

A romantic close-up photograph of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man, with a beard and wearing a white shirt, is leaning towards the woman, who has long blonde hair and is wearing a grey top. They are lying on a white surface, possibly a bed, with a straw-like background. The lighting is soft and warm, creating an intimate atmosphere.

TBC SERIES
BOOK 5

BUSINESS
Temptations

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH LENNOX

Business Temptations

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Prologue

Twelve-year-old Matteo stormed out of the castle, his heart pounding with a mixture of fury and desperation, his young mind unable to comprehend the unfairness of it all. He needed solace, a moment to gather his thoughts away from the suffocating presence of his father's expectations.

As he stepped into the cool evening air, his anger flared brighter, fueled by the bitter taste of betrayal. The echoes of their confrontation still rang in his ears, each word a dagger aimed at his wounded pride. How could his father be so blind, so oblivious to Matteo's struggles and desires?

But as he looked up, his gaze met that of his half-brother, Antonio, the epitome of everything Matteo was not. Spoiled, pampered, the golden child destined to inherit the title and wealth that Matteo could only dream of. Antonio's very presence grated on Matteo's nerves, a constant reminder of the gaping chasm between them.

Matteo's chest tightened with resentment as he brushed past Antonio, his footsteps heavy with pent-up frustration. He didn't spare his brother a second glance, his own pain too raw to acknowledge anyone else's. Why should he care about Antonio's privileged existence? Why should he bow down to his father's commands when all it brought him was anguish and disappointment?

With each step, Matteo's resolve hardened, a defiant spark igniting within him. He wouldn't let them break him, wouldn't allow their expectations to crush his spirit. And as he disappeared into the shadows, his heart torn between defiance and despair, he vowed to carve his own path, no matter the cost.

"What did he say?" Antonio's voice cut through the tense silence, his brows furrowed with worry as he leaned in, searching for any sign of physical harm on Matteo's form. "Did he hit you?"

Matteo's glare intensified, his eyes flashing with a mix of defiance and wounded pride. How dare Antonio ask such questions? Didn't he understand the depth of Matteo's pain, the betrayal that coursed through his veins like a river of fire? But beneath the anger, a part of Matteo longed for the comfort of his brother's concern, a flicker of hope buried beneath layers of resentment and hurt.

If he hadn't been so consumed by his own rage, Matteo might have noticed the genuine concern shining in Antonio's eyes, the unspoken plea for reassurance. But the weight of their father's words hung heavy in the air, a constant reminder of Matteo's status as the unwanted son, the bastard child born of a forbidden union.

The realization struck him like a physical blow, the pain cutting through his defenses and leaving him feeling exposed and vulnerable. He had been a fool to think he could ever earn his father's love, to believe that he belonged in this world of opulence and privilege. And as he stood there, his heart heavy with unspoken anguish, Matteo wished for nothing more than to escape the suffocating confines of his reality, to find solace in the embrace of the night. The intensity of his hatred for his half-brother boiled up to new heights within him, fueling his anger at the unjust and solitary existence he endured for so long. Antonio possessed everything Matteo longed for: a father who genuinely cared, a magnificent home, and an abundance of food. In due course, Antonio would inherit the wretched dominion their father presently ruled as the Marquesso del Campo, granting him the power to wreak havoc on the lives of his people.

But Matteo chided himself for his last thought. His mother never let him go hungry, despite their modest means. She worked in the local tavern, and while money was scarce, they always managed to get by. However, Matteo's father showed no concern and offered no support. The despicable man reveled in his immense wealth and influence, yet he chose to exert control over every aspect of the villagers' lives, including his own illegitimate son.

Clenching his fists at his sides, Matteo quickly glanced around, needing an alternative route to get away from this horrible, miserable place. But this was his only escape path.

So in his impotent rage, Matteo gritted his teeth and snapped, “He’s sending me away!”

He tried to calm his fury so that his half-brother wouldn’t delight in Matteo’s predicament, but it was pointless. When he looked at his half-brother, the legitimate son, it was difficult to hide his resentment.

“He said I was an embarrassment to him ‘and his good name’ so he wanted me gone from the village. Instead of ‘enduring my shameful presence’,” Matteo had to pause as the hurt from those words rose in his throat, threatened to choke him. When he had himself back under control, he continued. “Because of that, the Marquesso is sending me to some stupid boarding school in the United States.” He glared at his half-brother. “Are you happy now?” Matteo’s furious gaze drilled into nearly identical, if startled, eyes. “You’ll never have to see me again!”

And with that parting shot, Matteo stomped forward, uncaring that the taller, stronger boy blocked his path. Thankfully, at the last moment, Antonio stepped out of the way. But Matteo would have plowed through him anyway. He was beyond caring about being beaten for abusing the precious “lord’s” son.

Matteo tried to tamp down on his anguish, to ignore it, or at least hide it from the villagers as he walked back to the small, Spanish village. But the pain and, if he were honest, the fear, still clawed at him. He was being sent away to boarding school, away from his mother. She was the only person in this entire world who gave a damn about him and he was being sent away from her! Matteo was defenseless to fight the banishment too. The Marquesso, Matteo refused to use the term “father”, had threatened to banish his mother from the village if he didn’t leave for boarding school.

When he was finally out of sight of the hated castle, he leaned against a nearby olive tree and closed his eyes. Breathing deeply, he again tried to calm his anger. He couldn't let his mother know that he was upset about this...this... banishment. Yes, that's exactly what it was. Matteo was being sent away from his home for something that wasn't his fault! He was being punished simply for being born.

