's study, where he spent more time than I would ever understand.

How unlucky.

The unfairness of it all felt like a heavy weight on my chest. Why did I have to share a wall with Dad's study? It was a constant reminder that he was always watching, always monitoring my actions. I just wanted some breathing space, a place where I could be free.

As I climbed up the stairs, dread swirled in my stomach. I could already hear the loud voices coming from the study, and fear clenched my heart. Sneaking past them seemed nearly impossible when they were this worked up. If they caught me, how severe would my punishment be?

But maybe they were too distracted by their argument to notice me. I held on to that sliver of hope and crept forward, trying to be as quiet as a mouse. The argument between my father and uncle was fierce.

The closer I tip-toed, the more I caught snippets of their conversation. My heart raced as I recognized my uncle's voice, speaking in Italian.

"Tradimento, Mathias! Tutto questo a causa del tuo tradimento (Betrayal, Mathias! This is all because of your betrayal)," my uncle, Luigi, accused in a heated tone.

I froze in my tracks, my eyes widening. Betrayal? What were they talking about?

My father's response was strained, *"Non pensavo che i Mancini lo avrebbero scoperto. (I didn't think the Mancini would find out.)"*

Luigi's voice grew louder and more accusing, *"Sei stato distratto! Questo pasticcio è colpa tua, perché hai tradito la famiglia Mancini (You were careless! This mess is because of you, because you betrayed the Mancini family)."*

I was a captive audience, my mind racing to process what I was hearing. Betrayal, Mancini family, and my father being accused? It felt like I had stumbled across a secret that I was never meant to know about. At this point, I had forgotten about trying to sneak into my room.

My father argued back, frustration lacing his words, *"Possiamo occuparci della famiglia Mancini. Non sono più potenti come una volta (We can handle the Mancini family. They are no longer as powerful as they once were)."*

Their argument continued, the Italian words flowing like a torrent as I struggled to keep up. My mind raced, filled with

questions. What had my father done, and why had he done it?

I tried to comprehend the meaning of what I had heard. Lost in my jumbled thoughts, I hadn't realized when my dad and uncle ceased their heated discussion. The creaking of the door as it was yanked open jolted me back to reality.

In front of me stood my uncle, his face contorted with rage. I glanced past him, meeting my father's eyes. The storm of fury within them sent a shiver down my spine. I knew I was in for it.

The two words he uttered sealed my fate for the night.

"Vieni qui. (Come here.)"

END OF FLASHBACK



Seeing Griselda's face now, I couldn't help but be reminded of that time in my youth. Her voice carried a tinge of disdain as she commented on how she seemed to dislike my father more and more.

A small laugh escaped my lips at how her feelings mirrored my own. It was hard not to harbor similar sentiments towards my father, given our complex history.

"Yeah, he doesn't make it easy," I admitted, trying to keep the mood light, although it was becoming increasingly difficult.

She sensed it, too. I could tell by the curiosity in her eyes. She wanted to know about the rift between my father and me but

that was a chapter I wasn't ready to read from out loud just yet.

I glanced at the time. "Getting late. You should get some rest," I offered, my tone gentle, trying to convey that some things were better left unspoken for now. "We'll be picking up your things in the morning.

She seemed to get the hint, and I was grateful for her understanding. She glanced at her phone.

"You're right," she agreed, setting our plates in the sink. Then, she made her way toward the guest room, ready to call it a night.

However, before she disappeared into the room, I couldn't let the moment pass without expressing my gratitude. She had given me a chance. I needed her to know how much that meant to me.

"Griselda," I called out, stopping her just before she entered the room.

She turned to face me, her eyes meeting mine with a mix of curiosity.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

She responded with a small smile before disappearing around the corner.

Maybe there was hope for the two of us.



The morning sun cast a gentle glow across the city as I drove, the hum of the engine filling the otherwise silent car. The atmosphere between Griselda and me was somewhat awkward, both of us lost in our thoughts.

Suddenly, a beep from my car interrupted the quietness, signaling an incoming call from Enzo. I saw Griselda glance over, her curiosity piqued. With a small smile, I swiped to answer the call, connecting to Enzo on the other end.

”Emilio, siamo pronti per la sperimentazione del nuovo prodotto. Stai arrivando? (Emilio, we’re ready for the new product testing. Are you on your way?)” Enzo’s voice came through the speakers.

”Sì, sarò lì presto, (Yes, I’ll be there soon,)” I replied, glancing at Griselda, who was listening intently to the conversation even though she couldn’t understand.

”Va bene, a presto, (Alright, see you soon,)” Enzo said before ending the call.

Griselda looked thoughtful for a moment before finally speaking up, “I could have gone to pick my things up by myself if you’re busy.”

I glanced at her in surprise. *“Lo hai capito? (You understood that?)”* I asked in Italian.

She smirked, a playful glint in her eyes. “While I’m not proficient in speaking it, I understand more than you’d think. My mother was of Italian descent, after all. Come on, wasn’t it obvious from my name?”

I chuckled at how I had been fooled. Luckily, I hadn't discussed any important matters around her. It seemed there was more to Griselda than met the eye.

"I see," I replied, returning to English.

The journey continued in a lighter atmosphere.



We arrived at Griselda's apartment, and I prepared to follow her inside to help with the packing. However, she stopped me as I began to unfasten my seatbelt.

"I can handle it myself," she said with a warm smile, sensing my intention to assist.

Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, I agreed, "Alright, if you're sure. I'll wait for you here."

She disappeared into her building, and a few minutes later, she returned with a couple of pieces of luggage. Stepping out of the car, I helped her load them into the back.

As we set off again, an idea sparked in my mind. I thought it might be a good opportunity to show Griselda a glimpse of my work. I turned to her and asked, "Do you mind if we make a quick detour?"

Curiosity flickered in her eyes as she questioned, "Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something," I replied, not giving away the surprise.

She hummed, studying my face for hints, and then decided, “Okay.”

With her agreement, I changed direction, heading toward the location of my secret lab where Enzo and some of my trusted workers were awaiting my arrival.

I couldn't wait to share this part of my world with Griselda, hoping it would further bridge the gap between us and allow her to understand me a little more.



As I drove into the hidden entrance of our secret lab, a familiar excitement cloaked me. The routine security checks began, verifying my identity and the car I was driving. The heavy doors slowly opened, revealing the brightly lit, cutting-edge facility that was concealed within.

I parked the car in its designated spot and gestured for Griselda to follow me as I stepped out. Enzo, always watchful, approached us, his eyes narrowing in surprise at the sight of Griselda.

”E’ saggio? (Is this wise?)” he questioned quietly.

I raised an eyebrow, smirking. “Griselda understands Italian, Enzo.”

Enzo’s surprise was evident, glancing between Griselda and me, silently communicating his concern.

I reassured him, patting his shoulder. “It’s okay, Enzo.”

Griselda walked over to join us.

“What is this place?” she asked, her eyes scanning the high-tech setup.

I couldn't help but smile with pride. “Welcome to my secret lab. It's a highly secure facility, accessible only to a select few.”

Her eyes widened in amazement. “But what do you do here?”

I began explaining, leading her through the lab. “This is where we work on modifying vehicles and equipping them with special features.”

She was genuinely intrigued. “Special features? Like what?”

I started walking her through the diverse modifications our team was currently working on, feeling a genuine sense of pride as I elaborated on our projects.

“We focus on enhancing vehicle capabilities, such as advanced navigation systems, self-driving technology, safety features like collision avoidance, and even integrated communication systems. Of course, this is what we work on for the cars available to the public.”

“What about these cars here? Are these cars available to the public?”

“Not at all.”

“Then what special modifications do these cars have?”

“Let me show you,” I said, excitement bubbling as we approached a sleek, unassuming sports car. “One of our special

modifications is altering the car's structure so it appears as an ordinary vehicle to the naked eye.”

Griselda watched in awe as the car's appearance morphed before her, subtly changing its contours and colors until it looked like an everyday sedan.

“This is a hologram covering, but there's more,” I continued, leading her toward another car. “We've integrated a system that allows access to local CCTV networks discreetly.”

She nodded, clearly fascinated by the blend of technology of stealth and espionage.

“Incredible,” she breathed.

“Indeed,” I grinned, proud of what we had accomplished so far. “And you know what? We're constantly working on new ideas.”

She arched an eyebrow, recalling my earlier conversation with Enzo. “You mentioned a new feature you're working on?”

“Ah, yes,” I replied, turning towards her with a wide smile. “We're in the process of developing a mechanism that enables us to record conversations from a distance. Imagine the possibilities for intelligence gathering and surveillance.”

Her eyes widened at the concept. “That's...wow.”

“Exactly,” I chuckled, swept up in her awe.

Griselda seemed genuinely intrigued, asking more questions about our projects, their potential applications, and the ethical considerations we took into account. It felt exhilarating to

share my passion with an outsider interested in my line of work.

We strolled through the lab, and I continued explaining each project, emphasizing the potential impact of our work. Her curiosity drove her to ask more questions, and I was more than happy to answer.

“But what are these modifications used for?” Griselda asked when I finished showing her around.

“They serve various purposes,” I began, gauging her reaction. “But a significant part of it is to deal with the Mancini family.”

Chapter 16

Griselda

As I stood in the corner of Emilio's lab, I found myself utterly captivated by the sight before me. Emilio was in his element. His presence seemed to fill the room, commanding attention and respect from everyone around him. It was a side of him I hadn't seen before, and it was fascinating.

He was engrossed in a conversation with his employees, each one wearing a white lab coat and carrying a board, presumably discussing modifications for one of the many cars parked around the lab.

Not able to hear their discussion from where I stood, I was drawn to watch Emilio's gestures. They were purposeful and expressive, emphasizing the points he was making. His hands moved fluidly through the air, sketching out ideas, designs, and concepts that only he could fully comprehend.

And then there were his eyes. Oh, those eyes. They burned with a passion that was impossible to ignore. I could see that this was something that he not only enjoyed but lived for and thrived on.

I caught myself smiling, my heart warming at the sight of him so engrossed in what he loved.

As I observed him, I couldn't help but reflect on our time together. The luxury of Lumière Heights Hotel, the elegance and sophistication—it all made sense now. Emilio was a billionaire, the CEO of Royalty Rentals, a man whose influence reached far beyond what I had initially imagined. It was both awe-inspiring and humbling.

I felt embarrassed when I remembered how I had laughed at him.

Amidst the hum of activity, Emilio's presence still commanded my attention. I stood there, lost in thought, when I sensed someone stepping up beside me.

I turned to find Enzo, Emilio's trusted right-hand man, standing next to me. His eyes were fixed on Emilio, observing his every move. We stood there in relative silence for a moment as I wondered what he wanted to say. Breaking the silence, Enzo's voice cut through the air, direct and probing.

“What are your intentions with Emilio?” The question hung in the air, stark and unexpected.

I choked on his words, taken aback by the bluntness. My mind raced, trying to find the right words to express my thoughts.

“I... I care for Emilio,” I finally managed, my voice hesitant yet resolute. “I genuinely care about him, though I can't say I approve of your...activities.”

Enzo studied my face for a moment, seemingly assessing the truth in my words. His demeanor softened, and he sighed, a mix of concern and something akin to relief in his eyes.

“Emilio values you,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “He’s been through a lot, and trust doesn’t come easily for him.”

I absorbed Enzo’s words, wondering what happened to Emilio to make Enzo say this.

“He’s had a challenging past,” Enzo continued, his intense gray eyes filled with empathy. “Growing up in a complex family situation, he learned to guard himself. It’s why he’s so focused on achieving his personal goals. He’s worked tirelessly to create a better life for himself and those he cares about.”

Having watched Emilio laugh and interact with his employees was a side I hadn’t expected from a person tied to a notorious mafia family. It made me wonder about him. It was also ridiculous how quickly my annoyance and anger at Emilio were fading.

Enzo noticed my soft smile, a warm expression on his face. It was as if he understood the questions that churned within me. He nodded towards the area over my shoulder, prompting me to turn back.

There, approaching us, was Emilio. Enzo leaned in close as if sharing a secret.

“In regards to what you’re thinking, not everything is as it seems,” he whispered, his voice tinged with a hint of mystery. “The truth about Emilio and the life he leads is more complicated than you think.”

Before I could even ask what he meant or what he knew about my thoughts, Enzo slipped away just as Emilio showed up, his genuine smile brightening the atmosphere around us.

“Everything alright?” Emilio inquired, glancing in the direction in which Enzo had just vanished.

I nodded. “Yeah, he just kept me company.”

Emilio raised an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism in his eyes.

“Enzo? Keeping someone company?” he teased.

I chuckled. “I’m serious.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, but a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Alright then. Ready to head back?”

I nodded again. “Sure.”

And as we left, I stole one more glance around his lab.

As we drove back, Enzo’s words played on repeat in my head. What was it about Emilio that he hinted at that I wasn’t fully grasping? Did he catch what was swirling in my thoughts?

My eyes shifted to Emilio, who was focused on the road. I couldn’t help but wonder how deep his involvement with the mafia was.



The penthouse felt strangely void as Emilio dropped me off, his reassuring smile doing little to lighten my disappointment.

“I have some things to attend to,” he said with a hint of regret.

“Sure,” I responded with a shrug, trying to seem unaffected.

As he left, the door clicking softly behind him, I was left alone with my thoughts. Glancing around, I took in his living space. It was a lavish abode. There was no way I could afford it on my salary. Even though I was a lawyer, I worked at a small firm.

Thinking of work, my mind wandered into troubling territories. Could his sudden departure be linked to the mafia?

I let out a deep sigh, leaning back and resting my head on the arm of the couch after turning on the TV. Its senseless chatter, filling the room, couldn't drown out the questions poking at my mind.

My phone was absent, Emilio having taken it for my safety. At first, I was irritated by this precaution, but after witnessing the marvels of his hidden lab, doubts about his motives seemed baseless.

Minutes they turned into a quiet hour.

I watched TV absent-mindedly, the news anchors discussing events that felt worlds away from my current mess.

The sudden sound of the door opening snapped me back to reality.

In walked a man I didn't recognize. My senses immediately went on high alert. Who was he, and how had he entered the penthouse? Frustration hit me, I had no phone. I couldn't contact Emilio even if I wanted to. I also didn't have his number.

Wonderful.

I eyed the telephone on the island counter, calculating the distance and wondering if I could make a run for it. The intruder, sensing my unease, raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Don't be scared!" he said hurriedly, attempting to reassure me. "I'm not an intruder."

My wariness remained, my posture defensive. Trusting strangers was a luxury I could not afford in my present circumstances.

"Emilio sent me, don't call the police." He implored, his hands raised in a placating manner. I was still not sure if I could trust him until he pulled out a phone—a familiar one. My phone! Immediately, I was on edge.

"I work for Emilio. He asked me to check your phone." He explained while keeping his distance. The pieces were slowly falling into place, but I remained cautious.

His next move was just as unexpected. He retrieved another phone and dialed a number, putting it on speaker. The call connected, and I heard Emilio's voice, "What's going on, Lucas?"

“Emilio, I’m with Griselda,” the stranger said, and I could hear the tension in his voice.

There was a brief pause and then Emilio’s voice, carrying a note of understanding. “I see. Griselda, you can trust Lucas. He’s a part of my team. I’m sorry I didn’t inform you about this beforehand.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. If Emilio vouched for this man, I felt a bit more at ease.

I glanced at Emilio’s picture on my phone’s wallpaper. He had chosen to help me even though we had our differences. That act spoke volumes. It was clear that Emilio cared for my safety and had taken significant steps to ensure it.

I listened intently as Emilio continued, “I can’t explain much right now due to time constraints, but please trust Lucas. He’s here to help.”

As Emilio ended the call, Lucas met my gaze, silently asking if I was convinced now. Slowly, I relaxed back on the couch, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. I took a cleansing breath and turned to Lucas, ready to address my initial hesitation.

“Lucas,” I began, my voice sincere, “I’m sorry for doubting you. It’s just that things have been... complicated lately, and trust isn’t something that comes easily for me.” I appreciated his understanding and continued, “Thank you for explaining everything. I’m grateful for your help and for making sure I’m safe.”

He waved it off casually, “No problem. I understand. Safety’s paramount.” He shrugged with one shoulder.

He handed me my phone, and I quickly checked it, not noticing any visible changes.

“Oh,” Lucas remarked, noticing my confusion, “My modifications are discreet. A more advanced firewall to keep the hackers out and your data safe. Anti-tracking software. So you can phone your family.”

“Thank you, Lucas,” I said appreciatively.

“No problem,” Lucas replied, flashing a casual smile.

And then, in his seemingly offhand manner, he dropped a bomb, “We look out for our own.”

I sat up, my curiosity piqued. “What do you mean?”

He leaned against the wall, adopting a relaxed posture. “You know, Emilio does what he can for those he truly trusts. Us.”

“Oh,” I responded, still not completely understanding.

Casually, Lucas continued, “In fact, not even for his older brother.”

My eyebrow raised involuntarily. It seemed like Lucas was sharing information he probably shouldn’t, but I wasn’t about to stop him. Instead, I pressed further, intrigued. “Really? Not even for the family?”

He shook his head, hands in his pockets, exuding an air of nonchalance. “Nope.”

Amazement and shock surged through me. While I had suspected Emilio's relationship with his father was strained, I hadn't fathomed the extent of it. The fact that he hadn't taken such protective measures for his own family spoke volumes.



As time passed under Emilio's protection, an unexpected camaraderie bloomed between me and some of his loyal men. Initially, I viewed them with a wary eye, cautious of their backgrounds and roles in Emilio's world, but as we spent more time together, sharing stories and experiences, I began to see the layers beyond their tough exteriors.

Our conversations revealed the sacrifices and unwavering loyalties that bound them to Emilio. They spoke of their dedication to him, not merely out of fear or obligation, but because they genuinely believed in him and admired him.

They described how Emilio had saved them from darker paths, offering them a sense of purpose and family they had never known.

One evening, as the city lights flickered to life, casting a mesmerizing glow across the room, I had a conversation with Antonio, another one of Emilio's most trusted and one of the bodyguards. He had a rough exterior, a testament to the life he led, yet his eyes held a kindness that contradicted his appearance.

Antonio began to share his journey, from a turbulent childhood to finding solace in Emilio's guidance. He spoke of the debts

he owed to Emilio, not just monetary, but the debt of gratitude for pulling him out of a life of crime and despair.

Listening to Antonio, I began to see these men as more than mere criminals. They were individuals with dreams, fears, and hopes. Their motivations were complex, shaped by circumstances that forced them into difficult choices. They were loyal to Emilio, not just because they feared him, but because they respected him.

As days turned into weeks, my old beliefs slowly eroded. These men, whom society labeled as dangerous criminals, became human in my eyes. They laughed, they cared for one another, and they bore burdens that weighed heavily on them.

This change in perspective made me question the judgments I had previously held. It reminded me that in a world painted with shades of gray, it was essential to understand the motivations that drove people to the paths they walked.

Chapter 17

Emilio

In the wake of my revelation to Griselda, the dynamics between us subtly shifted. A cool distance crept into our interactions, a space that didn't exist when we'd first met.

Days turned into weeks, and as we continued to coexist in this forced proximity, another shift took place. The initial anger and frustration Griselda held towards me seemed to fade slowly, making way for a kind of understanding—perhaps even friendship.

I saw it in the small gestures she began to offer—a smile, a shared joke, a conversation that didn't revolve around the complex world I was a part of. There was a genuine interest, and it was a welcome change.

Our conversations grew more candid, and we shared snippets of our lives that weren't shrouded in secrecy. Griselda spoke of her dreams, her ambitions, and her love for music. I, too, began to open up about my past, about the struggles that had shaped me and my family.

During these moments, I found myself being drawn to Griselda. She was a breath of fresh air. However, I was cautious. I didn't want to impose my feelings or intentions on her. I had done enough of that already.

There were instances where our hands would brush, or our eyes would meet, and in those fleeting moments, it was as if the universe was hinting at something more, something beyond the quandary of our respective lives.

Yet, I knew better than to rush it. Building a genuine connection requires time, patience, and, most importantly, trust. Trust was something I had to earn, not demand.

Griselda's curiosity about my world seemed to grow with each passing day. One evening, as we sat in my penthouse overlooking the city, the skyline lit up by the breathtaking display of lights, she broached the topic.

"Emilio," she began cautiously, "I've been wondering. Since your brother is the heir, then what about your future in the mafia."

I sighed, having expected this conversation to happen sooner or later.

"My older brother will likely take over as Don," I explained, "which would normally position me as his right hand."

"Right hand?" she repeated, catching onto my hesitant phrasing.

I leaned back in my chair, trying to find the right words. "Traditionally, yes, but it's not something I aspire to be a part

of.”

“You don’t want to be part of the mafia,” she probed.

I shook my head. “No, I want nothing to do with the mafia,” I stated firmly, my tone leaving no room for doubt. “It’s not where I see my future, not where my passion lies.”

“So, Emilio, what do you want then, if not the mafia?” The question was direct, unvarnished curiosity gleaming in her eyes.

“That’s precisely why I’ve built my business, striving for its success. It’s not an easy journey, but giving up isn’t an option.”

Griselda looked relieved but still concerned. “It’s just you have so many men working for you. It’s hard to distinguish between business and... other matters.”

I understood her concern.

“I have a business empire to run,” I clarified. “The people working for me are part of various legitimate ventures. I ensure that they’re not dragged into the darker aspects of my family’s history.”

She nodded, her expression thoughtful as if digesting my words.

She delved deeper, seeking clarity. “Do any of your family members know about your business, your aspirations?”

I shook my head in response, my expression serious and resolute. “No, they don’t. It’s important to keep it hidden,

especially from my family. My role as the CEO of Royalty Rentals is a well-guarded secret, known only to those I trust implicitly.”

Griselda’s brow furrowed with concern, her next question laced with worry. “What happens if they find out, particularly your father?”

Leaning back, I considered the hypothetical scenario, acknowledging the risks. “I honestly don’t know. And to be frank, I’d rather not find out.”

We both fell into a contemplative silence.



Griselda’s curiosity was insatiable, a trait I admired. It reflected in her eyes, bright with interest, as she leaned forward. “Your passion for cars, what drives that?”

I paused, reflecting on my affinity for automobiles. “Cars, for me, are an epitome of engineering marvels and human creativity. To be able to enhance their capabilities their performance and incorporate cutting-edge technology is an art in itself. It’s about pushing boundaries and achieving what others may deem impossible.”

She nodded, absorbing my response, and followed up with more questions. “And these modifications, how do they tie into your business at Royalty Rentals?”

“Ah, good question,” I replied with a smile. “The modifications align with our business strategy. It allows us to

offer unique and customized vehicles to our clients, setting us apart in a competitive market. The tech integration, safety features, and performance enhancements ensure our customers have an exceptional experience. Of course, not every modification we add to the cars is for sale.”

Her inquisitive nature drove the conversation deeper. “And your men, the people you work with—did you handpick them for a specific reason?”

A serious tone set in as I explained, “Absolutely. In this line of work, trust is paramount. The people I’ve surrounded myself with are not just employees. They are individuals I trust implicitly. It’s like having a family that you can rely on, especially in challenging times.”

She considered my words, then asked, “In case things turn south?”

“Exactly,” I confirmed, leaning back and reflecting on my choices. “Unfortunately, in the world I navigate, there are potential dangers. Having a loyal team ensures we’re prepared for anything.”



Day by day, our conversations chipped away at the invisible ice wall that had initially stood tall between us. Griselda’s demeanor started shifting, and I could sense a gradual change in how she perceived me. Her expressions had softened, and she engaged more freely in our talks.

The skepticism and caution that she held at the beginning seemed to be replaced by understanding and, perhaps, a hint of empathy.

The more I shared about my true aspirations and ambitions, the more accepting she seemed to become.

A turning point came when she realized that my goals had nothing to do with the criminal life my family was deeply entrenched in. The disbelief in her eyes slowly faded, giving room to a new understanding. It was a revelation that seemed to reshape her view of me, a transformation I had hoped for.

Our conversations delved into the depths of my dreams and convictions, shedding an old skin, so to speak. Griselda's questions were thoughtful and insightful, reflecting a genuine attempt to understand the person I was. Her inquiries no longer carried a hint of judgment.

Through those dialogues, I witnessed the growth of her trust. It was a slow and delicate process, akin to a tender bloom unfurling its petals to the sun. She was beginning to see Emilio—the person, the dreamer, and the aspiring businessman.

The trust she was starting to place in me was a precious gift, one I valued immensely.

As the invisible barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice crumbled away, a sense of mutual respect began to take root. Griselda was no longer just a person fate had brought into my life; she was turning into a friend.



It was a tranquil evening. The aroma of Italian spices wafted through the kitchen. The simmering pot on the stove held the promise of a delicious meal.

Griselda sauntered into the kitchen, her presence instantly adding a touch of warmth to the room. She settled on a stool by the counter, propping her head on her palm, her lips forming an adorable pout as she gazed at the culinary scene.

Trying not to be distracted by her charm, I continued the cooking process. I stirred the ingredients in the pot, letting the flavors meld.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” she started, her curiosity evident, “who taught you how to cook?”

I smiled, momentarily setting the spoon aside.

“I taught myself,” I confessed. “Once I was able to leave my father’s house, I realized I needed to learn. Despite having the means to order food forever, there’s something satisfying about creating a dish with your own hands.”

She looked slightly surprised, prompting her to inquire, “How did you learn?”

I proceeded to explain, recounting my journey into the culinary world.

“I used cookbooks and watched countless videos,” I confessed.

The stove crackled softly as I spoke, the flickering flames reflecting the motivation that had driven me to master the art of cooking. I had practiced tirelessly, experimenting and tweaking recipes until I could craft a satisfying dish.

Griselda leaned on the counter, watching me intently as I bustled around the kitchen, and the savory aroma of sautéing vegetables filled the air.

“What’s cooking?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

With a smile, I glanced at the simmering pot and then back at her.

“Osso Buco,” I said, twirling a wooden spoon.

Osso Buco was a traditional Italian stew made with braised veal shanks, simmered to achieve tender, melt-in-your-mouth perfection. The combination of tender meat, white wine, aromatic vegetables, and a hint of citrus zest creates a rich, savory flavor that tantalizes the taste buds.

Griselda’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. “Osso Buco? That’s quite complicated, isn’t it?”

I shook my head, the corners of my lips tugging upward. “It’s not as complicated as it seems. I’ll prove it to you. Come here.”

I motioned for her to join me, inviting her to take over the cooking process. I smiled at seeing her so eager to learn. Her presence beside me was comforting.

When the stew was ready, she tasted it, and her eyes lit up with genuine delight. “Wow, it tastes amazing!”

Pleased with her reaction, I was caught in the moment, and before I fully registered my actions, I found myself tasting the spoon she held out. It was an innocent gesture, one that seemed natural in the culinary atmosphere we were enveloped in.

But as Griselda turned to put the spoon aside, her face just inches away from mine, I could feel the warmth of her breath on my skin. Time seemed to slow, and for a moment, we were suspended in an unspoken connection.

She gently cleared her throat, breaking the trance that had befallen us. “How was the stew?”

I didn’t answer immediately, my gaze fixated on her lips. She must have noticed, too, because a nervous look flitted across her features—she lightly licked her lips. It was an innocent action, but it had a profound effect on me. Unable to resist the magnetic pull, I leaned forward, our lips meeting in a harsh kiss.

Her body was warm and soft against mine. The two of us weren’t supposed to be doing this right now, but I couldn’t resist the temptation. One casual kiss had led to another and then another, and then my arm was snaking around her waist to pull her closer before I could register what I was doing.

Her little grunt as her back hit the counter made my stomach flutter. Her hands slid over my chest and over my shoulders to curl into the hair at the base of my neck. My hands cupped her face as I nipped on her bottom lip, and then my tongue slipped

into her mouth. She whimpered, body arching to press herself closer to me, and I found myself responding in kind.

It was dizzying, the knowledge that she wanted me as much as I wanted her. My hands dropped to her waist, and eager fingers dipped under the hem of her shirt to stroke across the soft skin of her hips. It must have surprised her because she jolted in my arms, her hips grinding forward on my thigh and then back again.

I held back a laugh, the desire to tease her for being so easily startled turning into a strangled choking noise as I realized the movement was deliberate, as she rocked forward along my thigh again. I huffed into her mouth as my fingers dug harder into her hips, pushing me to grind against her a little quicker.

“Emilio,” She moaned, low and quiet, into my mouth, and it was perfect, so fucking perfect, and any chance I had of regaining control and stopping myself evaporated entirely.

“You like that?” I whispered, my breath tickling the side of her face in between kisses.

I nipped hard at the skin just under her ear and then soothed my tongue over the forming mark on her neck.

Her moan was one of the hottest things I had ever heard.

One of my hands slid up under her shirt, tickling across her stomach and up over her ribs to cup her breast through her bra. I opened my mouth to ask, but her hand closed around mine, forcing me to squeeze her breast again.

I took the hint, my fingers flexing into her skin and fluttering across her nipple, which elicited another delicious moan from her.

It was a sound that had my cock twitching hard in my trousers. I knew that feeling, warmth pooling low and hot in my abdomen with every jerk of my hips. I was going to cum, and I was going to cum soon. I was tempted to pull away, to stop before I embarrassed myself by making a mess.

“Fuck! More...” Her plea morphed into a low moan as I lifted my knee higher to press harder against her core.

“Fuck, Emilio,” Her voice became thick with want, she threw her head back, and I sank my teeth into the junction between her neck and shoulder.

My hand on her hip reached up to tangle into her hair, pulling her forward until I could press my mouth back to hers, stopping any further words falling from her lips. My thumb stroked over her clothed nipple at the same time she started to grind against me in earnest. I couldn't believe we were doing this in the kitchen.

“Emilio I-, I'm-,”

“Me too.” I hissed in pleasure.

Suddenly, cumming in my trousers no longer struck me as embarrassing.

Just as I was about to reach my peak, my phone, perched on the counter beside us, began to ring.

“Ignore...it,” She moaned.

I planned on doing exactly that until I glanced at the screen and saw the caller's name.

It was my father.

Fuck!

I didn't know why he was calling, but I already felt the cold claws of dread on my neck.

Despite Griselda's soft protest, I immediately stopped and picked up the call.

"Emilio," his voice rang through, cold and serious.

"Vieni adesso. (Come over now.)"

Chapter 18

Emilio

Lying there on my stomach, the wounds on my back throbbing painfully, I sighed. The relief of getting out of that blood-soaked shirt was short-lived. My mind was anything but at ease. The events of the day had left an indelible mark, a stain that would not wash away as easily as the blood from my shirt.

Beside me, Enzo was in the midst of a furious tirade on the phone, his anger directed at my despicable father. His words were venomous, each curse-laden with years of resentment.

I could only catch fragments of the conversation, but the raw emotion in his voice was unmistakable. He ended the call with another expletive. Then, I dialed another number.

Despite the pain, I cracked a smile when Enzo demanded that Andrea, our family doctor, rush to the penthouse. The urgency in his tone was almost comical.

I strained to hear Andrea's response, imagining the doctor's annoyance at the sudden order. 'Andrea got a kick from

defying Enzo's instructions, and patience had never been one of Enzo's virtues.

A chuckle escaped me, but the smile was short-lived as pain flashed across my back.

Enzo ended the call, and the room fell into a thick silence. My thoughts were a blur.

I couldn't help but dread Andrea's inevitable arrival. The man was not just a doctor; he was a scolder par excellence. The idea of his sharp, disapproving tones grating on my ears made me wince even more than my injuries did.

In this state, my mind wandered to Griselda. Her worried expression was etched in my mind—the mix of concern and surprise that played out on her features, especially when she noticed the blood on my shirt. It was a reaction I hadn't anticipated, and it left me feeling strangely exposed.

Griselda was already aware of my turbulent relationship with my father, but revealing the full extent of the abuse and the scars that ran much deeper than what met the eye was something I was still too hesitant to do.

The shame and humiliation that clung to those memories were difficult barriers to overcome.

There was a fear of how she might perceive me. I wanted Griselda to see the dedicated man who aspired for something and not the vulnerable, fractured pieces of a painful past.

Tomorrow was poised to bring a confrontation with both my past and my father, and I knew it would be a grueling battle.

The wounds on my back were a bitter reminder of that.

Enzo shifted his focus from the phone to me, his eyes carrying a mix of concern and curiosity. “So, care to spill the details of this father-son visit that ended in your nursing wounds?”

I exhaled, bracing myself to recount the ordeal once more, this time for Enzo. There was a certain familiarity in telling the story, like replaying a script I had memorized long ago, yet each telling bore its weight, its own set of emotions.

“He summoned me to the family estate,” I began, giving him a brief overview.



I stood in the hallowed halls of my father’s study, the weight of his stern gaze heavy upon me. It wasn’t my uncle, who usually stood at his side during these family reckonings, but my older brother Carlo.

Yet, my face remained an impassive mask, betraying no hint of surprise.

My father’s silence was suffocating, stretching into an eternity. The ticking of the clock on the wall seemed to resonate louder, amplifying the tension. I shifted slightly, trying for a more comfortable position, while stealing a glance at Carlo. His expression was blank...as usual.

Carlo, my older brother, had mastered the art of emotional opacity, especially when it came to family matters. It wasn’t a comforting demeanor, nor was it hostile; it was simply a void.

Through the years, I had tried to understand him. Yet, the mask never cracked, and I was left perpetually guessing what lay beneath.

In moments like this, I wished for a sign, a hint that Carlo was more than the stone facade he presented. I often wondered what kind of a burden it was to be the eldest son.

Carlo hadn't always been like this. In our childhood, he had been different—a spirited and open-hearted brother. But as the weight of our family's expectations bore down on him, he changed.

It was as if the responsibilities and the realization of the world we were born into transformed him, shaping him into this enigmatic figure.

As the eldest, he bore the weight of our family legacy, a burden that seemed to increase as we grew older. Carlo realized early on that he had to fight for himself and, in turn, for our family's status and power.

The ruthless world of the mafia demanded it. The pressure molded him, turning his warmth into a steely resolve, his openness into guarded composure.

I saw the transformation happen gradually, like the fading of colors in an old photograph. The innocence of childhood faded, replaced by a hard exterior forged by the trials and tribulations of our reality. Carlo became the embodiment of resilience, a leader in the making.

Yet, even now, a part of me longed for a glimpse of the brother I once knew, the one unburdened by the weight of our heritage. I wondered what dreams he had to shelve, what aspirations he had to sacrifice for the sake of our family.

In those rare moments of vulnerability, when the walls he built seemed momentarily fragile, I glimpsed the remnants of that youthful spirit. It made me realize the battle he fought within himself—a struggle to maintain a stoic facade while dealing with the emotions that lay beneath.

Carlo's transformation mirrored the evolution of our family.

As we faced the challenging circumstances surrounding our father's inheritance, I hoped to glimpse a flicker of that brother I once knew. The brother who laughed freely, who played without worry, who shared his hopes and dreams with me.

But deep down, I had to acknowledge that the Carlo I yearned for might be lost in the labyrinth of our reality, forever concealed behind the mask he wore to navigate this world of shadows and secrets.

So, when faced with my father's scrutiny, I stole glances at Carlo, hoping for a clue, but his gaze remained distant, his features unyielding - an impenetrable fortress, and I, the emotional wanderer, still seeking a connection that remained elusive.

It made me question if he had mastered the art of detachment or if he had given up on connecting emotionally within the dynamics of our family.

My father leaned forward, his eyes never leaving mine. He pulled something out of his drawer and, with deliberate emphasis, placed it on the table. The printed photos display frozen moments of my encounter with Griselda at the Lumière Heights Hotel.

Each picture spoke a thousand words, painting a vivid picture of an evening I had wanted to keep hidden from my father's prying eyes.

There they were—Griselda and I—captured in stolen glances and candid smiles. Her back was to the camera, a mysterious silhouette against the lavish backdrop of the hotel. But our closeness was undeniable.

The atmosphere in the room charged with tension. My father's eyes bore into me, assessing every flicker of emotion on my face. It was a moment of reckoning, a test of my ability to deceive, a skill honed in years of living under his watchful eye.

Carlo leaned in, peering at the photos with keen interest, adding a layer of pressure I could feel bearing down on me.

My father's stare grew more pronounced, a predator toying with its prey. This revelation was a threat, a crack in the facade that I had so carefully constructed. The consequences of this moment could be catastrophic, not just for me but for Griselda, too.

I tightened my jaw, stifling the emotions that threatened to surface. The fear for Griselda's safety mingled with anger at my father's intrusion into my personal life warred within me.

It was a dangerous game we played, a game where revealing too much could be fatal. I took a breath, summoning the calm that had served me well in the cutthroat world I had been raised in.

”Emilio, hai idea del motivo per cui sei stato convocato qui? (Emilio, do you have any idea why you were summoned here?)”, The sharp edge of my father’s voice cut through the room, and I glanced at Carlo, seeking a lifeline, but his expression remained a stoic mask.

”Non preoccuparti di cercare risposte da tuo Fratello, (Don’t bother seeking answers from your brother,)” my father barked, placing the incriminating photos of Griselda’s back before me.

I managed to keep my face impassive as I looked back at my father. His sharp eyes bore into mine, waiting for an explanation.

”Eri in albergo con la tua donna (You were at the hotel with your woman,)” he continued with a sneer in his voice. *“E la mattina dopo sono arrivati i membri di Mancini a cercarti. Perché non me ne hai parlato? (And the next morning, Mancini soldiers arrived looking for you. Why didn’t you mention this to me?)”*

”Non l’ho sperimentato (I didn’t experience it,)” I replied calmly. *“Ho lasciato l’albergo nel cuore della notte. (I left the hotel in the middle of the night).”*

My father raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. *“So che ne hai sentito parlare più tardi, quindi non fingere di non saperlo (I know you heard about it later, so don’t pretend you didn’t*

know),” he snapped. He glanced at the photo, smirking. “*Preoccupato per la donna, eri?* (Worried about the woman, were you?)”