For several long moments, Matteo took deep, slow breaths. His mother could never know how upset he was about being sent away. If she knew, his mother would fight the bastard. And she would lose. The Marquesso del Campo had absolute power over this village. He "owned" all of the court employees, all of the employers, all of the law enforcement personnel. There was no one to help his mother fight this edict from a cold, merciless man.

Lifting his head, he blinked up at the gorgeous sky. Finally, he started walking again, needing to get back and help his mother.

He would go, Matteo thought as he crushed the spring flowers under his heel. He would go to this horrible boarding school and learn everything possible. He'd learn everything he could so that he would never be vulnerable again. Then he would become powerful, far more powerful than the Marquesso and he would crush the ass! He would destroy each and every one of the bastard's businesses and leave him poor and powerless!

Three months later...

Matteo sat on the rough, hard floor of the attic, his hands hanging limply as they hung over his upraised knees. There was only a single window, but it was too high for him to see the outside world. He couldn't even see the stars because of the cloud cover tonight. His cell phone had been taken away as soon as he'd stepped through the gates of this hellish boarding school. The headmaster had claimed that none of the students were allowed cell phones, but Matteo knew that every

other student had a phone. And none tried to hide it. Apparently, cell phones were only disallowed for bastard students with an ass for a “father”.

And this latest punishment? Matteo wasn't even sure what he'd done wrong, but the headmaster had sentenced him to what was essentially solitary confinement for the night. Hence, the attic room with no furniture, no lights, and...even worse, no food.

Closing his eyes, Matteo tried to retreat into his mind and calm the raging fury building within him. Life wasn't fair, he reminded himself. He'd learned that lesson early and often in life and his current hell was no different.

He breathed in again, held the air in his lungs for the count of five, then slowly let it out. The calming sensation washed over him almost immediately and some of the tension eased from his shoulders.

Matteo del Campo, the illegitimate son of the Marquesso del Campo, had learned the hard way to find solace in his mind when the world became too much to handle. Math problems and science were his go-to lately. He enjoyed those subjects because the formulas were logical, made sense, and didn't change simply because someone was in a foul mood. Literature was fine, but the rules shifted without warning. Matteo suspected that some writers broke the “rules” of writing simply because they could. Math and science *always* obeyed the rules. The outcome of every formula was absolute, unless a change was added to the calculation.

The rest of the world, with its complexities and nuances, remained an enigma to Matteo. Humans, in their varied motivations and actions, often left him perplexed. Matteo couldn't fathom the reasoning behind his father's decision to send him to this desolate boarding school. His father had never shown much interest in him before, so why the sudden attention? And why this particular institution? What transgression had Matteo committed months ago to warrant such severe punishment? These questions gnawed at

Matteo's mind, fueling his sense of confusion and abandonment.

He sighed and thought about lying down to get some sleep, but he knew that the floor was filthy. Matteo wasn't sure how much time he'd have in the morning to get ready for the morning inspection of his school uniform before classes started for the day. Not to mention, it was cold enough to see his breath. Sitting curled up seemed slightly warmer.

So instead, he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, trying to sleep sitting up.

Before Matteo could find respite in the refuge of sleep, a chilling scraping sound reverberated through the dimly lit hallway outside his room. His eyes snapped open, pupils dilating in the darkness as he strained to identify the source of the disturbance. Clouds drifted lazily across the night sky, casting fleeting shadows that danced across the walls, while the feeble glow of the moon offered little solace.

The scraping ceased abruptly, plunging the room into an oppressive silence that seemed to suffocate Matteo. His senses sharpened, every nerve tingling with apprehension. Was it rats scurrying about in the dead of night, their presence a sinister omen in this decrepit boarding school? Or perhaps something far more menacing lurked in the shadows, unseen but undeniably present.

Matteo remained frozen in place, his breathing shallow and ragged, fear clawing at his throat. The air grew thick with tension as he strained to discern any sign of movement beyond the confines of this miserable room. And then, just as his heart threatened to burst from his chest, the sound returned, accompanied by a faint shuffling that set his nerves alight.

His gaze fixated on the imposing door, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach as something shifted, barely perceptible, beneath the narrow gap at its base. Panic surged through Matteo's veins like a wildfire, his mind racing with

terrifying possibilities. What lurked on the other side, concealed by the veil of darkness?

With every fiber of his being, Matteo fought to suppress the overwhelming urge to flee, to reveal the depth of his fear to whoever or whatever lay beyond that ominous door. If this was another twisted test, another punishment devised by those who held power over him, Matteo refused to show weakness. But as the tension mounted and the unknown threat loomed ever closer, Matteo's resolve wavered, a desperate plea for salvation echoing silently in the depths of his soul.

But no, the small object sliding under the doorway wasn't an animal. It was...a tube of...something? He didn't recognize the shape and there wasn't enough light to read the label from his sitting position against the wall.

"For your lip!" a small voice whispered.

Matteo jumped at the sound of another human being. Quickly, his mind sifted through the possibilities. Another trick?

"Who are you?" he demanded, not touching the thing on the floor for fear of what might happen if he did.

"I can't tell you!" the voice whispered back.

A moment later, something else was pushed under the doorway. Matteo stood up and inched closer, intrigued despite himself.

"I know you're hungry," the voice whispered.

Matteo looked down, wondering if the flat package was food. *Si*, of course he was hungry. He'd been dragged up here to this attic room right before dinner and no food had been delivered. The absence of a meal was part of his punishment, he knew.

He bent down and picked up the small white tube and realized that it was antibiotic ointment. He squeezed a bit out and rubbed it on his split lip. Instantly, the throbbing pain

eased and he realized that the ointment must have a bit of anesthetic in it as well.

“If you tug the corner from your side, this will be easier.”

Matteo wondered what that meant until he noticed a small corner of something appeared under the door. There was less than an inch of space between the door and the wood floor. Just enough to see the corner of a rough blanket being shoved through.

Matteo pulled at the corner, careful not to tug too hard and make the material bunch up on the other side. With a bit of strategic tugging, he managed to pull the whole blanket through. Wow! Immediately, he wrapped the wool blanket around his shoulders, grateful for the warmth.

“Thank you!” he whispered back. “Who are you?”

“Can’t tell you!” the voice whispered.

Moments later, he heard quiet footsteps receding from the door and down the stairs.

He looked down and realized that his mysterious “friend” had also shoved two protein bars under the door. Hungrily, he ripped open the wrapper and took a huge bite, nearly choking in his hurry to get the food into his urgently cramping belly.

With a sigh, he lowered himself back down to the floor, chewing slowly with his eyes closed, pretending that the sawdust-flavored protein bar was actually a cookie. Chocolate chip, he thought. No, gingersnaps. He remembered the school cook had made gingersnaps for dessert recently and they were the best cookies he’d ever tasted.

With his belly quieted, if not satisfied, Matteo spread out the blanket and settled down on the floor. He stared up at the ceiling, wondering what time it was. But after trying to figure out the time based on the placement of the moon in the sky, he gave up. He didn’t know enough about the moon’s movements, so anything he came up with would be a guess.

He acknowledged that it would be better if he got some sleep. With the blanket to protect his uniform from the dust and grime covering the floor, he closed his eyes and, almost instantly, fell asleep.

The heavy footsteps echoing through the hallway startled Matteo awake. With a speed he hadn't realized he was capable of, he rolled up the blanket and, after quickly glancing around the room, stuffed it into the empty closet, closing the door just as a key clicked into the lock of the entry door.

Matteo turned, smoothing the angry expression from his features as he faced his tormentor.

"Have you learned your lesson, young man?" Headmaster Daniels demanded, spinning the ancient key ring on his index finger. The movement reminded him of a movie Matteo had seen a long time ago about a prison guard and death row inmates.

Matteo blinked, focusing back on the present. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure what the headmaster was talking about. "Sir?" He nearly choked on the term of respect. "I didn't start that fight yesterday. I was just defending myself."

The headmaster sighed, as if severely put out by Matteo's answer. "I know you're not from the United States, son," he replied, shaking his head. "However, fighting is not allowed here at The Colby School for Boys. You're going to have to learn to work out your problems in a more civilized manner. Otherwise, you will be spending a great deal of time here in this punishment room."

Matteo didn't respond. After only two months here, Matteo knew that the headmaster was doing everything possible to make Matteo's life miserable. This latest punishment was completely unjustified, and the headmaster knew it. Matteo had been attacked by three of the other students, but Matteo, being a better fighter, had won the battle. He'd had to be, growing up in a small village outside

of Madrid and being the illegitimate son of one of the wealthiest landowners in Spain. Matteo had learned early on how to defend himself. The local kids had loved picking on him so learning strategic fighting tactics had been essential.

Maybe that was why he was here in this hellish school. Had the Marquesso sent Matteo away because he'd won too many fights in the local village? Was his father embarrassed that Matteo couldn't be beaten by the village boys anymore?

That explanation made a certain sense. It was as good of an explanation as any, Matteo thought. The old man had shipped his bastard son off to boarding school because Matteo was learning to be strong. He'd been shipped away from everything that was familiar and away from the only person in the world who cared. Matteo refused to admit that he was lonely or that he missed his mother. And right now, he refused to admit to something he hadn't done. He hadn't started the fight. But he'd finished it. Besides, the other students, the three that had attacked him, hadn't been punished.

Headmaster Daniels didn't seem impressed by Matteo's stoic silence. "So, you think you're better than us?" he demanded, his white, bushy eyebrows furrowing with rage. His nose twitched with disdain. "I've broken better kids than you," he announced, leaning forward slightly. "And you *will* learn humility!"

Matteo refused to look the man in the eye. He refused to be intimidated. He'd would never let this man break him!

"Am I to remain in here, sir?" he asked. "Or should I get to class?"

The man spun the keys around on his finger once more, a smug smirk curling at the corners of his lips. With an air of arrogance, he scowled, as if daring anyone to challenge his authority.

"Get to class!" Headmaster Daniels snapped, fisting the keys in one hand. "And hurry. You're already late for first

period.”

Matteo stepped gingerly around the man and rushed out. He wasn't sure what time it was, but he assumed that the man had ensured that Matteo would be too late for breakfast this morning.

Sure enough, as Matteo rushed across the quad, his footsteps echoing in the empty courtyard, the familiar chime of the bell for the first class sliced through the air like a blade. Panic surged within him as he quickened his pace, the weight of yesterday's uniform clinging to his body like a shroud of shame. Books and backpack swung haphazardly from his shoulder, threatening to spill their contents with each hurried step.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Matteo reached the cafeteria doors, only to find them firmly closed, barricading him from the tantalizing aroma of breakfast. The realization hit him like a physical blow, a cruel reminder of his perpetual struggle against time and circumstance. He was too late, condemned to face the day on an empty stomach, his hunger gnawing at his insides like a relentless beast.

With a muttered curse, he changed direction. Matteo couldn't be late for his first class. That would result in additional demerits and he wasn't going to sleep on the floor again tonight!