I maintained my composure, not letting my emotions betray me. His insinuations were clear, and the danger of this revelation hung in the air like a noose. He leaned back in his chair, asking the inevitable question.

”*E chi è lei* (And who is she?)”

I could feel Carlo’s gaze on the photo, and his interest piqued—my father’s gaze, tinged with something more ominous.

Choosing my words carefully, I responded, “*Non è una persona importante, padre* (She is no one important, Father).”

The lie rolled off my tongue with practiced ease, a skill honed through years of deception and maneuvering in my father’s world. Revealing the truth was not an option; Griselda’s safety was my paramount concern, and I would do whatever it took to protect her.

“She was just a one-night stand,” I replied, my voice cool and unaffected—a shallow explanation, perhaps, but one that would hopefully satisfy my father’s inquisition.

My father gazed at me, his eyes sharp and discerning. He wasn’t one to be easily fooled. Instead of challenging me, he stood up slowly, his imposing figure dominating the room. His disappointment was palpable, a crushing presence that made it hard to breathe.

”Sapevi che i Mancini ti erano venuti a cercare. Eppure nemmeno una volta hai pensato che fosse necessario informarmi. Dovevo scoprirlo dal mio informatore. (You knew that the Mancini soldiers had come after you. Yet not once did you think it was necessary to inform me. I had to hear it from my informant.)” His words held a bitter undertone.

Memories of that day flashed through my mind—the anxiety, the fear for Griselda’s safety, my mind consumed with worry for her. At that moment, I was oblivious to anything else, focused only on keeping her out of harm’s way.

My father’s accusations and disappointment made little sense to me, but I held my tongue, swallowing my frustrations and the urge to defend myself. I had learned at a young age that challenging my father was a futile endeavor, a battle I could never win.

Silence enveloped the room, heavy and suffocating. My father’s gaze bore into me, and though I longed to express the conflicting emotions within, I remained outwardly composed.

As long as I remained in the mafia, my freedom to act according to my desires would remain an illusion, overshadowed by the loyalty and expectations of those around me.

I shifted my attention away from my father’s unwavering gaze, seeking refuge in the room’s surroundings. In the dimly lit room, my eyes fell upon a cabinet. My father, seemingly unfazed by the silence, opened the cabinet’s door and retrieved a long, menacing whip.

He walked towards me with measured steps, the whip coiled and poised.

The tension in the room thickened, and I braced myself for the inevitable. My father was not a man to be trifled with, and the pain I was about to endure was a harsh reminder of why.



Amid the chaos of our dangerous situation, Griselda and I found solace in stolen moments of normalcy. We created a place where we could share meals, engage in conversations that transcended the madness around us, and, unexpectedly, find laughter.

Griselda took a breath, her eyes still reflecting the emotions stirred by my revelation. “My family is a lot less complicated, in a way. My mother raised me alone. My father died when I was very young.”

The honesty in her words struck a chord. I wanted to respond with equal openness to share my own experiences, but some wounds were harder to expose.

“I can relate to the absent father part,” I began carefully, choosing my words. “My mother passed away when I was young, and I was left in the care of my father, a man whose definition of parenting was questionable at best.”

Her gaze held mine, a mix of empathy and curiosity, inviting me to continue.

“He was always absent emotionally,” I added, my voice carrying the weight of the memories. “And when he was present, it was suffocating, unbearable. Punishments were a norm for the smallest of ‘offenses.’ My escape was through learning, books, and eventually, building my world.”

A somber atmosphere hung around us, the weight of unspoken pain mingling with the scent of our meal. Griselda’s quiet understanding was a balm to my soul, making it easier to peel back layers I rarely exposed.

“I used to be fascinated by cars,” I continued, steering the conversation towards a lighter note. “My mother and I would watch races together on TV. She was my source of strength.”

Griselda listened intently, her eyes reflecting a mix of sorrow and understanding.

“But life,” I said, “has a way of testing your strength. Losing her was the hardest blow.”

Chapter 19

Griselda

The anticipation between us had been building, a magnetic pull that seemed to grow stronger with each passing day. His presence, his smile, the way he looked at me—it was all part of a force that I couldn't deny or ignore. I found myself falling under Emilio's spell.

The sun was high in the sky, casting a warm, golden glow that bathed the room in a soft light. We stood there, the atmosphere charged with live energy. Emilio took a step closer, his eyes holding a silent question, a desire that mirrored my own.

At that moment, as the afternoon sun kissed our skin, we yielded to the magnetic pull that had been growing between us. Our lips met in a kiss that was electric and fiery, a collision of longing and affection that sent a rush of warmth through me.

The kiss seemed to last forever, and yet not nearly long enough. When we finally pulled away, I felt a sense of loss, an ache for more. Emilio's eyes bore into mine.

“Should we take it to the room?” He panted.

I didn't bother answering. Instead, I grabbed him by his hand, wordlessly, and he followed me to my bedroom. Memories of when we had gotten interrupted by his father flashed in my head. Even though I had berated myself for giving in, I didn't care anymore.

I wasn't going to let anything interrupt us this time. Behind the closed door, the world seemed to fade away, leaving just us and the unspoken desires that had been simmering for so long.

In the quiet intimacy of that room, we allowed ourselves to be pulled by the magnetic force of our attraction.



I smiled when I felt his calloused palms skim over my smooth skin, shivering when his fingers dug in hungrily. He groped lazily at my soft flesh, mapping the dips and curves of my body with practiced hands.

When I'd had enough of Emilio's teasing, I rolled over to face him, gripping his face in both hands and dragged him in for a kiss. The moment his lips touched mine, fireworks lit behind my eyes, as they always did when I kissed Emilio.

Our mouths moved against one another leisurely, as if we had all the time in the world to enjoy each other's bodies, though I knew that wasn't the case.

I panted in a whisper when he finally pulled away, staring into his crystal blue eyes. I scratched my nails through his beard,

drawing a pleased rumble from his chest that made me smile and lean in to nuzzle his jaw.

He wrapped his arms around my lower back and pulled me in closer until our naked bodies were pressed flush together. His hardness throbbed against my belly, a reminder of his ravenous desire for me.

I hummed in acknowledgment, pressing kisses to his throat.

Emilio let out a little growl and covered my body with his own. His mouth hitched up in a grin. He reached between our bodies, deft fingers finding the slit at the juncture of my thighs and began stroking my dampening folds.

“Mm, always so wet when my fingers visit,” he murmured, sounding exceptionally pleased.

His eyes sparkled with delight as he stared down at me, watching pleasure contort my features.

My face heated at his devoted attention, a gasp catching in my throat when his thumb flicked over my clit. A moan was building in my chest, but it couldn't escape past my panting breaths as Emilio's fingers worked their magic on my dripping center.

My hands grabbed hold of his thick biceps, clinging to him as my hips began to squirm, trying to take his fingers inside an aching hole.

“Please, Emilio,” I begged with a plaintive sigh.

Emilio rumbled, reaching to grip his cock. His mouth dropped to mine to give me a heated kiss. When his tongue slipped

between my lips, he moaned as he tasted me, so much more potent from my mouth.

Pulling away, Emilio's expression was darkened with his desire for me, his blue eyes hooded, his mouth set into a firm line. Pressing the tip of his cock to my slick entrance, he pushed inside, groaning as my tight warmth enveloped him.

"Emilio," I cried. His thick hardness stretched me to the point of pushing all the air from my lungs, and I was left gasping for breath.

I raised my legs and clung to his sides, careful not to touch his still-sensitive back. I pulled him closer, dragging his lips to mine for a filthy kiss that was all gasping moans and nipping teeth.

"Feel so good inside me, my Emilio," I murmured when he pulled away, bracing his arms on either side of me so that he could move his hips.

Emilio withdrew from my heat slowly, making both of us groan as the bulging veins of his cock dragged along my sensitive inner walls before he huffed a determined breath and slid back inside with the same torturously calm pace.

Wrapping my legs more tightly around his waist, I held him close so he could scarcely pull out of my tight hole.

"Please stay with me, my Emilio," I begged in a desperate voice, clinging to him with all my might.

I rocked my hips up to meet his thrusts, my mouth open and panting out my pleasure against his throat. The pace of his

thrusts slowed down until I was left with nothing more than the leisurely, tortuous slide of his cock inside me, driving me wild with need.

I pictured staying in bed with Emilio all day, our bodies locked together for hours on end, as I cared about nothing but bringing each other as much pleasure as possible. And, at the end of it, I could imagine the sated, happy smile Emilio would wear as he drifted off to sleep, taking his much-needed rest.

It occurred to me, and I was certain it was what Emilio needed, which made me all the more determined to see it happen.

“Yes,” I cried, writhing beneath Emilio’s broad body, trying to urge him to move faster again, to grind harder against my clit. But he only kept up his steady, shallow pace, fucking me in short, slow thrusts.

Emilio hummed in acknowledgment, kissing his way up my neck to nip at the lobe of my ear.

With my hands in his mane, I tugged his head up so I could look him in the eye. Emilio’s cock pressed against something inside me that made me arc my back up off the bed, a cry tumbling from my lips.

His hips began thrusting into me faster, harder, his cock pummeling my cunt as if he intended to imprint himself inside my body. I moaned helplessly into his mouth.

Emilio moaned as he fucked me.

He changed the angle of his thrusts so that the base of his cock rubbed ruthlessly against my clit, his length spearing deep inside me until it was too much to bear.

I came on a breathless scream, nails digging into his upper arms and clinging to him as I shattered apart beneath him. Pleasure washed over me in wave after relentless wave, my whole body trembling as I babbled my bliss.

His thrusts had slowed as he'd reveled in the feeling of my cunt grasping at his cock, but as I came down from my high, his need for his release redoubled.

Emilio moved faster, thrusting into my fluttering cunt until I could hear the wet, smacking sounds of our fucking, filling the room as completely as the summer sunshine.

Trailing my nails up and down Emilio's neck, I held him close as he took pleasure in my body, enjoying the feel of him chasing his release.

His hands were everywhere, groping my tits, plucking at my nipples, gripping my hips so he could pound into me all the harder.

Then, he groaned as he buried himself to the hilt in my soft, warm cunt. I felt him twitch within me, the heat of his seed filling me up, his grunts and moans of pleasure spilling past his lips and into my mouth.

Once Emilio was spent, he collapsed on top of me, forcing the air from my lungs and pinning me down to the soft bed with his delightful, heavyweight.

He kissed me lazily, lovingly, as we both recovered, smiles curling the edges of our mouths.

After long moments of basking in the aftermath of our pleasure together, Emilio tried to pull away and extract himself from the bed, but I was having none of that. My mouth chased him while my legs wrapped tighter around his waist, holding his cock still buried inside me.

Emilio gave me an exasperated look, heaving himself up from the bed, making me squeal and cling to him tighter as he began to rise with me still wrapped around him like a clinging, needy koala.

I caught his face in my hands and held him close for a deeper kiss.

Chapter 20

Emilio

The soft afternoon light filtered through the curtains, casting a gentle, warm glow across the room. Griselda and I lay on the bed, facing each other, a sense of intimacy and trust enveloping us. There was no awkwardness this time, no hesitation in our gaze.

Her fingers traced the scars that marred my back; each touch a caress of understanding and acceptance. Griselda had seen the vulnerability within me, a part of me I had kept carefully concealed for so long. It was a side that bore the weight of years of abuse, the lingering shadows of a painful past.

As her touch soothed my skin, I debated whether to share my deepest truth with her. It felt like standing at a precipice, on the edge of a revelation that could change the course of our relationship. I took a breath, my heart feeling both heavy and light with the decision I was about to make.

“The battles in the mafia, they weren’t the only source of these scars,” I continued, my voice barely above a whisper. “My father... he had his ways of disciplining me.”

It was a vulnerable moment, bearing my wounds, both physical and emotional. Griselda's eyes were filled with compassion, and I felt a strange mix of shame and relief. Shame for allowing her to see this side of me, but relief for finally confiding in someone.

She reached out, her touch gentle, her fingers tracing the patterns of pain etched into my skin. Griselda's touch was like a soothing balm on the wounds that lay hidden beneath my skin, both physical and emotional.

Her fingers traced the jagged patterns of pain etched into my chest and back, her touch gentle and understanding.

"Emilio, I'm so sorry," the soft murmur of sympathy escaped her lips.

I took a deep breath, trying to find the words to convey the torment of my past. "My father believed in discipline, in his twisted way. When I was young, it started with punishments on my hands—whipping or hitting with a belt. As I grew older, the punishments shifted to my back. He always found reasons—sometimes trivial, sometimes concocted—to inflict pain. And initially, he claimed it was a form of love to mold me into the man he wanted me to be."

The memories surged like a relentless tide, threatening to pull me under.

"But now," I continued, "he no longer hides behind such excuses. He labels me a disappointment, a failure. I'm 35 years old, and I often wonder why I still tolerate it. Maybe it's the ease of leaving his presence once the punishment is over.

Maybe it's the conditioning from childhood. Or maybe I fear the repercussions of rebellion.”

I looked into Griselda's eyes, hoping she could comprehend the twisted complexities that kept me ensnared.

“You see,” I said, struggling to put my thoughts into words, “because my father is the don. His orders are to be obeyed, or there are severe consequences. Death is not a distant threat—it's a reality in our world.”

Her hand, warm and comforting, came to rest on my arm. “Emilio, you're not alone anymore.”

The hope in her voice stirred something within me, something I had almost forgotten existed. Griselda sat up, the sheets slipping down her frame, and leaned over to me. At first, I had no idea what she was doing until I felt a soft touch on my back, followed by another and another. She was kissing my scars.

A whirlwind of emotions surged within me: vulnerability, gratitude, and a sense of being seen and accepted. My heart felt like it was caught in my throat as Griselda's lips pressed against the marks that bore the years of pain and torment.

“You are not a disappointment,” her words came as a whisper against my skin, a soothing salve to my wounded soul. “You are strong, Emilio. Strong for enduring all of it, for surviving, and still standing tall.”

Her voice carried a conviction that my soul desperately needed to hear. Griselda continued, her voice steady and filled with

empathy, “You’ve faced darkness, but it hasn’t consumed you. It’s made you resilient and compassionate. I care for you, Emilio, not despite your scars but because you are so much more than your past.”

I closed my eyes, allowing her words to sink in, each one like a lifeboat pulling me out of the depths of my memories. It was as if a weight lifted off my shoulders, a burden I had carried for far too long. Griselda’s gestures, her kindness, and her unwavering support were breaking down the walls around my heart.

Overwhelmed, I sat up and pulled her into my arms, our lips meeting in a deep, fervent kiss. It was a kiss filled with a blend of emotions that words failed to capture—gratitude, longing, relief, and a burgeoning love that had taken root in the depths of my being.

She softened in my arms, and her legs fell open for my hand. I wasted no time digging deeper between her thighs, my fingers teasing as they wandered through her damp folds.

Slowly, so achingly slow it felt decadently torturous, I pressed one of my thick fingers into her tight little hole, making her stretch slightly to take it in. She breathed a little harder and leaned forward to bury her face in her pillow, muffling her mewls.

I dug an arm between the mattress and her front, my hand trailing up her chest over her t-shirt until my searching fingers found her chin. I gently turned her face away from the soft, safe refuge of her pillow.

“Ah, ah,” I asked softly, “Wanna hear your pretty sounds, *Gattina* (kitten), don’t hide them from me, please.”

She could hear the faint smile in my tone.

Kissing her cheek and nuzzling her neck, my finger still plunged deep into her core, fucking her as slowly as possible. She moaned and gasped freely.

When I sunk a second finger into her slick hole, she let out a whimper to join the lewd noises.

“Emilio,” She whined, clutching loosely to the arm I held bracketed between her breasts, my hand still gently clasped around her throat.

She clung to me as a tether in the endless sea of pleasure I’d set her sail in. Her mind hovered between sleep and wakefulness, focused entirely on how I was making her feel, making her needy.

“So wet, *Gattina* (kitten),” I murmured against the shell of her ear.

Her hips wiggled in a wordless plea for more, and I took pity on her, sliding my fingers back inside her aching hole. Sleepily, she fucked herself on my fingers, and I moaned obscenely in her ear in response.

“Fuck,” I muttered, my fingers stretching her pussy and readying her for my thick cock.

A smile curved her lips as she pressed her ass back into my lap, feeling for herself exactly how hard and throbbing my dick was. She pushed and wiggled until I was wedged between

her cheeks, cradled in the softness of her bare flesh, then worked her hips slowly to rub up and down my length.

I moaned again, shoving my fingers inside her pussy harder and making her cry out in a hushed whisper, “Emilio.”

Dragging my fingers from her sopping wet hole so they deliberately rubbed against her needy little clit, I breathed hard against her cheek, my chest pressing firmly against her back with every inhale.

“Don’t care how sleepy she is, *Gattina* (kitten), I’m going to use her little pussy—because it’s mine,” I nudged the oversized t-shirt she was still wearing up until it hitched around her hips, too eager to get inside, she paused long enough to strip herself of it.

“And she’s going to take it like a good girl, *Gattina* (kitten)?”

I groaned appreciatively as I manhandled her relaxed body into the position I wanted, pulling her hips up in the air, her face still pressed down against the bed.

“That’s my girl, so fucking good to me,” I praised, my hands greedy and grasping as I groped her ass, her hips, and her thighs while I shifted her gently. When I was satisfied, I thrust my dick between her thighs, her dripping arousal coating my length.

“Such a good girl, letting me fuck her pretty little pussy,” I muttered.

“Mm,” She mumbled, already relaxing back into the bed, face smoothing into her pillow.

I pumped between her soft thighs, teasing her just a little bit more each time I grazed her clit.

“That’s it, *Gattina* (kitten); she doesn’t have to do a thing,” I murmured as I thrust my cock lazily between her thighs a few more times.

I groaned, deep in my throat, finally lining himself up to her soaked entrance, teasing her hole with the head of my dick. I fed my cock into her warm, waiting pussy, grunting at the pleasure of feeling her taking every inch of my hard length.

“Emilio,” she whined into the soft cotton cushioning her face, my intrusion massive in her tight little cunt, feeling like it was forcing the breath from her lungs.

Her whole body trembled from the overwhelming pleasure of being stretched out on my dick. I held myself inside her for a moment, leaning down and pressing a sweet kiss to her cheek. She relaxed slowly as she got used to my big cock stuffed deep in her pussy.

“Emilio, Emilio, Emilio,” She sighed as her body softened into the bed.

I waited, my hands smoothing appreciatively up her thighs, over her hips, and along her spine as I watched her reverently, her body going loose and pliant for me once again.

I stayed still until her breathing deepened, and I knew she’d almost fallen back asleep before leisurely sliding my dick from her warm cunt until only the tip remained inside. Then, with

one long, languorous thrust, I fucked back into her pussy, mercilessly hitting the end.

She was dragged away from the brink of sleep, a lusty cry falling from her lips and her eyes opening wide with pleasure at the feel of my cock so thoroughly filling her up and stretching her out.

With a fumbling hand, she reached for me, and I threaded my fingers through hers. Her hands pressed into the soft bedsheets as I withdrew my cock again, then pushed back inside her tight hole, making a husky moan spill from her lips.

“That’s it, take my cock, *Gattina* (kitten),” I mumbled, my big body curling over her as I picked up my pace gradually.

I fucked her in long, hard strokes, pummeling deep inside her body with every thrust like I was trying to rearrange her very being and fuse our two souls. Slowly, I lost all of the gentleness I’d had earlier, stripped away by the primal need to fuck, until she was screaming my name.

The feeling of being wrenched from dreamland by the forceful thrusts of my cock inside her tight pussy overwhelmed her brain and body until all that was left was to let herself be swallowed up by the sensation.

All she could manage was to mewl and whine desperately, squeezing my fingers to let me know she was still with me in the hurricane of pleasure we’d created.

I nuzzled the side of her face, my hips slapping against her ass with heavy smacks, pinning her to the bed so completely she

could barely squirm beneath me, let alone try to meet my thrusts. I licked her cheek, her jaw, and her neck, as I kept stuffing her full of my dick, over and over and over again.

“Uh huh,” She mumbled in between soft, gasping cries. It was the most she could manage. I huffed a hoarse chuckle, my breath hot against her skin.

“My little *Gattina* (kitten),” I murmured affectionately, squeezing her fingers in mine. My lips found hers in the soft depths of her pillow, and dropped a kiss to the corner of her mouth.

A moan rose in her throat, and she turned her head, letting the sound pour from her lips and into my mouth. I swallowed it down greedily, grunting in response and picking up the pace of my thrusts. My cock pounded into her tight pussy until she was floating in bliss, only aware of every part of her body I touched.

She whined into her pillow, “Emilio...”

With my cock stuffing her cunt, twisting up her insides with every thrust, I could feel the pleasure coiling tight in her body and winding up to what would surely be an earth-shattering orgasm.

“Please,” She begged helplessly, unable to form any other words around her still sleep-heavy tongue.

I still had her pinned to the bed, and she was at my mercy, but I was thankfully feeling indulgent after she’d been so good for me.

“I know, *Gattina* (kitten), I know,” I hushed her in my comfortingly deep rasp, pushing myself up and disentangling my fingers from her so I could lift her hips into the position I wanted.

Her mouth moved, letting out unintelligible babbling sounds as her hands gripped the bedsheets desperately. She lay there and took every brutal thrust of my cock.

One of my hands dug between her body and the bed until my fingers found her sensitive clit, the needy button straining for attention. I stroked her softly, torturously, making her jerk under me. I bent forward, pinning her to the bed, and kept rubbing her clit, murmuring in her ear, “C’mon, *Gattina* (kitten), cum for me.”

My pounding cock and fingers strumming her clit was too much for her body to handle and the tension coiling tight in her core snapped suddenly, overwhelming her with pleasure. Mouth open on a scream muffled by her pillow, she was sent tumbling over the edge of her release.

“That’s my girl,” I mumbled in a slightly strangled voice as I thrust harder and faster into her cunt, fighting against her clenching walls. I groaned, pounding into her with a feral need as I chased my release.

The way I fucked her made her squirm beneath me, drawing out her orgasm every time I stuffed her pussy full of my cock, making her mindless, just a writhing bundle of pleasure.

I dug my arms underneath her, holding her tight and pinning her down until the only thing she could move was her toes so I

could fuck her exactly how I wanted. I mumbled praises into her ear as she floated through the aftershocks of her orgasm.

With a few more thrusts and a loud groan, I came apart above her, squeezing her tight in my arms as I pushed deep into her pussy. I finally stilled, my cock twitching in her cunt as I flooded her with my cum, moaning in her ear.

She moaned softly at the feel of my seed filling her up, my cock throbbing gently inside her still-pulsing walls.

“S’good, Emilio,” She mumbled when I thrust shallowly a few more times, fucking my load deep inside her pussy.

When I’d finally wrung myself out, I brushed a sweet kiss against her cheek, rolling her back onto her sides, my softening cock still buried in her cunt.

My chest pressed hot and hard at her back as I caught my breath. She was so close that she could feel the heavy thumping of my heart, and a smile tugged at her lips as she nestled into the warm cradle of my arms while sleep called out to her.

I groaned quietly, pulling myself from her body with gentle care. The sweet emotion was joined by lustful satisfaction when she felt our combined releases leak from her pussy and down her thigh.

Trying not to disturb her, I slid from the bed, and she grumbled unhappily at the loss of my warmth, making me chuckle huskily.

A moment later, I returned with a warm, damp washcloth, cleaning between her thighs with tender, soothing hands, shifting her onto her back so I could clean up all the mess I had made.

A sound caught my attention, and I found her looking at me. A shameless grin spread across my face.

She nodded dumbly, still too fucked out and sleepy to manage any words in response. I grinned again, nuzzling her sensitive little clit and making her twitch slightly at the shocks of pleasure. Eyes slipping closed, she tilted her head, silently begging for a kiss.

I couldn't even fathom denying her, slanting my lips to her in a soft graze before claiming her mouth with a gentle kiss. My lips moved against her with an adoring sweetness, drinking down her soft sighs like decadent wine.

When my tongue slid between her lips, I groaned quietly into her, losing myself in the sensation of devouring her lush mouth.

I didn't know how long the kiss lasted, one moment melting into the next as she sank into the feeling of my mouth against her. My body was heavy with satisfaction. She didn't realize she'd stopped kissing me until my mouth curved up in a smile against her own.

"Sweet dreams, *Gattina* (kitten)," I murmured, my breath ghosting past her parted lips and settling deep in her lungs.

As I watched her peacefully slumber in the evening light, a strong sense of resolve rose in me. I was adamant about keeping Griselda safe. I silently swore to myself that I would do everything in my power to protect her.

The idea of being without her was inconceivable. She had become an integral part of my life, and the mere thought of any harm befalling her was too much to bear.

Chapter 21

Griselda

The morning sun filtered through the curtains, lending a warm, comforting glow to the room. Emilio and I sat on the couch, enjoying the simple pleasure of freshly brewed coffee and each other's company.

There was a playfulness in his eyes, a promise of a story he was eager to share.

"Let me take you on a trip down my culinary memory lane," Emilio began, reclining back with a grin, and I knew I was in for a treat. He had a way of narrating that made everything seem vivid.

"In my early days of aspiring to be a chef," he started, "I was on a mission to conquer the kitchen world. Armed with confidence and a recipe I'd seen on TV, I was ready to dazzle."

"Sounds exciting," I chimed in, already envisioning a young Emilio setting his kitchen ablaze.

"Oh, it was," he continued with a chuckle. "Except my culinary skills were not quite on par with my enthusiasm. The

next thing I knew, I had a mini inferno in my pan. Flames were doing a fiery salsa!”

I laughed, picturing the chaos of his kitchen. “What happened next?”

“Well,” he grinned sheepishly, “panic ensued. I was knocking things over, including a pot of water, in my frantic attempts to douse the flames. That’s when the fire alarm decided to join the party.”

“Uh-oh,” I teased, sipping my coffee.

“Exactly. And then came the sprinklers,” he recalled, a playful glint in his eye. “Before I knew it, I was drenched, my apartment was drenched, and the dish... well, let’s just say it had a dramatic exit.”

We both laughed at the image of a drenched young Emilio during a kitchen catastrophe.

“After that episode, I decided to take a step back and start with simpler recipes,” he concluded, his eyes twinkling with humor.

As Emilio wrapped up his entertaining cooking mishap story, a cozy quiet settled between us. My mind wandered back to the morning we had just shared—memories that were delicate and affectionate.

Unlike the fervent passion of yesterday, today held a different tone. It wasn’t driven by a rush of desire or a craving for one another. Instead, it was a tender connection, an intimacy that went beyond the physical.

There was a softness in our interactions, a gentle exploration of each other that hinted at a deeper emotional bond. It felt like making love in the truest sense.

Every touch conveyed care and tenderness. His fingers traced delicate patterns on my skin, telling a silent story of his affection. His kisses were lingering, carrying a message beyond words—an unspoken connection that went deeper than the surface.

In this intimate dance, doubts and uncertainties faded away. Clarity about my feelings for Emilio emerged like the first rays of dawn, dispelling the darkness. I realized, within these tender moments, that I was falling for him. The stoic exterior hid a man of complexity, compassion, and passion.

Emilio was not the ruthless individual I had once perceived him to be. He was someone ensnared by circumstances, caught in the intricate web of a dangerous family legacy. He longed to break free, to rise above the shadows cast by his name.

As his gaze met mine, a genuine smile played on his lips, evoking a whirlwind of emotions. Gratitude surged within me for the day our paths crossed, for the bond that strengthened with each passing day. I understood that we were both navigating challenging terrains, but together, we could brave the storm.

His eyes reflected a tenderness that reached deep into my soul, unveiling layers I hadn't explored before. In that fleeting moment, I witnessed his vulnerability and his desire to protect

and care for me. It was an unspoken promise but one that resonated deeply.

Emilio carried a heart that had endured pain and torment, yet it remained capable of love. It was a heart I wanted to hold, to nurture, and to cherish. And as I looked back into his eyes, I was certain this connection was worth exploring, worth embracing, and worth defending.

In the quiet intimacy of the morning, I whispered my newfound clarity to the universe—a silent vow to stand by Emilio, to support his journey to break free from the chains of his past. I was ready to face the challenges that lay ahead, for we were stronger together—a force that could defy the odds.



Emilio's phone rang, shattering the quiet intimacy of the moment. He answered and engaged in a brief conversation, his face composed and attentive. As the call ended, he turned his gaze towards me, and I looked up from my phone, catching his movement as he picked up a car key from the bowl on the counter.

Curiosity sparked, and I couldn't help but ask, "Going somewhere?"

My voice was laced with a hint of concern.

"Yeah," Emilio replied, his tone calm but tinged with a weight of purpose. "I have to meet Enzo."

"Is everything alright?" I inquired.

He glanced at me, those dark eyes holding a deep sincerity.

“I’ve been giving this a lot of thought. I can’t keep hiding from the Mancini family,” he said. “If I don’t take care of them, you’ll always have to remain hidden, living in fear for your life. I want you to go back to living a normal, happy life, free of worry and fear.”

His words tugged at my heart, an unsettling feeling creeping in. Did he mean he wanted to go back to his life without me in it? A wave of insecurity washed over me. Did he regret having me here, sharing his space and life?

Emilio seemed to sense my unease.

I nodded, trying to shake off my insecurities. “Alright. Just... be careful, okay?”

He offered me a reassuring smile. “Always. I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he assured.

With that, he left, the apartment feeling emptier without his presence. My mind wandered, grappling with the uncertainty of what the future held for us.

As the door clicked shut, enveloping the room in a different kind of silence, I found myself grappling with the conflicting emotions swirling within. Emilio’s departure left a void, a hollowness that I hadn’t anticipated. It was like a part of the apartment’s warmth had gone with him.

I tried to convince myself that everything was fine. After all, I wasn’t going to stay here forever. The reality of my temporary

sojourn in this life nudged at me, reminding me that, eventually, I'd have to face the world I knew.

But even in this realization, there was a tiny flutter deep inside, a whisper of longing that I had pushed away before but was now resurfacing.

I rubbed my face, attempting to will away these thoughts. Yes, I had feelings for him, but confessing them wouldn't do either of us any good. Emilio had a life filled with complexities and dangers that I couldn't truly comprehend.

Would I be able to stand by him and navigate the storms that would come our way, especially as the son of the leader of the Fiore mafia family?

The somber reality hit me harder as I remembered he hadn't left that life; he was still deeply involved in the mafia. Could he even truly leave it all behind? The weight of that realization pressed on me, a heaviness that sank into my heart.

I reassured myself that it was better to leave, to distance myself. The quicker I stepped out of this environment, the sooner I could attempt to untangle my emotions. Distance would, hopefully, help me dispel these feelings for Emilio. Or at least, that's what I told myself.

Yet, even as I convinced myself of this course, I couldn't deny the bittersweet ache that lingered.

The room, now devoid of his presence, seemed to echo with the fragments of our shared moments, reminding me of the depth of my attachment. Emilio had unknowingly become a

significant part of my life, and disentangling from that was proving to be more challenging than I had envisioned.

Longing for an escape from the emotional rollercoaster that Emilio and the future seemed to be, I opted for a dose of sleep. It felt like the only way to hit pause on the thoughts that were spinning in my head.

Sinking into the couch, its familiar embrace enveloping me, I succumbed to the room's warmth and the softness of the cushions. I shut my eyes, letting the tiredness seep in.

The world, with all its complications, could wait.

In the peaceful confines of the room, I slid into a nap, hoping my dreams would steer clear of Emilio and the tangled fate that awaited us. But even in this transitional state, his image persisted, refusing to fade.

Flashes of moments we shared, his laughter, the touch of his hand—I could feel it all vividly. It was like a soundtrack that refused to be turned off, a bittersweet reminder of our time together.

As slumber gradually took over, I clung to the shreds of reassurance I had tried to give myself. I knew the road ahead was going to be a rocky one, but at this moment, I just needed to let go.



I awoke abruptly, the sound of the door being swung open roughly reverberating through the room. My eyes shot open,

alert and confused, trying to make sense of why Emilio would return with such clamor. However, when the figure stepped in, it wasn't Emilio at all.

The stranger stood tall, dressed sharply, and had a sleek appearance with black hair and glasses. We locked eyes, both of us taken aback by the unexpected encounter.

“Who are you?” we asked almost simultaneously, our cautious expressions mirroring each other.

The room seemed to shrink, the tension building to a palpable level as we both stood there, locked in a silent standoff, suspicion clouding both our faces. The weight of uncertainty hung heavily in the air, like a storm on the verge of breaking.

“I should be asking you that. You're the one barging into Emilio's house,” I responded, my voice carrying a blend of surprise and assertiveness.

It was evident he was not one to be easily intimidated.

“And you should be answering me, considering you're already here,” the stranger shot back, his tone unwavering and resolute.

Our gazes locked, a battle of wills in progress. I broke the silence, introducing myself in an attempt to defuse the tension.

“I'm Griselda,” I stated, a touch of wariness still evident in my eyes.

“You're Griselda?” he exclaimed, a flicker of recognition and intrigue passing over his face.

I raised an eyebrow, my confusion mounting at how this man seemed to be acquainted with my name.

“And you are...?” I probed further.

The stranger adjusted his glasses and introduced himself, “Andrea, a friend of Emilio’s.”

It was then that my eyes caught the small plastic bag in his hand.

“What’s in the bag?” I inquired, attempting to bridge the gap of this unexpected encounter.

Andrea’s gaze shifted to the bag momentarily before returning to meet mine.

“I brought some things for Emilio,” he explained.

“Ah, I see,” I replied, though a cloud of unanswered questions lingered. “And how exactly do you know me?”

He leaned casually against the doorframe, a smirk playing on his lips. “Emilio mentioned you.”

The revelation was unexpected, and my interest was piqued.

“Oh? And what did Emilio say about me?” I asked, eager to understand this mysterious connection.

Andrea removed his glasses and started rubbing them clean with leisure. He seemed to revel in the intrigue, his smirk widening. “He cares about you a lot. More than I’ve seen him care about anyone else.” He slipped his glasses back on.

A flush of warmth spread across my cheeks at those words. Andrea’s observation left me both elated and introspective,

thoughts whirling in my mind.

“Is that so?” I responded, doing my best to keep my composure despite the sudden surge of excitement that danced beneath my skin.

Andrea noticed, his smirk widening slightly as if he could see through my facade. It was unnerving the way he seemed to possess an uncanny ability to perceive what lay beneath the surface.

Before I could pose any further questions or peel back the layers of his enigmatic presence, Andrea glanced at his watch.

“I should get going,” he remarked, his tone casual yet laced with a sense of purpose.

Nodding, I replied, “Of course. It was... nice meeting you, Andrea.”

He smirked again, a knowing glint in his eyes. “Likewise. Take care, Griselda. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

His words hung in the air as he turned to leave.

The mention of Emilio’s feelings stirred a tempest of emotions within me. It was one thing to suspect the depth of his care for me, but hearing it from a person who knew him well added a layer of validation. It made my heart flutter with a mix of apprehension and delight.

As Andrea left, the apartment felt somehow quieter, more contemplative. I pondered the implications of this newfound revelation. Emilio’s sentiments were now exposed, not just to me but to someone else as well. It signified a shift, an

evolution in our relationship that I couldn't quite put into words.

The day continued, the sun painting shifting patterns on the walls as the hours passed. Despite the whirlwind of emotions and the lingering questions, life pressed on. It was a delicate balance, trying to reconcile my burgeoning feelings for Emilio with the complex world he was a part of.

The encounter with Andrea lingered in my thoughts.

How deep did Emilio's feelings run? How had our connection impacted him?

Chapter 22

Emilio

The city's underbelly pulsed with a dark energy as the night swallowed the streets. My fingers tapped restlessly against the steering wheel of my car, the hum of the engine beneath me like a low growl.

The plan was set, and the pieces were in place. We were waiting for the predator to fall into our trap.

Beside me, Enzo adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on the nondescript building in front of us.

"This is it, Emilio. The perfect bait. Crino won't be able to resist."

I nodded, acknowledging the truth in his words. Crino Mancini, the ruthless head of the rival family, was cunning but predictable in his desire for power. Tonight, we would exploit that weakness.

"Let's make sure everything is set," I instructed, checking my guns and adjusting my attire to be ready for any confrontation.

The tension was palpable; this was a defining moment, one that could change the course of our ongoing war with the Mancini family.

Our men were stationed strategically, hidden from sight but ready to move at a moment's notice. The plan was simple yet effective. We had spread the information that I would be conducting significant business at this location tonight, inviting Crino to take the bait.

Minutes felt like hours as we awaited his arrival. The anticipation was almost suffocating, the stakes incredibly high. But in the midst of it all, determination coursed through me to end this pointless spiral.

Enzo glanced at me, his face reflecting a mix of concern and conviction. "You ready for this, Emilio?"

I took a deep breath, summoning the calm within me. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Crino had made a grave mistake by making this personal. The attacks, the threats, the constant violence—it was a cycle that needed to be broken. If there were a chance to negotiate, to find a path toward peace, it would start tonight.

The roar of engines and the screeching of tires filled the night as Crino Mancini's convoy of vehicles approached our carefully chosen battleground.

This was it — the moment where the fate of our families hung in the balance.

I gripped the steering wheel of my car, my knuckles white with anticipation, ready for the eruption of violence.

Enzo's voice crackled through the radio, breaking the tense silence. "Get ready, Emilio. Here they come."

My gaze was fixed on the headlights piercing the darkness. Crino's vehicles were swarming in, like vultures converging on their prey. My men were primed, each one a warrior in this battlefield of asphalt and shadows.

The clash was inevitable, and as the opposing forces collided, the violence unfurled like a ferocious dance. Metal clashed against metal, and the stench of burning rubber and gasoline mingled with the acrid tang of gun smoke.

My car became a weapon, a battering ram in this deadly ballet.

We had meticulously modified our vehicles for this encounter, reinforcing them to withstand the onslaught. The impact of our vehicles smashing into theirs was like a thunderous symphony, an orchestra of destruction playing out in the dimly lit streets.