He was just about to enter the building where his class was located when a flash of something to his left caught his eye. A little blond haired girl, maybe five or six years old, was running across the grass. She had a determined, almost angry, expression on her adorable face. Matteo knew that he'd have to hurry, but there was something...intriguing...about the child. At fourteen, he was very interested in girls, but not children. So, why was it so hard to pull his eyes away from her?

Not only was she interesting to look at, with her long, flaxen hair flying out in small curls behind her, but she was

heading right for him!

Matteo tried to pull his eyes away, but there was just...something about her. So it wasn't a surprise when the small girl rushed over to him and handed him...an odd bundle of something. Before he could ask her about it, she turned and raced away, her short, skinny legs carrying her faster than he would have expected. The little sprite was speedy!

Looking down, he noticed that the package was actually a paper napkin. And inside, was a warm biscuit stuffed with scrambled eggs and a sausage patty!

Matteo didn't hesitate. He had less than three minutes to eat and get to class. Plus, food wasn't allowed outside of the cafeteria, so he ate the egg and sausage biscuit with his head down as he hurried to the building that housed his first class of the day. As he stepped into the classroom, the second bell rang and he was able to drop the now-empty napkin into the trashcan by the doorway and take his seat.

With the delicious breakfast warming his stomach, Matteo opened his notebook and, because he was angry about the unjustified punishment, he raised his hand for every question the teacher asked, showing up the other students. For Matteo, this was not merely a display of academic prowess; it was a calculated act of defiance, a twisted game of psychological warfare designed to assert his dominance and exact vengeance upon those who dared to cross him.

Back in the damn room! Matteo was hungry, tired, and frustrated that the headmaster was more than willing to dole out unjust punishments.

At least he'd been shoved into the attic room early enough that there was enough light. The early evening sunshine allowed him to look around and get his bearings. Was the blanket still in the closet? It had been over a week since he'd been in here; had anyone else been punished during that time? Matteo had been diligently trying to keep his head

down and out of trouble over the past seven days. One night in this horrible room, alone and with only his secret visitor to ease the aching loneliness, had been enough.

He waited until the footsteps of his captor had faded before he moved to the closet. Sure enough, the wool blanket was there, exactly where he'd left it.

Grabbing the blanket, he shook it out and spread it over the floor. Before he sat down, he took off his blazer and laid it carefully aside so it wouldn't get wrinkled. He hated ironing and would do just about anything to avoid the chore.

He was hungry, but ignored the gnawing sensation in his stomach. He was always hungry here at the school. It seemed that several of the teachers thought meal times were a good time to lecture him on one subject or another. So missing meals was a regular thing lately.

An image of a blond-haired sprite popped into his head. Was she going to show up tonight? He glanced through the high window. The sun was still out, but dusk filtered the sunshine through the trees. Everyone would be having dinner about now. What was the girl doing? And what was her name? Why was she here, at an all-boys' boarding school?

The little darling was a mystery he wanted to solve. But he hadn't seen her since that morning when she'd slipped him that biscuit. He'd sensed her, but no glimpse of blond curls had appeared in his line of sight.

However, maybe thirty minutes later, he heard the sounds of a lighter tread coming up the stairs. He almost smiled when he heard the soft scraping sounds.

"I know you're hungry," the small voice called out underneath the doorway. "I wish I could sneak you something warm, but this is all I can find that will fit under the doorway."

"This is great," Matteo said, eagerly taking the three protein bars that appeared under the doorway. "What's your name?"

"I can't tell you," she whispered back.

“Are you the blond girl that gave me a breakfast sandwich last week?”

There was a long silence, then the girl whispered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He chuckled as he tore into the protein bar.

There was a small shuffling sound and Matteo pictured the sprite sitting down outside the doorway. “Why is Mr. Daniels so mad at you?” the girl asked.

Matteo had asked himself that question repeatedly over the past few weeks. “I don’t know.”

Another long silence, then the girl said, “I think we should find out,” she whispered. “I’m going to sneak into the headmaster’s office and see what I can learn. I’ll be right back!”

Matteo tried to swallow the waxy sawdust masquerading as healthy protein, but he’d taken too large of a bite of the bar and, before he could speak again, the small footsteps had faded away.

He wished that the girl would come back. Matteo hated to admit it, but the girl was the first friendly voice he’d heard since coming to this place. If he could get word to his mother about what was happening, she would figure out how to get him home. But would she dare go against his father’s edict? The Marquesso Ricardo del Campo was a vicious, evil man. Matteo hated that he shared the old man’s last name and vowed to somehow change it as soon as an opportunity arose. Matteo might be illegitimate, but Ricardo was the one who had cheated on his wife. It wasn’t Matteo’s fault that his mother, Camilla, hadn’t wanted the old man’s attentions.

At least, that’s the story his mother had told him. But Matteo’s mother always added a soft touch to his hair and a smile as she said, “But I never regretted having you, Matteo. You are the light of my life.”

Not much of a “light” at the moment, he thought, and sighed.

A few minutes later, the small steps came back. “I couldn’t find anything!” the girl whispered. “But I brought this. I thought you might want to read.”

Matteo watched as a book appeared under the doorway. It was a thick book and barely fit, but the girl shoved hard and the book made it through. “You’ll need this too,” and a small flashlight appeared.

“Thank you,” he replied, taking the book gratefully. As he looked down at the title, he chuckled. “A story about fairies?” he teased.

“I like fairy stories,” she argued. “They’re fun.”

Matteo opened the book and started reading, assuming that the small girl would run away again. But he heard a small voice say, “It’s more fun if you read it out loud.” The voice was just a whisper and it came directly under the door. He imagined the girl lying on her stomach as she tried to see what was going on.

Matteo chuckled, charmed by the girl’s idea. He turned back to the first page and started reading. “Madeline was born in the year twenty-thirty-two,” the story began. He read until the sun faded, and then he turned on the flashlight, reading for at least another hour.

“It’s time for you to be in bed,” he told the girl.

“Just one more chapter?” she pleaded.

He laughed softly but started sliding the book under the doorway. “Tomorrow night.”

“But what if you’re not punished tomorrow?” asked the worried voice.

That was a good question. The girl had helped him in ways she probably didn’t even understand. There was no way he was going to repay her thoughtfulness by leaving the story in the middle.

He thought quickly and came up with a solution. “If I’m not punished again, why don’t you meet me behind the

abbey tomorrow after the dinner bell?" he suggested. "We could read back there until it's too dark."

"Okay!" he heard the excitement coloring her tone. "Don't get in trouble tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," he vowed, and hoped that he could keep his promise. However, Matteo realized determination alone couldn't keep him out of this attic prison. It seemed the headmaster was purposely finding arbitrary reasons to punish him.

Matteo was "freed" at the same time the following morning. But this time, he didn't see a small girl with blond curls racing towards him and he had to tamp down a spurt of disappointment. The girl was cute, but she probably had to be at school early in the morning.

He arrived in time for his first class and opened his backpack. Then froze. Inside his pack was another breakfast sandwich. He looked around, wondering if anyone had noticed the forbidden food. But everyone seemed to be concentrating on the reading assignment that had been written on the board.

Matteo stuffed the sandwich down deeper into his backpack. He'd eat it in between classes, he thought as he pulled out the textbook for class. He didn't need to read through the assignment. He'd read this chapter several days ago. None of the other kids wanted to be friends with him, so Matteo spent most of his time in the library reading ahead on his assignments. As the school pariah, he didn't have much to do with his time, other than study.

Four years until graduation, he thought as he opened the textbook to a chapter he hadn't read and began skimming through the text. No, not four years. Three years, seven months, and eight days until he'd be released from this school. Maybe he could convince his father to pay for summer school classes. Then he could finish faster. Plus, there

would be fewer students here during the summer. Fewer tormentors.

Yes, Matteo silently determined to look into that possibility.

Nine hours later, he lugged his book bag to the other side of the school's abbey. It was a massive stone structure that was vaguely reminiscent of the churches in Spain, although the architecture was most likely copied from the English monasteries. Still, he missed his home country, and especially the warmth and the solidness of his village, despite the occasional cruelty of the village kids. So being here, surrounded by something that was nearly similar to his home, felt good, like a breath of home.

And he felt even better when a small, blond girl raced around the corner, with a book tucked under her arm.

"You're here!" she gasped, skidding to a halt on the soft grass.

"I'm here," he replied with a chuckle. "How about if you read to me tonight?"

As he watched, he realized that his guess was correct. If the crestfallen expression on her adorable face was any indication, she didn't know how to read. "Would you like me to teach you?" he offered.

Her eyes lit up with a mixture of hope and uncertainty, her childish innocence shining through. "Maybe," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. She nibbled on her lip, a nervous habit that tugged at Matteo's heartstrings. "If I learn how to read, will you still...talk to me?"

"Of course," Matteo agreed, nodding for emphasis. "It would be an honor to teach you how to read as repayment for your generosity in bringing me food."

She grinned and he could see the charmer that she would grow to become. "Are you going to teach me just

because I brought you food? Or because I'm fun?"

Matteo chuckled, the weight of his troubles momentarily forgotten as he basked in the innocent joy of their budding friendship. "Both," he admitted with a playful wink, his heart swelling with a newfound sense of purpose. "But mostly because you're fun."

She turned and planted her bottom right next to him, plunking the heavy book down on his lap. "I'm Bailey Larkin and my mother is the cafeteria cook here. She also works at night to earn more money, typing up stuff for doctors. I don't really understand what she does, but she says that it pays the rent, so I try not to bother her."

"Where did we leave off last night?" he asked.

She pointed a dirty finger at one of the pictures. "This is the fairy princess," Bailey explained, then lifted chocolate-colored eyes up to Matteo.

He looked at her, at the hope in her pretty, brown eyes, and smiled faintly. Together, they read. He would read one paragraph, and then guide her as she awkwardly sounded out the words in the next. It was painful listening to her read, sounding out the words slowly, stumbling over some of the more complicated combinations of vowels and consonants, but eventually, she got the hang of it.

Every night after that, she showed up at their spot behind the abbey. Matteo learned several things during their evening conversations. The first was that Bailey was intelligent. Extremely so! She picked up words and sounded them out, then never forgot them. Also, when she heard something, she could repeat those words almost verbatim. Her mind was agile and sharp, and he wondered why she hadn't learned to read until now.

The second thing was that Bailey was almost as painfully lonely as he was. There were several moments over the course of the next few months that he saw her across the school, just sitting by herself while the male students hurried

to or from classes. She never had any other friends and he never saw her with another family member. None of the Colby teachers spoke to her and she tended to keep to herself. Except around him. Whenever she appeared, Bailey talked about anything and everything. She asked intelligent questions, but still had the soul of a child.

She was adorable and, as they read more books together and he helped her with her math homework, a strong friendship formed. They were an odd couple, a fourteen year old bastard and an elfin, blond-haired six year old. But by the end of that first year, their friendship had become one of the most profound connections in his life. Only Matteo's mother had as special of a place in his heart.

He eventually made a few friends of the other male students. And there were nights when Bailey spent time at other girls' houses. But she always ran to him when she came back, eagerly telling him all about her latest adventure.

Three and a half years later...