My pulse quickened as the fight escalated. The sounds of gunfire, the crunching of metal, and the shouts of my men merged into a cacophony of chaos. I focused on the road ahead, calculating every move, every turn, and every evasion.

But soon, a moment arrived when I knew I needed to step out of the car and confront Crino face-to-face. I pulled over, leaving my trusted men to engage the enemy. My heart beat like a war drum as I stepped out onto the battleground, armed and ready.

Through the mayhem, I spotted Crino — the man I'd wanted to face for so long. There was a determination in his eyes, a reflection of the fierce pride of a leader defending his turf. I respected that, but this had to end.

I approached him with a steady stride, a storm of fury and resolution swirling within me. Our eyes locked, and for a moment, the chaos around us seemed to fade into the background, leaving only him and me in this twisted dance of fate.

Crino sneered, lifting his weapon, but before he could fire, I acted. Our battle was brutal and intense.

Each punch was thrown, and each dodge executed felt like a step toward closure. My body was aching, adrenaline and determination fueling every move. This fight was a culmination of years of rivalry and bloodshed.

It had to end now.

As our struggle continued, I saw the weariness in Crino's eyes, the cracks in his composure. He was a formidable opponent, but I knew we had the upper hand.

Finally, I seized an opportunity, piercing a bullet through his torso. He was down.

"It's over, Crino," I stated, my voice laced with fatigue and the weight of our history.

The deafening echoes of the confrontation were slowly replaced by an eerie silence as Crino Mancini, the man I had fought, lay on the ground, defeated and dying. His breaths

were shallow, each one a fleeting reminder of the battle that had just taken place.

As I stood over him, panting and trying to collect my thoughts in the wake of the battle, Crino wheezed out a twisted laugh, a chilling sound that sent shivers down my spine. His eyes bore into mine, a malevolent glint betraying the darkness that still lurked within him.

“Why, Crino?” I demanded, struggling to catch my breath. “What was the real reason behind all of this bloodshed?”

Crino coughed, blood staining his lips. “*Vendetta, Emilio* (Revenge, Emilio,)” he spat out. “Revenge against Mathias Fiore. That’s what this was all about.”

“Mathias Fiore destroyed my family,” Crino wheezed, his voice dripping with venom. “I wanted his blood to stain the earth, and for that, I needed to crush his son, to make him suffer.”

My mind raced, attempting to process his words. My father had certainly done terrible things in his lifetime, and I knew there was some betrayal involved, but the scale of Crino’s vendetta was staggering.

“You think killing me will avenge your family?” I asked incredulously. “This cycle of vengeance will never end.”

Crino let out another bitter laugh mingled with pain. “Oh, Emilio, you’re so naive. Killing you was just a small part of the plan. My revenge against Mathias wasn’t going to end with your death. Do you think I’m the one who planned this?”

A cold shiver slithered down my spine as the implications of his words settled in. Had Crino just been a pawn in a much larger game? Was he implying that someone else had orchestrated this vendetta, manipulating the Mancini family to enact their dark scheme against the Fiores?

“You’re finished, Emilio,” Crino spat, his laughter now more desperate, more deranged. “Even in death, you’ll never escape the truth. The true mastermind is beyond your reach.”

Anguish and frustration surged through me. Crino’s maniacal laughter echoed in my ears, a cruel reminder of the tangled web of secrets and feuds that had led us here. Suddenly, I felt like a puppet in a much grander show, the strings pulled by an invisible hand, and my father’s sins seemed to be the linchpin of it all.

“Tell me!” I demanded, my voice strained with urgency. “Who is behind all this? Who orchestrated this vendetta?”

Crino’s laughter subsided, replaced by a chilling smile. “You’re too late, Emilio. The puppet master is already at play, and you’ll dance to their tune until your last breath.”

A wave of helplessness washed over me. Crino’s eyes flickered, his life slipping away. His revelation had opened a chasm of unanswered questions, a void that threatened to consume me.

“I’ll find them,” I vowed, my voice a low growl.

Crino’s eyes glazed over, and he breathed his last. His revelation was another weight added to my shoulders. My

mind raced with the consequences of his words.

It seemed this blood feud was far from over. The true orchestrator lurked in the shadows, pulling the strings and manipulating families for their sinister purposes.

I would unearth the truth, I would unravel this dark plot. I had to bring an end to this lurking shadow of death that had plagued our lives for so long.

Chapter 23

Griselda

In those hectic days when Emilio was deep in his plans to deal with the Mancini family, I found myself spending a lot of time alone. The apartment felt empty without him, and it was hard not to worry about the future constantly.

One day, as I sat on the couch, a wave of nausea hit me out of nowhere. I tried to brush it off, blaming it on the stress that had become my regular companion. I hadn't been feeling like myself for a couple of days.

At first, I attributed it to being cooped up in the silent penthouse every day. I was used to working hard at the firm, keeping my mind occupied. Here, there was too much empty time, just begging to be filled with stress, fear, and worry.

Emilio's safety had consumed my mind, the dangers that seemed to close in on us with each passing day. The constant state of alert and dread had taken a toll on my physical well-being. Feeling queasy had become a part of my daily existence, and although I'd tried to push through it, the persistent discomfort left me drained.

Each day spent in the penthouse without Emilio was a day filled with anxiety, and my longing for his safe return was only eclipsed by my overwhelming relief when he came home unharmed.

I couldn't help but wonder, though, if this amount of nausea were truly just a result of heightened stress and anxiety. I wasn't just concerned for my own sake; Emilio was walking a treacherously dangerous path. The perils that encircled our lives were as much his burden as they were mine.

Andrea, who I only recently found out was a doctor, popped by to drop off medical supplies for Emilio. Emilio was held up somewhere, so Andrea was running late, adding to the slight chaos of the moment.

We were knee-deep in discussions about bandages and medications when my stomach churned again, making me feel queasy and off. Andrea noticed my discomfort and paused, concern written all over his face.

“You feeling alright?” he asked, genuine worry in his voice.

I managed a weak smile, “Yeah, just the stress, I think.”

But Andrea, with his medical instincts, wasn't convinced.

“If you're not feeling good, it's important to take care of yourself,” he insisted. Andrea, being the ever-attentive doctor, wasn't one to take health lightly. “You're sure it's not a bug?”

I tried to reassure both him and myself. “Yeah, it's just a minor discomfort, probably nothing.”

Andrea could see through my feeble attempt at a smile. He paused, no longer interested in our discussion about medical supplies.

“Nothing, huh?” he echoed, not buying it entirely.

I chuckled nervously, “Yeah, you know, dealing with my uprooted life and all that entails. It can be a bit overwhelming.”

But Andrea was now in full doctor mode. He pressed on, “You’ve been feeling this way for a couple of days?” His voice sounded all professional; gone was the friendly banter.

I hesitated. Andrea was a doctor, after all. Being honest with him was probably a good idea. I gave in to his questioning. “Yeah, it started a few days back.”

His frown deepened, a clear indication that this was concerning him more than he was letting on.

“Griselda,” he said gently, “I think you should see a doctor. It could be a big or something more serious.”

My stomach rebelled violently, the queasiness escalating into a full-blown upheaval. Panic clawed its way up my throat as I dashed for the kitchen sink, not a second to spare. The world around me blurred momentarily as waves of nausea crashed over me.

I reached the sink just in time, the sound of retching filling the air. My entire body seemed to convulse, expelling whatever had caused this sudden discomfort. The taste was bitter and acrid.

Every heave is a stark reminder of my body's distress. My eyes watered, and I could feel my face flushing, a mix of embarrassment and discomfort.

Andrea, right beside me, must have felt the tension and worry in the air. He put a comforting hand on my back, patting it gently.

"Take it easy," he murmured, his voice laced with empathy.

After what felt like an eternity, the heaving subsided. I stayed bent over the sink, catching my breath, my forehead resting against the cool surface. The ordeal had left me weak and shaky, but there was a peculiar relief, too, as if something that had been bothering me had been expelled, if only temporarily.

I turned on the tap, rinsing my mouth to rid it of the lingering taste. My thoughts were a jumble of confusion and concern. What was happening to me? This was definitely more than just stress, and it didn't present like any stomach bug I've had before.

Andrea offered me a glass of water, his face a mix of compassion and worry.

"You should get this checked out," he advised gently, concern etched in his eyes.

I took the water gratefully, nodding slightly. He was right, and I knew it. I took a few sips, still feeling weak and uneasy.

Andrea, with a determined look, said firmly, "We're going to the hospital."

I hesitated, I didn't want to be more of a burden to Emilio than I already was.

“Okay, but promise me you won't tell Emilio yet,” I requested, my concern for Emilio battling with my concern for my health.

He raised an eyebrow, skeptical, “Why keep it from him?”

I took a breath, attempting to explain, “I don't want him to worry unnecessarily. Let's first confirm if it's serious or not. If it is, I promise I'll tell him.”

He scrutinized me for a moment, assessing my sincerity. I could sense his internal conflict about hiding something from Emilio. Finally, he relented, “Alright, but we're going.”

With a sense of urgency, we made our way out of the apartment. As we rounded the corner, my heart raced, anticipating the encounter with the guards. I knew they would object; I expected it. I had seen firsthand how they operated and how dedicated they were to enforcing security.

And sure enough, as we approached the building's entrance, the guards stepped forward, firm and resolute. “I'm sorry, miss,” one of them began, “but you can't leave for your safety.”

Andrea, however, was prepared. He spoke up, maintaining an air of authority, “She's not feeling well, and I'm taking her to my private hospital. It's necessary.”

I watched as a flicker of doubt crossed the guards' faces. It was a delicate gamble, but Andrea pressed on, taking a chance.

“I’ve already informed Emilio. Can’t you see how pale she looks?” I hadn’t realized how exhausted I was until he pointed it out.

Andrea’s words seemed to sway them, hesitance still clouding their expressions.

“Are you willing to take responsibility if anything happens to her?” He added, his voice laced with urgency.

The two guards exchanged uncertain glances, clearly grappling with the situation’s gravity. After a few more tense seconds, they reluctantly moved aside, allowing us to pass. Relief washed over me, mingled with surprise at the unexpected success of this ruse.

I tried my best to conceal my astonishment as we walked past the guards and stepped into the elevator. Andrea, beside me, wore a wry grin.

As we made our way to the hospital, I found myself appreciating Andrea more and more. His concern felt genuine, and his determination to ensure my well-being was both sweet and reassuring. The dynamics of our situation were strange, to say the least, but Andrea’s presence made it a bit more manageable.

Andrea expertly maneuvered the car through the city’s streets, a sleek black Mercedes-Benz gleaming under the city lights. Its elegance and sophistication were hard to miss, a testament to Andrea’s success.

The contrast between my humble origins and the world he lived in was stark, and yet he made an effort to bridge that gap to help me navigate this unfamiliar territory.

As we drove, the queasiness resurfaced, not as intense as before, but enough to remind me of my discomfort. I pressed my hand against my stomach, silently grateful that the waves of nausea didn't escalate.

The last thing I wanted was to make a mess in this grand car. Who knew, maybe it even was one of Royalty Rentals' special editions.

As Andrea guided me through the posh hallways of his hospital, I couldn't help but be impressed by the elegance of the place and the friendly efficiency of the staff. It was a far cry from the often hectic and crowded public hospitals I was used to.

Each step of the process, from registering to the tests to the consultations, was well-organized and went as smoothly as could be expected, thanks to Andrea's presence and expertise.

It was an eye-opener, showing me how different life could be with the right connections and resources. The quick and personalized attention was a luxury I had rarely experienced.

I found myself wondering if this was the everyday reality for the wealthy. A life where connections and status smoothed out the rough edges, granting access to a world of ease and privilege. It made me ponder if I was prepared for such a lifestyle, one that was so far removed from my own.

After the tests were done, Andrea drove me back to the penthouse, a precaution to avoid any suspicion if Emilio returned before me. It was a prudent move to keep my secret under wraps. Although, I could see the whole cloak and dagger thing bothered Andrea. His loyalty to his friend was endearing.

I had barely settled back into the apartment, the memory of the posh medical facility still fresh in my mind, when my phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID, I noticed it was my mother. We hadn't spoken in a while, so I immediately picked up, a mix of curiosity and concern tugging at me.

"Hello, Mom," I greeted, attempting to mask the surprise in my voice.

"Griselda, sweetheart, I need to talk to you about something very important," my mother began, her tone somber and urgent.

"Of course, Mom. What's going on?" I asked, instinctively leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Someone came asking about your father," she revealed, her voice tinged with worry. "They seemed dangerous, and I'm afraid your life might be in danger."

A surge of fear and confusion shot through me. I had come to grips with my life being threatened because of my involvement with Emilio. But my father? I had grown up believing he was no longer in the picture. "What do you mean, Mom? Dad is —"

“He’s alive, Griselda,” she interrupted, her voice shaking with emotion. “There are things I’ve kept from you, things I need to explain. But for now, could you stay safe and trust me? Don’t come back from holiday until I say it’s okay.”

The shock from her words momentarily stunned me. Was my father alive? Dangerous people were inquiring about him? Why would my life possibly be in jeopardy? It felt like a whirlwind of revelations, a storm brewing on the horizon.

“What do you mean, Mom? I need to know more. I deserve to know what’s happening,” I urged, my mind having gotten through to my vocal cords.

A hurried rustle of breath came through the phone.

“I promise, Griselda, I’ll tell you everything when the coast is clear,” my mother said anxiously, her voice tinged with desperation.

Before I could say another word, the line went dead. She had hung up.

I stood there, staring at my phone, a whirlwind of emotions crashing within me. The abruptness of our conversation left me with more questions than answers. My father, alive? It was a notion that contradicted everything I had believed for years.

My mind buzzed with disbelief, confusion, and worry. The words played on an unending loop in my head. My father was alive. How could this be? Why would my mother keep this from me? The pieces of my reality seemed to crumble, and I struggled to grasp the enormity of what had just been revealed.

I paced the apartment, restless and anxious, running scenarios in my head. What did it mean for me? What did this mean for my mother? The danger that seemed to loom over my life suddenly took on a whole new level of complexity. Was all of this somehow connected to my father's sudden reappearance?

My thoughts spiraled into a black hole.

Sinking onto the couch, I buried my face in my hands. The person I had believed to be dead was very much alive, and my mother had been keeping this secret, all while evading my questions.

Chapter 24

Emilio

As I sat in my dimly lit office, the weight of Crino's words still pressed heavily on my mind. The revelation that the Mancini family had been following orders from a more powerful, unseen force unsettled me to my core.

I had always been prepared for the vicious battles within our world, but to realize that there might be a puppeteer pulling the strings from the shadows was a different kind of fear.

Enzo, my ever-loyal second-in-command, entered the room, his face reflecting the same concern that gnawed at me.

"Emilio," he began, "this changes everything. We've been fighting for so long, but now it seems like we've only been pawns."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair, frustration and helplessness coiling within me. "I know, Enzo. Crino's revelation has shaken me to my core. But dwelling on it won't help us. We need a new plan. We need more information."

He nodded, leaning against the desk. “So, what do you intend to do? How do we proceed from here?”

“It’s time to take control of the situation.”

Enzo studied my face, recognizing the determination that fueled my words. “And how do you plan to do that?”

“I’ll confront my father,” I declared, “and tell him Crino’s words. It’s a matter of filial piety, a last act of respect before I break these suffocating bonds.”

Enzo’s eyes bore into mine, understanding the gravity of my decision. “Are you sure about this, Emilio? It’s a dangerous path you’re choosing.”

“I’ve never been more certain,” I affirmed, “I’ve tried doing this slowly, edging my way to freedom, but this is where I take a stand.”

“You’re not going back to Griselda yet?” Enzo inquired, his voice tinged with concern.

I hesitated, torn between the urgency of addressing the newfound revelation and the longing to be with Griselda. “I will, Enzo, but I need to speak to my father first.”

Enzo nodded, understanding the conflict within me. “Do you want me to accompany you, Emilio?”

I appreciated his offer but shook my head. “There’s no need, Enzo. I must do this alone.”

He furrowed his brows, worry evident in his eyes. “Are you sure, Emilio? It’s a risky move.”

“I have to face him,” I affirmed, my determination unwavering. “I need to know the truth, and I need him to know that I’m breaking free from this cycle.”

Enzo regarded me for a moment, then relented. “Alright, I know you will tread carefully. A lot is riding on this for all of us.”

“I understand,” I assured him, grateful for his unwavering support. “Before I go, I’ll freshen up.”

“And Emilio?” I turned back, looking into Enzo’s serious, gray eyes. “Take the new car; it might come in handy.” He threw me the key, and I smiled. He always had my back.

I left Enzo and made my way to what I referred to as “my quarters” at the lab. The bathroom mirror reflected a face marked by battles, both seen and unseen. Weariness etched lines into my features, but my resolve remained unbroken. I splashed water on my face, letting it clear my mind.

As I looked at my reflection, memories of the past surged forward, intertwining with the present. My father’s stern teachings, the weight of expectations placed upon us as sons, the struggles of getting Royalty rentals off the ground and building a new future—each fragment of my life seemed to converge in this moment.



The fresh suit I had changed into felt restricting as I made my way through the Fiore family house. Its grandeur bore witness

to the centuries-old legacy, a reminder of the expectations that loomed over the males in each generation.

Uncle Luigi, surprised by my unannounced appearance, questioned me as I entered. “Emilio, is something the matter?”

“I need to speak to Father,” I replied curtly, unwilling to delve into details.

He studied my face, likely detecting my grave determination. “Very well. He’s in his study.”

I proceeded through the familiar corridors, past portraits of ancestors who had carried the same weight of responsibility. Arriving at my father’s study, I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the confrontation ahead.

He glanced up from his desk, surprise momentarily flickering across his slightly wrinkled features before he masked it.

“Emilio,” he greeted, composed as always. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

“I’ve come to discuss a matter of great importance,” I replied, stepping forward but not sitting down.

He leaned back, steepling his fingers. “I’m listening.”

“I recently had an encounter with Crino Mancini,” I began, scrutinizing his reaction.

He raised an eyebrow, feigning nonchalance. “Oh? And what happened during this encounter?”

My father, Don Giovanni Fiore, sat across from me in his opulent study. The room exuded power and control, much like

the man himself. I took a deep breath, attempting to steady my nerves.

“He revealed something before his demise,” I continued, choosing my words carefully.

“Crino is dead?” The surprise in my father’s voice was palpable, and I could see the initial signs of concern etching across his features.

“Yes,” I confirmed, my voice unwavering.

“How did this happen?” His inquiry was sharp, a demand for details.

He leaned forward, eyes fixed on mine, awaiting an explanation.

“I killed him,” I stated matter-of-factly, suppressing the tide of emotions that threatened to rise within me.

“You killed him?” His frown deepened, and a hint of disapproval laced his voice. “I expected you to handle this situation discreetly. Nevertheless, continue. Tell me how it unfolded.”

Despite the weight of the moment, a slight tremor coursed through my hands. I fought to maintain a composed exterior.

“Father, what is of paramount importance, more so than the act of killing Crino, are his last words.” I paused, making sure I have my father’s full attention. “He claimed that the Mancini family was merely a pawn in a much larger game, orchestrated by a mastermind obscured in the shadows.”

“A mastermind?” My father repeated, absorbing the gravity of the revelation. “Did he provide any indication of who this mastermind might be? Or what their motives are?”

I shook my head, the uncertainty of it all gnawing at me. “No specifics were given. But a force beyond the vendetta between our families is at play. This feud might be part of a larger, more intricate plan.”

He sat back in his chair, fingers steepled in front of him, deep in thought. I couldn’t help but wonder what was going through his mind. Was he hiding something?

“What’s going on, Father?” I asked, my voice steady but tinged with urgency. “Do you have any knowledge of what Crino was hinting at?”

He met my gaze, his eyes steady, and replied, “No, Emilio. I’m as much in the dark as you are.”

Yet, as he spoke those words, I caught a flicker of hesitation in his eyes, a brief moment where fear and uncertainty danced before he masked it again. The realization shook me. He was lying.

When it came down to it, when the Fiore family was facing an opponent that could potentially unravel us, he chose to stay silent, keeping information to himself. My jaw clenched.

I nodded reluctantly. Trapped within a web of secrets, there was nothing left to say. I turned to leave, trepidation filling me. What was my father hiding? What could be so dire that he couldn’t disclose it to me, even at this critical juncture?

I paused at the door, hesitating, but I did not dare to back at my father. The revelation about Crino's words had opened a Pandora's box. Our family, once established by a bedrock code of loyalty and honor, now seemed more like a hand of cards, precariously being gambled at a blackjack table.

Unraveling this tangled tapestry of hidden motives and concealed truths was no longer just about my freedom, not even about my possible future with Griselda. I had to get to the truth for my family's sake.

The path ahead was unclear, but one thing was certain — I couldn't afford to be naive anymore. I had to immerse myself in the world of the Mafiosi to navigate the shadows of my father's world and emerge with the truth, no matter the cost.

Chapter 25

Griselda

I settled into a corner of my couch, phone clutched tightly in my hand, fingers nervously tapping against the device. Avery's face popped up on the screen as the call connected.

"Hey," Avery greeted with a cheery wave.

"Hey," I replied, attempting a weak smile.

"So, tell me, how's your time off? Are you enjoying your impulsive vacation?" Avery asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

"It's okay," I replied. I still hadn't told her where I really was or what the true circumstances were for my impromptu time away.

"What's wrong," Avery leaned into the screen, "you don't look so good," her voice forming a question.

My shoulders sagged as I sighed, "You won't believe the call I got from my mom today."

"Is it bad news? Is she sick?" Avery asked with a worried frown.

I shook my head, “No, my mom is fine. It’s something else, something huge.” I took a deep breath, trying to steady my shaking hands. “She told me... my father is alive.”

Avery’s eyes widened, mirroring my initial reaction. “What? Your father? But I thought...”

“I know,” I interrupted, shaking my head in disbelief while recalling how many years I had been convinced that he was gone. “It’s a shock, to say the least.”

Avery waited for me to gather myself, her concerned frown deepening, then continued, “Oh Griselda, how are you coping with this news? Did she explain what happened?”

“That’s the thing,” I said, rubbing my temples, trying to organize my derailed train of thoughts. “She wants to meet in person and tell me everything then. She didn’t want to share anything over the phone. She also mentioned danger, and she wants me to stay away until she says it’s safe.”

“Wow,” Avery murmured, her face looking thoughtful, “did she only recently find this out herself? Or why did she keep this hidden for so long?”

“I don’t know, Avery, but she sounded worried.” Just as I was worried.

“This sounds like something out of a thriller. But you need to be cautious. Don’t meet without understanding everything.”

“I know,” I said, “but it’s driving me crazy, Avery. I hate being kept in the dark, especially about something so significant.”

“I get it,” Avery reassured. “This is your family, your life. It’s frustrating to be left hanging like this.”

“I wish she would just tell me everything over the phone,” I sighed, wanting to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.

My emotions overwhelmed me: confusion, anger, and a profound sense of betrayal, and tears welled up in my eyes. Even Avery’s comforting words couldn’t appease the storm, but they offered a steadying hand in the lingering tempest of my thoughts.

“I get it, Avery. I do. But it’s just, “my voice broke, “I’ve spent my entire life believing one thing about my dad, and now, suddenly, it’s all turned upside down.”

“I can’t even imagine what you’re going through,” Avery soothed. “But perhaps your mom had her reasons. Maybe she thought she was protecting you from something.”

“I know,” I blinked, trying to keep the tears at bay. “But it’s a lot to process, you know. And what’s with the secrecy? Why keep this from me for so long?”

Avery paused for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “Parents make mistakes. Sometimes they believe they’re doing what’s best for us, even if it means hiding the truth. It doesn’t make it right, but maybe it’s her way of shielding you from a painful past.”

“I wish she’d trust me enough to handle the truth,” I whispered, feeling a mix of vulnerability and frustration.

“She will. When she’s ready,” Avery said, offering a glimmer of hope. “Maybe she’s waiting for the right time to explain everything.”

I nodded, understanding the wisdom in Avery’s words. “You’re right. I need to give her a chance to explain.”

“I’m here for you,” Avery’s empathy was evident in the way she tilted her head, looking at me with deep care. “Whatever you decide to do, I’ll stand by you.”

“Thank you, Avery,” I said with gratitude.

Her unwavering support meant the world to me. With a promise to keep her updated, I hung up and took a deep breath, preparing to face what lay ahead.

Just then, I heard the door creak open, and my head snapped up.

And there he was, Emilio.

A rush of relief flooded through me. I rushed toward him with an overwhelming urge to be close to him. “Emilio,” I breathed, pressing my head into his chest, his embrace feeling like a haven.

As I pulled back, scrutinizing him. The signs of the battle were evident—scrapes, bruises—but he reassured me he was fine. His lips pressed a tender kiss to my forehead, a natural gesture that felt like it had always been a part of our closeness.

Guiding him to the couch, we both sat down. I watched him intently, my eyes silently pleading for good news.

“Is it over?” I asked, hoping against hope that the whirlwind of conflict had finally subsided.

Emilio’s face darkened, and he shook his head, a sense of powerlessness flickering across his features.

“No,” he admitted, and my heart sank. “The Mancini family was just a pawn in a much larger game. There’s a mastermind, someone else pulling the strings.”

I was shocked by the gravity of his words. I asked, “What do you mean? How do you know?”

He took a deep breath and began recounting the unsettling conversation he had with Crino, including the revelation of a mastermind orchestrating everything. It sent shivers down my spine as the implications of such a revelation sank in.

“And then,” he continued, “when I spoke to my father about it, he acted suspicious. It’s as if he knew more than he was letting on.”

“I had something to discuss with my father concerning the problem with the Mancinis. I suspect that there is a third party involved, an unknown person or group that has been manipulating the Mancinis all this time. I don’t know who, and I don’t know why.” He looked frustrated and sad, running his hand through his hair.

I didn’t know which knocked my world off balance more, this news or my mom’s news. I was speechless.

“But when I spoke to my father about it, he acted suspicious. It’s as if he knew more than he was letting on,” Emilio

continued.

I scoffed, frustration bubbling within me.

“What is it with parents and their secrets?” I vented, not realizing how agitated I was until the words spilled out.

He tried to lighten the mood with a teasing smile.

“What happened? Did your mother hide something from you?” he asked, his tone playfully curious.

The annoyance that had been simmering beneath the surface surged.

“Actually, yes,” I retorted, sounding bitter.

I recounted the phone call with my mother and the distressing revelation. Emilio’s playful demeanor vanished, replaced by concern.

“Oh wow, I had no idea,” he said, his eyes reflecting genuine sympathy.

“Yeah, well, secrets seem to be a new family tradition,” I replied with sarcasm. “And to make things worse, she didn’t want to tell me anything more over the phone. No indication of what really happened, where he is, or how long she’s known about this.” I was on a roll.

He cupped my cheek and gave me a tender kiss. “We’ll face this together. I’ll start digging around for information concerning your father. We need to know what’s going on.” He spoke gently, soothingly. This man was utterly amazing. He had just come from what must have been a most difficult

conversation with his father, and yet reassuring me was his first priority. It was like rain on a flower; my heart couldn't help but bloom in his care.

“Thank you,” I whispered with gratitude, gazing into his sincere, blue eyes.

He nodded, kissing me deeper this time. “I need a shower,” he sighed and let go of me.

Emilio walked to his room, and I settled into a chair, lost in my thoughts. The weight of everything was beginning to take its toll. I felt ashamed at how close I had come to ranting earlier. The secrets, the potential danger, the reappearance of my father—it was all so much to process and was taking its toll.

I held no sense of kinship for my father. My mother's suggestion that merely knowing my father was alive somehow put my life in danger was baffling and terrifying at the same time.

Why would anyone want to harm me because of him? What sort of mess had my family gotten into? Had my mother really tried to shield me from some unsavory truth, as Avery suggested?

There were just too many questions and seemingly no way to get at least some answers soon.

My phone buzzed, a welcome distraction from my chaotic thoughts. It was from Andrea. My fingers trembled slightly as I picked it up, my breath catching in my throat.

My heart raced as I opened the message, revealing the results of the tests I had taken earlier. The words blurred momentarily as my eyes struggled to focus. When the message finally came into sharp relief, my heart seemed to both leap and stand still.

I read the words again, just to be sure. The reality sank in, and I froze, not knowing what to feel. I was pregnant.

Chapter 26

Emilio

“Hey, Lucas. I’ve got a task for you,” I said, my tone serious as I walked into my secret lab and made my way toward my busy workers.

Lucas spun around on his chair, ready to assist. “Sure thing, Emilio. What’s up?”

I chose my words carefully, knowing the importance of the task. “I need your help locating information on someone—Griselda’s father. He was believed to be dead but she received information from her mom recently, that he was alive.”

Lucas understood the gravity of the situation.

“Done,” he affirmed with a shrug.

I decided to clarify, “Do you need any specific information from me?”

“No need,” Lucas replied, his fingers already typing away on his keyboard. “I had Griselda’s phone, remember?”

“Lucas, I trust you with this. But remember, Griselda’s privacy is paramount. Only gather what’s necessary to find her father.”

Despite my trust in Lucas, I couldn’t help but give him a warning look, making it clear that Griselda was off-limits, a line that should never be crossed.

Seeing my expression, Lucas raised his hands in playful surrender. “Hey, she’s all yours.”

I must have really looked intimidating because Lucas reassured me once more, “don’t worry, I won’t overstep. Don’t have a death wish.” He turned back to his computer, and said over his shoulder, “when I find something, I’ll let you know.” And with that his fingers were back working his keyboard.

A faint smile crossed my face at the thought of Griselda being “mine.” I wanted to confess my feelings and allow myself to pursue her openly. Maybe once this ordeal was over.

I was still in thought, when Enzo approached, wearing a disgruntled expression. I couldn’t help but be amused by his obvious frustration. The only person who could annoy Enzo, make him lose his cool, was Andrea.

“What’s got you all riled up, Enzo?” I asked, feigning innocence.

He grumbled in annoyance, “Andrea. He was giving me a hard time about the supplies as if they were for me. I mean, it’s your operation.”

I burst into laughter at the absurdity of the situation. “Why the glare? Andrea’s the one who should be getting an earful, not

me.”

Enzo rolled his eyes, clearly irritated. “Alright, spill it. What’s going on?”

Our conversation turned serious as I filled him in on the conversation with my father and the recent revelation of Griselda’s mother about her father.

Enzo was back to his typical calm demeanor, hiding his surprise well.

“There’s a lot Griselda doesn’t know yet, and her mother will tell her when she deems it safe.”

Enzo raised an eyebrow. “Safe? Safe from what?”

I shook my head, “Her mother didn’t elaborate much. Just mentioned it wasn’t safe for Griselda to come over.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I admitted. “But, as if it’s not enough that we have to find a mystery enemy using the Mancinis against us, we now have a second threat to investigate.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I’ve asked Lucas to look into Griselda’s father. That leaves you and me open to go after the Mancini’s collaborator.”

Enzo’s looked at me with concern. “Just be cautious, Emilio. We can’t afford any more surprises.”

“I will, Enzo,” offering him a reassuring pat on the shoulder as silent acknowledgment for his vigilance.

Just then, my phone buzzed in my pocket, and I fished it out while keeping one arm around Enzo's shoulders. The caller ID displayed Carlo's name.

It wasn't an everyday occurrence for him to call me. We hadn't maintained a close relationship, especially after our childhood when it became clear I was the unfavored son.

Enzo noticed the caller ID, too and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Carlo calling? That's unusual. What could he want?"

I picked up the call, my tone all straight-to-business mode. "Carlo, what's the matter?"

Carlo's voice crackled over the line, delivering news that rattled me to the core. I could only manage a shocked "What?"

My arm slid off Enzo's shoulder, my eyes widening in disbelief. The weight of those words crashed over me like a tidal wave, leaving me struggling to hold on to my phone.

Enzo voicelessly formed the words beside me, "What happened?"

Carlo's voice continued over the line, relaying the details, but I was no longer listening.

The words kept on replaying in my head. My father, the man who I had seen two days ago...was dead.***

I pushed my foot down on the gas pedal, my grip on the steering wheel tightening as I accelerated toward the Fiore family residence. Beside me, Enzo sat, visibly shaken by the sudden news of my father's passing. The very idea of my

father being gone felt like a cruel joke, an unimaginable reality.

“Emilio, are you certain he’s...?” Enzo’s words trailed off, unable to fully express the doubt that lingered in the air.

“I don’t know, Enzo,” I replied, my eyes fixed on the road ahead. The notion of this being a twisted prank seemed a true possibility. It couldn’t be real. There had to be some mistake.

As we arrived at the Fiore compound, I couldn’t wait to get out of the car. My steps felt too slow as I headed inside.

The atmosphere was heavy with grief and uncertainty. Members of the Fiore organization wore sorrowful expressions, their usual vivacity subdued by the news.

At the front, my uncle and brother were engaged in a solemn conversation. Throwing aside any pretense of formality, I made my way toward them, my voice shaky with a mix of grief and disbelief.

“What’s happening?” I demanded the question, leaving my lips before I was ready for the answer.

They exchanged glances, and the weight of their expressions confirmed the news. My uncle was the one to break it to me, confirming the unthinkable - my father was dead.

My abuser was gone, and it felt like a surreal blend of dream and nightmare.

I stood there, at a loss for words, grappling with the reality that I had both wished for and feared. My uncle’s comforting hand

patted my shoulder, offering words of encouragement, but they felt distant, like echoes in a tunnel.

“You’ll need to be strong, Emilio,” my uncle’s voice reached me, but my mind was in a haze.

I looked at him blankly, unable to fully grasp what this meant for me. He left, leaving me alone with my thoughts, or so I thought, until my brother stepped forward, an unexpected concern in his voice.

It caught me off guard; today seemed to be a day of surprises. I couldn’t hide the confusion that painted my face.

Carlo seemed to choose his words carefully, acknowledging the weight of what had transpired. He mentioned the torment our father had put me through, and his concern felt genuine. I locked eyes with him, suspicious of his intentions. What was he trying to convey?

“What are you getting at?” I asked, unable to hide the distrust in my voice.

Carlo leaned back slightly, offering no further explanation, leaving me hanging with unanswered questions. He mentioned the funeral, instructing me to be present within the next two hours before departing abruptly.

Two hours? The speed and urgency of the funeral arrangements puzzled me, leaving a whirlwind of confusion in its wake. When Enzo approached, concern etched on his face, I could only voice what was swirling in my mind.

“A funeral in two hours? How... how is that possible?”

Enzo's voice dropped to a hushed tone as he shared what he had overheard. My father had been found dead yesterday morning. The words hit me like a punch to the gut, a mix of disbelief and a strange concoction of emotions. He had been dead for almost a day, and I was finding out now.

Why hadn't anyone told me earlier? The feeling of being an outsider, even in my own family, intensified. I wanted to confront my uncle and older brother and demand an explanation for the secrecy and the lack of communication.

I looked in the direction they had gone, but I found myself paralyzed, unable to summon the strength to challenge them. Numbness overcame me, wrapping around my senses like a thick fog.

I couldn't move or speak. My father, the source of fear and pain for so many years, was no more. A part of me was relieved, but another part felt guilty for such emotions. He was my father, flawed and cruel, yet still my father.

"What... What happened to him?" I managed to stammer.

Enzo hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "It's not entirely clear yet. Some say it was a heart attack. Others aren't so sure. There's a lot of talk about the circumstances."

I tried to process the information, but my mind felt like a stormy sea with waves crashing relentlessly against the shore. "Why did nobody tell me sooner?" The question slipped out, edged with frustration.

My voice was almost a whisper, carrying the weight of my confusion and the turmoil of my emotions.

“I don’t know.” Enzo shook his head apologetically.

I wanted to be glad that he was gone, that I was free from the grasp of his terror, but I didn’t know why a part of me felt grief and anger.

My head nodded involuntarily as I tried to make sense of it all, attempting to put the puzzle pieces together. And in that moment, I realized that, despite the cruelty he had inflicted on me, his absence would create a void, a void that would require time to understand and accept.

Enzo put a comforting hand on my shoulder. He gently suggested we find our seats before the funeral began, his touch a grounding force. We were navigating the sea of hushed whispers and pained expressions.

Two hours passed in a blur of memories and tangled thoughts. The somber moment arrived—the commencement of the funeral.

We made our way to a grand room in the mansion where the ceremony would take place. It was an old, grand space adorned with portraits of ancestors long past—a fitting setting for a farewell within the Fiore family.

The atmosphere was heavy with grief as the pallbearers carried the polished wooden coffin with my father’s remains, memories, and mixed emotions clinging to the air like a

haunting melody. They set the coffin open, allowing those in attendance to approach and pay their last respects.

Enzo and I approached, joining my uncle and brother in the line of mourners. I stood before the open casket, looking at my father's lifeless form.

He looked peaceful, undisturbed by the chaos he had wrought during his lifetime. Anger surged within me—how could he find peace in death after the pain he had caused?

Enzo sensed my inner turmoil and guided me away before my emotions could break free.

The ceremony continued, the air thick with grief and sorrow. My older brother and uncle stood before the gathering, delivering speeches about my father—how he was a great leader, a good man.

I couldn't help but scoff inwardly at their words. Good man? It felt like a charade, a farce. I struggled to reconcile their descriptions of him with the memories of my own experiences.

I wanted to distance myself from this man who had caused so much suffering, yet I grappled with the idea that I should be glad I wasn't asked to speak about him. Did it matter? Did any of it matter in the grand scheme of things?

For the longest time, I'd wanted to break free from the clutches of the Fiore family, and now, fate seemed to be granting me that wish.

Amidst everything that was happening, I noticed Enzo seated nearby, busily typing away on his phone. The who and the

why hardly registered in my thoughts; my mind was elsewhere. Perhaps he was texting Andrea, but at that moment, I couldn't bring myself to care.

The journey back to my penthouse was a haze, like scenes from a distant dream. I could only grasp that it was Enzo who accompanied me, guiding me through the motions. Gratitude washed over me for having a friend like him in this tumultuous time.