"What do you mean?" Bailey demanded, her voice tinged with confusion as she froze in her tracks, her gaze locked on Matteo. "You have to walk for your graduation ceremony!" Bailey exclaimed, a sense of urgency evident in her tone as Matteo quickened his pace, his longer strides forcing Bailey to hurry to keep up. Bailey jumped to action, her heart pounding with a mixture of anxiety and determination. "And would you please slow down?" she pleaded, her voice betraying the hint of panic bubbling beneath the surface.

But as they walked side by side, their footsteps echoing in sync, Matteo couldn't help but feel a sense of connection blossoming between them. Despite their differences, despite the obstacles they faced, they were united in this moment, bound together by a shared goal and a common purpose. And as they navigated the uncertain path ahead, Matteo found solace in the knowledge that they were in

this together, a testament to the power of friendship and camaraderie in the face of adversity.

Matteo slowed slightly, but didn't stop. "*No es necesario,*" he mumbled in Spanish. Then reverted to English as he continued, "I don't have time to participate in a stupid ceremony, Bailey."

Normally, Bailey would drop a subject when Matteo got all prickly like this. But his high school years had been absolutely miserable. Headmaster Daniels had eased off after the first few months, especially when several of the other teachers at the school began to defend Matteo. But that didn't alter the fact that nearly all of the students at the school had shunned him.

"But...you're the class valedictorian! You get to give a speech! You get to...!" She came to an abrupt stop when Matteo turned.

At eighteen, he literally towered over Bailey who, at ten, was still waiting for a growth spurt. Matteo teased her about her height and Bailey was sensitive about her lack of breasts. Matteo didn't say anything about her non-existent feminine curves, but she'd seen the women he dated and they were all gorgeous and incredibly curvy.

"Por que?"

Bailey blinked up at him. "Why what?"

"Why do I need to give a speech? What's the value that would be added to my life if I attend the graduation ceremony versus if I simply move on with the next phase of my life?"

Bailey hated the reminder that Matteo would be going to college soon. He'd gotten a full scholarship to several big universities, none of which were nearby.

"Because you earned the best marks of your class, Matteo," she explained with what she considered to be a very calm tone. "And because this is your opportunity to prove to all of those jerks who ignored you that you beat them," she

said, poking his chest with her finger. “You won! Despite all of the obstacles they put in your way, you came out on top!”

Matteo chuckled and moved her finger, tickling her behind her ear in the process.

“Giving a speech isn’t the best way to show the world that you beat them, Short-Stuff.” And he turned, releasing her hand as he headed towards his car. It was just a beat up old jalopy that only ran because of Matteo’s determination and brilliance at anything mechanical.

“What *would* be the best way?” she demanded, irritated now. Or maybe she was just panicking because her best friend in the entire world was leaving her behind.

He shrugged and kept walking, but his stride was shorter now. Less angry.

“I think that the best way to snub all of them is to become a wildly successful person.” He looked at her. “I’m a bastard, Bailey,” he reminded her. “My father cheated on his wife by having an affair with my mother when she was too young to know better.”

Bailey’s big, chocolate eyes stared up at him, unblinking as she tried to understand. “I know this, Matteo.”

“And then I was sent away so that the villagers wouldn’t constantly be reminded of his shame.”

Bailey’s heart ached. She understood his anger and resentment over his father’s cruel treatment of him over the years. “I know this too, although, you’ve never been explicit about why you were sent here specifically.”

He turned, looking up at the sky but Bailey doubted Matteo actually saw the bright, spring sky or the fluffy clouds. His mind was enmeshed in the past and his current pain. “I wasn’t able to go home for my mother’s funeral, Bailey.” His jaw clenched. “I didn’t even know that she was sick. She wrote to me all the time, but she never told me that she had cancer.”

“I’m so sorry!” she whispered, then wrapped her arms around his waist in a tight hug. “I know that she died last year and you’re still not over her passing.”

His arms closed around her and Bailey wished that she had more to give him than just a hug.

“A hug is pretty nice,” he replied, reading her mind.

She pulled away and looked up at him. “So when do you leave for the University of Pennsylvania?” she asked, praying that he’d decided to attend that school instead of one further away. Matteo could literally choose any school and they would be thrilled to have him.

“I leave in two weeks,” he told her.

The relief that washed her with his confirmation that he wouldn’t be too far from her, made her dizzy.

“Will you come to my house this weekend to celebrate your graduation?” She saw the coming rejection in his eyes and continued quickly before he could say no. “It will be just you, me, and my mom. We’ll make that macaroni and cheese casserole that you love so much.”

Matteo hesitated, unable to deny the temptation of mac-n-cheese. There wasn’t anything like it in Spain. “With the crumbled potato chips on top?”

Bailey’s smile grew sunnier. “Duh!”

He laughed and flung his arm around her shoulders. “Deal.”

They walked for a bit more, then she looked at him. “What would you consider to be a success?”

He thought about it for a long moment, then answered, “I’ll know I’ve made it when I can crush my father’s businesses and leave him in the same poverty in which I was raised.”

Her friend’s tone was calm and controlled as he described his life’s goal. Bailey cringed and they kept

walking. She hoped Matteo could reach that goal. She'd done a great deal of research on his father. The man was a freaking Marquess! She wasn't entirely sure what that was, other than some type of European aristocrat. The man owned several businesses that were spread out across Europe, so he clearly had a great deal of money. She also knew that he lived in a castle that was hundreds of years old.

So, how was her best friend going to destroy his father? Bailey pondered. The thought of Matteo exacting revenge on the man who had caused him so much pain sent a thrill coursing through her veins, even if she couldn't quite wrap her mind around how that goal could be accomplished.

As she mulled over the possibilities, Bailey's heart ached with empathy for Matteo. The mere mention of his abusive treatment at school stirred a whirlwind of emotions within her—a potent blend of anger, sorrow, and indignation. She had witnessed firsthand the injustices he had endured, the blatant disregard for his well-being that seemed to permeate every corner of the institution.

Bailey's mind raced with memories of the times she had tried in vain to uncover evidence of the headmaster's biases, her frustration mounting with each dead end she'd encountered. The accusations and punishments leveled against Matteo felt like cruel and arbitrary acts of malice, leaving Bailey grappling with a sense of helplessness in the face of such blatant injustice.

And yet, despite the odds stacked against them, a flicker of determination ignited within Bailey's heart. She refused to stand idly by while her best friend suffered at the hands of those who sought to break him. Together, they would find a way to expose the truth, to bring justice to Matteo and ensure that no one else would ever endure the same torment again.

Twelve years later...

Bailey gazed out at the crowd, wondering if Matteo was among the sea of faces. It was her graduation from the University of Virginia and she desperately wanted to see him today. But she also knew that Matteo's work promotions were coming fast and furiously. He'd gotten a job with a small pharmaceutical company three years ago and had managed to expand the business dramatically.

Was he even here in the United States? Matteo traveled constantly for his job, but she'd asked him to be here. Bailey desperately hoped that he was.

Glancing into the audience, she caught Timothy's eye. Timothy was nervous about being here. Not because of the event, but because he knew what Bailey wanted to happen afterwards.

He was obviously nervous, but Bailey managed to paste on a smile, offering him a thumbs-up sign of confidence. Tim returned the smile and leaned back against the uncomfortable metal chairs as he sat in the audience. Tim had just been awarded his doctorate in chemical science from the University of Virginia. Bailey still struggled to think of him as "Doctor Mullins", even though she was incredibly proud of him. For so long, he'd been her friend, the guy she'd hung out with and joked with when they weren't in class or studying.

Tim was extremely tall, just like Matteo. But Tim was also thin while Matteo was built more like a line backer. Tim loved running and she'd teased him unmercifully about his obsession. Tim was naturally brilliant...and painfully awkward. With Bailey's help, Tim was growing out of his natural, geeky tendency. Hopefully that side of him wouldn't be completely gone. It was endearing, in a geeky, nerdy sort of way.

Would Matteo and Tim get along? They were the two most important men in her life. She loved them both for their brilliance, but what if they hated each other? What if one of them said something or did something or...?

What if Matteo couldn't come today? She'd planned everything! This had to work! Even Bailey's mother had helped prepare for today's...uh...introduction, for lack of a better word.

No, Matteo had to be here. He'd never, ever, let her down. So no matter where he was in the world, Bailey knew that Matteo would have gotten here. She prayed that Matteo, the man she missed desperately, was somewhere in the audience.

For the next forty minutes, Bailey listened to the graduation speeches with a half an ear, wondering how much longer until she could walk across that stage. Memories of Matteo not attending his high school graduation flitted through her mind, and she understood his past reluctance now. This ceremony was for the parents, not the students. She definitely wasn't getting anything out of this long and tedious ceremony. She was here because her mother wanted to see her walk across the stage to receive her degree.

So she sat, twiddling her thumbs wishing she was talking with Matteo and getting him on board with her plan.

Finally, the speeches ended and they began calling each graduate's name to take their turn walking across the stage. She groaned, impatient to get on with it.

After another hour, the president of the university stood behind the podium and grandly announced that they'd all graduated. There was a raucous cheer and a bunch of hats flew into the air. Bailey rolled her eyes and huffed impatiently. She wanted to get out of here and see Matteo. Yeah, she wanted to tell him her plan as well, but it had been months since she'd actually spoken face to face with him. He'd pop into town every few months and they'd have lunch or dinner together. But this...her plan for everyone's future, would be a much more interesting conversation! Plus, she just wanted to see him again.

It still took another half hour before she found her mother in the enormous crowd. When Bailey finally spotted

her, she jumped up and down, grabbing Tim's arm as she dragged him with her as she hurried for her mother's congratulatory hug.

"I'm so proud of you!" Anna Larkin gasped, hugging Bailey tightly. She turned and smiled as she looked over Bailey's shoulder. "And you must be Timothy," she said, extending her hand. "I've heard so much about you and it's an honor to finally meet you."

Timothy nudged his wire-rimmed glasses higher onto his nose and nodded awkwardly. There was a strained tension that never seemed to leave Timothy's body, but today, he seemed extra worried and Bailey knew why.

"I've heard a great deal about you too, Ms. Larkin," Tim replied. His lanky form gave off "scientist vibes" so strong they were comical. The man would fit perfectly into any movie or television set about a geeky scientist. "Bailey talks about you all the time."

Anna laughed and hugged Bailey close. "From what Bailey tells me, you have an impressive future ahead of you!"

Tim bowed his head slightly, blushing at the praise. "Thank you ma'am."

Anna shifted, her body language indicating that she'd already accepted Tim into their small "family". But she also looked around, obviously looking for someone else. "Where's Matteo? I spoke to him earlier and he said he'd be here."

Bailey's chocolate eyes widened. "You spoke to him already?" she asked, then turned to search the crowd. Her heart pounded against her ribs, but Bailey told herself it was only because she missed her friend. The fact that she never felt this excited to see Tim wasn't a point that she was going to think about.

"Yes. We tried to connect so that we could sit together, but he was running behind and the crowd was too heavy for us to find each other in time."