When we arrived back at the penthouse, Griselda was already waiting. Her eyes held concern, reflecting her worry. I realized Enzo had messaged her. She embraced me, her comforting warmth a reminder of the stability I craved in that moment.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said gently, her voice filled with compassion.

The words were a small solace, but it was her willingness to be there for me that mattered most. I sat on the couch, and she asked if I wanted to talk, her concern evident in her gaze. But my emotions were a chaotic whirlwind, a tempest within me. I struggled to find words.

She stood before me, waiting patiently, her presence a balm for my troubled soul. I looked at Griselda, realizing that amidst the tumult, the grief, and the questions, she was a constant, a beacon of love and care.

At that moment, my heart spoke my truth. I looked at her, the one who had always stood by me, and said, "I want you."

I grasped her hips and tugged softly to guide her closer to me. I let a hand slide over her backside and fall further down to the skin of the back of her thigh, fingers grazing lightly down to the back of her knee, grasped it, and lifted her leg carefully over my own, effectively making her half-straddle me.

She had reached out with her empty hand to find support on my bare shoulder, and not wanting to keep her balance in this awkward position, she quickly let her other leg mirror its partner, raised it over my other leg, and finally rested her weight in my lap, arms draping over my shoulders.

My hand slid up and over so it rested on the top of her thigh. I let it slowly slide further up, under the hem of her skirt, expecting my fingertips to feel the edge of her panties soon. When my fingers continued up and met the skin of her uncovered hip, I paused.

I opened my eyes to look at her. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth. I squeezed her hip, my thumb gently tracing her hipbone, and another low sigh left her lips.

I leaned forward to press a small kiss to the side of her neck.

My hand returned to between her legs, and I slowly started placing open-mouthed kisses up the side of her neck, letting my tongue slip out occasionally to taste her skin.

One hand had left her hip in favor of slowly caressing up and down her thigh from hip to knee, fingertips sporadically digging softly into her pliant flesh.

The other found its way to the collar of her shirt, the tips of my fingers grazing the skin of her upper chest before slowly undoing each button.

My breathing had increased in pace, coming out in a deep and fast rhythm as I kissed my way across her throat to give the other side of her neck the same treatment.

“Emilio,” she sighed, her hands tugging lightly on my hair, grinding her core against my hardening erection, making me elicit a growl against her neck in response, scraping my teeth lightly over her skin.

The hand that had been unbuttoning her shirt delved under the opening to palm her breast. She ground against me, arched her spine, and threw her head back, lips parted in a loud moan.

My hand, which had been caressing her thigh, slid up to palm her backside, giving it a firm squeeze as I started nibbling my way up her neck and over her jaw.

She tilted her head and claimed my lips in a passionate, open-mouthed kiss, our tongues quickly finding and exploring each other as if this was our first time.

But instead of discovering new pleasures, we gave in to slow, well-known comfort and desire, the knowledge that the other was there, warm and inviting.

Giving it a thorough massage, my hand wandered from her breast, skimming further down over her stomach before stroking the sensitive skin on the inside of her thigh.

She whined when I had skipped over where she wanted me, her hips slowly grinding against my hard erection, drawing a small groan from me.

I then chuckled into her mouth, torturing her for a moment by letting the backs of my fingers glide against her inner thigh before taking pity on her and letting a finger caress her outer lips.

I moaned against her lips when I thought that I was the one making her ache for my touch. Deep, familiar emotions came bubbling up, threatening to overwhelm me, almost making me choke on them.

I felt this crushing need for her, to be in her, rising in me, and my finger moved to her center, sliding along her slit to coat itself in her slick.

I circled her clit a few times, making her hips stutter in our continued grinding, before teasing her entrance and sliding my finger into her inviting cunt.

Griselda broke the kiss, gasping loudly, and buried her face in the crook of my neck with a whine, and when I looked down to watch my finger disappear into her, I growled at the erotic sight. She was dressed in an open-wide shirt, legs spread and breasts and pussy on display.

I began pumping my finger in and out of her, deep sighs of intense pleasure escaping her at my movements. My pleasure at touching her like this, wanting her so badly, made me pull my finger out, adding a second before inserting both of them, beginning to pump in and out again.

I'd never hurt her, especially not by being too impatient due to my own needs.

She started bucking against me, seeking her climax.

I leaned in to kiss down her chest, my lips and tongue venturing further down. She must have realized what I was doing because she leaned back away from my neck slightly, allowing me access to her breasts.

I let my lips close around a perked nipple, tongue-teasing it into further hardness while my long fingers worked magic inside her, pumping fast now, knowing how close she was.

I could hear it in the way she breathed fast and desperately. I knew it would only take a few more hard pumps and a few more swipes of both my tongue and thumb, and she would crash over the edge of orgasm.

With one last swipe of my thumb, she came on my hand with a loud cry of my name on her lips, her hands in my hair tugging hard.

She slumped over in my arms, her face buried once again in my neck. My fingers had slowed down to extend her pleasure, and my grip on her backside eased up, my face tucked into her neck, placing small kisses there.

I felt overwhelming pride in my actions and swore never to get tired of this. She never tired of knowing I was the one to bring her pleasure. Of hearing my name called out like that.

Of the trust she put in me with her body. She was trusting me with her. That emotional choking feeling made itself known,

and I took a deep, shuddering breath.

I slowly removed my fingers from her pussy.

She saw through my act, as she always did, let go of my hand, and placed her hands on my jaw, thumbs caressing my cheeks. She leaned down to kiss me gently, my arms going around her to her clothed back, my palms sliding slowly up and down.

The kiss turned from an innocent meeting of lips to open-mouthed within seconds, and I groaned when my tongue tasted the familiar tang of her slick. I was gripped by lust at the taste, and my arms crushed her to me, the kiss growing wild and passionate in my haste to have all of her at once.

She must have felt the same way as her hands slid from my jaw into my hair again while wearing and grinding her hips against me again, searching for more friction.

While keeping up the kiss, I pulled my hands away to remove my belt and trousers, a task made difficult not only by the tongue currently plundering my mouth but also by the owner of said tongue sitting on top of me.

Somehow, with a little shuffling around, as I was very unwilling to let her get up from my lap, I discarded my pants, and my cock stood proud and erect between us.

Her hand reached for my cock, caressing it softly in her fist at first, lightly pulling my foreskin back and spreading the clear pre-cum gathered there, then she started to pump my cock in firm strokes.

My hands went back to our preferred space at her hips, groaning my pleasure at her touch, and as much as I enjoyed the sight, I closed my eyes in delight.

I tried to control my breathing by taking deep breaths and tightening my hold on her, but the pleasure coursing through me had me give up that particular endeavor quickly. I was too wound up after pleasing her and wanted nothing more than to sink into her warmth.

She lifted herself on her toes, leaned towards me with one hand on my shoulder for support, and positioned her wet cunt over the head of my cock. I opened my eyes to watch my cock disappear into her and felt the warm wetness of her enveloping me.

When I had filled her, I wrapped my arms around her in a loving embrace, kissing her neck, hoping to convey how grateful I was despite the heated situation we were in, as I let her get used to my cock inside her.

She spent a few seconds with closed eyes, just holding me, before she looked up from my neck and kissed my lips slowly, giving the silent signal to start moving. My hand slid down to her ass, helping her along when she moved her hips against mine.

Our equally slow, open-mouthed kiss had me pushing my limits, and as my hands tightened on her, I secured both of my feet firmly on the floor and stood up with her securely in my arms. She wound her legs around my waist and locked her ankles behind me.

Gently, I lifted her and moved towards the kitchen table, careful not to let her slip from my grasp. Once we reached our destination, I seated her at the edge of the table. With one swift movement, I used my arm to clear the book she had been reading and the now-cold mug of coffee, causing them to crash against the floor.

As soon as I had more leverage with a little help from the table, I set at a much faster pace than the slow grinding we had enjoyed on the chair.

Her hands were still in my hair, clutching handfuls, and her legs wrapped around me. I kept one hand on her backside, and the other went hiking her leg up higher on my waist, keeping it there while I kissed her deeply and started pounding into her, my hips moving fast.

I needed this. I needed her.

Both of us let our moans flow freely, and the sounds of slick skin meeting skin in hard slaps were loud in the kitchen.

I broke the kiss, gently pushing her down on her back as I continued to fuck her hard and fast, chasing both of our climaxes. My hand moved, finding her clit again and starting to work it over with my fingertips.

Judging by her loud moans, shrieks of pleasure, and the way her cunt was gripping me tightly, she was close to her second orgasm. Her hands had left my hair and were clawing down my back, making me hiss in pleasure as I climaxed as deep inside of her as I could.

I didn't know how much time had passed when I started getting my breathing under control, but my face was still buried in her neck, and my cock was still buried in her cunt, though it had begun to go flaccid, and could feel the after spasms of her climax.

My warped emotions came back, and I kept my face hidden from her when I felt the first tear gathered at the corner of my eye. Taking a few deep breaths, I moved the emotions back down where I'd sort through them at a later time. Not now. Not here.

Her legs, still locked at the ankles, had loosened our grip on my waist, and her fingers were moving up and down my back in feather-light strokes. I let myself breathe through it and enjoy her presence.

Eventually, I had gotten myself under control and lifted my head from her neck to give her lips a slow, chaste kiss before looking her in the eyes. A soft look adorned her face, satisfaction evident as a lazy smile curled her lips.

I couldn't help but smile back at her.

"Thank you," I appreciated her softly.

Chapter 27

Griselda

I couldn't help but worry about Emilio. Even though Emilio held no affection toward him, the man was still his father—a complex connection that was difficult to untangle. It reminded me of my situation, the yearning to learn more about a father I never really knew.

One morning, with the sun gently illuminating our home, I woke up early, driven by the desire to bring some comfort into Emilio's world. The thought of making him breakfast appealed to me.

Humming softly, I settled on a quick, light breakfast—scrambled eggs sprinkled with cheese and a side of toast. I moved around the kitchen, feeling the warmth of the morning sun on my skin.

As I plated the food, I heard familiar footsteps approaching. Emilio entered the room, looking weary.

“Good morning,” I greeted, trying to infuse warmth into my voice.

He managed a small smile, though his mind seemed far away. I could only imagine the burden of his thoughts. This was a difficult time for him.

“I made you some breakfast,” I offered gently, nodding toward the table.

He nodded appreciatively and sat down. The aroma of the food filled the air as I placed the plate in front of him. I watched as he picked at the food, his thoughts still elsewhere.

It pained me to see him like this.

“Are you okay, Emilio?” I asked gently, observing the whirlwind of emotions in his eyes as he sat at the table.

He sighed, his expression troubled.

“Not really,” he admitted, his voice heavy with the weight of his feelings.

Sensing his need to talk, I sat down across from him and listened intently as he poured his heart out. He struggled to put into words the complex array of emotions that had gripped him since his father’s passing.

“I don’t know how to act,” he began, his voice tinged with frustration. “I’m happy he’s gone because, let’s face it, he was a monster. But at the same time, I’m sad. He passed away without even acknowledging or apologizing for the torment he put me through. And then there’s this anger... How could he look so peaceful in death when he left me feeling tortured in the land of the living?”

I empathized with the torment he was going through. It was an emotional rollercoaster I couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Emilio," I said softly, "it's okay to feel all these things. You're human, and what you went through was unimaginably difficult. Your feelings are valid."

He looked at me, his eyes grateful for the understanding.

"Thank you," he murmured, taking a deep breath as if trying to clear the jumble of emotions.

"I'm here for you," I reassured him, placing my hand over his. "You don't have to go through this alone."

He nodded appreciatively, his hand finding a sense of comfort in mine. He continued to share, speaking of the surreal moment when he approached his father's coffin during the funeral. His father looked peaceful, and that struck him deeply.

"How could he look so peaceful, as if he had done no wrong when he had tormented me for so long?" He mused, his voice a mix of disbelief and anger.

I met his gaze, offering a sympathetic look. "It's hard to understand sometimes how people can project a certain image to the world, even when their actions have been anything but peaceful. It's not about you. It's about him and his demons."

Emilio nodded, absorbing my words. "I just wish he had faced the consequences of his actions while he was alive. I wanted him to know the pain he had caused."

"Closure is something we all seek," I replied softly. "But sometimes, it's about finding our closure within ourselves,

regardless of whether the other person realizes their wrongdoings.”

Emilio nodded, digesting my words. His eyes showed a glimmer of hope as if realizing that closure was something he could attain within himself.

“What’s your plan moving forward?” I asked gently, curious about how he intended to rebuild his life after this monumental event.

“I’m going to leave the mafia,” he stated, his voice resolute.

Surprised, even though he had mentioned it before, I felt a mixture of worry and admiration. It was a courageous decision, one that I knew wouldn’t come without challenges.

“And the mastermind behind the conflict between the Fiore and Mancini family?” I inquired, concerned about the safety and peace he sought.

He considered my question carefully. “The leader of the Mancini family was after me, but now that he’s gone, I doubt anyone will come after me again. As for the mastermind, honestly, I don’t care anymore. I want to move forward, away from this darkness. I want to reach for something better.”

“I’m proud of you,” I said sincerely, a smile tugging at my lips.

He returned the smile, gratitude evident in his eyes. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. Your support has meant everything to me.”

Finishing our breakfast, the atmosphere between us had lightened considerably. I was genuinely happy for Emilio, proud of the courageous steps he was taking to carve out a new path.

However, my heart was burdened with a secret I carried. I couldn't shake off the thought that amidst this newfound hope and change, there was another life growing within me. I felt a mix of emotions - joy, anxiety, and a profound sense of responsibility.

As Emilio stood, expressing his intention to head to his company, I understood it was his way of seeking distraction from the whirlwind of emotions. It was a moment for both of us to gather our thoughts.

My mind was in a mess, wrestling with the decision of whether or not to tell him about the pregnancy. The recent loss of his father made me hesitate. Would it be fair to tell him this news now?

Shaking off the uncertainty, I reminded myself that Emilio deserved to know. Yet, a nagging fear persisted - did he want children? Did he see a future that included a family?

As he left, I found myself in a quiet apartment, left to my thoughts.



I steeled myself for the difficult conversation I needed to have with Avery, my best friend. We were connected through a call,

the distance acting as a shield but also leaving me wide open.

“Avery, there’s something I want to share,” I began, my voice laced with nervousness.

Avery’s response was immediate, her concern evident. “Of course. You know you can tell me anything.”

Taking a deep breath, I confessed, “Remember that trip I mentioned planning? I never actually went. I’ve been in the city this whole time.”

A brief pause, and then Avery asked, “But why did you say you were going on a trip?”

I grappled with how to explain the complex situation. “It’s... complicated. It involves Emilio, the man I’ve talked to you about before.”

Avery remembered, her tone cautious. “Emilio? What about him?”

I delved into the story, explaining Emilio’s involvement with the mafia and his strong desire to escape that life. I bared my soul about my feelings, the conflicting attraction, and how we navigated our emotions despite the challenging circumstances.

Avery’s stunned silence echoed through the call, and I could almost feel the weight of her thoughts crashing down. The truth was a heavy burden, especially with the revelation of Emilio’s involvement with the mafia and my unexpected pregnancy. It was a lot to take in, a lot for anyone to process.

“Avery,” I finally said, my voice shaky with a mix of anxiety and vulnerability. “I know it’s overwhelming. It was for me

too.”

She took a deep breath, her exhale audible through the phone. “Griselda, this is beyond anything I could have imagined. The mafia? And... you’re pregnant?”

I nodded, forgetting she couldn’t see me. “Yes. It’s a lot to digest, and I didn’t expect any of this to happen.”

“I can’t even fathom how you’re feeling right now,” Avery admitted, “But I think you need to be honest with him.”

Avery’s advice settled like a weight on my chest, pushing me to confront a reality I wasn’t ready to face. I knew she was right—honesty was crucial, especially with something as significant as a pregnancy. But telling Emilio was a step I wasn’t sure I was prepared to take just yet.

“Avery,” I sighed, wrestling with the emotional tempest inside me. “I know you’re right. It’s just... it’s so complicated.”

“I understand, but he has a right to know,” Avery gently reminded me.

“He does,” I acknowledged, biting my lip nervously. “But what if he reacts negatively? What if this is too much for him to handle?”

Avery’s voice was soft but firm. “Griselda, you can’t control how he reacts. All you can do is be honest and let him process it in his way.”

I knew she was right. Emilio deserved to know he was going to be a father. I shouldn’t keep it from him any longer. It

wasn't fair to him or the baby. My fear and anxiety could no longer hold me back from doing what was right.

"I'll talk to him," I said, feeling a sense of determination kindling inside. "I'll find the right time and place, and I'll tell him."

Avery's encouragement was a beacon of strength. "That's the spirit. You've got this."

Chapter 28

Emilio

The grand table in our ancestral mansion had transformed into a battleground, each seat occupied by a contender vying for the throne of the Fiore legacy.

On one side sat Uncle Luigi, and on the other side sat my older brother, Carlo. And then there was me, the reluctant contender. I had no desire to inherit this legacy. I had built my success outside the family's criminal enterprises and wanted to distance myself from the life I had grown up in.

"I won't participate in this contest," I declared, trying to diffuse the tension in the room. "I don't seek the throne, and I won't engage in this battle for power."

Carlo glared at me, clearly annoyed. "Don't pretend to be noble. You're just afraid to face the challenge."

"I'm afraid of nothing," I retorted, my resolve firm. "But I choose my battles wisely, and this isn't one of them."

Tensions flared, the arguments and counterarguments growing more heated. Words were exchanged, some laced with anger,

others with frustration. The room seemed like a cauldron about to boil over.

I had to escape the cacophony. Rising abruptly, I declared my disinterest in the inheritance and leadership tussle.

“I’m out,” I stated firmly, uninterested in the squabble.

A moment of disbelief lingered in the room. My uncle and brother exchanged doubtful glances. But internally, a sense of liberation was building. It was time to break free from the chains that had held me captive. Ignoring the skeptical looks, I headed outside, leaving the mansion and its discord behind.

The warmth of the afternoon greeted me, a breath of fresh air, a reminder of the new path I had chosen.

The road ahead was uncertain, but I was eager to embrace it. This was my decision—to step away from the family’s dark past and carve my future unburdened.

As I slipped into my car and pulled away from the compound, the open road stretched out before me, offering an escape without a set destination. I wanted to clear my mind, and driving seemed like the perfect outlet.

Behind the wheel of my car, I felt a surge of determination. The engine roared to life, echoing my readiness to craft my own story independent of the Fiore legacy.

As the wheels turned and the familiar sights of the city passed by, my thoughts returned to the scene at the mansion. The image of my uncle and brother, bickering like hounds over my father’s property, was etched into my mind.

It was a stark reminder of the vultures that often circled family fortunes, waiting to swoop in and claim their share.

It bothered me the way they handled things. It wasn't about mourning my father or appreciating his life; it was all about power and possessions. They seemed oblivious to the man my father had been, lost in their greed and thirst for dominance.

Turning a corner, I headed down a quieter street, the hum of the engine soothing. The desire for wealth and influence held no allure for me. Was there a point when I had both already?

As I drove through the streets, my mind drifted to Griselda. The mere thought of her brought an involuntary smile to my face. It was as if her presence could light up even the darkest recesses of my mind. In her presence, I found solace and a glimpse of the life I wished to create.

I remembered the first time we met and how her genuine smile caught my attention. She possessed a rare authenticity, something often lacking in my world of masks and facades. Our interactions had started casually, but as time went by, I found myself drawn to her in ways I never anticipated.

Her passion for life was infectious. It was inspiring to see how she faced challenges with resilience, never allowing them to dim her spirit, like when she got suspended from work. Griselda was the epitome of strength, an embodiment of the qualities I admired and aspired to possess.

And then there was her kindness, a trait that radiated from her like a gentle halo. She had a way of making everyone feel

heard, understood, and appreciated. I had noticed her conversations with Antonio, one of our bodyguards.

It was a quality so precious, especially in a world where empathy often took a backseat to personal ambitions.

Every memory with her was engraved on my heart—the way she looked at me with understanding, the laughter we shared, and the tender moments of vulnerability. It was in her embrace that I found comfort and in her laughter that I found joy. Griselda had a way of making the ordinary extraordinary.

As the sun painted the sky with hues of orange and pink, I realized that I wanted her to be a part of my future. I envisioned a life where we could navigate the complexities together, a life where love and understanding formed the foundation.

With her by my side, I felt a sense of purpose. She was the reason I believed in a better tomorrow. And as I drove aimlessly through the city, a sense of determination welled up within me. I would find a way to make things right, build a life worth living, and cherish the love that blossomed between us.

Griselda was my beacon of hope, and no matter the challenges that lay ahead, I was ready to face them for her. The thought of her kept a smile on my face as I continued my journey into the unknown, eager to see where life would lead us.



Arriving at home, I felt my thoughts finally quiet down. I was amidst familiar surroundings, thankful for Enzo, who had come over to make sure I was okay, and for Griselda's comforting embrace.

But before I could enjoy this moment of respite, my phone started ringing. I picked it up to hear my brother, Carlo, on the other end, his tone serious and to the point.

"The family lawyer wants us there for the reading of our father's will," Carlo's voice crackled over the phone, conveying the urgency of the situation.

"The will reading? Now?" I responded, surprised by the suddenness of the request.

"Yes, he's calling us all in. It's important we're present," Carlo emphasized, leaving no room for negotiation.

"I'll be there soon."

Chapter 29

Griselda

The afternoon light painted the walls and floor with a soft glow. After Emilio left, a sense of intrigue lingered in his wake. I stayed back in the kitchen, eager to gain some understanding about the sudden call that had pulled him away.

Enzo had come by earlier to be here when Emilio returned. Always approachable, he seemed like the person to provide the missing pieces.

“So, where did he go to?” I asked, directing my attention at Enzo, who was engrossed in his phone.

He looked up, offering a reassuring smile. “Emilio left to deal with some family matters. The lawyer has called for a meeting regarding the will of his late father, Mathias Fiore.”

“And I assume this is a big deal?”

He nodded solemnly. “Absolutely. The Fiore family is no ordinary family. Their wealth and influence run deep, and inheriting any part of that is significant. Emilio isn’t

particularly keen on the inheritance, but that's the lawyer's call."

I took a moment to absorb this. "Is Emilio emotionally okay with all of this?"

Enzo sighed, mirroring Emilio's complex emotions. "It's a two-sided coin for him, but he'll handle it. He always does."

Worry was etched in my features. "If he needs any support, I'm here for him."

Enzo nodded appreciatively. "He knows, Griselda. Your presence means a lot to him."

Enzo leaned back in his chair at the kitchen island, a contemplative look in his gray eyes. "Griselda, this family's history is tangled and complicated. Mathias Fiore was a powerful man in the world of organized crime. His influence, wealth, and properties are substantial."

I listened intently, understanding the gravity of what he was unveiling. "Emilio really mentioned that he isn't interested in inheriting any of it? I mean, the mafia business."

Enzo nodded. "Absolutely. He doesn't want to be part of the mafia. The power struggles, the violence, the deceit—it's not what he envisions for his future."

A glimmer of light became visible at the end of the tunnel as Enzo shared Emilio's decision to step away from the suffocating grasp of the mafia's legacy. It was a glimmer that held the promise of a future I had lately come to dream of—a future with Emilio, free from the chains of crime and violence.

But as the sun began its gentle descent, painting the room in hues of gold and amber, my mind wandered to another aspect of this future that stirred both excitement and apprehension within me—my pregnancy.

I sat back, allowing my thoughts to drift into the realm of possibilities. I loved Emilio more deeply than I had ever imagined possible, and the idea of building a family with him filled my heart with warmth and hope.

I imagined Emilio by my side, his eyes reflecting the same love and tenderness that I felt for him. Our child nestled safely in my arms, a blend of our features and our love, a testament to the life we had created together. A life free from the darkness that had haunted our past.

In my vision, Emilio was the doting father, caring and protective, a stark contrast to the life he had known as a child. He would guide and nurture our children, imparting love and wisdom and giving them a life devoid of fear and secrecy.

We would be a family bound by love, not blood. Our child would grow up in a world where they would be free to chase their dreams, unburdened by the expectations of an infamous legacy.

But even as I reveled in this beautiful vision, the reality of our circumstances lingered in the corners of my mind. The battles for power, the complex web of family dynamics, and the shadows of the mafia were not easily escaped.

Could we truly shed this life? Could Emilio morph out of the mold of expectations and demands of his family? The

questions pulsed in my mind, a reminder that change often progressed in steps and certainly would not be simple.

Nonetheless, I clung to the glimmer of hope. Emilio had taken the first step—a step away from the life that shackled him.

As my thoughts danced in the delicate balance between dreams and reality, a sobering reminder nudged its way into my consciousness. Amidst the swirl of hopes and aspirations, I had yet to share one of the most significant aspects of my life with Emilio—our child, growing within me.

The mere thought of revealing my pregnancy to him injected a sense of both joy and trepidation into my heart. A part of me longed to share this secret, but another part of me feared for his reaction. Nonetheless, I hoped for the best.

After today's reading, Emilio was going to be free.

Chapter 30

Emilio

The conference room bore the solemnity one would expect for the reading of a will. Mahogany furniture and muted lighting created a formal atmosphere, a setting that matched the gravity of the occasion.

I sat at the polished table, flanked by my uncle Luigi and my older brother Carlo, waiting for the lawyer to begin. The lawyer, Mr. Thompson, a man of seasoned experience with a stoic demeanor, cleared his throat and glanced over his glasses at the gathered family members.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today for the reading of the last will of the late Mathias Fiore.”

His words felt like a drumroll, the anticipation and anxiety amplifying with each passing moment. I, however, felt detached, the proceedings a mere formality. My mind was occupied elsewhere, straying to thoughts of Griselda and the future I wished to build with her.

“The document before us has been verified for its authenticity, and the necessary legal procedures have been observed,” Mr. Thompson continued, leafing through the pages of the will.

I exchanged a glance with Carlo, our eyes locking briefly. The tension in the room was palpable, each family member keenly aware of what was at stake. My father’s passing had left a void, and now we were to witness the division of his legacy.

“The estate of Mathias Fiore is bequeathed as follows: All liquid assets are to be divided equally amongst the three male Fiore family members: my brother, Luigi Fiore; my eldest son, Carlo Fiore; my youngest son, Emilio Fiore.” Mr. Thompson announced, his tone professional yet carrying an undertone of empathy for the circumstances that brought about this gathering.

Uncle Luigi leaned forward; his growing anticipation was evident. “Proceed.”

My father’s voice echoed in my mind, memories of his harsh words and the relentless pressure he had exerted on me throughout the years. That a third of his cash and bank should be going to me, felt like a twist of irony.

The lawyer read further, “To my sons, Carlo Fiore and Emilio Fiore, I bequeath all my properties to be divided equally between them.”

I swallowed, my throat feeling dry, as I glanced over at Uncle Luigi.

“Additionally,” Mr. Thompson continued, “the remaining portion of my estate I bequeath to my son, Emilio Fiore, in recognition of his steadfast dedication to the Fiore family.”

You could hear a pin drop as a thick, suffocating veil of silence settled over the room. The lawyer’s words hung in the air. My mind raced, struggling to comprehend the unexpected turn of events.

I sat there in disbelief as Mr. Thompson detailed the intricate transfers of property and assets. It felt like a surreal play, and I was a spectator forced to watch my life unfold on a stage that I had not anticipated.

The shock in the room was palpable, each face contorted with a mix of surprise, confusion, and disbelief. Carlo and Uncle Luigi were visibly taken aback, struggling as much to comprehend the unexpected twist in our father’s will as I was

“What?” Carlo exclaimed in disbelief, his eyes darting between the lawyer and the papers he held in his hand. “Are you sure you’re reading the right document?”

Mr. Thompson, the epitome of professionalism, replied, “I assure you, Mr. Fiore, this is the correct and verified will of the late Mathias Fiore.”

Carlo seemed to be grappling with the news, desperately searching for an explanation or an error that could make this reality disappear. Uncle Luigi, usually composed and collected, appeared equally confounded.

While we all grappled to come to terms with the implications of this unexpected inheritance, the lawyer continued to outline the distribution of assets. But amidst all the confusion, my mind was clear on one thing—I did not want this. I didn't need my father's wealth, and I certainly didn't want to be ensnared by it.

Even in his death, he sought to control my life. He didn't leave me in peace. This was not how I had envisioned my father's will reading.

Clearing my throat, I interrupted the lawyer, my voice firm, "I appreciate my father's intentions, but I decline the properties and assets bequeathed to me."

A hushed silence descended upon the room, broken only by the rustle of papers and the hum of the air conditioning. The lawyer looked at me in surprise, waiting for confirmation.

"You're declining?" he asked, seeking affirmation.

"Yes," I replied resolutely. "Please transfer them to my brother, Carlo Fiore, and my uncle, Luigi Fiore."

The room seemed to hold its breath collectively. Carlo and Luigi exchanged puzzled glances, trying to guess the reasons behind my decision.

"Are you sure about this?" the lawyer pressed, leaning slightly towards me, his brow furrowed with a mix of surprise and concern.

"Yes," I affirmed, my resolve unyielding, meeting his gaze with a determination fueled by the desire to be free.

The lawyer shuffled his papers nervously, seemingly taken aback by my refusal of the inheritance. He glanced at the clauses in the will, double-checking the provisions, and then looked back at me.

“The properties and assets have already been legally transferred to you,” he explained, choosing his words carefully. “If you wish to allocate them to your brother and uncle, you will need to formally accept the inheritance and then make the necessary arrangements for transfer.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with implication. To refuse the inheritance meant refusing to honor my father’s last wishes. But accepting the inheritance also meant entangling myself further with the Fiore legacy, a path I was adamant to avoid.

I took a deep breath, grappling with the dilemma presented before me. The lawyer watched me closely, sensing me weighing my decision.

At that moment, I made a choice that felt like a compromise—a compromise between my desire for freedom and the reality of my circumstances.

“Very well,” I said finally, my voice steady but tinged with a touch of resignation. “I accept the inheritance.”

The lawyer nodded, marking my acceptance in his documents, and continued the proceedings. The properties and assets were officially mine by law, but in my heart, they were a burden I wished I didn’t have to bear.

It's not as if I asked for this, I thought, frustration simmering beneath my calm exterior. I had chosen to accept the inheritance to honor the legalities and to abide by the parameters set by my late father's will.

My uncle's stern countenance and my brother's incredulous expression added to my sense of frustration. Was it my fault that our father had allocated a substantial portion of the estate to me? Did they expect me to reject his wishes outright? Yet, their gazes bore into me as if I were responsible for this predicament.

The lawyer cleared his throat, commanding the attention in the room. "We have reached a critical point in this proceeding. It is my solemn duty to announce the person designated by the late Mathias Fiore to take the helm as the next Don of the Fiore family."

His words hung in the air, heavy and pregnant with anticipation. It was going to be Carlo. After all, he was the oldest son and the heir, though the expectant look on my uncle's face made me frown. Was there something I wasn't aware of?

"Mathias Fiore has designated..." The lawyer paused, and his eyes scanned the room. "Emilio Fiore as the new Don of the Fiore family."

Silence.

Time seemed to freeze, each heartbeat echoing louder.

What the actual fuck!

“What?!” Carlo’s voice roared, disbelief and anger twined in his tone.

My uncle, Luigi, was equally taken aback. “This can’t be true. Mathias never discussed such a decision.”

The lawyer calmly continued, “It is explicitly outlined in the will. Emilio Fiore is chosen as the next Don.”

Carlo’s face was a painting of fury, but beneath the rage, I saw a hint of desperation. I honestly felt sorry for him.

I remained rooted to the spot as the lawyer proceeded to explain the legal reasoning behind the decision, citing Mathias Fiore’s explicit wishes and the responsibilities tied to the role.

Carlo was not one to surrender easily. He began to argue vehemently, pointing out his seniority and experience. His objections ricocheted in the room.

To think that when I was just a step away from freedom.

Even while dead, my father had played a cruel joke on me.

Chapter 31

Griselda

Enzo was immersed in his phone, still perched at the kitchen island, probably checking up on Emilio and who knew what else. I cleared away our plates and packed away the leftovers from the small snack I had prepared for us.

Standing at the sink, washing a few dishes, my mind wandered to Emilio. Emilio was still with his family for the reading of the will, and I couldn't help but slightly wonder why it was taking so long.

Three months into this pregnancy, keeping it secret felt like international espionage. I had thought hard about what to do. Emilio deciding to distance himself from the criminal life was a huge deal for both of us. It meant a shot at a future free from the crime-related family—a future where our baby could grow up safely.

I peered over at Enzo, who was still absorbed in his phone. How did he step into Emilio's life and become such a big part of it? What was the story behind their friendship, and why was he so loyal?

I had figured out that Enzo was Emilio's right-hand man, a friend from way back. During one of our many chats, Emilio had let slip that they met when they were kids, which meant that he had seen Emilio through the highs and lows of being in the mafia.

"Hey, Enzo," I called, catching his attention. He looked over to where I was drying the dishes. "I have a question I've been meaning to ask you."

"Sure, shoot," he replied, setting his phone aside and coming over, taking up another dishcloth.

I contemplated how to begin my quest for answers. "So, you and Emilio have been friends for a long time, right?"

"Since we were kids," he confirmed, a nostalgic smile appearing. "We've been through a lot together. It's more like we're family than just friends."

We moved around the kitchen, returning the clean dishes to their respective shelves.

Curiosity sparked a question within me. "What about your father? Was he...?"

"Yeah, he was in the mafia, just like Emilio's father," Enzo replied without any trace of sadness.

"Is it okay if I ask how he passed away?" I hesitated, unsure if it was a sensitive topic.

"No problem at all," he reassured, opening up. "He died during a mission when I was just a child."

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I offered, feeling compelled to express my condolences.

He waved it off, offering a reassuring smile. “It’s alright. I’ve moved past it. In this world, you learn that actions have consequences. My father knew the risks of what he did.”

My mind grappled with the image of a young Enzo facing such loss and tragedy at an early age. “Who took care of you after that?” I asked gently, wanting to know more.

“Normally, kids like me would be sent to the facilities where they groom future members of the mafia,” Enzo explained. “But fate had different plans.” His words held a mix of memories and gratitude.

I poured us each a glass of water from a jug from the fridge. Carrying both glasses over to the lounge area, I waited for Enzo to settle on a couch before handing him his glass.

I was still intrigued by our conversation, and so I pressed further. “What did you mean by fate having different plans?”

I settled in a modern recliner and put up my feet. They had started to feel a little swollen lately. Enzo didn’t seem to notice, and he began painting a picture of his past, the strokes revealing a young boy navigating a world far from ordinary.

“I met Emilio when we were children before everything got complicated. When Emilio’s father, the Don of the Fiore family, saw us together,” Enzo narrated. “He saw something in me, I guess. He decided to entrust me into the care of a trusted confidante, ensuring I grew up alongside Emilio.”

Enzo spoke fondly of their childhood antics, the mischievous adventures that strengthened their bond. It made me smile. They were more than friends; they were brothers in all but blood.

“Emilio’s always been the kind of guy to put others before himself,” Enzo mused, a sense of pride evident in his voice. “Even when we were kids, he had this innate sense of responsibility.”

“And that hasn’t changed,” I observed, thinking of Emilio’s determination to free himself from the clutches of the mafia.

Enzo nodded, taking a big sip of water. “Exactly. He’s been through a lot, but he’s got this unwavering spirit to carve out a better life for himself and the people he cares about.”

I glanced at him, curiosity piqued. “But what about you? You’re part of this world too, yet you’re fine with him leaving, and even you, leaving as well. Why?”

He raised an eyebrow as if wondering why I even asked. “Well, why wouldn’t I want to leave? The mafia isn’t exactly a desirable place.”

I rolled my eyes, playfully nudging him. “Of course, it’s a horrible place, but I’m asking about the reason. You still stayed for all these years, but now you’re leaving.”

He took a moment to think, then shrugged. “The mafia is a world of crime and violence. If my father hadn’t been a part of it, he’d probably still be alive, as would my mother. Staying in that life leads to destruction. Emilio knows that; he’s seen the

consequences firsthand. He wants out, for himself and for those he cares about.”

He then continued, his gaze thoughtful. “The only reason I stuck around was because of Emilio, but now that he’s making this choice to leave, I don’t have a reason to stay, and neither does Andrea. The mafia is dangerous, full of risks, and I’m just not interested anymore in risking my life or getting involved in illegal activities.”

I was taken aback by the revelation about Andrea’s connection to the mafia world. The words “doctor” and “mafia” seemed like a strange pairing.

I couldn’t help but ask, my voice tinged with surprise, “So, is Andrea a part of the Fiore family, too?”

Enzo chuckled, shaking his head. “No, not at all. Andrea, despite being in the same circle, doesn’t want to get involved with the mafia. He’s got a strong stance against it.”

I felt more confused than before.

“But then, what about you and Emilio?” I queried, perplexed.

Enzo leaned back, a hint of a grin playing on his lips. “Griselda, you seem to have forgotten that Emilio’s security team, including me, are not a part of the mafia. We operate independently, handling his protection and legal affairs.”

The pieces were coming together.

“I see,” I replied, taking in this new information.

As Enzo unraveled the story of their shared past, my curiosity was piqued. I was eager to know more about how Emilio, Andrea, and he had connected over the years.

He began, “The story of how we all met is quite something. Back when we were just young teens, Emilio’s dad hired Andrea’s father, a skilled doctor, to look after some of the men. Andrea often tagged along with his father during these visits. He’s about our age, you know.”

“Got it,” I said, connecting the dots. Despite having limited interactions with Andrea, there was a clear sense of camaraderie among the trio.

As if on cue, my phone chimed, jolting me from the absorbing conversation. My eyes widened as I glanced at the screen—it was my mom calling. Panic flickered through me, a mix of surprise and worry.

Enzo, perceptive as always, asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I hurriedly replied, trying to conceal my astonishment. “It’s just my mom calling. I should take this.”

Enzo’s eyes flickered to my phone, but he didn’t say anything, for which I was grateful. My phone was still ringing, but as much as I wanted to pick it up, I didn’t want to do it in the presence of Enzo.

He stood up and said, “I have to run. Lucas sent me a message. Got to check on a few things.”

“Everything alright?” I asked, seeing him to the door, though I was hoping to answer the call quickly.

“Yeah, yeah,” he assured as he left. “Take care, Griselda.”

As soon as the door clicked shut behind Enzo, I grabbed my phone, its screen glowing with my mother’s name. With a swift swipe, I answered, not wanting the call to go to voicemail.

“Mom?” I answered, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Griselda,” she began, sounding anxious. “It’s time I tell you the truth. When you’re ready, come over.”

I still couldn’t get her first phone call out of my head.

“Mom, why can’t you just tell me now?” I pressed, a knot forming in my stomach.

Can you come over soon?”

She paused, and for a moment, the line crackled with uncertainty. Then, with a heavy sigh, she continued, “I’ll explain everything when we meet. It’s not safe to talk about it over the phone.”

The mention of safety sent shivers down my spine. “Is something wrong, Mom? Are you in danger? Who’s after you?”

Another pause, this one heavier, almost suffocating. “Can you come over soon, sweetheart?”

“But... what about Dad? Is he there with you?” It felt odd to say a word I had barely said throughout the years. I was practically calling someone I had never seen my dad.

I hesitated before finally asking, “Did he even bother to come and see you?”

A brief silence hung in the air before her response, and I could sense her uncertainty.

“No,” she admitted, her voice tinged with sadness and regret. “He hasn’t.”

An involuntary sound escaped me, a mixture of annoyance and realization. If he hadn’t even bothered to visit her, then how did she know about him being back?

“How do you know he’s back then?” I scoffed.

“I’ll answer all your questions when we meet, face-to-face,” she responded, her voice firm yet tinged with sorrow.

Then, abruptly, she hung up.

“What the heck?” I muttered to myself. This was the second time she had ended our conversation abruptly.

I dropped back onto the reclining chair behind me, feeling mentally drained and emotionally tangled.

I grabbed my phone, and I texted Avery, pouring out the recent twists in this unfolding drama. My fingers tapped against the screen:

<Mom just called me. She wants to meet face-to-face to spill the beans. She says it isn’t safe to talk over the phone. And then she just hung up. What the hell is going on?>

The message flew off into the digital abyss, leaving a lingering sense of unease. Avery would be just as baffled by this as I

was. I leaned back into the comfortable chair, awaiting a reply while my thoughts spun like a hamster on a treadmill.

Avery's reply popped up on my screen: <Finally!! What else did she say?>

I quickly typed back, my thumbs flying across the screen: <Not much. Only that my father hasn't bothered to visit.>

Avery's reply came almost instantly., <What?! How did she know he was back? Why is it dangerous?>

<No idea.> I typed back with frustration. <Refused to say more. I insisted we meet for the whole story.>

Avery was getting worried, too., <When are you planning to meet?>

<Don't know yet.> I texted back.

Avery's surprise was evident in her reply, <You don't know?!?!?!?!? Don't you want to find out?>

Of course, I did, but it was hard to explain. I hesitated, my fingers hovering over the key. Avery's question mark popped up on the screen, a silent nudge.

<It feels unreal.> I began typing again, the words hesitant but genuine. <My dad was never dead!!!! Everything was a lie. I'm scared of more secrets. I'm not ready for the truth yet.>

She responded, <I get it. Take your time. I'm here for you.>

Avery's understanding and support were a great source of comfort. I felt a rush of gratitude. <Thank you, Av> As I hit send, the door swung open, and in walked Emilio.

“You’re back,” I exclaimed, a glimmer of excitement despite my somber mood.

But that faded as I saw his expression. He seemed distant, lost in thought.

“Emilio, are you okay?” I asked, my pace slowing as I approached him with concern.

He seemed to snap out of his thoughts, looking around for a moment before meeting my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m... fine,” he replied hesitantly.

I could sense something was very off, and my worry deepened as he asked about Enzo.

“Enzo left to meet Lucas,” I said.

Emilio sighed and pulled out his phone, immediately engrossed in typing a message. “I need to tell Enzo something.”

I wondered what could have transpired during the will reading that preoccupied Emilio so. As he walked past me, probably heading to his room, I looked at my buzzing phone. It wasn’t Avery; it was my mom: <Please visit soon, honey.>

My mood had soured once again. I stood still, my gaze fixed on the phone, until Emilio came beside me, sensing something was amiss.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and I showed him the message. His brows furrowed as he read it.

“Your mom?” he asked, already guessing the answer. “Did she contact you?”

I sat down and sighed, feeling the weight of the day bearing down on me.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “She called to tell me she’s ready to tell me everything.”

Emilio’s concern was evident. He asked what she had said, probably assuming my mom had revealed some information. But I shook my head.

“She wants to tell me face to face,” I muttered, feeling the complexity of my life increase with every passing second.

Emilio’s concern was obvious as he sat beside me, gently holding my hand.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his eyes searching mine for answers.

“I don’t know,” I admitted quietly, finding it hard to put everything into words.

How many times had I been asked this question in the past few days?

Not wanting to wait for him to ask when I planned to meet my mom, I decided to beat him to it.

“I also don’t know when I’m going to meet her,” I confessed. “I need more time to process all of this.”

Emilio nodded, understanding that this was not easy for me. His thumb gently stroked my hand as he gave it another

reassuring squeeze.

“Take all the time you need,” he said softly, “This is a lot to digest.”

As he spoke, he leaned a little closer, his gaze fixed on mine. His eyes, filled with warmth and unwavering support, held mine captive.

“Griselda,” he continued, “You don’t have to be worried. Whatever it is, whatever you’re going to find out, I’ll be right there with you every step of the way.”

His words resonated deep within me, and I felt a flutter of emotions stir in my chest.

Emilio’s reassuring words struck a chord within me, making my heart flutter. Memories of my early dilemma regarding the pregnancy flooded my mind. Could this be the moment to share this secret?

The words sat on the tip of my tongue, yearning to be set free. I took a deep breath, trying to muster the courage to share the news that had been weighing me down for so long.

“Have you eaten?” he asked as he stood up.

I knew this was the moment to tell him, and so I grabbed his hand and stopped him. He looked down at me, concerned.

Nervousness overwhelmed me as I stood, struggling to find the right words.

“What’s wrong?” Emilio asked, his brows furrowing in concern.

I struggled with my words, my heart pounding in my chest.

“I have something important to tell you,” I managed to say, the nervousness nearly choking my words.

He looked at me, concern deepening in his eyes. “Is everything alright?”

I took a deep breath, attempting to steady myself.

“Everything is... well, not fine. But it’s ok... and it’s important,” I stammered, feeling the weight of my confession pressing on me. “I just don’t know how you’ll react, but I hope... I hope you’ll be happy and maybe... feel the same way as I do.”

Words stumbled out in a frenzy of nervous energy. I was tripping over my thoughts, struggling to articulate what I wanted to say. Emilio’s reassuring presence encouraged me to continue, but the fear of how he would react knotted my tongue.

“Take deep breaths,” he encouraged, and following his lead, I calmed my racing heart back down.

A chuckle escaped him, lightening the tension. “Feeling better,” he asked, a playful tease in his voice, attempting to ease the moment.

“The thing is,” I began again, my words jumbling together, “I wasn’t sure when would be a good time to tell you, so I waited, and maybe I waited too long to tell you, and now I’m worried.”

Emilio's eyebrows pulled together, a mixture of confusion and concern on his face. He gently stroked my arms, trying to soothe my anxiety.

"It's going to be okay, whatever you have to tell me." He tried to hide a smile by pinching his lips together tightly, but the jest in his eyes gave him away.

I nodded, still feeling the adrenaline-fueled ramble bubbling up.

"Yes, okay. It's going to be okay. I just, um, wasn't sure, you know, how you'll take it, and maybe it's not the best time since you've had a very long day yourself, with the reading of your father's will, and ... how did it go with the best...I mean bequeath," I shook my head, "the bequeathment?" And suddenly I was quiet and looking at him, waiting for his answer.

Emilio's eyes widened in utter bewilderment at the whirlwind of words coming his way. He wore a helpless smile, a mixture of amusement and understanding, gently taking hold of my forearms and steadying me.

"Griselda, calm down," he said softly, his smile a balm for my nerves. "Come, let's sit." He guided me to the couch and, sitting down first, took me on his lap.

I took a deep breath, attempting to gather my scattered thoughts.

"Sorry, I'm just... nervous. I'm not sure if there's ever a perfect time for this kind of news. I mean, when I first found

out, I was like-.”

Emilio gently interrupted, his tone soothing.

“Breath,” he said, modeling more calming breaths.

Again, I followed suit, trying to emulate his breathing pattern.

A small laugh escaped him, lightening the atmosphere.

“Better?” he asked, a teasing smile dancing on his lips. I nodded, feeling the knots in my stomach slowly loosen. He chuckled, asking playfully, “Are you sure?”

I nodded again, a bit more confident this time, though the nervous fluttering in my stomach persisted. He leaned in slightly, his eyes warm and encouraging, waiting for me to gather my thoughts.

“What I wanted to say is... I’m pregnant.”

And this time, it came out perfectly.

Chapter 32

Emilio

“What I wanted to say is... I’m pregnant.”

My world seemed to screech to a halt. Time stood still as Griselda’s words echoed in my mind. Pregnant. It felt like I had lifted off in a hot-air balloon, seeing things from afar, and as I tried to wrap my head around the magnitude of what she had just revealed, I slowly came back down.

“You’re... what?” I managed to stammer out, my voice a mixture of shock and disbelief. The words felt unreal, like a dream.

“I’m pregnant,” she repeated, her eyes reflecting a blend of shy nervousness and hope.

My thoughts were still too high in the clouds to grasp this sudden reality. How did she even find out?

I stammered, asking her, “How did you find out that you’re pregnant?”

“That’s what you want to know? Well...” She took a deep breath and spoke slowly, choosing her words with care.

“It happened when you were making plans to deal with the Mancini family. Andrea had come over to give you something, but you weren’t around. During that period, I had been feeling unwell, and when Andrea saw me, he insisted on getting me a checkup at his hospital.”

I was stunned by this revelation, my mind processing the timeline.

That was three months ago!

And Andrea had known?!

“And you didn’t tell me?” I asked, struggling to understand.

She continued, “I didn’t want to worry you at the time. A couple of days later, I received the results of the tests, confirming that I was pregnant but with your father’s passing and you being busy and preoccupied, I didn’t want to add any more stress to your plate.”

Guilt gnawed at me. She had kept this a secret, thinking she was protecting me. I wished she had shared this with me sooner, but I understood her intentions.

“Why didn’t you tell me later on?” I inquired.

“I was freaking out,” she admitted. “I thought you might freak out too about having a kid with me, and I didn’t want to stress you out.”

She took a deep breath, determination in her eyes.

“But now, I have to be real with you. I want to keep this baby, and regardless of your reaction, I had to spill the beans.”

As I finally wrapped my head around the news, a rush of feelings hit me. The fear for her safety started to fade, making way for the realization that I was going to be a dad. It sunk in deep, and I understood that our lives were about to do a complete 180.

A whole bunch of new thoughts and emotions started growing in me. A child was on the way, a tiny human that would be part of us. Maybe the timing wasn't what we had in mind, but it was a blessing.

I was going to be a dad.

The news pushed aside the weight of what I had heard at the will reading.

The thought of having a child had been a longstanding dream, one that grew with the passing years. At the age of 37, I felt a pressing need for a genuine family to redirect my focus from the relentless battles I faced daily.

This news was a breath of fresh air, a ray of hope piercing through the dark clouds that hovered over my world as the Don.

However, as Griselda hesitated and her voice quivered, a sudden wave of fear washed over me. Did she doubt my desire for this child? The mere thought was unfathomable. In that instant, a surge of love and determination propelled me. I had to show her how much this meant to me.

Without a second thought, I pulled her close, our lips meeting in a deep, passionate kiss. It was a spontaneous, heartfelt

reaction to the overwhelming rush of emotions. Her initial surprise gave way to reciprocation, and for that fleeting moment, it felt like time stopped.

Breaking away, I looked into her eyes, my own reflecting a mix of happiness, love, and resolute determination.

“Of course, I want this child,” I assured her, my voice gentle yet firm. “More than anything.”

I leaned in and kissed her again. Without a second thought, I scooped her up, her laughter ringing in my ears, and carried her to my bedroom.

She clung to me, her eyes alight with a mix of joy and surprise, mirroring my own emotions. As I gently placed her on the bed, I knew that this was the beginning of something incredible.

She leaned up to me, savoring my mouth. I let out a pleased hum, and my hand wandered across her body, tracing her back and her sides. She shivered a bit at my touch, and I looked at her with a bemused smile.

I grinned and dragged my hand up her sides, under her top, and brushed my thumb along the underside of her breasts. She gasped a little, and I swiftly unbuttoned her shirt, exposing her torso, as she gave another slight shiver in the cool night air.

I rubbed my thumb over her nipples, making little circles around them and stimulating them. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she bit her lip. I played with the sensitive buds as I pulled her

down and started to suck on them, causing her to yelp in surprise.

My tongue circled the nipple and flicked it a few times, earning a soft whimper from her, before sucking for a few moments and releasing it with a soft -pop.

She sighed and looked away, probably embarrassed at how easily aroused she was from just a bit of nipple play, but I enjoyed it.

“S-stop teasing me...” She whined, but she couldn’t help the small smile that graced her lips.

I gently shifted her so that she was lying beside me with her back to my chest, one arm around her, the other caressing her face, and then traveling down to squeeze one breast.

Was I imagining it, or did it feel slightly larger? Then my hand traveled to her belly and lingered at the waistband of the shorts she was wearing, silently asking for permission.

She nodded, and my hand slid under them, touching her lightly over her underwear. She moaned a little at this sensation, and I slipped my hand into her underwear, gliding my fingertips over her wet, warm folds.

This brought out a low moan from her.

Parting her legs, I rubbed circles around her clit and dipped a finger into her hole, wetting it and using her slick to lubricate her clit. As I stimulated her, I slipped another finger in, pumping them deeply and causing her to whimper and gasp in pleasure.

I crooked them, and she let out a breathy moan, to which I just laughed softly and continued my work. Soon, her legs started to quiver.

“Oh- oh, fuck-” she managed to exclaim, practically whining the words, her hips buckling involuntarily.

She moved her body, rolling away from me, and pushed herself up on her hands and knees, straddling my body.

She leaned down to kiss me again, eventually breaking away to place a light kiss across my jawline and down my neck, stopping at my collarbone, where she grazed me with my teeth.

I hummed softly, and she straightened up, pushing her pelvis back to sit on my own. She shifted backward to place kisses down my torso, tracing the line of my body with her nails. I shifted so she could go even lower, and she unbuttoned my trousers for me, pulling them down past my hips.

“It seems you also can’t hide your excitement,” she teased as she dragged a finger along the hardening length of my trousers.

“Can you blame me when I have a beautiful lady on top of me?” I grinned and tugged the rest of my trousers off, leaving myself only in my underwear.

She resumed her careful inspection, tracing lines along the contours of my body, taking note of every scar. Her eyes turned somber as she ran her fingers over my scars, and I placed my hand on hers.

There was no need for her to feel bad. It was all in the past, and the man responsible for them was dead.

She met my gaze with a half-smile and began to palm my bulge over my shorts, eliciting a strained groan from me. She hooked one finger under the waistband. I winked at her, and she tugged it down, freeing my cock.

Though it wasn't the first time she had seen it, I enjoyed seeing her expression each time she saw my cock. She ran her hand up the shaft and smoothed her thumb over the head, eliciting a soft grunt from me, and she flicked her eyes back up to mine.

She licked her lip slightly before stating, "I want to suck you off."

I chuckled nonchalantly, but I was turned on by how straightforward she was. "Darling, you can do anything you want to me. I won't complain."

She shifted her body further down the bed, her head lowering to meet my cock. She started at the base and dragged her tongue up along the length of my cock before swiping it over the head.

I held back a moan as she did this. She took my cock in her mouth and slowly began to bob her head before releasing my dick with a wet *pop*. Pumping it slowly by hand, she slid her other hand up to my chest.

She was about to take more of my dick in her mouth before I placed a hand on her shoulder. She paused and looked up at

me.

“I want to fuck you right now,” I stated.

Though it came out as a demand, I was still asking for permission. Since she was pregnant, I wasn't sure if it would be uncomfortable for her.

She answered by rolling over to sit, leaning back on her hands and opening her legs, making space for me. I smirked and stripped off the remaining clothes before flopping back onto the bed.

She welcomed me by kissing me deeply. I caught her lower lip between my teeth in a gentle but firm hold, then released it after a moment. She whimpered softly, and her hands came up to roam my body.

I shifted our position so that she was lying on her back, and I was taking up the space above her with one knee between her legs and one hand holding hers beside her head.

My other hand traveled down to one of her nipples, and she moaned, breaking the kiss. I placed an open-mouthed kiss under her jaw, on the side of her neck, to the place where her shoulder and collarbone meet, where I bit her firmly, not enough to draw blood, but enough to leave a mark, before kissing her there too.

She lifted one of her legs and hooked it over my shoulder. I kissed her inner thigh, and she made a somewhat strangled sound, and I grinned before giving her another bite.

I teased her, placing kisses on both thighs, getting closer and closer but never quite touching where she wanted my mouth to be. She ached with anticipation, and I knew it.

“I...please...” she whimpered, squirming a bit.

“Please, what?” I asked, caressing her thigh. I leaned my head further down, my lip ghosting just above her pussy. “Oh, you mean... here?” I said, purposefully letting her feel my warm breath.

She nodded, and I finally obliged, dragging my tongue up the length of her vulva. I explored her with my tongue, taking my time, savoring the fact that I could make her squirm and pant and moan with just a few deliberate motions.

To change things up, I decided to focus on her clit, swiping my tongue around it in slow circles before directly touching it with the tip of my tongue. She moaned and arched her back off the mattress.

I let myself be immersed in the sensation as her thighs began to shake involuntarily, and I could feel her muscles contracting, but I stopped before she could reach her climax, causing her to release a noise of frustration.

I licked my lips, clearly pleased with my work, and gently lowered her legs back to the bed so that she could relax them for a bit. I pressed a kiss to her forehead and brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face, pink and a little dewy.

She smiled up at me with half-lidded eyes and pulled me in for a kiss, not caring that she could taste herself in my mouth.

“Hurry up and fuck me,” She demanded, meeting my eyes.

It was the hottest thing I had heard in a long while.

She took hold of my cock and pumped it with her hands while I slid a finger inside her, making sure she was lubricated and relaxed, then added a second finger and scissored them for a while. I removed my finger and positioned myself, aligning the blunt head of my cock with her entrance, and she nodded.

She exhaled, and I pushed into her slowly, holding her hips. She closed her eyes as she felt me stretching her. It was a good stretch, making her feel full. Once I was fully seated, she hooked her legs around my back, and I began to thrust. I started slow and deep, relishing the feeling of her slick wall around my cock as I let out a low moan.

Her breath hitched as I thrust into her a bit harder, hitting a deliciously deep spot. I tossed my head a bit to keep my hair out of my face and have my vision of her flushed face unhindered.

“You like the way I’m fucking you?” My words came out in a breathy whisper in her ears.

“Mm...yes!” she managed to say between short, gasping moans. I was hitting her G-spot with my cock, and it was driving her crazy. I grinned and leaned down to press our bodies together, and she brought her hand up to claw at my back.

I continued to pump at an even faster pace, my moans turning into growls. I gasped in pleasant surprise when she dug her

nails into my skin, and my desperate movements became shallow and sloppy.

“*Fuck*, I’m going to cum soon...” I choked out, still holding her close.

She managed to turn her head slightly and kissed my shoulder before deciding to bite me. *Hard*. She did so, and I felt her pussy clench around my cock as she came.

Due to her walls convulsing around me, my pleasure heightened, and I came. My hips buckled shallowly a few more times before coming to a stop as I emptied myself into her.

I panted above her and slowly withdrew. Some of my cum spilled out of her, and she tilted her head back and breathed deeply, sighing with satisfaction.

Sliding off her body and lying beside her, I instinctively pulled Griselda close, our limbs entwined in the peaceful aftermath of our intimacy. I spooned her, our bodies fitting perfectly into each other as if we were meant to be this way.

In the soft glow of the room, wrapped in each other’s arms, a rush of emotions flooded through me. It had been a long time coming, the confession of how I truly felt about Griselda. Being part of the mafia had kept me holding back, but now, with the news of our child on the way, I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

Why wait?

We were going to be parents together.

Griselda had always captivated me. Her fierce independence and unwavering determination were things I deeply admired. Her laughter was infectious, brightening even the gloomiest days.

Our conversations were something I looked forward to. She had been my pillar of support, and being with her brought a sense of peace and contentment I had never known before.

Holding her close, I found myself overwhelmed by my feelings for her. It wasn't a perfect scenario, but I loved her deeply and completely. For Griselda and our child, I was ready to face whatever challenges came my way.

Chapter 33

Griselda

“I love you.”

His confession sent a beautiful shiver through me, a cascade of emotions that I had been yearning to hear. For so long, I had hoped he felt the same way, but the circumstances and the fear of complicating things held me back. Now that he had confessed, it was both a relief and a moment of truth.

Emilio’s words echoed in my mind and heart, sinking in slowly like ripples on a calm lake. His confession had been abrupt, catching me off guard, but the feelings behind it were genuine.

But as I lay there, overwhelmed by my feelings, not knowing how to react, it was both exhilarating and terrifying.

Emilio slid close to me and pulled me close so that he was spooning me.

“Griselda,” he began, his voice gentle, “I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable by saying that. I couldn’t hide my feelings anymore.”

His words carried a tinge of regret as if confessing had been a mistake. It jolted me out of my stupor, and I turned to face him. In his eyes, I saw vulnerability and disappointment, though he tried to hide it. He seemed to be giving me an out, suggesting I didn't have to return his feelings.

"You didn't make me uncomfortable," I said, my voice soft but certain, a rush of courage bolstering my words. "I've been hoping for this too."

His eyes widened, the regret replaced by surprise and a glimmer of hope.

"Really?" he asked, almost cautiously, as if afraid this was a dream that could shatter.

I smiled, trying to convey what was in my heart. "Yes. You don't know how much I've wanted you to say that."

Relief washed over his face, and he looked at me as if a weight had been lifted. It was almost a comical moment, realizing that we both wanted the same thing yet had been holding back, afraid to shatter the delicate balance we had. Now, the truth was out, and it was liberating.

He pulled me closer, his arms embracing me in a secure, comforting hold.

"Griselda," he murmured, his breath warm against my ear, "I love you."

"I love you too," I whispered back, my voice breaking with emotion.

His face broke into a wide grin, a burst of happiness and relief that was contagious. Without another word, he leaned in and crashed his lips against mine in a deep, tender kiss.

I giggled into the kiss, unable to contain the bubbling euphoria that was flooding through me. Our lips moved in sync, expressing what words couldn't,

The world around us seemed to fade away.

When we finally pulled away, our smiles mirrored each other, brimming with happiness. He cupped my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing gently against my cheeks.

I couldn't contain the excitement and joy bubbling within me.

"I'm so happy, Emilio," I gushed, unable to hide my exuberance. "I've been waiting for this for so long, for us."

His eyes sparkled with delight at my words, and for a moment, it seemed like nothing could dampen this newfound happiness. He pulled me closer, wrapping me in a warm embrace. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and reassuring, against my chest.

"You've made me the happiest I've ever been," he murmured, his voice filled with a tenderness that made my heart flutter.

"When Enzo told me about how you were considering cutting all ties with the mafia, you had no idea how relieved I was. I thought about our child growing up in a safer, more normal life."

As I spoke those words, my excitement still buzzing in the air, Emilio's expression changed. It wasn't the reaction I had expected. Instead of the happiness and relief I thought I'd see,

his face seemed to cloud over with a sudden heaviness. It was as if my words had unexpectedly unearthed a hidden burden.

I paused, my voice trailing off as concern etched across my features. Did I say something wrong? I replayed my words in my mind, trying to pinpoint what could have caused the change.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concern etching my voice. “I thought you’d be happy about this.”

He seemed to hesitate, annoyance flickering in his eyes. Running a hand through his hair, he sighed. My worry only deepened as the seconds ticked by.

“Just say it, Emilio,” I urged, my heart thudding in my chest.

With another sigh, he confessed, “I am the new leader of the Fiore family.”

The words hit me like a sledgehammer to my chest, sending shockwaves of disbelief through my entire body. I sat up abruptly, the bedsheets falling around my waist.

“What?” I exclaimed, unable to mask the astonishment in my voice. “How... how did this happen? I thought you were leaving the mafia. You were strictly opposed to sharing any part of that life, and now you’re becoming the leader?”

Emilio closed his eyes.

“I didn’t expect this either,” he admitted. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but it was pushed to the back of my mind when you told me about our child.”

My confusion only deepened.

“But what about your brother?” I asked, recalling the conversations we’d had about the family hierarchy. “Wasn’t he supposed to be the next don? What changed?”

He sighed again, pinching the space between his eyebrows, clearly frustrated.

Emilio took a deep breath, trying to navigate through the complexities of his family’s affairs. His frustration was evident, an underlying tension that had likely been building for a long time. He began recounting the events surrounding his father’s will reading.

He explained, his words tinged with bitterness. “He divided his properties among us, but I got the majority, more than Carlo and Uncle Luigi.”

I sat there, baffled by this revelation. It was common knowledge that Emilio’s relationship with his father had been strained, if not outright tumultuous. The idea of him receiving the lion’s share of the family estate seemed like a joke.

“But why?” I asked, my confusion growing. “Why would he give you the majority when it’s clear he had issues with you?”

Emilio’s smile was tinged with sarcasm. “Exactly my thoughts. I didn’t need the money, and I planned on transferring the properties to Carlo and Uncle Luigi. After all, I aimed to sever all ties with the family, but the lawyer went on to announce the next leader of the mafia, and instead of Carlo, he named me as the new Don.”

I was utterly stunned. “But why?”

I couldn't fathom why Emilio, despite the strained relationship with his father, would be chosen as the successor. It wasn't that I doubted his abilities—after all, he had proven his competence as the CEO of a prominent car company.

It was more of the fact that his father never treated him well, so why would he bypass the oldest and favored son to choose Emilio as the Don?

Emilio nodded, his expression mirroring my astonishment. “Exactly. Given how I was treated, especially by him, this was the last thing I expected.”

I leaned towards him, my curiosity pressing. “And what about Carlo and your uncle?” I asked. “How did they take the news?”

A sardonic smile played on his lips. “How do you think? They didn't exactly give me a round of applause.”

I felt a twinge of shame for questioning him like a suspect instead of seeing things from his perspective. “It's not your fault, Emilio. You had no idea this would happen.”

He squeezed my hand reassuringly. “I know, *gattina* (kitten), but it doesn't change the situation.”

“Are you going to stay?”

He shook his head decisively. “No. I can't, and I won't.”

I was relieved. As much as I wanted to support Emilio, the idea of him staying within the mafia's clutches made me

uneasy. The dangers that came with that world weren't something I wanted for him—or our child.

“I can't believe his influence still reaches beyond the grave,” I commented, frustration in my voice. “How could he treat you that way for so many years and yet practically make you his successor? What exactly was he thinking when he did that?”

Emilio sighed. The heaviness of the situation was evident in his eyes.

“Before I left, my father's lawyer came by to give me an envelope,” he revealed, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the pocket of his jacket where the message was stowed. “Something he asked the lawyer to pass on to me.”

“Where is it now?” I asked softly.

“It's still in my pocket,” he replied, his voice tinged with hesitation. “I don't think I'm ready to read it, at least not yet.”

“You don't have to force yourself,” I assured him, moving closer and wrapping my arms around his waist. He reciprocated, encircling me in his warm embrace.

“It's just... I need time,” he murmured, resting his head on mine.

“And you'll read it when you're ready,” I affirmed, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek.

Chapter 34

Emilio

Tired of lying down while still covered with body fluids, Griselda and I both agreed it was time to wash up and we decided to do it together.

We walked into the bathroom hand in hand, the familiar comfort of her touch grounding me. It was strange how even the mundane task of showering became something more when shared with someone you love.

We turned on the water, letting it warm up. The sound of it splashing against the tiles was soothing. As we stepped under the spray, the warmth enveloped us, a gentle caress against our bodies.

We took turns lathering each other with soap and as the water rinsed away the suds, it felt like it was also washing away the worries and anxieties of the day. Griselda stood on her tiptoes to press a tender kiss on my lips, a simple yet meaningful gesture that filled my heart with warmth.

Griselda and I finally emerged from the warmth of the shower, the droplets of water still glistening on our skin. We quickly dried off and threw on some cozy, casual clothes, not bothering with anything too fancy since it was already late in the evening.

“I’m thinking of whipping up a quick bruschetta. Does that sound good to you?”

WE moved to the kitchen and I pulled out a loaf of crusty bread from the pantry and started slicing it into thick, uneven pieces.

I toasted them lightly, and the aroma of the freshly baked bread began to fill the room, mingling with the scent of the brewing coffee.

Griselda leaned against the counter with her eyes fixed on me.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked, her voice laced with worry.

I paused in my actions.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, the heaviness of my uncertainty tainting the warmth of the kitchen. “It’s not easy. I can’t just dissolve the family. It would create chaos, not just for us but for so many others as well.”

There was no doubt that the word had spread about my newfound role as Don, and it was inevitable that our enemies would be on high alert, ready to stir up trouble. The mafia’s protection had shifted from an inconvenience to essential.

Walking away from the mafia wasn't something I could afford now, especially with the added security and peace of mind it provided for myself, Griselda, and our imminent bundle of joy.

She reached out to touch my arm, her gentle caress a silent reassurance that we were in this together.

"I understand," she whispered, her voice soft yet laced with worry. "But I worry too, Emilio. I want us to have a future where we don't have to constantly look over our shoulders, where we can live without fear."

I turned to face her fully, the corners of my lips tugging into a faint smile as I reached for the chopped tomatoes and basil leaves, ready to assemble the bruschetta.

"We will find a way," I assured her, my voice steady. "I promise you, Griselda, I won't let anything harm you or our child."

After drizzling a generous amount of olive oil over the toasted bread and layering it with the vibrant mix of tomatoes and basil, I finished preparing the bruschetta and served it between Griselda and me. The fragrant aroma wafted through the air, momentarily diverting our attention from the weight of our conversation.

As we savored the flavors, I couldn't shake off the growing curiosity about her family's history.

In between bites, I gently broached the subject of her mother, asking if she had made any decisions about when to see her.

Griselda's lips curved into a slight smile, but I could detect a hint of the troubles that had been clouding her thoughts.

"It's like we're stuck in this loop of never-ending problems," she sighed, her voice tinged with a mix of weariness and determination. She continued after a pause, her voice laced with gratitude.

"Thank you, I appreciate it, Emilio. It means a lot." She paused again, her fingers tracing the rim of her plate thoughtfully. "I'm not sure when I'll be ready to see her." She confessed.

As we continued to enjoy the meal, I felt compelled to bring up the topic of her father.

"I still haven't been able to find much about your dad," I admitted, a trace of frustration seeping into my voice. "Even Lucas would have dug something up by now. It's like he's a ghost."

Her gaze remained fixed on her plate, lost in the depths of her memories.

"My mother rarely spoke about him, and I never had the chance to know him," she revealed softly, her voice carrying the weight of a past left unexplored.

I took a bite of the bruschetta, the crisp texture of the bread complementing the burst of flavors.

"Do you ever wish to get to know him?" I asked, my curiosity mingling with a desire to understand her perspective. "If you

had the opportunity to meet him, would you be open to work at building a relationship with him?"

She paused, delicately setting down her fork before responding.

"No, I don't think so." She continued, giving a poignant explanation, "regardless of his reasons, I can't think of any justification for leaving us, for leaving my mother to shoulder all the responsibility on her own for all those years."

I nodded in silent acknowledgment, the weight of her pain palpable in the shared silence.

"Have you ever thought about meeting him, though?" I inquired gently, hoping to unravel the complexities of her feelings.

She met my gaze, her eyes reflecting a depth of emotion that words couldn't fully capture.

"No, I don't want to meet him," she replied firmly. "I just want to uncover the truths that have been hidden from me and if finding him leads to that, then so be it; but meeting him face-to-face, inviting him into my life, is not part of the plan."

"But what if he wants to come back into your life, into your mom's life?" I probed further, careful not to impose but genuinely seeking to understand her stance.

"I wouldn't agree," she stated firmly, her voice unwavering. "His absence has left a void that can't simply be erased. I can't just let him waltz back into our lives as if nothing happened."

Thinking of another angle, my curiosity tugged at me, compelling me to ask the next question.

“What if your mom is ready to accept him back?” Thinking of the tangled emotions that must have haunted her mother all these years.

Griselda chewed thoughtfully; her brow furrowed in contemplation.

“I can’t speak for my mom or dictate her choices,” she began, her words measured. “But I can’t see why she would want to let him back into her life. He chose to walk away, to leave us to fend for ourselves. I don’t see how she could forgive that.”

I continued eating quietly, my mind lingering on Griselda’s dad and the mysteries surrounding him. Our lives always seemed tangled in some drama. On top of my challenges within the mafia, now I had to figure out who her dad was.

Then Griselda spoke up, firm in her decision.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she declared. “I’m going to see my mom tomorrow.”

Her sudden determination caught me off guard, but I could see she was resolute.

“I’ll drop you off,” I offered, wanting to make sure she felt supported.

She tried to brush it off, but I insisted until she relented.

“I’ll pick you up afterward.”

There didn't seem to be any break for us. The more we tried to sort things out, the more complicated they got. It was like we were stuck in this endless loop of problems, and it was starting to wear me down.

As I chewed on the bruschetta, it became a brief distraction from the mess we were dealing with. Looking over at Griselda, her thoughtful expression tugged at my heart, making me want to protect her from all the craziness.

The clinking of our forks and knives against the plates was the only sound in the room, echoing the weight of the things we couldn't say out loud. With each bite, I silently promised myself that I would get to the bottom of this whole dad situation for her sake. No matter how tough things got, she wasn't going to face it alone.



The following day, I found myself settled into my office after dropping Griselda off at her mom's place. Sunlight filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows, painting a warm, inviting glow over the sleek contemporary furnishings and tasteful artwork that adorned the walls.

Enzo sat across from me on one of several comfortable sofas; the worry etched on his face mirroring my concerns.

We were knee-deep in a discussion about the issue of my newfound role in the mafia. Enzo leaned forward, his brows furrowed.

“So, what’s the play now, Emilio?” he asked, his voice laced with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

I took a moment, letting my gaze wander over the ever-moving city below, before replying, “Same as what I told Griselda. It’s not a simple puzzle to solve. With news of my new role spreading like wildfire among the families, it’s like putting a spotlight on our every move. Right now, the mafia is sheltering us.”

Enzo nodded. “It’s a tricky web you’re caught in,” he mused. “But what about the long term? You can’t keep balancing on this wire forever.”

“I don’t plan on staying on the fence forever,” I answered while looking out the windows. “This wasn’t meant to be mine. It was supposed to be Carlo’s, and the role will naturally revert to him.”

Enzo regarded me with a skeptical gaze.

“Have you spoken to Carlo since then?” he inquired. “I’m pretty sure he’s not exactly thrilled with the turn of events.”

A wry smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I shook my head in response.

“Haven’t had the pleasure,” I admitted, the strained relationship with both my uncle and my brother weighing heavily on my mind, in addition to everything else. “I haven’t spoken to either of them since the will reading. But the silence won’t last forever, especially since I’ll have to make a trip to the family house soon enough.”

Enzo let out a sigh. “And what about Griselda?”

I let out a small sigh.

“She’s the reason I’m taking things slow,” I confessed, the thought of her safety intertwined with every decision I made. “Can’t afford to mess up, not when it’s not just her anymore.”

Enzo’s curiosity was piqued, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Not just her? Who else is there?” he probed.

A wide grin spread across my face.

“She’s pregnant,” I revealed, the thrill of the news reverberating through me despite the surrounding drama.

Enzo’s eyes widened to the size of saucers.

“Congratulations,” Enzo managed, his shock still evident. I couldn’t help but chuckle at his reaction. The sheer incredulity on his face was almost comical. “Didn’t think I’d ever settle down, huh?” I teased, a playful glint in my eye as I savored the moment.

Enzo’s response was typically candid.

“Can’t say I did,” he retorted, his straightforward nature causing my amusement to wane, replaced by a good-natured eye roll, but beneath the skepticism, I knew he was happy for me.

“I’ve now got two people to worry about,” I remarked.

Enzo nodded in silent understanding, and then, as if on cue, his phone rang. He glanced at the screen before answering, “It’s Lucas.”

I gestured for him to pick it up, slightly wondering what happened for him to call.

Enzo swiftly picked up the call, and as the seconds ticked by, his eyes lifted to mine once more, conveying the message that it was, indeed, Lucas on the line.

“Lucas couldn’t get through to you,” Enzo relayed.

The memory of switching off my phone amidst the barrage of congratulatory calls and messages from fellow mafia leaders came back to me.

“I had my phone off,” I explained.

Enzo swiftly relayed my message to Lucas, emphasizing my presence in the room. With a deft motion, he activated the speakerphone, allowing Lucas’s voice to fill the space. His words were measured, laden with a hint of unease, which made me sit up.

“Boss, I found Griselda’s father,” he began, the weight of his discovery palpable in the charged atmosphere. “Check the data on your phone, Enzo.”

There was a crackle of anticipation in the air.

“Thank you, Lucas. You did a great job,” I commended brusquely.

Enzo hung up, his fingers swiftly navigating through the information that Lucas had sent him. I watched intently, my anticipation mingling with a growing sense of unease as Enzo’s expression underwent a marked change. Surprise gave

way to shock, which then morphed into an unreadable expression.

As my sense of foreboding escalated, I couldn't contain my growing apprehension.

"Spit it out, Enzo," I urged.

Enzo's face contorted with a mix of emotions that I couldn't quite place, his expression reflecting the weight of the discovery he had just made.

"Her father," he began slowly, his voice laden with an undeniable sense of gravity, "He's part of the mafia. He's Don of the Esposito family."

Chapter 35

Griselda

I stood on the threshold of my childhood home, face to face with my mother, after Emilio had dropped me off. As she opened the door, her eyes met mine, a small, sad smile playing at the corners of her lips. I couldn't bring myself to smile. Unanswered questions and unresolved emotions weighed down my mind.

Noticing my solemn demeanor, my mother opened the door wider, motioning for me to step inside. The interior of the house enveloped me with a sense of familiarity as I walked through the hall. It had been a while since I had been here, and a lot had happened in the meantime.

I picked up a gentle scent of freshly brewed coffee. The soft, warm hues of the furnishings exuded an air of comfort that did nothing to soothe my nerves.

It was odd to notice how uneasy I felt in my mom's house.

We made our way into the living room, and I saw two steaming cups of coffee sitting atop the small coffee table. I

settled into the couch, clutching a cup in my hands.

Turning to face my mother, I mustered the strength to voice the one demand that had weighed heavily on my mind since the moment I had decided to confront her.

“I’m here,” I began, my voice steady despite the turmoil that churned within. “So, explain everything.”

My mother’s gaze reflected my nervousness and apprehension.

“I didn’t tell you because I wanted you to be safe,” she admitted, her voice tinged with remorse. “I never thought he would find us. I wanted you to live your life without the burden of knowing what he did.”

I gripped the cup tighter. “I’m old enough to make my own decisions,” I asserted. “I want to know the truth.”

My mother’s eyes held mine, pleading with mine for understanding.

“Your father is Riccardo Esposito,” she began, her voice low and laden with meaning as if I should recognize the name. “He’s Don of the Esposito family.”

My mind reeled. He was part of the mafia?!

She continued, her voice tinged with sorrow as she recounted the family’s tumultuous history.

“Riccardo was once Riccardo Mancini and was set to inherit the Mancini family,” she explained, her gaze momentarily distant as she delved into the past. “But everything changed when his trusted friend, Mathias Fiore, betrayed the family.”

Mathias Fiore? As in Emilio's father?

"The events that followed led him down a path that made him become Don of the Esposito family."

"What the fuck?" I murmured the words in a reflexive response, shaking my head in disbelief.

My mother continued to explain in a melancholy voice. "But when Mathias betrayed them, it all went wrong. Your grandfather, who was the don of the Mancini family then, blamed your father for bringing shame to the family. He disowned Riccardo because your grandfather believed that your father was responsible for the loss that Mathias brought upon the Mancini family."

"Riccardo saw no other option. He toiled tirelessly to establish his faction," she recounted, her eyes clouded with memories. "Meanwhile, his younger brother was appointed as the Don of the Mancini family. Tragically, he passed away after only a few years, leaving his son, Crino, to inherit the mantle."

So Crino Mancini, Emilio's enemy, was my cousin?! A slight nausea started growing in my belly.

I listened to my mother as she spoke about how the Mancini family declined under Crino's leadership, casting a shadow over their once-mighty name.

My father, seizing the opportunity presented by the weakened state of the Mancini family, took it upon himself to manipulate his nephew. He painted Mathias Fiore's betrayal as the root

cause of their downfall, using it to sow the seeds of doubt and discord within Crino's leadership.

My mother interrupted her account, getting up to stand over by the window. With a heavy sigh, she continued.

“Riccardo saw an opportunity to weaken both the Mancini and Fiore families,” she explained, the weight of her words hanging in the air. “He held onto a deep-seated resentment toward his father for disowning him, blaming him for a betrayal that was not his own. His animosity extended to his brother, whom he believed had failed to bring him back into the fold after their father's passing.”

The revelation hung in the air, the implications of my father's calculated actions echoing within the room. The wounds of abandonment and injustice had festered within him, casting a dark shadow over his relationship with the family he had once called his own and the man who had long ago been his friend, Mathias Fiore.

However, he couldn't bring himself to be the agent of the Mancini family's destruction. Instead, he had sought to pit the two families against each other, using their resources and ambitions to bring about their downfall.

It was a strategy that would allow him to achieve his goal while keeping his own hands clean, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

My mother's eyes held a deep tiredness as she continued her narrative, delving into the harrowing chapter of our lives that had unfolded when I was just a year old.

“Riccardo had become consumed by his lust for revenge,” she confessed, her voice quivering under the weight of the past. “He had descended into a dark abyss, and I grew increasingly fearful for our safety.”

The fear that had gripped her heart ultimately led her to make a decision that would alter the course of our lives. When I was just a year old, she made the heart-wrenching choice to flee from Riccardo, desperate to protect us from the menacing shadow he had become. The journey to escape his reach was not an easy one, marked by a constant vigilance to avoid detection.

Over the years, she had worked tirelessly to erase any trace of our former identities, leaving behind the lives we had known and adopting new ones in their place.

The secrets of our past had been buried beneath layers of deception with a single purpose: to remain hidden from the vengeance of a man who had become unrecognizable in his obsession.

However, the past had resurfaced in the form of Mathias Fiore, who had appeared at her doorstep with palpable anxiety, seeking information about Riccardo. His inquiries had carried a veiled threat, a reminder of the danger that still loomed over our lives.

He had demanded answers, compelling my mother to reveal whether Riccardo was alive or not, under the ominous promise that he would pursue us, his threats extending to me.

The revelation of Mathias Fiore's involvement in our lives left me dumbfounded. Suddenly, several pieces of the complex puzzle fell into place. I now understood the reason behind my mother's visceral reaction upon hearing the name Fiore. It wasn't just a matter of recognizing the name; it was an acknowledgment of the peril that it represented.

The fear in her eyes and the urgency in her voice when she had warned me about my life being in danger all made sense.

Emilio's father, Mathias Fiore, was at the epicenter of the turmoil that had disrupted our lives. It was a revelation that left me struggling to grasp the depth of his involvement and the complexity of the web that entangled us all.

While understanding his motives provided a semblance of clarity, it didn't absolve my own father's actions or the responsibility he bore for his choices.

I found myself contemplating whether Emilio had any knowledge of his father's past, but I swiftly dismissed the thought. There was no way he could have known. No, he didn't know.

A heavy silence settled between my mother and me as I absorbed all that she told me. The truths she had shared only added to our burdens.

"This is why I didn't want to tell you," my mother murmured, her voice carrying the weight of her past decisions. I nodded, appreciating her reasoning. However, the need for answers still pulsed within me, refusing to be quelled by digging up the skeletons of the past.

“I know,” I replied softly, acknowledging the difficult choices she had made. “But I needed to know.”

I gazed at her, my eyes searching for reassurance, seeking solace in the shared understanding of the turmoil that had shaped our lives. I couldn't help but ask the question that had plagued my thoughts for so long.

“Has he ever come close to finding us?” I inquired, the tension lacing my words betraying the fear that still lingered within me.

My mother's response was measured, her voice a testament to the resilience that had sustained us through the years. She recounted a few close calls that had threatened to expose our carefully guarded sanctuary.

Yet, her resourcefulness and the relationships she had cultivated, even during her time with my father, had served as a shield.

My mind circled back to the unsettling memory of Mathias's visit, the underlying threat of his inquiries still lingering in the air. I turned to my mother, my brow furrowed with the weight of my questions.

“Why do you think he came, demanding to know about my father?” I asked, the unease evident in my voice.

My mother's response was tinged with uncertainty, mirroring the bewilderment that had shrouded her during the encounter.

“I'm not sure,” she admitted, her voice carrying a hint of trepidation. “But the urgency in his tone, the way he spoke...

It was as though he was facing problems, and he thought they were because of Riccardo.”

In that poignant moment, I enveloped my mother in a tight embrace, both of us seeking solace in the reassuring presence of the other.

“Thank you for everything,” I murmured, my voice conveying my gratitude and a deep-seated appreciation for the sacrifices she had made. “I know it couldn’t have been easy, running away with a child.”

Her embrace tightened around me, a silent acknowledgment of the struggles and hurdles we had faced together.

“I’m just happy you’re safe,” she whispered.

My mind raced back to the troubling accounts Emilio had shared regarding the persistent conflicts between the Fiore and Mancini families. I retraced the details my mother had just disclosed, a web of connections and implications knitting themselves together in my mind.

The urgency that had underscored Mathias’ inquiries seemed to mirror the very issues that Emilio had highlighted, the continuous onslaughts and hostilities between the two families.

A dawning realization settled over me, the pieces of the intricate puzzle aligning in a way that sent a shiver down my spine. Could it be possible that the persistent attack that Emilio had faced and the escalating tensions were the result of my father’s calculated manipulations?

I thought about all the times my father's actions had put Emilio in danger. What if one of Crino's attempts on his life had succeeded? I shuddered at the idea.

How different would my life be right now if that had happened?

Chapter 36

Emilio

My mind reeled with the weight of the revelation. Griselda's father, a Don in the mafia? And to make things more perplexing, the Esposito family was an unfamiliar name in our world. Mafia families were intimately aware of each other, making the existence of an unknown entity a cause for suspicion.

Why was her father at the helm of this obscure family?

Enzo's phone buzzed again, drawing my attention. He swiftly navigated through the message from Lucas, his expression registering yet another discovery.

"It's another finding from Lucas," Enzo announced, sounding intrigued.

"What does it say?" I inquired, my curiosity piqued by the intensity of Enzo's reaction. As he read through the text, a sudden lift of his eyebrows hinted at the staggering nature of the information. "What happened?" I pressed with my anticipation mounting.

Enzo's next words hit me like a thunderbolt. "You wouldn't believe what Lucas just found. Griselda's father's name is Riccardo Esposito, but he was previously known as Riccardo Mancini."

The ground beneath me seemed to shift as disbelief jolted through me.

"*Maledetto!* (Fucking hell!)" I cursed.

I couldn't believe it. Griselda's father, a member of the rival family? It was like a scene straight out of one of those intense mafia dramas we used to watch for kicks. The sudden switch in surnames raised a million questions in my mind, but before I could even form the words, Enzo was diving into the details on his phone.

"Listen to this," Enzo began, his voice loaded with astonishment. "Riccardo got the boot from the Mancini family, thanks to some supposed betrayal from back in the day."

His eyes flitted back and forth across the screen, deciphering each word as if he were reading a gripping novel.

Another name came into the picture, and it clicked almost instantly. Memories of the relentless clashes between the Fiore and Mancini families collided with faint recollections of conversations between my father and uncle, forming a vivid picture in my mind.

It was like the missing piece of the puzzle had suddenly fallen into place. I shook my head, trying to process the flood of information.

“So, it must have been my old man,” I mused, my tone laced with disbelief.

Enzo’s solemn nod confirmed my suspicions, our shared realization sinking in with a heavyweight. It explained a hell of a lot, that was for sure.

“Let’s put this all together,” I suggested, my mind working overtime to organize the influx of information. “There must have been some serious bad blood between Riccardo and my old man. Whatever happened led to this perceived betrayal, which got Riccardo kicked out of the Mancini family. He was practically disowned.”

Enzo interjected, his voice brimming with realization.

“*Esposito*... it means ‘exposed’ in Italian,” he explained.

I nodded. This was shedding a new light on the situation. Who knew a name could carry so much significance?

The implications of it all were mind-boggling. This was the kind of twist that not even the most imaginative storyteller could dream up. I had to admit, I never expected something of this magnitude.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, Crino’s dying words came rushing back to me. ‘It’s not the end. There’s someone behind all this.’

That cryptic warning suddenly felt more relevant than ever.

“I’m thinking the same thing,” I muttered to Enzo, my voice barely above a whisper. “Do you think it could be Riccardo?” I asked, already dreading the answer.

The idea that Griselda's father could be the architect of all the chaos that had haunted us for years seemed too grim to consider. Enzo's silence spoke volumes, our unspoken agreement hanging heavy in the air. He shifted the conversation, directing it towards Griselda.

"What about her? Are you going to tell her?" he inquired, his gaze probing mine.

"I'll have to," I sighed, the weight of that responsibility cementing my resolve. "She was already angry with her mother for keeping this from her. She deserves to know, and she has every right to make her own decisions."

Besides, the thought nagged at me that Griselda might already have an inkling of the truth. After all, she had gone to her mother to finally get to the bottom of her father's supposed death.

Enzo's gaze darted back to his phone, his expression deep in thought.

"If it's Riccardo pulling the strings, we can pretty much guess his reason for stirring up trouble between the Mancini and Fiore families," he suggested. "It's payback for what he thinks your old man did to him."

I mulled over Enzo's theory, pondering what it meant now that my father had already passed away. Would Riccardo give up seeking revenge, or would he keep going, seeking blood in my father's family?

Enzo's next question was a sharp turn.

“What if Riccardo was behind your old man’s death?” he proposed.

I tried not to look surprised, though deep down, I’d always had my doubts about my father’s supposed heart attack. Back then, I didn’t care much to dig into the truth, but now it felt like there might be more to his death than I thought.

Racking my brain, I remembered that any proof would’ve likely been erased by the time my old man was laid to rest, leaving us with nothing but baseless claims.

“Why not talk to your brother?” he suggested, breaking the silence that had settled in the office.

Enzo’s idea seemed reasonable. Even if my brother refused to speak with me, it hardly mattered.

“I’ll go see him now,” I declared, already tapping away on my phone to reach my brother.

If he chose not to answer, I could track him down.

However, my intentions were sidelined by an unexpected call from Griselda. “Hey.”

“Hey, Emilio,” she said softly. “I’m ready to be picked up.”

Her tone seemed subdued and lost, as if she were in a daze. It made me wonder just what her mother had revealed to her. What truth had she learned about her father? I glanced at Enzo. Was our theory about her father’s involvement accurate, or were we completely off the mark?

“I’m leaving the office now,” I replied, concern evident in my voice. After hanging up, I turned to Enzo. “I’ll pick up Griselda first before I see my brother.”

Amidst the many uncertainties and questions surrounding us, one thing remained crystal clear: Griselda’s well-being was my top priority.

I made my way to the door, a sense of urgency propelling my movements. Enzo followed suit, his quiet presence a steady reassurance. As we descended the stairs, my mind whirled with several possible implications.



The long drive to Griselda’s place was a rollercoaster of feelings for me. I couldn’t shake off the worry tugging at my mind or the urgency to be there for her. When I finally reached her mother’s street, there she was, standing outside, looking more vulnerable and lost than I’d ever seen her. I could tell she was going through a storm of emotions.

I pulled up beside her. Wordlessly, she entered the car, her silence speaking volumes.

“How did it go?” I asked, not sure whether it was wise to question her now or whether she needed some space. So I waited for her to show me what she needed.

During the car ride back to our place, she opened up slowly. Her voice sounded so timid I grew concerned for her emotional wellbeing.

She began to reveal that her mother had disclosed her father's role as the leader of the Esposito family, recounting the details of her father's betrayal and subsequent expulsion from the Mancini family.

Glancing at her as I drove, I couldn't help but worry about how all this news was affecting her. I tried reading her, gauging whether she knew or at least suspected something about her father's true identity.

My own father's involvement in the events unfolded by Griselda struck me with a sharp pang. To think that my father had visited her mother and had threatened both their lives by demanding information about her father's whereabouts, was deeply disturbing.

I mentally berated myself for not taking the necessary precautions to ensure her mother's safety, realizing that I had underestimated the extent of the danger she faced. "Sorry," I blurted out, my remorse palpable.

Her reassurance that I had enough on my plate did little to ease the guilt that gnawed at me. The air hung heavy between us. Each dragged under by the current of our chaotic thoughts.

Griselda stared out the window, her expression inscrutable. I cleared my throat, breaking the heavy silence.

"How are you feeling about all this?" I asked, my voice tentative.

"I don't know," she replied softly. "It's a lot to take in."

She seemed so defeated. I wanted to console her, to say something that would make it all better, but I was just as lost in this convoluted situation. How could I even begin to ease her mind when my own was a jumbled mess?

“Yeah, it’s a lot to take in,” I replied softly, barely audible.

My eyes remained fixed on the road ahead. The city sounds barely made it through the thick air that sat around us. Time seemed to slow down, weighed down by all the things we couldn’t put into words while we were both lost in our thoughts.

As I navigated through the streets, the dashboard screen suddenly lit up, displaying an incoming call alert. Positioned prominently at the center, just above the console, the touch-sensitive display framed in glossy black easily caught my attention. Its modern interface with vibrant colors and crisp visuals was a stark contrast to the interior of the car.

Glancing at the screen, I was surprised to see my brother’s name flashing. I hadn’t expected him to call, and I couldn’t help but wonder what could have prompted him to do so. Swiping the screen, I answered the call, only to be met with a breathless voice and a cacophony of background noises.

“Emilio!” Carlo’s voice rang out, filled with urgency and panic.

My body reacted with an immediate adrenaline spike, and I did my best to focus on the road despite the tumult. I could sense Griselda’s worried gaze on me from the corner of my eye.

“Carlo, what’s happening?” I asked, now really worried.

The background noise was chaotic, with shouts and gunfire filling the air in my car. I strained to hear my brother’s response over the commotion. His words tumbled out in a rush.

“The Fiore family is under attack!” Carlo exclaimed, his voice barely audible over the noise.

“Carlo, can you hear me?” I shouted into the phone, my pulse quickening with panic. But my calls went unanswered.

The line went dead, and deafening silence filled the car.

Chapter 37

Griselda

I couldn't help but feel terror after what Emilio's brother had just revealed. Despite them not being very close, Carlo was still his brother.

I glanced at Emilio, my heart palpitating at the worry etched on his face. His jaws clenched tightly, his lips pulled back, exposing his grinding teeth. He looked like a wounded animal in agony. I reached out and placed my hand on his thigh, trying to ground him in the present.

"I have to get there," he said with desperation.

With swift movements, he began tapping on the car screen. I wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, but it seemed like he was sending his GPS location to someone. Before I could ask him, Emilio spoke up.

"I don't know what's happening, but I need to help the Fiore family," he explained. "I'm sending our location to Enzo. He'll meet us on the way and make sure you get back to the penthouse safely."

I nodded, understanding the urgency that propelled him into action.

“Be careful,” I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper.

Emilio’s grip on the steering wheel didn’t relax, his knuckles turning white from the strain. He met my gaze briefly, a flicker of reassurance passing between us before he redirected his focus back to the road.

As we sped through the streets and the city lights blurred into streaks of color, his desperation to reach his brother was reflected in every sharp turn and sudden acceleration.

Although the timing was highly inappropriate, I couldn’t help but secretly admire his vehicle and his driving skills.

Emilio pulled up at a discreet corner, surrounded by tall buildings. I saw another car waiting there, a sleek white BMW 7 Series, its luxurious yet understated design blending seamlessly into the urban surroundings. The windshield was entirely black, tinted so dark that I couldn’t see who was inside.

As Emilio’s car rolled to a stop, previously opaque glass morphed into a clear surface, providing a sudden view of Enzo sitting calmly behind the wheel. Despite knowing that Emilio modified his cars with high technology, the seamless transformation left me awestruck.

Emilio turned to me, his gaze filled with concern.

“Take care of yourself,” Emilio said softly, his voice laced with an unmistakable worry.

“You too,” I replied, holding his gaze. “Remember, I’m not the only one waiting for you.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips as I placed a hand on my abdomen, a silent reference to our unborn child.

His expression softened.

“I promise nothing will happen to me,” he assured me, leaning in to press a tender kiss to my forehead before pulling away.

“And you’ll be safe with Enzo,” he added, his tone gentle yet firm.

I nodded and stepped out of the car before turning to watch Emilio’s sleek black sedan drive away until it vanished from my sight. I couldn’t help it, but my breath hitched. Gathering my resolve, I made my way toward Enzo’s waiting vehicle and settled into the passenger seat.



As Enzo started the car and merged into the flow of traffic, his reassuring voice broke the heavy silence.

“Emilio will be fine, Griselda,” he said, his words offering a sliver of comfort. I could only hope his words rang true.

Lost in thought, I mulled over what I had been told about my father. My father, who had once been Riccardo Mancini, was now Riccardo Esposito.

I frowned.

The name 'Esposito' lingered in my mind as if I'd heard it before. My curiosity piqued, and I reached for my phone, intending to search the web, but as I unlocked the screen, a new notification stole my attention. It was from Sophia.

My mind raced back to the time I was suspended and how my interactions with my team had dwindled. At first, the messages had poured in, filled with complaints about working with Carmella, but eventually, the discussions had all but ceased.

I had assumed they were busy with work, never giving the firm or my suspension a second thought. It felt more like a prolonged break than a suspension.

I opened Sophia's message, my curiosity heightened by the unexpected communication. She revealed that the boss was planning to lift my suspension, revealing Carmella's mishandling of several significant cases as the reason behind the decision.

Although I felt vindicated in my position as a lawyer, I felt really bad for the clients who had received shoddy representation, maybe even blatant mishandling of their case, all because of Carmella's conniving and incompetence.

According to Sophia, their silence had been due to the overwhelming workload caused by Carmella's missteps and the subsequent efforts to salvage the cases. A scoff escaped my lips as I read Sophia's message.

Carmella's mistakes causing such chaos within the firm were almost comical if this were a reality show, albeit in a grim way.

I quickly composed a response to Sophia, expressing my skepticism about the sudden change in the firm's stance. Wasn't my suspension a direct consequence of Carmella's sway over our boss?

Had her influence finally waned? Sophia's quick reply hinted at the financial struggles the firm was facing due to Carmella's screw-ups.

A wry chuckle escaped my lips at the image of my boss scrambling to contain the fallout. Despite the possibility of my reinstatement, the thought of returning to an environment that consistently undervalued my efforts didn't sit well with me. I nodded to myself, silently reaffirming my decision to carve out my path far from the suffocating limitations of the firm.

Refocusing on the group chat, I swiftly fired off a message about the name "Esposito," hoping for a prompt reply, but the dots, indicating that someone was typing, had stopped dancing in the group chat window.

A few minutes passed by with no response, and I looked up to see familiar buildings surrounding us, meaning that we were almost at the penthouse. A buzz from my phone drew my attention back to the screen, revealing responses from the group members.

Matthew: No idea, sorry.

Dave: I think I've heard it before, but I can't recall.

Luca: How could you guys forget? It was that case we worked on, the one she lost, remember?

Luca: It was the Esposito v. Moretti lawsuit. It's crazy how you guys blanked on that!

It was one of the few cases I had ever lost, and suddenly, the memory came rushing back to me, recalling a young adult client embroiled in murky dealings and accused of murder. Although the details were hazy, I distinctly remembered the mention of the name "Esposito" during our interactions.

As the messages continued to pour in from the group, my attention was fixated on Luca's responses.

Me: Luca, do you have more details about the case? I need to know everything.

Luca: I can't remember, but I think the case file is still around somewhere. I'll look for it.

With a sigh, I fired off another message.

Me: Can you check now? It's urgent.

Luca: I wish I could, but I'm being called to do something right now. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

Exasperation surged through me, and I cursed under my breath. Ignoring the concerned look, Enzo shot my way through the rearview mirror, I quickly composed a response.

Me: Can you get the file for me? I'll head to the firm and pick it up.

Luca: No problem. I'll let you know once I have it.

Me: Tx. You're a star!

Enzo's voice cut through my thoughts, "We've arrived."

I raised my gaze to confirm that we were indeed parked in front of Emilio's building. Glancing back down at my phone, I read Luca's response.

I ignored the flood of astonished messages from the rest of the group, who were surprised to see signs of life from me after so long finally and leaned forward between the front seats, halting Enzo's exit from the car.

"Wait," I exclaimed with urgency, "I have to go to my law firm."

Enzo settled back into his seat and regarded me with a raised eyebrow.

"Weren't you suspended?" He asked, unsure of what to make of my request.

"I still am, but I need to get something," I replied, meeting his gaze directly.

"With what's happening at the Fiore family house, Emilio wouldn't want you to go anywhere until he's sure it's safe," Enzo cautioned.

"It's about the Esposito family. I need to find out more," I explained.

"Esposito family?" Enzo's voice expressed surprise, and when he turned to look at me, curiosity danced in his gray eyes.

"What did you find out?"

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "And that's why I need to go to the law firm."

Enzo didn't say anything, but I could see the struggle on his face. On the one hand, he was tasked with keeping me safe, and on the other hand, we needed to find out everything we could about the Esposito family.

"Enzo, you'll be with me, and it's during work hours, so there'll be plenty of people around," I attempted to assuage his concerns and hopefully persuade him that this was the right thing to do.

He muttered, clearly not entirely convinced. "That's also a problem, you know."

I chose to brush off his lingering doubts, focusing on my goal.

"I'll be fine. Trust me," I replied, my voice laced with determination.

Finally, Enzo relented, his tone carrying a mix of resignation and caution. "Fine, just buckle up."



As we arrived at the familiar building of Joe and Burrows Law Firm, nostalgia washed over me. It had been quite a while since I last stepped foot here. Shaking off the sentimental pull of memories, I made my way toward the entrance, only to halt when I noticed Enzo close behind.

Realizing his intent to accompany me, I blurted out, "You can't come in with me, Enzo."

Enzo's expression turned serious as he asserted, "I compromised on you coming here because of the Esposito

family information, but I won't compromise on this."

I let out a sigh, feeling a twinge of frustration, though I couldn't help but appreciate his protective instincts.

Mentally grumbling about Emilio's similar behavior, I asked, "Then what should I introduce you as?"

Enzo waved off the concern.

"Doesn't matter. We're here for something important," he said firmly, signaling that there was no time to dwell on formalities.

With his words left hanging in the air, we entered the building.

The interior of the law firm was as I remembered it. The firm's reception area boasted a sleek, modern design, its spacious layout adorned with minimalist decor.

A large logo was subtly embedded into the wall behind the receptionist's desk. As we moved deeper into the building, the hallways revealed numerous private offices with glass walls, creating a sense of transparency while maintaining a level of privacy.

Making our way through the corridors, the muted hum of work and the click-clack of heels echoed around us. Finally, we reached my office, situated at the end of the corridor.

It was spacious and well-organized, with a large wooden desk positioned in front of a floor-to-ceiling window that offered a good view of the city.

To my surprise, standing in front of the desk were none other than my group members, with Luca holding the file. Relief flooded through me.

We exchanged greetings and pleasantries, their warm words creating a sense of familiarity that I hadn't realized I had missed.

"You look good," Matthew remarked with a grin, "like you've been on holiday or something."

Dave nodded in agreement, adding, "We've missed having you around. The office isn't the same without you."

I was immediately enveloped in a warm hug from both Sophia and Luca.

"Griselda, you're finally back!" Sophia exclaimed, her voice tinged with genuine joy.

Luca chimed in, "We missed you! It's good to have you here again."

I couldn't help but smile. I reciprocated their warm embrace.

"I've missed you too, both of you," I admitted. Looking around the office, I added, "I can't say I've missed the firm, but I did miss my office view."

Their laughter filled the room, momentarily lightening the tension that had built up within me. However, amidst the laughter, I noticed that Enzo was not near me, and I looked around, trying to locate him.

My gaze finally fell on Enzo, standing at a cautious distance away. It was enough to give the impression that he was someone else, not overtly attached to me.

I breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that Enzo had given me the space I needed, especially in the presence of my colleagues. At least for the moment, I wouldn't have to answer any awkward questions from them.

As much as I wanted to catch up with them, I reminded myself of the reason why I had come here. There were matters I needed to attend to, and I couldn't afford to linger longer than necessary. Looking at Luca's hand, the sight of the familiar folder, its edges slightly worn with time, evoked a surge of memories.

As I took the file from Luca, murmuring my thanks, Dave's curious question interrupted my train of thought. "What do you need the file for?"

I hesitated for a moment, frantically searching for a plausible excuse. Before I could muster a convincing response, a familiar, sharp voice sliced through the air. I quickly moved the file behind my back.

"Griselda, what are you doing here?" Carmella's sharp voice sliced through the air, demanding to know why I was back at the firm despite my suspension.

"How is it any of your business?" I shot back, meeting her gaze with defiance.

Carmella's eyes narrowed, her lips curling into a disdainful smirk. "You think you can just waltz back in here as if nothing happened? You've caused enough trouble already. You should be glad we didn't press charges for what you did."

I clenched my jaw, refusing to let her rile me up. "If anyone has caused trouble, it's you. Don't act like you're innocent in all of this."

Carmella retorted that she wasn't the one who went against the firm's policies and got suspended. She smirked and said that I should feel fortunate that I wasn't fired, considering how much damage I had done to the firm's reputation.

My patience was wearing thin, but I maintained a cool facade. I took a deep breath, gathering my wits before letting loose and pelting Camilla with a string of insults.

"Carmella, do you ever shut up? It's almost impressive how you manage to keep running your mouth even though you've single-handedly botched more cases than anyone else in this firm! You've become a laughingstock, a byword for incompetence. Everyone here knows how much money you've managed to lose for the company. Yet astonishingly, you're still employed."

Carmella's expression contorted in a mix of humiliation and fury as my words hit their mark. Her eyes widened in a moment of disbelief, her cheeks flushing red with indignation. She seemed to be struggling to find a response, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly. The mask of superiority she usually wore cracked, revealing a vulnerability she rarely let

others witness. Despite the anger in her eyes, she appeared momentarily at a loss for words, which was a rare sight.

My voice was sharp, and I didn't mince my words. "So, do yourself a favor and stop trying to antagonize people because, frankly, it's beneath you. You've sunk low enough already."

Feeling no need to remain in her presence any longer than necessary, I bid my group members goodbye.

"See you later, guys," I called out to them, while they looked quite shocked but secretly exchanged satisfied glances as I walked away.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief as I made my way out the door and past Carmella, who seethed with fury but had nothing more to say. I also noticed that Enzo had moved closer during our verbal spat. It made me feel safe, also for my baby's sake, and I felt grateful towards Emilio for tasking Enzo with my protection.

We walked back down the corridor toward reception. Holding the file as nonchalantly as possible, I walked by the last offices with a confident stride. With the exit straight ahead, I mentally started counting down from 'three.' But before we could reach freedom, we were intercepted by the arrival of Mr. Gilbert.

His haggard appearance spoke volumes about the struggles he had endured to keep the company afloat despite the havoc Carmella wreaked. I couldn't fathom how she had managed to retain her position despite all her missteps.

Mr. Gilbert cleared his throat, and I sensed a combination of surprise and relief in his expression as he addressed me.

“Griselda,” he paused to clear his throat, “I’ve heard you’re back. I was just about to contact you to let you know that your suspension is going to be lifted,” he said, his voice hesitant yet eager.

I glanced at my former colleagues, noticing their curious glances and hushed whispers.

“Mr. Gilbert, there’s no need,” I replied evenly, my tone firm but composed.

Perplexed, he pressed on, his brows furrowing with concern.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand,” he inquired, leaning in slightly as if to catch every word I uttered.

I met his gaze with an open expression, making sure my decision was clear.

“I mean, there’s no need to lift my suspension because I am resigning,” I declared, enunciating each word carefully.

The room fell silent for a moment, and I could feel the weight of their collective gazes on me. I saw Luca’s eyes widen with surprise, Sophia’s worried expression and Dave’s eyebrows shoot up, his mouth slightly agape.

Carmella, meanwhile, wore a sly grin, clearly relishing the turn of events. Mr. Gilbert’s mouth opened and closed a few times as he struggled to find the right words.

Close behind me, I hear Enzo cough, no doubt covering a laugh.

“Griselda, are you sure? You’ve been an integral part of this firm, and we value your contributions,” he implored, his voice tinged with a hint of desperation.

I couldn’t help but scoff inwardly as Mr. Gilbert struggled to find the right words. Was he truly desperate to have me return, or was this merely an attempt to make up for Carmella’s losses? I couldn’t remember a single incident when my work had been praised, appreciated or respected.

“I meant what I said,” I responded coldly, my resolve unshaken, “I’m not interested in working for someone like you.”

As I turned and walked away, Mr. Gilbert called out my name, but I paid no heed to his pleas.

I felt a pang of sympathy for my group members, who hadn’t been privy to my plans to quit. I hated leaving them in such an abrupt manner, but I had no choice. I couldn’t stay at a firm that had lost sight of its principles.

What was fortunate was that no one paid much attention to the file I clutched in my hand.

Heading towards the exit, I noticed Enzo standing there, his expression a mix of surprise and amusement. Without breaking stride, I walked past him, letting him know it was time to leave.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter 38

Emilio

The scene that greeted me and my team as I approached the mansion was nothing short of a horror show. The once stately building was now a chaotic mess. Inside, broken furniture and shattered glass lay scattered in nearly every room, and bloodstains adorned the floors and walls.

The bodies of our men lay strewn across the building, some injured and groaning, others ominously still. It was an onslaught, a calculated assault on our territory. My heart clenched at the sight of the carnage.

My brother was nowhere in sight, and the uncertainty hurried me on as I assessed the situation. Instructing my men in rapid Italian, I ordered them to rid us of these intruders, the urgency in my voice a reflection of the dire circumstances.

Aiming with my weapon, I focused on the enemies. My mind honed solely on the task at hand. Gunfire echoed on various floors throughout the mansion. I maneuvered through the chaos, my movements guided by a mixture of rage and determination to protect what was rightfully ours.

The minutes stretched into an eternity as the confrontation escalated. I could practically taste the tension in the air, charged with the scent of blood and gunpowder. My muscles tensed with each shot; every movement was calculated to ensure the safety of our family and our domain.

The attackers seemed to recognize that our defense was no pushover, and they soon started to retreat, much to my relief. I wasted no time in instructing my men to pursue them, determined to extract every bit of information possible about the person or persons responsible for this audacious assault.

Amid the turmoil, my thoughts remained fixated on finding my brother. Carlo's well-being was all that mattered at this moment. With each room I cleared, my apprehension grew, already fearing the worst as I called out his name each time, desperately hoping for a response.

My heart skipped a beat when, finally, I stumbled upon him lying in one of the corridors on the second floor. His form was huddled against the wall at an odd angle. Rushing to his side, I gently gathered him in my arms, my concern palpable.

"Carlo, are you alright? What happened?" I asked, my voice laced with urgency and worry washed over me at the sight of him.

Helping Carlo sit up, I leaned in with a furrowed brow.

"Carlo, what's going on?"

He muttered a frustrated Italian curse under his breath. Carlo's eyes revealed the seriousness of the situation.

“Uncle Luigi,” he began, “he planned this. He’s behind the attack.”

I staggered back, my voice barely a whisper.

“Uncle Luigi? What are you talking about, Carlo? You must be mistaken.”

My disbelief was evident. Despite my strained relationship with our uncle, I found it hard to fathom that he would give the order for this destruction.

Carlo’s face contorted into a snarl as he elaborated.

“He wanted to seize control of the entire Fiore empire. He even joined forces with the Mancini family, but when you killed Crino, he changed sides. He formed an alliance with Riccardo Esposito, but as soon as you inherited the title of Don, Uncle Luigi turned on Riccardo and took control of the Esposito family, merging their forces with ours.”

My mind raced with the implications of his words.

The revelation sent a shiver down my spine. The level of betrayal left me reeling.

“Riccardo?” I hissed, trying to process the unexpected turn of events.

Our uncle allied himself with Griselda’s father. But for what? His father was already dead, so what else did Riccardo want?

Carlo’s expression darkened. “Yes, he did. I heard he manipulated the circumstances to merge the two families.”

Merge the two families? Was there anything left of the Mancini family? As I took in the gravity of the situation, I couldn't help but curse under my breath.

Carlo's revelation hit me like a ton of bricks, leaving me momentarily speechless. The news, combined with the chaos around us, made it difficult to process what I was being told. I had countless questions demanding answers, but for now, I had to get us out of here.

Moving to assist Carlo, I was taken aback as he firmly grasped my arms.

"Luigi confessed to killing our father. It wasn't a heart attack. He poisoned him," Carlo rasped.

The ground beneath me seemed to waver as the shock settled in. My mind struggled to reconcile this new information, my brother's intense gaze locking with mine.

Enzo and I had long suspected foul play in our father's death, but the revelation that our uncle had orchestrated it left me reeling. My mind grappled with the implications of such a monstrous act as I grudgingly acknowledged the depths to which our family's darkness extended.

It was a tale of abusers and kingslayers, and the more I thought about it, the more the lines between the two blurred.

With a firm resolve, I helped Carlo to his feet, but once he was up, his knees buckled, and he let out a pained hiss. Looking down, I could see that Carlo's right pant leg was stained with blood.

“Were you shot?” I asked.

His pained grunt confirmed my fears, sending a wave of frustration and anger coursing through me. I couldn't believe Luigi actually wanted to kill his nephew.

Cursing softly under my breath, I carefully looped Carlo's arm around my shoulder, supporting his weight as we made our way through the wreckage. Each step felt like an eternity as we navigated the blood-smeared floors. His words broke through my thoughts, a mix of pain and uncertainty in his voice.

“What's going to happen now?” he asked, his gaze flickering over the wreckage around us, the fallen bodies of our men silently testifying to the violent life of the Mafiosi.

“For now, we get out of here,” I replied, the words laced with urgency. “Luigi knows we're onto him. There's no way he'll risk showing his face anytime soon. What we need to do is find out what he's up to.”

As we staggered towards the exit, my men swiftly moved in to provide the necessary medical assistance. Lowering Carlo gently to the ground, I watched as they worked diligently to stem the bleeding and stabilize his condition.

As they worked on his leg, my fingers swiftly dialed Andrea's number, my voice tight with urgency as I relayed the situation to him. I provided a brief overview of Carlo's injuries and our need for immediate medical attention for other injured men.

Once the bleeding was under control, I carefully helped Carlo to my car, his weight leaning heavily against me. As I settled into the driver's seat, my hand discreetly found the button that activated the recorder.

"Tell me everything from the beginning," I instructed quietly, my eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Carlo's recounting of his meeting with Luigi unfolded. The conversation revolved around our father's decision to name me as the leader of the family. My grip on the steering wheel tightened as the implications of their discussion settled in.

Carlo's somber tone cut through the quiet hum of the car.

"Luigi called me to the Fiore house and said he needed to discuss some urgent business. We talked about Father's choice to hand the reins over to you. It didn't make any sense to us, Emilio. We even speculated whether the will had been tampered with." His voice wavered slightly as he recounted the heated exchange.

I glanced at him, a flicker of surprise registering on my face. His words stirred a whirlwind of emotions within me, but I remained silent, allowing him to continue.

"We were talking about how to remove you from being the leader," he confessed, his gaze fixed on the dashboard in front of him.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened as his words sank in. A pang of disappointment rippled through me, mingling with the sense of betrayal that threatened to overwhelm my

thoughts. I stole a glance at Carlo, the weight of his admission heavy in the air.

My voice emerged emotionless, devoid of any bitterness. “I didn’t realize you and Uncle Luigi were conspiring against me,” I murmured.

The hurt simmered just beneath the surface, no matter how much I told myself that I should have expected this. Carlo’s eyes avoided looking at me. His expression was clouded with a mix of frustration and guilt.

“Emilio, you know Father never designated you as the leader. He never explicitly said anything about you taking over,” he countered, his tone laced with defensiveness. “I was trained for this, groomed from a young age to step into his shoes. You know how Father treated you, how he favored me. It was what I had been raised for.”

A maelstrom of conflicting emotions churned within me, the years of emotional neglect and physical abuse, resentment coalescing into a chaotic but silent storm.

“You were the one he pushed,” I echoed, my voice barely above a whisper. “I was the afterthought.”

Glancing over at Carlo, I found myself struggling to process the waves of emotions crashing over me. His attempt at justifying their conversation, emphasizing the expectations placed on him as the older child to inherit the family legacy, made me feel empty.

Did I even have a family?

“What happened after that?” I asked with no fluctuation in my voice.

Carlo’s voice quivered slightly, his gaze flitting towards me with a tinge of guilt before he resumed his narrative.

“He suggested that we got rid of you,” he muttered, the heaviness of the admission echoing in the confined space of the car.

My chest constricted at the revelation, the hollowness expanding within me.

”*Ma ho rifiutato* (But I refused),” Carlo hastened to add as if his refusal was meant to make me feel better.

I maintained a stoic façade, my features carefully arranged. Carlo’s discomfort was obvious.

“He was adamant that removing you was the only way for him to claim the throne,” Carlo revealed, his voice heavy with the weight of the truth.

I listened intently, my features carefully schooled into a neutral mask.

Carlo explained further, recounting the moment when Luigi’s slip of the tongue had thrown him off. He had initially thought they were discussing the restoration of his birthright as the leader, but Luigi had laughed, suggesting that the leadership belonged to him. This revelation had ignited a fierce argument between them.

A surge of bitterness welled within me as I ruminated on Carlo’s reaction. He seemed more taken aback by Uncle

Luigi's desire to claim leadership for himself than the suggestion to eliminate me.

Carlo interjected, his voice tinged with a mix of regret and defiance. "*Non potevo andare fino in fondo, Emilio. Non potevo tradirti.* (I couldn't go through with it, Emilio. I couldn't betray you)."

The tale continued, and Carlo's voice held a hint of resignation as his words echoed in the confined space.

"An argument ensued," he began, "He insisted he should be the one in charge, that the family was rightfully his to lead."

As the tale continued, Carlo described how Luigi's intentions had taken a darker turn. Luigi had declared that since Carlo was of no use to him anymore, there was no reason to keep him alive.

The confrontation had escalated, and it became clear that Luigi had hidden Mancini and Esposito members within the Fiore mansion, waiting for the right moment to strike.

With a heavy heart, Carlo explained how Luigi had drawn a gun, threatening to end his life. However, Carlo's quick thinking saved him from a dire fate. During their altercation, Luigi had confessed to a sinister secret – he had formed a covert alliance with the Mancini family and Riccardo Esposito.

Carlo recounted Luigi's words, describing how our uncle had initially intended to use the Mancini members to harass our father, pushing him to yield to the leadership. But when I had

unexpectedly killed Crino, Luigi had been left with a hidden, albeit useless, partnership.

Luigi had silently seized control of the Mancini family, discovering the existence of a figure named Riccardo Esposito and forging an alliance with him.

Silence enveloped us as Carlo's words settled in, revealing the extent of Luigi's calculated moves to secure power within the Fiore family. It was so absurdly meticulous that, for a fleeting moment, I wanted to burst into laughter.

The irony was not lost on me—our blood had carefully plotted against us, orchestrating a complex network of deceit and manipulation.

As I pulled up to Andrea's private hospital, I spotted him already waiting outside with his team and equipment, prepared to handle the situation from there. The moment the car halted, Andrea's employees swiftly assisted Carlo out and onto a gurney. I followed suit, approaching Andrea, who was already issuing orders to his other staff.

Carlo suddenly grabbed my hand before he was wheeled away, catching me off guard. "*Mi dispiace, Emilio, per quello che è successo* (I'm sorry, Emilio, for what happened)," he murmured, his tone laced with remorse, "and I'm grateful you came to my rescue. I swear I will not forget it."

With that, he was wheeled away, leaving me to face Andrea's inquisitive gaze.

Andrea's eyebrows raised above the frame of his glasses, and the quizzical scrunch of his face prompted me to give a simple response.

“È una lunga storia (It's a long story,)” I replied wearily, my energy drained from the events of the day.

Turning away, I made my way back to the car, settling into the driver's seat with a heavy heart, and dialed Enzo's number.

“Enzo, radunare gli uomini per una riunione. (Enzo, gather the men for a meeting).”

Chapter 39

Griselda

As I pored over the file, the details began to come back to me in vivid flashes. It was the case of Frederick, a young drug dealer accused of first-degree murder. His story unraveled as I delved deeper into the documents, recounting his struggles and the murky world he was entangled in.

He had been involved in drug dealings and had become an errand boy for a notorious gang, all in a desperate bid to secure medical treatment for his ailing sister.

I remembered our conversation clearly, the pain and helplessness in his eyes as he spoke of his desperate attempts to break free from the clutches of the Esposito family. They had held his sister's life as leverage, refusing to release him from their dangerous business.

The accusation of murder against him had stemmed from a dramatic confrontation where he had attempted to secure his freedom by force, wielding a gun to defend himself. The encounter had resulted in a threat from the Esposito family, a promise to make him pay for his defiance.

As the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, I couldn't help but feel a surge of empathy for Frederick, caught in the ruthless grip of organized crime. His intentions had been pure, his actions driven by a brother's love.

The desperation in his voice, the fear for his sister's life, it had all been painfully real. It was clear that he had been framed, made an example of in a complex game of power and manipulation.

I recounted the frustrating turn of events to Enzo, my voice carrying the pain as my team's collective efforts had ultimately fallen short. Despite our tireless work, we had been unable to substantiate Frederick's innocence, leading to his unjust imprisonment.

As I flipped through the file, I stumbled upon the contact information for Frederick and his sister, Isabella. A spark of hope coursed through me as I proposed the idea of introducing Isabella to Enzo. I emphasized that with Frederick's lengthy sentence, it was unlikely he would be out of prison anytime soon.

Enzo sighed, his apprehension palpable, but he didn't outrightly dismiss the notion.

With a sly grin, I swiftly dialed Isabella's number, my fingers tapping impatiently as I awaited her response.

With a sense of anticipation, I heard Isabella's voice on the other end.

“Hello, this is Isabella. Who’s calling?” she inquired, her tone reserved and cautious.

I introduced myself as the lawyer who had handled her brother’s case, noting the lack of enthusiasm in her response, which I had expected.

As Isabella inquired about the purpose of my call, I explained to her that I had stumbled upon a case similar to her brother’s and was hoping to gather more information.

I delicately broached the topic, asking if she would be willing to meet briefly and share any insights she might have. Isabella’s next words, however, stopped me in my tracks.

“He’s dead,” she uttered, her voice heavy with sorrow.

My shock was palpable as her words hung heavily in the air. Fredrick’s death was unexpected, and the news hit me with a crippling force. My mind raced with questions, trying to piece together the circumstances of his death. How had he died in prison? The uncertainty gnawed at me as I took a moment to gather my thoughts before responding.

“I’m deeply sorry for your loss, Isabella. I had no idea,” I offered, hoping to convey my genuine sympathy. Despite the unexpected turn, I pressed on, mustering the courage to request a meeting.

“Would it be possible for us to meet and discuss what happened? It would greatly help my current case,” I added, hoping to convey the importance of the matter at hand.

Isabella hesitated for a moment before conceding, “I suppose we could meet briefly. There’s not much I know, but I’ll try to help.”

Her willingness to assist despite her evident grief was both admirable and heartrending.

“Thank you, Isabella. Your help means a lot.”



Enzo and I navigated our way through the bustling streets, eventually arriving at the quaint cafe that Isabella had suggested. The cafe’s exterior exuded an inviting charm, with its rustic brick walls adorned with ivy and its warm lighting that spilled out onto the sidewalk.

A faint aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, adding to the cozy ambiance of the place.

As we stepped inside, the gentle hum of conversations enveloped us, punctuated by the occasional clink of cutlery against ceramic. The interior was adorned with an eclectic mix of wooden furniture, giving the space a homely and comfortable feel. Soft jazz music played in the background, providing a soothing backdrop to the scene.

I spotted a woman, who I guessed was Isabella, seated at a small, round table near the back. We made our way over, the scent of coffee beans growing stronger with each step. The woman appeared slightly nervous, her fingers tracing an invisible pattern on the table as she waited.

“Isabella?” I inquired softly as we approached, and she looked up and nodded, her eyes reflecting a mixture of apprehension and curiosity.

Enzo and I introduced ourselves, taking the seats opposite her with a warm smile, trying to put her at ease.

“Isabella, hi. I’m Griselda, and this is Enzo,” I said with a sympathetic smile as we settled into the seats opposite her.

Isabella nodded with a polite greeting.

After a brief pause, Isabella spoke up, her voice tinged with sadness, “My brother passed away a few days ago quite unexpectedly.”

I was surprised. He had died so recently?

Enzo’s brows furrowed in suspicion. “Oh, we’re so sorry to hear that. How did he die? Was it in prison?” he inquired gently.

“He wasn’t in prison. He was released a couple of months ago,” Isabella explained.

My jaw dropped in astonishment. How was it possible that Fredrick had been released when he was convicted of murder? He was supposed to be serving his sentence, not walking free.

Isabella continued, explaining how she had been taken aback the day he suddenly appeared at her door. Upon questioning him, all he had been told was that the authorities had made a mistake in arresting him.

“That’s unexpected. Do you know what he was up to after he got out?” Enzo asked, leaning forward with curiosity.

Isabella shook her head, her expression troubled. “Not much, to be honest. He seemed restless, always looking over his shoulder. He was constantly muttering about someone coming after him.”

I leaned in, my interest piqued. “Did he mention who it might be or why they were after him?”

Isabella hesitantly began, her voice trembling slightly. “A few days before he... before he passed away, he was so panicky. Always looking over his shoulder, muttering to himself about being screwed.” She paused, her gaze fixated on a distant point as if reliving the memory.

“I confronted him and demanded to know what was going on. That’s when he told me something about the leader of the Esposito family being killed by someone else and how the new leader was eliminating weak links like him.”

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. If the leader of the Esposito family had been killed, it could only mean one thing - my father was no more. My father, the leader of the Esposito family, was no more.

Enzo’s worried gaze was fixed on me, but I struggled to summon any deep emotions. My relationship with my father was nonexistent, leaving me feeling disconnected from the news.

I leaned in, my curiosity and concern growing with each passing word.

“Did he ever mention the new leader’s name to you?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Isabella nodded solemnly. “Yes, he said it was Luigi Fiore.”

What?

A chill crept down my spine as I exchanged a glance with Enzo and saw that he was also just as baffled as I was.

Emilio’s uncle was the new leader of the Esposito family?!



We stepped back into the sleek penthouse, the weight of the newfound revelation heavy on my mind. How could Emilio’s uncle be the turncoat within the Esposito family? Enzo and I exchanged concerned glances, silently processing the implications of Isabella’s words.

“We have to tell Emilio,” I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper.

Enzo nodded solemnly. “I agree, and as soon as possible.”

Just as we were grappling with the implications of this new information, Enzo’s phone abruptly shattered the heavy silence, its shrill ring cutting through the air. My thoughts scattered as I watched Enzo reach for the device, his expression guarded as he answered the call.

“Enzo here,” he spoke into the phone, his tone crisp and businesslike.

I leaned against the nearby marble countertop, the cool surface providing a slight reprieve from the emotional whirlwind. It was surreal, almost unbelievable, that Emilio’s uncle, a family member, could be involved in such treachery.

The complexity of mafia politics had always been beyond me, but this particular revelation shook the foundation of everything I thought I knew.

Enzo’s voice grew quieter as he absorbed the information on the other end of the line. He glanced at me occasionally, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“What’s going on?” I finally interjected, unable to contain my impatience.

Enzo’s expression shifted, his voice carrying a note of urgency. “It’s Emilio. He’s called for a meeting. I need to go.”

As Enzo made his way out of the penthouse, bidding me a quick farewell, his promise to inform Emilio about Luigi echoed in my mind. The revelation about my father’s alleged demise and subsequent reemergence left me grappling with a mix of emotions.

The man I thought had been dead all my life was suddenly a secret presence, while the discovery of treachery within the mafia further blurred the lines between reality and the shadowy world of crime and deceit.

I found myself lost in a sea of thoughts, the image of my supposedly deceased father lingering at the forefront of my mind. The uncertainty of his true status gnawed at me, casting doubts on everything I had believed until now.

The revelation felt surreal, almost as if the ground beneath me had shifted, leaving me adrift in a tumultuous sea of conflicting truths.

A soft sigh escaped my lips as I gathered my thoughts.

As time trickled by in the quiet confines of the penthouse, I heard the familiar creak of the door opening. Glancing up, I saw Emilio step into the room, his countenance etched with a mix of weariness and resolve.

It was apparent from the furrowed lines on his forehead and the shadow in his eyes that he bore the weight of newfound knowledge, the truth about his uncle's treachery likely gnawing at him.

With a heavy heart, I rose to meet him, my steps measured as I closed the distance between us. There was a palpable tension in the air, laden with unspoken turmoil and the weight of betrayal. Emilio and I shared a glance, a silent understanding passing between us as he took a seat.

I eased myself down beside him, my gaze softening as I sought to offer what little comfort I could amidst the storm of revelations that had engulfed us.

The silence lingered for a moment, heavy with unspoken thoughts and shared apprehension. Then, softly and with

empathy, I spoke, my voice gentle yet laced with a steely resolve.

“I’m here for you, Emilio. I can’t imagine what you must be feeling right now, but I want you to know that you’re not alone.”

Emilio’s gaze remained fixed ahead, his jaw tight as he grappled with the weight of familial betrayal. The lines of his face bore witness to a myriad of conflicting emotions, his struggle evident even in the set of his shoulders.

My hand found his, offering a small gesture of solidarity amidst the storm of emotions threatening to consume us both.

Emilio’s voice, laced with a quiet intensity, cut through the stillness as he relayed the details shared by Carlo. With each word, the fury within me swelled, an inferno of anger and betrayal kindling at the revelation of Luigi’s deceit.

I listened in silence, my jaw clenched in indignation, my fingers curling into fists as I struggled to contain the storm of emotions brewing within.

“It’s not easy to come to terms with something like this, especially when it’s family,” I continued my voice a soothing murmur in the quiet room. “But you’re strong, Emilio. Stronger than you know. And we’ll get through this together, one step at a time.”

Chapter 40

Emilio

As we prepared our forces, I couldn't help but feel a sense of grim determination settling over me.

Carlo's injury, though not life-threatening, served as a constant reminder of the stakes at hand. The bullet had mercifully missed any critical organs, and he would heal properly without any issues as long as he did not put any unnecessary strain on it.

Our gathered forces comprised not only my trusted men but also the surviving members of the Fiore family, united by a common desire to avenge the betrayal we had endured. As we convened in a spacious meeting room, the gravity of the situation weighed heavily upon us, each of us acutely aware of the imminent danger we faced.

In the hushed confines of the room, our collective focus centered on the strategic plan of attack, with the dilapidated Chinese restaurant that had lingered in my memory for months emerging as our primary target. The dingy establishment had etched itself into my mind as the only plausible starting point.

The revelation of Luigi's actions, including the murder of Griselda's father and his takeover of the Esposito family, intensified the urgency of our mission. There was little time to spare as Luigi fortified his army.

The atmosphere in the room was tense as we gathered around the table, maps and blueprints spread before us, detailing the layout of the old Chinese restaurant. Enzo leaned forward, tracing his finger over the faded lines and contours.

“Non possiamo essere sicuri che questa sia la loro roccaforte principale, ma possiamo scommettere che ci sono informazioni preziose nascoste tra quelle mura (We can't be sure this is their main stronghold, but we can bet there's some valuable intel hidden within those walls),” he remarked, his voice carrying an air of authority.

Carlo's gaze was steely as he interjected, “We need to be certain about their numbers and weapons. We can't afford any surprises.”

His words resonated with the collective sentiment, each of us acutely aware of the precarious nature of our endeavor. I studied the layout, my mind racing with possibilities.

“We'll need a small team to conduct reconnaissance, scope out the area, and confirm the presence of any high-ranking members. We can't risk a full-scale assault without accurate information,” I proposed, my tone measured but resolute.

Enzo nodded in agreement, his eyes flitting across the plans.

“Dovremo muoverci velocemente e con discrezione. Un attacco diretto potrebbe avvisare Luigi delle nostre intenzioni (We’ll have to move fast and discreetly. A direct attack could alert Luigi to our intentions),” he warned, his brow furrowed with concern.

Carlo’s jaw tightened, a simmering determination flickering in his eyes.

“We can’t let him slip away again. We need to make sure we capture some of his men alive. They’re our ticket to finding his true hideout,” he insisted, his voice laced with an unwavering resolve.

I glanced at Enzo, silently acknowledging the validity of Carlo’s point.

“We’ll need to be meticulous—no room for errors. We can’t afford to lose any more of our men,” I affirmed, my thoughts racing through the potential risks and contingencies that lay ahead.

After we were done planning, our main focus was to capture some men alive to find Luigi.

With a final glance at the maps before us, I straightened in my seat. *“Scioperamo di notte. (We strike at night.)”*



As the final preparations for the mission were underway, I knew I couldn’t afford to leave Griselda’s safety to chance.

With a heavy heart, I pulled her aside, my expression grave yet tender.

“Griselda, I need you to go with your mom for now. It’s not safe here,” I explained, my voice tinged with concern.

She looked up at me, her eyes reflecting a mixture of worry and determination.

“But what about you? I don’t want anything to happen to you,” she murmured, her voice wavering with anxiety.

I took her hands in mine, my gaze unwavering.

“I promise I’ll come back for you. Nothing will happen to me, *gattina* (kitten). I’ll personally pick you up myself,” I reassured her, my words laced with a quiet conviction that I hoped would alleviate her fears.

Her eyes softened, a flicker of hope sparking within them.

“Okay, just... please be careful,” she implored, her grip tightening on my hands.

I brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face, my touch gentle and reassuring.

“I will. You take care of yourself, okay?” I replied, my voice soft yet resolute.

We shared a lingering kiss before we separated, and she made her way towards the waiting vehicle. I watched her go, my heart heavy.

I ensured that several vehicles were assigned to escort her to her mother’s place, each one meticulously outfitted with

enhanced security measures. I knew I couldn't risk any harm coming her way, not now, not ever. The safety of those I cared for was paramount, especially in the midst of the brewing storm.

As she entered the sleek black car, I met her gaze one last time, silently conveying my unspoken promise to return unscathed. With a final nod, I watched as the convoy pulled away, my men maintaining a vigilant watch over her until she reached the safety of her mother's embrace.

Once the last of the convoy turned around the corner, I headed back inside.

I had a battle to win.



As we approached the old Chinese restaurant, the quiet of the night was disturbed only by the distant hum of the city. Our steps were measured, each member of my mafia following my lead as we prepared to confront the Esposito family members, who were known to frequent this establishment for their clandestine meetings.

With a swift and coordinated attack, we burst through the entrance, catching our adversaries off guard. The room erupted in a flurry of violence and chaos as we engaged in a fierce battle, determined to subdue the opposition and extract the critical information we sought.

The scuffles were intense, and each move was calculated to neutralize the threat quickly and efficiently. Amidst the fray, we managed to apprehend several members of the Esposito family, their struggles futile in the face of our relentless onslaught.

Moving the captives to a more secluded area, we initiated our interrogation, determined to extract the truth from them. Through a combination of persuasive tactics and assertive questioning, we were able to glean the information necessary for our next move - the location of their secret base concealed deep within the heart of the city.

“Where is your boss hiding, huh?” Carlo’s voice sliced through the tense silence, his eyes narrowing as he leaned in towards one of the captives. “We know you’ve been working with Luigi. Don’t try to play dumb with us.”

The captive squirmed in his restraints, sweat beading on his forehead.

“I-I don’t know, I swear,” he stammered, his words laced with desperation.

I watched from the shadows, my jaw clenched as I observed the scene unfold.

“We’re not here to play games,” Carlo retorted, his tone unwavering. “You’ve been seen with him, meeting him here. You must know something.”

“I swear, I don’t know his location,” the captive insisted, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. “He’s moved to a new

hideout. We were only given instructions to come here, I swear.”

My brows furrowed as I analyzed the captive’s response.

“What kind of instructions?” Carlo pressed, his gaze unwavering. “Tell us everything, or you’ll face the consequences.”

The captive hesitated, his eyes darting nervously around the room.

“We were told to meet at the abandoned warehouse by the docks,” he finally admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “That’s where he’s been conducting his operations lately.”

My heart quickened at the revelation, my mind already mapping out the logistics of our next move.

“Good,” Carlo nodded, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes. “Now, you better hope you’re telling the truth, or you’ll regret it.”

I stepped forward, my expression a blend of determination and restraint.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” I stated, my voice firm yet laced with an underlying edge. “*Ci assicureremo che tu ti prenda cura di te* (We’ll make sure you’re taken care of.)”

In a swift motion, I raised my gun and fired a single shot, silencing the captive before he could relay any information about our next move to Luigi.

Gathering my trusted lieutenants, we strategized with a single-minded focus, aware of the risks and challenges that lay ahead. We meticulously devised a plan, capitalizing on the element of surprise and leveraging our tactical advantage to ensure a swift and decisive strike against our adversaries.

The tension was palpable as we geared up for the showdown.

Chapter 41

Griselda

I settled into the plush armchair, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of Emilio's safety. My mother, who had been observing my restless demeanor, finally broached the subject, her concern etched across her features.

"What's going on? Why were all those cars following you earlier?"

I offered her a strained smile, attempting to ease her worries while grappling with my apprehensions.

"It's just a precaution, Mom," I reassured her, my voice tinged with a hint of unease. "I've been dealing with some complicated matters lately."

She nodded understandingly, her gaze softening as she reached out to clasp my hand in hers.

"You know you can always confide in me, right?" she murmured, her eyes searching mine for any signs of reluctance.

I hesitated, the weight of my concealed truths pressing heavily upon me. Despite my lingering frustrations at her previous silence, I knew that my mother had her reasons for keeping certain details from me.

With a resigned sigh, I decided it was time to let her in on the events that had unfolded in my life.

I told my mom everything about Emilio and the whole mafia mess, how it was all dangerous and complicated. Her face changed from worry to surprise as I spilled the beans about the power struggles and shady dealings.

I didn't hold back about my relationship with Emilio either, how we'd fallen for each other despite the chaos around us. And when I dropped the bomb that I was pregnant, my mom's jaw practically hit the floor, a mix of shock and concern written all over her face.

As I spoke, I noticed her hands fidgeting nervously in her lap, her gaze never wavering from mine.

I finished recounting the series of events that had led to Emilio's current predicament, and a somber silence hung heavily in the air. Reaching out, I gently squeezed my mother's hand, seeking comfort and understanding in her presence.

"Griselda, you need to leave Emilio," my mother said with urgency, her voice tinged with concern.

I was taken aback.

“What?” I exclaimed, unable to comprehend her sudden insistence.

She stood up, facing me directly, her hands grasping my forearms.

“Nothing good ever comes out of those involved in the mafia. You know that,” she implored, her eyes brimming with worry.

I felt a surge of frustration.

“But he’s not like that, Mom,” I countered, my voice rising in defense of Emilio. “He doesn’t even want to be in the mafia.”

My mother’s grip tightened, her expression fraught with fear.

“*Ma è ancora nella mafia, vero?* (But he’s still in the mafia, isn’t he?)” she pressed, her tone quivering with anxiety.

I pulled away, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Yes, but...” I began, attempting to explain Emilio’s situation, but my mother cut me off, her voice resolute.

“He’s lying to you, Griselda. You can’t trust him,” she asserted, her eyes searching mine, filled with a mixture of apprehension and desperation.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my emotions.

“Mom, I understand your concern, but you have to believe me,” I implored, meeting her gaze with determination. “Emilio is not like his father. He’s different.”

My mother’s features softened, but the worry remained etched in her expression.

“È solo che non voglio che tu ti faccia male, Tesoro (I just don’t want you to get hurt, darling),” she admitted, her voice laced with a mix of fear and tenderness. “I’ve seen enough pain in my life. I don’t want you to go through the same.”

I reached out and held her hand, the weight of her concern settling heavily in my heart.

“I know, Mom. But I love him,” I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. “And I believe in him.”

I held my mother’s hand firmly, a torrent of emotions churning within me.

“I understand, Mom. But it’s not as simple as you think. Leaving the mafia is not an easy feat,” I explained, my voice tinged with frustration.

My mother shook her head, her expression etched with disapproval.

“I still don’t approve of this, Griselda,” she reiterated, her worry palpable in her tone.

My patience waned, and I couldn’t help but retort,

“You shouldn’t judge Emilio when you don’t even know him, Mom. Just because Dad and his father deceived you doesn’t mean Emilio will do the same to me.”

Her sigh was heavy with the weight of her concern.

“I’m just afraid, Griselda. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you,” she confessed, her voice tinged with vulnerability.

“I understand where your fear is coming from,” I replied, my tone softening as I squeezed her hand gently. “But I know Emilio. And even if I were to leave him, would I be able to raise our child by myself?”

Her gaze softened, and I could see the conflict within her. She pulled me into a tight embrace, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just want what’s best for you, my dear.”

I held onto her, the warmth of her embrace a balm to my troubled heart.

“I know, Mom. I know,” I murmured.

I thought I was getting through to my mom, but our conversation escalated into a fiery argument, my mother’s worry transforming into frustration.

“But what if he can’t leave the mafia, Griselda? What if he’s in too deep now, leading the whole operation?” she implored, her eyes blazing with an intensity that matched her concern.

I took a step forward, my frustration boiling over.

“You don’t even know him, Mom. You’re judging him without even giving him a chance!” I retorted, my voice rising with every word.

She stood her ground, her features etched with worry and determination.

“I can’t just stand by and watch you make the same mistakes I did. I won’t let that happen,” she declared, her voice resolute with a tinge of desperation.

My hands clenched into fists, my body trembling with a mix of anger and exasperation.

“I’m not you, and he’s not Dad,” I shot back, my tone defiant as I met her gaze head-on.

Her eyes flashed with a mix of concern and frustration, her words seething with an unspoken fear.

“Sei mia figlia e non ti permetterò di rovinarti la vita come ho fatto con la mia (You’re my daughter, and I won’t let you ruin your life as I did mine),” she declared, her voice thick with emotion.

I felt my resolve wavering, the weight of her worry and past experiences pressing down on me.

“I’m not going to ruin my life! I love him, and I’m not going to give up on him,” I asserted, my voice laced with determination.

Tears welled up in her eyes, her body tensing with a mix of anguish and defiance.

“You’re making a mistake, Griselda. I can’t let you do this,” she murmured, her voice tinged with a raw sense of helplessness.

I stood my ground. My resolve was unwavering despite my rising emotions.

“I’m not going to deprive my child of a father just because you’re scared,” I declared.

My mother's expression contorted with a mix of shock and defiance.

"You didn't need your father, and you turned out fine, didn't you?" she insisted.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. With a cold glare, I retorted, "I wasn't fine, Mom. I was bullied for not having a dad, and I felt envious every time I saw other kids playing with theirs. I didn't tell you," I confessed, the memories resurfacing with a painful clarity. "Don't mistake my silence for happiness or strength."

Her eyes widened in shock as my words hung heavy in the air.

"I had no idea, Griselda," she whispered, her voice laced with a raw sense of regret and sorrow. "I didn't mean to overlook your pain."

I shook my head, the burden of the past weighing heavily on my heart.

"I know you didn't, Mom. But I can't let my child go through the same thing," I murmured, my voice tinged with a sense of bittersweetness.

"I love him, Mom," I stated firmly for the nth time. "I can't just leave him."

My mother's brows furrowed with a mix of concern and apprehension.

"But what if he can't leave the mafia behind, Griselda? What then?" She kept repeating.

I bit my lip, the weight of her words settling heavily on my shoulders.

“I don’t know what the future holds,” I confessed, my voice tinged with a sense of uncertainty. “But I’m not going to leave him.”

Chapter 42

Emilio

The anticipation hung thick in the air as we prepared for the ambush, the revving of our modified cars serving as a prelude to the imminent confrontation.

The vehicles, equipped with an array of specialized enhancements, stood as a testament to the meticulous planning and preparation that had gone into this critical moment.

As we crept closer to the location of Luigi's hideout, the darkness of the night enveloped us, providing the perfect cover for our stealthy approach. The engines of our cars purred with suppressed energy, the faint hums of their customized mechanisms barely audible amidst the quiet of the night.

With a subtle signal, our convoy sprang into action, the synchronized movements of the vehicles orchestrated with practiced precision. Our cars maneuvered with fluid grace, their advanced modifications allowing them to glide effortlessly through the winding streets and narrow alleyways, evading detection as we closed in on our target.

The element of surprise was our greatest asset, and we capitalized on it with unwavering determination. Our cars executed intricate maneuvers, seamlessly navigating through the labyrinthine network of alleys and side streets, their enhanced speed and agility propelling us closer to our intended destination.

The occasional flash of headlights and the faint screech of tires marked our steady advancement, each member of my meticulously trained crew operating in perfect synchrony to maintain our strategic advantage.

Our modified cars were not just a means of transportation; they were formidable weapons in their own right. Each vehicle was equipped with a discreet yet powerful arsenal concealed within their sleek and unassuming exteriors.

The front grilles were outfitted with retractable panels, concealing a series of small, rapid-fire turrets armed with specialized ammunition. These turrets were synchronized with the vehicle's internal systems, allowing for precise targeting and firing capabilities at a moment's notice.

Additionally, the rear bumpers housed a concealed compartment that housed a retractable machine gun capable of unleashing a hail of bullets with unparalleled accuracy and force.

The machine gun was integrated with the car's navigation system, enabling our skilled drivers to operate it with pinpoint precision, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Furthermore, the cars were equipped with advanced communication systems, allowing for seamless coordination between the vehicles during the heat of battle.

These systems were essential in ensuring that our convoy maintained an unbroken line of communication, enabling us to swiftly adapt to changing circumstances and respond to emerging threats with speed and efficiency.

The engine blocks were reinforced with a specialized alloy, providing enhanced durability and resilience against potential attacks or collisions. This reinforcement allowed our vehicles to withstand significant impacts, ensuring that they remained operational even in the most demanding and hazardous environments.

In terms of defensive capabilities, each car was equipped with bullet-resistant glass, providing an additional layer of protection for our operatives during intense firefights.

The windows were designed to withstand a barrage of bullets, mitigating the risks posed by enemy gunfire and providing our team with a crucial advantage during battle.

Overall, our modified cars were a testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of our team; their intricate design and sophisticated weaponry serving as a testament to our unwavering commitment to securing victory and reclaiming our family's rightful place in the tumultuous world of organized crime.

As our convoy approached the hidden fortress of the Esposito family, tension was palpable in the air as we readied ourselves

for the inevitable clash that awaited us.

The stronghold itself was a formidable sight, a bastion of fortified walls and imposing structures that exuded an air of impenetrability. As our modified vehicles surged forward, their reinforced frames and fortified defenses braced for impact, I could see the determined glint in my men's eyes, their unwavering resolve matching my own.

Luigi's hideout was a testament to his paranoia, with towering walls and strategically placed defenses designed to repel any would-be assailants. As we barreled toward the fortified gate, I could see the glint of desperation in the eyes of his sentries, their weapons trained on our approaching convoy.

The gate loomed before us, a formidable barrier that stood between us and our target, yet I knew that our modified vehicles were more than equipped to handle the challenge.

With a resounding crash, our foremost vehicle plowed into the gate, its reinforced frame easily smashing through the imposing barrier as if it were mere paper. The sound of metal meeting metal reverberated through the courtyard; the impact, was a testament to the sheer force of our advance.

As we breached the outer defenses, the courtyard erupted into chaos, Luigi's men scrambling to mount a defense against our sudden onslaught.

Their poorly orchestrated response was evident. Their men hastily took up positions as they unleashed a torrent of gunfire in our direction. I watched as their vehicles revved with

desperate ferocity, their drivers intent on ramming into our armored cars in a futile attempt to halt our advance.

It was a pitiful display, their efforts proving to be no match for the reinforced defenses of our vehicles, which effortlessly repelled their feeble assaults.

Bullets ricocheted off our vehicles' bulletproof exteriors, the staccato rhythm of gunfire serving as a backdrop to the cacophony of chaos that engulfed the courtyard.

My men swiftly retaliated, putting those modified cars through their paces with all the finesse of seasoned fighters. The courtyard turned into a war zone, but our riders were the kings of the battlefield, deflecting bullets like they were nothing more than pesky insects.

The opposing side seemed to be throwing everything they had at us, but our cars stood firm, undeterred, and unscathed. Our precision shots found their marks, taking out enemy combatants and disabling their feeble attempts to ram us with their vehicles. It was like a dance of metal and mayhem, and we were leading the charge.

Exiting our vehicles amidst the chaos, Enzo, Carlo, and I led our contingent of operatives through the labyrinthine corridors of Luigi's fortified mansion.

The interior was a blend of wealth and strategic design, with sprawling hallways and intricately adorned chambers serving as both a testament to Luigi's wealth and a reflection of his paranoia.

Luigi's men flooded the hallways, their determined footsteps echoing through the opulent yet foreboding atmosphere. The sound of gunfire intensified, reverberating through the mansion as the clashes escalated.

I swiftly took down a couple of assailants, the adrenaline coursing through my veins as Enzo, Carlo, and I moved with calculated haste, our men providing essential cover fire to secure our advance.

The hallways seemed to stretch endlessly, a dizzying maze of opulence and danger that we navigated with steely determination. Each turn brought us closer to our quarry, the tension in the air palpable as we inched toward our confrontation with the treacherous Luigi.

The library loomed ahead, its grandeur a stark contrast to the turmoil that unfolded within its walls. Luigi stood at the far end, flanked by his loyal henchmen, their weapons trained on us with unyielding intent. I met his gaze, the animosity between us crackling in the charged silence that enveloped the room.

It was a showdown that had been a long time coming, a clash of wills and ideologies that would determine the fate of our intertwined legacies.

Without a word, the standoff erupted into a frenzy of gunfire and strategic maneuvers, the library's shelves providing scant cover as we engaged in a relentless exchange of bullets and tactics.

The resounding thunder of firearms filled the air, punctuated by the grunts of exertion and the occasional clatter of shattered glass.

We advanced cautiously, our movements calculated and precise as we sought to gain the upper hand. The dim light filtered through the ornate windows, casting eerie shadows that danced around us as we grappled for control.

Luigi's men fought ferociously, their loyalty to their leader evident in their unwavering resolve, but we matched them blow for blow, each of us driven by an unyielding determination to emerge victorious.

The library became a battleground, its once serene atmosphere shattered by the intensity of our conflict. Every surface became a potential vantage point, every shelf a shield against the onslaught of bullets.

The chaos intensified as I inched closer to where Luigi was taking cover. My only goal was to reach him. The swirling melee of gunfire and adrenaline-fueled action blurred the edges of my vision, leaving only the singular image of my target in my mind's eye.

Finally closing the distance, I locked eyes with Luigi, his steely gaze betraying a mix of defiance and desperation. He raised his gun, the metallic glint of the weapon a grim reflection of the danger that loomed between us.

Reacting swiftly, I launched into a fluid roundhouse kick, knocking the firearm out of his grasp before he could aim.

The room seemed to slow down as we engaged in hand-to-hand combat, each of us trading blows with a ferocity that belied the years of pent-up animosity between us. Luigi was quick and agile with sharp reflexes as I met each of his strikes with a calculated counterstrike.

Our clash was a symphony of physicality, each move executed with calculated precision and honed skill. As Luigi lunged forward with a sweeping punch, I deftly sidestepped, feeling the rush of displaced air as his strike barely missed its mark.

Seizing the opportunity, I launched a swift jab towards his abdomen, the impact sending a reverberating jolt through my knuckles as it made contact.

He grunted in response, his body recoiling slightly as he swiftly recovered, retaliating with a series of quick jabs aimed at my chest. I managed to deflect the majority, but one landed squarely on my ribs, the sudden burst of pain eliciting a sharp intake of breath as I shifted backward, attempting to regain my balance.

With a calculated pivot, I evaded another one of Luigi's powerful strikes, feeling the rush of wind as his fist whisked past my ear. Using the momentum from my dodge, I retaliated with a well-placed kick, my foot connecting with the side of his knee, the impact sending a jolt of reverberating pain through my leg as I forced myself to remain steady.

Luigi staggered slightly, but his resolve remained unyielding as he redirected his focus, coming at me with a flurry of

relentless blows. I parried and weaved through his attacks despite the strain I was starting to feel.

Despite the searing ache that pulsed through my muscles, I pressed on. My mind focused on the singular goal of emerging victorious. With a swift twist and a burst of energy, I managed to outmaneuver Luigi, driving him to the ground and pinning him in place. Quickly, I held my gun to his head.

With Luigi defeated and underneath me, the chaos in the library gradually subsided, and the room fell into a tense silence. Around us, the fallen bodies of Luigi's men were littered on the ground, while the subdued figures of those who had surrendered or been apprehended added a layer of tension to the scene.

My gaze locks with Luigi's, and I see his eyes seething with so much hatred and anger. Seeing these emotions in the eyes of someone who was once my uncle, the anger that had fueled my pursuit of him slowly disappeared.

My gaze locked with Luigi's, his eyes emanating a potent cocktail of hatred and anger. At that moment, the tangible animosity in his gaze was impossible to ignore. It was the kind of seething rage that had fueled our relentless pursuit, the very emotions that had driven us to this point. Yet, as I stood victorious, his former nephew but now his captor, a profound shift occurred within me.

The questions and 'whys' that had once loomed large in my mind, the burning desire for answers and explanations, no longer held the same significance. At that moment, I was no

longer the curious nephew seeking to understand the motivations of his estranged uncle. Instead, I was the victor, and a solemn acceptance of the inevitability of our fate had eclipsed my desire for answers.

”*Qualche ultima parola?* (Any last words?).” I asked, my voice steady and composed.

In response, Luigi’s lips curled into a malevolent grin, his defiance unbroken. He attempted to spit at me, but his weakened state betrayed him, and the spittle landed on his chin rather than my face. I observed this with calm detachment, my finger hovering over the trigger of the gun.

Just as I was about to pull the trigger, Carlo’s voice sliced through the air. “Emilio, let me do it.”

I turned to Carlo, momentarily bewildered by his request. It took a moment for his words to register fully. “What are you talking about, Carlo?”

He moved closer, his eyes locked onto Luigi’s.

“I want to be the one to end this, Emilio. He almost killed me. If it hadn’t been for you, I would have been dead. I want to be the one to kill him.”

I considered his words, recognizing the significance of this moment for Carlo. Carlo had been at Luigi’s mercy, and now, the tables had turned in our favor.

Carlo leaned down, his voice a venomous whisper. “*Una volta hai avuto la possibilità di uccidermi, Luigi, e hai fallito, ma io*

non fallirò. (You once had the chance to kill me, Luigi, and you failed, but I won't fail.)”

With those final words, Carlo took the gun from my hand, aimed it at Luigi, and pulled the trigger. The gunshot echoed through the room.

Taking a moment for myself, I turned to Carlo, “You can take care of everything from here on out, Carlo.”

Carlo's eyes widened with surprise. “What do you mean, Emilio?”

I met his gaze with a sense of peace that I hadn't felt in a long time.

“I never wanted to be the Don, and neither do I want to be a part of the mafia, Carlo. This was the position you always wanted to have. It's yours now. I no longer want to be a part of the mafia.”

Carlo remained speechless, his expression a mixture of astonishment and disbelief. However, I didn't care, I walked away with a sense of lightness that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

It was over.

Chapter 43

Griselda

I sat on the couch, my gaze fixed on the window, my thoughts consumed by worry for Emilio's safety. I couldn't fathom what I would do if something were to happen to him.

My mother quietly joined me on the adjacent couch, and though her presence brought me some comfort, I remained silent, lost in my apprehensions.

"You do like him, don't you?" my mother tentatively ventured.

I couldn't help but snort at her observation.

"Against all odds," I replied with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

A heavy sigh escaped my mother's lips as she leaned closer.

"I don't want you to have the same kind of life I did, Griselda," she admitted.

I reassured her, my voice firm with conviction. "He's not like them, Mom. He's not interested in the mafia. He'll find a way out."

Shifting closer to me, she attempted to meet my gaze.

“Am I going to become a grandmother?” she asked, a touch of disbelief coloring her words.

I couldn't contain my laughter at the reality of the situation.

“Yes,” I confirmed, and before I knew it, she took me into her warm, comforting embrace.

“As long as you're sure about the kind of man he is,” my mother murmured, her concern palpable.

I reciprocated her embrace, holding her close.

“I am, Mom,” I reassured her.

A thoughtful hum resonated in my chest as she pulled back slightly.

“I'll still have reservations until he leaves the mafia,” she admitted, a hint of worry lingering in her expression.

I chuckled softly at her protective nature.

“I know you're worried for me,” I acknowledged, understanding her fears all too well.

Her sigh was filled with a mix of emotions.

“I can't believe my only baby will be having a baby,” she remarked with a laugh.

I couldn't help but giggle at the sentiment. The conversation then shifted as my mother inquired about my work and the status of my suspension.

“I quit,” I replied, the decision still fresh in my mind.

She pulled back slightly, her gaze locking with mine.

“I’m proud of you,” she declared, her smile wide and genuine.

As my mother’s words filled the room with a warm sense of pride, the familiar sound of a car engine interrupted our moment. We both turned to the window and spotted the sleek black Mercedes-Benz pulling into the driveway.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I knew it was Emilio. Relief flooded through me, dispelling the anxious cloud that had settled in my chest.

Rushing outside, I saw Emilio stepping out of the car, his arms open wide. I practically leaped into his embrace, feeling the familiar comfort of his presence enveloping me.

“Be careful,” he murmured, his voice laced with affection.

“I missed you,” I admitted, my voice muffled against his chest.

The warmth of his chuckle reverberated through me as he assured me that he was fine.

As we reluctantly parted, I remembered my mother standing in the doorway, her gaze wary yet curious. I debated internally whether I should introduce Emilio to her or not, but before I could make that decision, Emilio strode over to her.

I was about to witness a monumental exchange between the two most important people in my life. I rubbed my hand tenderly over my growing belly, grateful that soon there would be three precious people in my life.

“Mom, this is Emilio,” I said with slight nervousness.

Emilio extended his hand, his demeanor polite and composed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” he said, his tone warm and respectful.

My mother glanced at his outstretched hand before tentatively reaching out to shake it.

“Likewise,” she replied, her tone guarded yet courteous.

I observed the subtle tension between them, each sizing the other up in a silent exchange. My mother nodded slowly.

“Griselda has told me a little about your family,” she said it as if it were a challenge. “I have to be honest, I don’t approve of the circumstances surrounding your occupation.”

Emilio’s gaze remained steady, his resolve unwavering as he met my mother’s gaze with a sense of understanding.

“I understand your concerns,” he replied, his voice calm yet resolute. “But I love Griselda, and I won’t leave her. Our child deserves to have both of us in its life, and I’ll do everything in my power to make that happen.”

My mother’s expression softened slightly, a hint of empathy mingling with her lingering apprehension.

“I just want what’s best for Griselda and the baby,” she murmured, her words laced with maternal concern.

Emilio nodded, his demeanor conveying a sense of earnestness.

“I understand. *Mi assicurerò di dimostrare che posso fornirglielo.* (I’ll make sure to prove that I can provide that for

them),” he assured her with confidence.)

The exchange between them carried an air of mutual respect and guarded understanding, each acknowledging the complexities of the situation while striving to find a common ground. When my mother and Emilio concluded their conversation, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of happiness.

I smiled, a sense of relief flooding through me.

“See! I told you that he’s not what you expected,” I explained, my words tinged with a mixture of defense and pride.

My mother regarded us both with a sense of understanding, her eyes reflecting a blend of caution and acceptance.

“I can see that. Just promise me you’ll take care of my daughter,” she implored, her words tinged with a mother’s instinctive worry.

“I will,” Emilio assured her, his voice unwavering in its commitment. “I promise.”



We stepped into the penthouse, and a deep sense of belonging filled me. I had really missed being here with Emilio. I turned to look at him with a warm smile, catching his gaze.

“How did it go?” I asked, my voice laced with a mixture of curiosity and anticipation.

Emilio closed the distance between us with purposeful strides, his smile growing with each step. In a sudden motion, he

pulled me into his lap as we settled onto the couch, his eyes gleaming with happiness.

“It’s done. I’m out of the mafia now.” He looked so relaxed and truly happy.

I was elated, and I leaned in to kiss him, smashing our lips together. His hand glided up my back and ran through strands of my hair.

I honestly couldn’t decide which was better. Our large bed or sitting in his lap like this, all our limbs entwined together.

I wiggled on his lap, noting something else rising and poking at my inner thigh.

Raising myself slightly, I teasingly drew a fingernail over the lump in his trousers. After hearing such good news, I just wanted to have him in me as quickly as possible. I immediately set to work on removing his clothes.

His hands were just as eager and quicker, as though he had been waiting all day for the excuse to touch me. He removed my outer clothes, leaving me in my undergarments, planting wet kisses on my skin along the way.

I smacked his shoulder and told him to stop several times as he kept finding ticklish spots along my stomach and arms.

His lips against my bosom tingled, and he easily picked me up and lay me on the floor right there in the living room.

I laughed and couldn’t believe we were going to do each other right there on the floor like a mating pair of animals, but my laughter turned into moans when his hand stroked my lower

half, his fingers dancing along my inner thigh and traveling further up.

I squirmed, reaching for him, but his other hand snatched my wrists, holding them high above my head. He kissed me, his tongue pressing against my lips for entry, which I gladly granted him.

His fingers continued to glide across my hips and legs, swirling around the ultimate target, leaving me in sheer torment for his attention there.

I growled into his mouth, irritated and needy, and he relented. He curled a finger along the wet patch in my underwear, rubbing along the soaked slit. My hips lifted, pressing his finger into the folds. Yet he pulled back, drawing it along to the top and back down.

Damn him, I thought, wanting to scream in his mouth out of sheer frustration but also melting into the desk all the while. His fingers hooked around the fabric, pulling it aside, and his fingertips finally touched bare skin, rubbing the perfect area that I needed him to touch.

I shivered, biting back a squeal rising in my throat, and I broke the kiss. Then he attacked my collarbone, sucking against the skin. Between the deep purple bruises he left in his wake and his circling hand on my lower half, it was an overload of sensation.

At this rate, I would finish too soon. I gasped and laid my chin on top of his head.

“Emilio,” I breathed, barely above a whisper.

He eased up and allowed me to settle down, bestowing loving kisses along my body here and there. Once my breathing returned to normal, he wasted no time in returning to the spot between my legs. This time, though, his head lowered with his hands.

“No,” I said, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him back up. “Let me suck you off first.” Rolling onto shaky legs, I directed him on what to do. “Lie down.”

Doing as he was told, I removed his trousers and his underwear, freeing his cock. It stood erect and glistening, and my core quivered in response to the idea of it being inside me.

I crawled on top of him, facing the other way and planting my knees on either side of Emilio’s head, then grabbed hold of the thick length. It pulsed in my hand, and the tip was already slick with his essence. Brushing back my hair, I gently licked it, and behind me, Emilio sucked in the air.

Pushing the shaft against my face, I used my entire tongue, dragging it from the base to the top in one long, fluid motion. I repeated it several times, gently cradling his balls in my other hand. At his tip, I circled my tongue around and around the head. Each pass brought yet another deep grunt from Emilio.

He wasn’t idle himself. I felt his fingers poking and prodding me, and all too soon, a warm heat against my opening. Then a slippery tongue went up and down my folds, combined with his fingers against my nub. I lost my concentration on his cock

a couple of times when he hit a sensitive spot. I moaned and suckled on him to return the favor.

Slowly, I opened my mouth wide and swallowed the tip whole. I withdrew, then went back for more, diving deeper.

I curved my tongue under the section in my mouth, sucking and rotating it in a way that I knew affected Emilio. Within moments, his attention on me broke, and his pelvis twisted, his butt bouncing on the floor.

He was stubborn, though, and when I lifted my head to catch my breath, he was back at it, his tongue probing deep inside me.

“Yes,” I moaned loudly, hanging my head in ecstasy.

That building tension was rising in my body, and I couldn't take much more. Any moment now, and it was over. I needed to get back to his length. I needed to-

Emilio's tongue won me over. All my muscles went lax, and I yelled, my head dropping down to his groin. I couldn't speak or do anything, only make mewling noises against his skin and let my body jerk as the orgasm pumped through my body like a heartbeat.

Gradually, I regained enough strength to push myself up and look over my shoulder. Emilio was covered in sweat and spittle.

“Enough foreplay,” I smiled, easing up and awkwardly turning around. “I want the real thing.”

“Anything for you, kitten.”

I raised my hips high while he held himself in position. Then, I pressed down on him, taking him in inch by inch until he couldn't fit any more of himself in. I sat there, my lower lips swollen from the pregnancy hormones, savoring the thickness inside me. If this is what sex was going to feel like for the next six months, we'd better get a softer carpet.

I unclasped my bra, letting it fall away, and chuckled as Emilio's eyes widened. No matter how many times I let him see them, he never failed to be impressed by certain aspects of my naked body. *Then again*, I glanced down at his sex in me and the toned body beneath; *he never fails to impress me either.*

His hands slid up my thighs and held firm to my ass. Spreading my fingers on his muscular chest, I pushed myself up to the point of letting him fall out, then seductively eased back down on him, ensuring that I contracted my inner muscles on every downward move. I stuck my tongue out with a devilish grin as he groaned. He squeezed his eyes shut, and his grip on me faltered.

It was a sight to see him like this, and I got a great deal of satisfaction from making him writhe like this.

I laughed and lifted myself again, this time pulling off him completely. In one fell swoop, I suddenly found myself on all fours beneath Emilio.

And his hands. *Gosh!* How they groped my breasts, pushing them up, caressing them.

I gave myself over to how his one hand wandered lower and the other explored. They were doing sinful things to my body. He bent a finger and drew the knuckle through my wet slit, lightly kneading through my folds, then over my clit and back.

It made me nearly lose my mind. I loved that only we were privy to each others' pleasure and could experience these sexual heights with only each other.

I craned my head to look back up at him and wrapped an arm around his neck, holding myself steady. He kissed me and, the next moment, impaled me. I yelped in his mouth, and that suppressed shiver exploded throughout my body.

My arm weakened, but he held me close to him, keeping me from falling forward as he steadily thrust into me. All I could do was moan and wail his name aloud.

“Yes, Emilio! Yes!” He understood as only he could.

His face trailed down my neck, nipping and sucking along. I reached for him, wanting more, but lost my balance and fell forward on my hands.

That didn't stop Emilio. He merely leaned over me, his pelvis unyielding in its quest to pleasure me. Those magical hands reached around and underneath me, massaging my clit, sending me along a wave of ecstasy.

The sounds of his animalistic grunting and groaning only made me wilder and more uninhibited with my moaning.

“Right there!” I yelled, pushing back against him, trying to angle his shaft to hit the right spot. “Yes, I'm almost there!”

“Me too,” he said, panting.

It was so close that I could almost reach out and grab it.

And then, it happened, like electric shockwaves, sizzling up and down my limbs. My walls clenched tightly around him the moment he seemed to slow down. Behind me, Emilio’s fingers dug into my sides painfully as he slammed his hips into me. Inside, I felt as if he orgasmed, filling me to the brim.

Then, the moment passed, and we collapsed on the floor against one another, both breathing hard and unable to speak for a few minutes.

I turned to him first and traced a finger down his heaving chest with a wide grin.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Chapter 44

Emilio

I was engrossed in the intricacies of the new designs for our latest installations. Knowing that I was no longer a slave to do the bidding of the mafia code filled me with renewed energy to work on my projects.

The freedom to live without constantly looking over my shoulder was liberating, and the prospect of a future with Griselda and my close friends was a source of immeasurable contentment.

Amidst my moment of respite, a knock on the door interrupted my reverie, and my secretary entered, announcing the unexpected arrival of my brother, Carlo. Surprised but composed, I instructed her to usher him in, mentally preparing myself for the nature of his visit.

“Emilio, those vehicles you used in the last encounter,” Carlo began to say as he walked in, his expression a blend of curiosity and a hint of astonishment. “Why didn’t you tell the family about them?”

He didn't even bother with a greeting. I thought about how he had apologized to me back when I had taken him to Andrea's hospital and how he now seemed to believe that everything between us was fine, as if nothing had happened. Was it because he was now the Don?

"During the chaos of the battle, there wasn't a moment to spare," Carlo admitted, a sense of understanding coloring his words. "I was impressed by the vehicles' capabilities, but I had to focus on the immediate situation."

As his words settled in the air, I felt a creeping sense of unease encroaching on my earlier contentment.

"So, this is what brought you here," I surmised, a tinge of resignation lacing my tone as I glanced at Carlo.

His gaze met mine. "Yes, Emilio. I came to discuss the potential of incorporating those vehicles into our operations," he clarified, his voice edged with a touch of earnestness. "I see their value and how they could benefit the family."

'Our' operations? Hadn't I made myself clear when I had told him that I wanted nothing to do with the mafia again?

I regarded him with a cool composure, the weight of my newfound independence fueling my resolve.

"Carlo, my business and the vehicles are not of your concern," I replied, my tone measured but firm. "I have my ventures now, separate from the affairs of the family. Have you forgotten that I am no longer interested in the mafia?"

Carlo's brows furrowed, his gaze unwavering as he probed further.

"But think about the profits, Emilio. We could benefit greatly from integrating those vehicles into our operations," he argued, his voice tinged with a hint of persuasion.

"It's not about the profits, Carlo," I asserted, my voice tinged with a sense of finality. "I've made my decision, and my focus is on building a legitimate business. The vehicles have no place in your family's dealings. "

Carlo's expression hardened, a flicker of frustration crossing his features.

"You've changed, Emilio," he murmured, his words laden with a mixture of disappointment and resignation. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Carlo's gaze remained steadfast, but there was a hardening in his expression, an edge of frustration in his eyes.

As the weight of his statement settled in the room, I met his eyes without a single ounce of fear. "Carlo, I'm the one who handed you the position," I reminded him, my voice firm yet tinged with a hint of caution. "Don't let that go to your head. I can take it back just as easily."

Carlo's response was laced with a subtle challenge.

"You think you can just reclaim it whenever you want?" he inquired, a note of skepticism coloring his tone.

I leaned in closer, the tension between us palpable. "Don't get cocky, Carlo. You wouldn't be where you are if I hadn't let it

happen,” I warned, my words laden with an unspoken threat. “And if you ever try anything, I won’t hesitate to take action. You know how formidable my men are.”

Our exchange brimmed with the unspoken tension of brotherly rivalry. Carlo took a step back, his expression a mix of frustration and acceptance.

“Fine, Emilio,” he conceded, his voice tinged with a hint of resignation and annoyance. “We’ll go our separate ways from now on. We can pretend the other doesn’t exist and live our own lives.”

There was a finality in his words, an acknowledgment of the rift that had grown between us, and I didn’t even feel bad about it. I just felt free.

When had he ever treated me like a brother?

I felt like another burden was lifted off my back.

With a final, lingering look, Carlo turned and left my office without another word. I watched his retreating figure. I hoped that this would, indeed, be the last time our paths crossed and that I could finally distance myself from the world of the mafia.

No longer wanting to think about Carlo, I took out my phone from my pocket, swiftly dialing Enzo’s number. As the call connected, I wasted no time in getting to the point.

“Enzo, how’s the progress with the Joe and Burrows Law Firm acquisition going?”

Epilogue

Griselda

I stared at the documents in my hands, my mouth agape in utter shock. Emilio stood before me, a wide smile playing on his lips. I couldn't believe what I was holding. My voice quivered as I attempted to form a coherent question, trying to understand when, how, and why he did this.

“Oh my God, Emilio, how did you... when did you... why?” I stammered, my voice barely audible as I struggled to comprehend the magnitude of the situation.

Emilio shrugged, his expression smug as he explained. Despite all we had been through, he hadn't forgotten about my boss and the injustices I had faced. I glanced down at the papers again.

They were the acquisition documents of the law firm where I used to work.

I was now the sole owner of Joe and Burrows Law Firm.

Emilio chuckled softly, his arms enveloping me in a comforting embrace.

“I’ve been planning it for a while, love,” he said, his voice warm and affectionate. “I know how much you love your work, and I wanted to make sure you have something of your own.”

I looked up at him, my eyes wide with a mix of bewilderment and wonder.

“But a whole law firm? How did you even manage this?” I asked, my mind still trying to grasp the reality of the documents in my hands.

Emilio’s grin widened as he explained, “Have you forgotten who I am?”

I let out a breath, feeling my heart swell with a rush of emotions. “I... I don’t know what to say,” I murmured, my eyes brimming with tears of gratitude. “Thank you, Emilio. This is... it’s incredible.”

He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead.

“You deserve it and so much more, my love. I’ll always take care of you,” he whispered, his voice full of sincerity and devotion.

As I processed the news, my mind raced with the implications of this unexpected turn of events. I had been contemplating searching for work after giving birth, but I never expected Emilio to grant me such an immense gift. He moved closer to

me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders, his voice warm and reassuring.

His words echoed in my ears, “No woman of mine will be an employee working for others.”

I felt a rush of emotions welling up inside me, a mix of disbelief, gratitude, and overwhelming affection for this man who had continuously surprised me with his thoughtfulness and generosity.

In a surge of intense gratitude, I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his, pouring all my emotions into that one kiss. It was a silent, heartfelt expression of thanks, conveying all the love and appreciation that I couldn't put into words. Emilio held me close, returning the kiss with equal fervor.

I loved this man so much!



I marveled at the expanse of the office space, my new domain where I held the reins of power. It was a tasteful blend of modern aesthetics and classic sophistication, with rich wooden furniture and large windows overlooking the city skyline.

When I had told Avery about what Emilio did for me, she had been gobsmacked and had told me that he was a keeper, especially after I had told her about how he was no longer a part of the mafia.

As I settled into the CEO's chair, awaiting the arrival of my trusted colleagues, a rush of excitement and nervous energy

pulsed through me. Moments later, the door swung open, and Sophia, Luca, Dave, and Matthew filed in, their expressions a mix of surprise and admiration.

“Griselda, you’re the new CEO?” Sophia blurted out, her eyes wide with disbelief.

I nodded, unable to contain my excitement. “Yes, it’s true. Mr. Gilbert has stepped down, and the board has appointed me as the new CEO.”

The room buzzed with a whirlwind of conversations, each of them expressing their astonishment and support for my newfound role.

Matthew let out a low whistle, shaking his head in amazement. “I never saw this coming. Congratulations, Griselda. You’ve earned this.”

“I can’t believe it,” Dave chimed in, a grin spreading across his face. “You were always destined for big things, but this? This is huge!”

Sophia and the others echoed similar sentiments, their voices filled with both surprise and excitement.

“How did this happen?” Sophia asked, her eyes wide with curiosity. “How did you become the CEO?”

I smiled mysteriously, deliberately omitting Emilio’s name.

“It was a gift,” I replied, enjoying their baffled reactions. “A generous gift.”

Their questions continued, but I kept the details veiled, not wanting to reveal too much about the sudden turn of events. However, before I could divert their attention, the door swung open, and Carmella stormed in, her eyes widening in shock as she spotted me in the CEO's seat.

Carmella stumbled back, stuttering as she tried to process the scene before her. "You? The CEO?"

"You still don't know how to knock?" I questioned, my tone laced with a mix of irritation and apprehension.

She stammered, her finger trembling as she pointed at me, her eyes wide with incredulity. "This... this can't be true. You can't be the CEO, Griselda!"

I rose from my seat, my gaze meeting hers. As I walked around the table, her eyes fixated on my noticeable baby bump, a sharp gasp escaping her lips. She wasn't the only one who was surprised. Even my team wasn't aware.

I stood before her.

"I assure you, Carmella, it is true," I asserted, my voice firm and resolute. "And I didn't need anyone to summon you here. You came on your own."

Carmella's face contorted with a range of emotions, her hands fidgeting nervously. I retrieved the envelope from my desk, handing it to her with a deliberate gesture. Her fingers trembled as she turned it over, her eyes scanning the contents.

"It's your termination letter," I informed her, my voice steady despite the rising tension. "Your services are no longer

required here.”

Carmella’s eyes blazed with fury as she denied my words vehemently.

“You can’t do this!” she exclaimed, her voice laced with defiance. “You can’t fire me!”

I tilted my head slightly, a small smile playing on my lips.

“I just did,” I replied calmly, meeting her gaze with unwavering resolve. “The decision is final.”

“Get out of my way!” Carmella barked, storming toward the door in a fit of rage.

I watched her leave, her steps heavy with indignation as she disappeared down the hallway.

As soon as Carmella was out of earshot, Sophia and the others erupted in excited chatter.

“That was so badass!” Sophia exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with admiration. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Griselda!”

Luca chimed in, nodding fervently. “Yeah, that was epic! She had it coming.”

Amidst the cheers and congratulations, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride.



I felt a familiar sense of comfort as I sat in the VIP room at Andrea’s hospital, awaiting the arrival of our little one. Having

frequented the hospital for checkups, I had grown accustomed to its halls and facilities.

Emilio and Andrea were in the room with me, their banter creating an amusing background to the otherwise serious atmosphere. Their playful exchange seamlessly transitioned between English and Italian, adding a lighthearted touch to the tension.

However, my laughter was abruptly cut short by a sudden twinge of pain in my lower abdomen. It was unmistakable - the baby was on the way.

The room quickly shifted gears as medical staff rushed in, their calm efficiency reassuring me amidst the intensity of the moment. The VIP room, with its soothing colors and spacious layout, exuded a sense of peace despite the urgency of the situation.

State-of-the-art equipment stood ready, a testament to the hospital's commitment to providing top-notch care.

Emilio's presence was a constant source of support, his alternating words of encouragement in English and Italian creating a sense of calm amid the chaos. The medical staff's precise instructions and soothing reassurances further added to the calming environment as labor progressed.

"Stai andando alla grande, cara (You're doing great, dear)," Emilio murmured, his voice a steady reassurance amidst the whirlwind of sensations.

I held onto his words, finding solace in the familiarity of his support as the labor intensified.

As the contractions grew more frequent and intense, the room seemed to pulse with a shared determination to welcome the newest member of our family. The medical staff's careful guidance and expertise guided me through the birthing process, their steady hands and focused demeanor fostering an environment of trust and security.

Amid the ebb and flow of labor, my body was consumed with a relentless surge of sensations, each wave intensifying the strain and exertion required to bring our child into the world.

The room echoed with the steady rhythm of my breaths, each exhalation punctuated by a quiet yet determined push, as the medical staff provided unwavering support and guidance.

As the labor progressed, the sheer intensity of the experience left me drained, every ounce of energy channeled into the monumental task at hand. The pain, while at times overwhelming, was tempered by the shared sense of anticipation and the knowledge that our child's arrival was imminent.

And then, amidst the whirlwind of emotions and physical strain, a sudden cry filled the room - a resounding announcement of new life entering the world.

Emilio and I exchanged a glance, our eyes brimming with tears of joy and awe at the sight of our precious daughter. Emilio gently cradled our daughter in his arms, his eyes sparkling with pride and tenderness.

“I’ve already contacted my mom. She’s on her way here with some of our men,” he informed me, his voice tinged with a mixture of relief and contentment.

I smiled at the thought of his mother meeting our newborn, imagining the joy that would radiate from her. As I watched them together, a name suddenly came to mind.

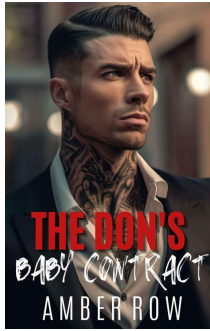
“Emilio, what should we name her?” I whispered, the exhaustion of labor mingling with the joy of our new arrival.

His gaze softened, and a smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“Let’s name her Chiara.”

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The Don’s Baby Contract



Tap Picture

I betrayed him and yet he still saved me.

Now I owe him more than I can afford to pay.

Nico Allotini is not someone you mess with.

His chiseled body was touched by the divine, but he's no angel.

With more power than I ever dreamed,

He's no longer the gentle lover I betrayed four years ago.

He's the brutal mafia boss, nicknamed "The Undertaker," with a reputation for taking what he's owed.

But then he saves me from certain death,

I owe him more than I can afford to pay.

Until he offers me a contract.

A dangerous, sinful contract.

One that will make me his and only his.

He needs an heir and wants to possess me in ways I shouldn't consider.

But if it protects my family, how can I refuse?

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Sneak Peek

The Don's Baby Contract

Sybil

It's not fair that we can't blame the dead since this really is my sister's fault.

I squirm again in the pitch-blackness, but it's futile. There's no movement to be had, shoved back here between the spare tire and who knows what else.

It smells horrible, and I try not to think about how many corpses this mobster has probably toted around in this trunk. Instead, I steady my breathing and squeeze my eyes shut.

The bindings on my wrists hurt, and my mouth is gagged. They did all this to keep me from being "problematic"—but I doubt anyone noticed them grab me in the empty parking lot of my workplace.

It's not like I could easily fight off two armed mobsters twice my size.

I'm pretty sure they're going to kill me.

Damn you, Angela.

My twin was the one who got involved with the Gatto family in the first place. She was always the one to get mixed up with bad things, and I was the one who got her out.

At least, until four years ago. When Angela's bad choices finally caught up to her.

Then it was just me, twinless and drowning in the mess she had left behind. And now that I'm about to bite the dust, our family will be left basically defenseless.

I fight my tears and mentally curse at Angela more because that's easier than admitting that I wish she was still here with me.

Well, maybe not *here*, here. I just miss my twin.

Just as I'm imagining all the different ways these dangerous men might kill me, the car breaks hard, and I hear honking. I gasp when I sense the car swerving and careening—and then my stomach flies into my throat at a sudden impact.

The sound is deafening, but the crash must have happened at the front of the car because I'm uninjured.

For a moment, I'm breathless and terrified in the dark, claustrophobic cold of the trunk. Did they swerve to avoid an animal or something? What if they're both dead?

Oh my God, I'm going to freeze in the back of this car. Or starve to death. I feel bad for whoever finds this wreck and the three corpses.

Then I hear muffled voices. There's a shout, sounds of scuffling, more yelling, and then the unmistakable sound of a gun firing. My heart takes off, almost painful in my chest.

Whoever is firing at these guys is probably also involved in the mafia. Which means—

Click. The trunk opens.

I flinch against the bright light that flashes in my face. My eyes can't adjust for a moment, but when they do, I freeze.

The man glowering down at me is all foreboding muscle and fury, blood smeared on his fists and down one side of his gorgeous, severe face. His eyes narrow at the sight of me, and he swears.

Now I wish the impact did kill me.

Because I know my rescuer...and he's probably going to finish the job.

Two other men step up beside him to peer into the trunk. His lackeys, I'm sure. One is almost my rescuer's height but is clearly younger.

The other is massive, with a face that's obviously been used as a punching bag one too many times over the years. I feel like a tied-up animal about to be butchered under the eyes of these mobsters.

But mostly under *his* eyes. I remember his gaze too well, and I feel heat everywhere in my face when he growls down at me.

The Undertaker. I've heard that's what they call him now. With a glare like that, I'm absolutely sure it's fitting. Nico Attolini is a hundred times more frightening than he was the first time we met.

Back then, he showed up as a white knight with questionable connections.

There's nothing questionable about him now. He looks like what he is: the infamously violent underboss of the all-

powerful Attolini crime empire. He looks like death itself.

Just another thing that's not fair, because death shouldn't have a face this gorgeous.

"Just a girl?" the giant lackey asks, confused.

"Get her out."

I shiver at the sound of Nico's voice. It's blistering and icy all at once. It's not a tone I've ever heard anyone manage before, but there's no arguing with the intrinsic authority of it.

I flinch but keep myself from fighting as the big one lifts me out of the trunk and deposits me none too gently on my feet. I want to cower, fight back, or just cry, but before I do anything, I need to survey my surroundings. Then maybe I can run.

The car crashed pretty far off the road, surrounded by trees. One of the Gatto mobsters who took me is dead, lying in the fallen leaves beside the car.

The other one, Pascal, is kneeling with a broken, bloodied face nearby. He's the one who kept whispering nasty things in my ear as they gagged and bound me—about what they would do to me, to my mom, to Krista, and my brother.

Another of Nico's men stands beside him, gun against his temple to keep him quiet.

I have no idea what road we're by or how far we are from New York City, but it can't be too far. If I got away, I could find my way back walking eventually.

Hell, I'd take my chances hitchhiking. Anything is better than leaving my fate up to the man now towering over me with dark, merciless turquoise eyes.

It's just a matter of waiting for the right time to run.

"She's really hot," the younger mobster shrugs. "Maybe they were just going to—"

Nico gives him a look that shuts him up. Then he turns from me and stops in front of Pascal. The bloodied man winces when Nico squats until they're at face level.

Then it's my turn to wince when he reaches out and twists the man's already-broken nose.

Pascal screeches and swears colorfully, rearing back. Nico is calm, unbothered by the blood he wipes onto Pascal's shoulder.

"You were unwise to involve her. Where did Mad Blood go?"

Pascal spits to the side and leers up at me. "Like seeing her again, Undertaker? We've kept her nice and unsullied for you. But the boss has a problem. He's tired of the stalemates and handshakes. He's ready to move. You kill me, and we'll punish this pretty little bitch's family again by—"

Nico moves fast, and I gasp and turn away before his fist connects with Pascal's face again. I hear it though—the sickly crunches and meaty thuds of the beating and the mobster's pathetic shouts and whimpers.

Nico's voice is so quiet, I can barely hear it, and I don't doubt he's right in Pascal's face.

“He’s not the only one tired of stalemates. But his problem? He’s afraid of getting his hands dirty doing something about it.” Pascal yelps sharply, and I can only imagine why. “See, I’m not. Last chance. Where were you taking her, and where the fuck is Mad Blood?”

I don’t want to see any of this. I need to get away before he turns that petrifying fury on me again. I glance at his lackeys, who are paying more attention to their boss’s terrifying display of violence than they are to me. I check over my shoulder.

I can just see the road from here. If I back up a little, I won’t be in their peripheral vision anymore....

I take a step back silently. Then another. I’ve seen too many movies not to check for anything that might crack under my boots before setting my foot down.

Over and over, I creep back until I know they can’t see me anymore. Then I pick up speed, backing away.

Pascal has croaked out a few things, but Nico must be crushing his throat or something because I can’t understand him. The Undertaker hisses something else, but by now, I’m far enough away that I don’t have to hear his viciousness.

Until another gunshot rings out. I’m out of time.

Heart clamoring in my chest, I turn completely and race to the road. Cars pass by in flashes, stirring dead leaves in the cold autumn air. I look around quickly, getting my bearings.

It’s dark, and I doubt the cars blurring past can even see that I’m gagged and tied like this. There are no toll booths, just an

endless stretch of road and trees. On one side of the road nearby, two cars are parked.

I almost run to them before realizing that Nico and his men had to drive here, too.

And they didn't leave their rides alone. Another mobster steps out of the driver's side of one parked vehicle. His eyes drift to me and narrow.

But even lightheaded with adrenaline and fear like this, I could get away. I could flag down someone else. I could—

Strong arms clamp around me, pulling me away from the road's edge. I let out a muffled scream, kicking and flailing. It's useless.

Then warm breath brushes against my ear. Nico's words are quiet but still biting.

“Stop fighting, *monella*. You'll cause a scene, and you don't want to drag other civilians into this. *Omertà*, remember?”

Omertà. He told me about it four years ago. Their code for “humble silence” in the face of questioning and the rule that keeps unfortunate civilians from going to the authorities.

I laughed when he explained it back then, saying it's ludicrous for them to expect people to just shut up and let them do whatever they want. I said it was bullshit.

But now, I get it. I go still, no longer hoping any of the cars passing will notice something is up. I want them to go along with their lives, blissfully unaware. I don't want them to meet Nico and get hurt because of me.

And that just makes me hate him more. Four years ago, I never would have thought he would prey on my fear and morals like this. I can still remember how it felt to laugh and reach out to fix his hair.

How warm his presence was. He'd seemed like a walking paradox then—the soft-hearted mobster. The gentleman enforcer.

He's still a paradox. I can sense his impatience as he walks me over to his waiting pals and their rides, but something about his movements is patient, too. He's an unreadable medley of hot and cold.

He's going to kill me.

“Brave, this one,” the driver notes.

“Should've grabbed her the moment you saw her, Giovanni,” the massive lackey huffs.

“It's not my job to clean up after you and Ace,” Giovanni says indignantly.

“Your *job*,” Nico snaps, quieting them all. He's directly behind me, and when I step forward to get away from his warmth, he moves forward to press against me again, gripping my arm tighter. “Was to tail Mad Blood. Tell me what the fuck went wrong.”

They exchange glances. The younger one, “Ace,” clears his throat.

“I thought that was Mad Blood....”

His voice fizzles out as Nico wipes the blood off his chin, exasperated but controlled. “That was his brother. They looked alike.”

I shiver at his use of past tense and look away when his glare shifts to me. I know what he’s thinking. I looked just like Angela. Maybe I wouldn’t be in this mess if they hadn’t taken such a liking to tormenting my wayward twin.

No. I can’t keep blaming her. This is my fault. I let my heart get involved and paid the price. And I’m about to pay again.

I just need to ensure my family doesn’t pay any more for my involvement. What Pascal said about punishing them has replayed in my head over and over.

“Why her?” Ace asks, eyeing me again. The way he tips his head reminds me of a puppy.

“Didn’t realize she was even still alive,” the big guy chuckles. “Maybe that’s what they were about to remedy, huh? This isn’t a bad place to take care of things.”

”*Vaffanculo*, Percy,” Nico growls, and I jump when his fingers graze my wrists. He’s untying me. I’m still processing that when the gag is undone, and finally, I can spit out the taste of it.

Nico’s hands go to my hips, turning me to face him. Looking up at him like this, battling the urge to step back and the urge to step closer all at the same time, I remind myself not to notice that four years have only made him more handsome.

I should pay attention to the blood smeared on his face, not the fact that his opalescent eyes are burning into mine.

Just another paradox. He's the same, but not. He has a new name now—a new reputation I'm about to experience the hard way.

“Well?” I finally manage, glowering with all the force I have left. I'm frightened for my family and on the verge of tears, but that doesn't mean I'll let him see it. “Go ahead. Keep your promise. Kill me.”

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