"I'm here," a deep, masculine voice called out.

Bailey turned towards the voice, her eyes wide and hopeful. She immediately recognized the tall man with the broad, muscular shoulders coming towards them.

As she did, her entire face lit up with joy and she rushed across the small expanse of gravel, throwing herself into Matteo's arms. "You're here!" she gasped, hugging him tightly. "Oh, I've missed you!"

He laughed and the rich, deep sound filled her with a joy that had been missing for the past several years. First, when he'd gone off to college and then during her own years at university. But now Bailey had a plan to keep them together! She had a *brilliant* plan, in fact!

When she loosened her hold, Bailey kept her hands on his shoulders as she beamed up at him. "You look good," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

He chuckled and nodded, but stepped back out of her arms. "I'm okay," he replied quietly. She remembered that Matteo never allowed his emotions to show and the memory broke her heart.

But she wasn't going to let Matteo's past mess up the present. "I have an idea," she told him, her eyes alight with anticipation.

Anna laughed and stepped closer, encircling Matteo and Bailey with her arms and her eyes. "I know you want to talk about your brilliant plan with Matteo, but perhaps we could do it away from this huge crowd?" she offered. "This isn't something that should be discussed in public." She turned and smiled at Timothy, including him in her conspiratorial whisper. "I have a picnic lunch for all of us and I know the perfect place to sit and celebrate, and also discuss Bailey's plan."

Matteo's dark eyebrow lifted quizzically at that and Bailey smiled her agreement. "Mom is right. This really should be a more private conversation."

“Sounds intriguing,” Matteo replied with his melodic Spanish accent tinting his words. That’s when he noticed Tim. His gaze immediately cooled. “And you are?”

Matteo felt an unexpectedly powerful jolt when Bailey stepped over to the tall, lanky stranger. The guy was handsome enough, but Matteo immediately decided that he wasn’t “right” for Bailey. Whoever he was, he looked smart, but Bailey needed a man that was stronger, someone who could keep up with her wild imagination and energy.

Bailey linked arms with the stranger, causing Matteo’s jaw to clench. But she seemed oblivious to his disapproval.

“Matteo,” she started off, smiling up at him, then at the other man, “this is Tim. Tim, this is the guy I’ve been telling you about.”

Slowly, as if he’d rather chew cut glass, Matteo extended his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he lied.

Tim nodded, his eyes equally intense. Matteo had to give him points for not cowering like so many other people he’d met lately.

“I’ve heard a great deal about you,” Timothy replied. “This meeting is very important.” He glanced at Bailey and smiled. “For all three of us, hopefully.”

Matteo’s stomach tightened. What the hell did that mean? Had this ass proposed to Bailey? Was she getting married? No! That couldn’t happen! Bailey was too young to get married! She had her whole career ahead of her! Why would she marry before she’d even stepped foot out into the world? She was barely able to drink legally! Was she even old enough to vote? As a Spanish citizen, he wasn’t certain of the voting laws within the United States, but he doubted Bailey had voted in any of the elections so far.

Then he scoffed. Bailey missing out on an important decision?

That simply wouldn't happen. Bailey was too intelligent to ignore an election day. She would have researched the candidates and decided on the person she thought would do the best job in the role.

If there was one thing he knew about his best friend, it was that Bailey was damn good at finding really good people and encouraging them to bend to her will.

Hell, she'd done it to him in the past! Matteo couldn't count the number of times that he'd gone along with Bailey's plans simply because she'd beamed at him. The woman could wrap him around her little finger with those bright, engaging smiles!

"Let's get out of here before all of the good picnic spots are taken," Anna encouraged. "Matteo and Timothy, let's all drive together. I'll bring everyone back to get your cars later."

Matteo's jaw tightened at further evidence that "Timothy" was coming along for the private celebration. This was going to be bad, he thought. Bailey looped her arm through his and gently tugged him towards the ancient minivan that Anna had driven for years, and Matteo sighed and went along with her. And he mentally braced himself for the announcement that Bailey and this ass were going to marry.

Anna drove all four of them out to a lovely park about five miles from the campus. Thankfully, the crowds hadn't followed them and the park was peaceful and picturesque as they spread out a large blanket, then unpacked the food that Anna had made for lunch.

"To Tim and Bailey!" Anna announced, lifting her paper cup filled with cheap champagne.

Matteo lifted his glass, but he didn't drink. He didn't think he could. He might be sick as soon as they announced their engagement.

He surveyed Bailey as she sipped her champagne and grinned at everyone, nearly bouncing with excitement. He suddenly realized that she wasn't too young anymore. The short, vivacious sprout that had saved his sanity all those years ago had grown into a stunningly beautiful woman. Her long, blond hair curled at the ends and those chocolate eyes sparkled. It was as if all of the happiness in the world was contained within her and she danced through life, exuding that joy at will.

And all of that happiness and energy would belong to Timothy, the jerk!

Anna laughed, distracting Matteo's grim thoughts of killing the lanky bastard off so that the ass couldn't marry his best friend. That would give Bailey more time to grow and mature. She needed some breathing space to learn who she was as an adult. Diving immediately into marriage would hinder her growth. She'd have to compromise on her hopes and dreams! She'd have to give up some of that ambition because Matteo doubted that the shy, skinny Timothy would manage to mature all by himself.

A well filled plate was shoved into his hands, disrupting his angry thoughts. "Here you go. Eat before you start discussing the business stuff," Bailey's mother commanded.

Business stuff? Matteo hated the idea that Tim would have any association with Bailey.

Matteo toyed with his food as he watched Bailey and Timothy's interactions. They were casual with each other, almost like a brother and sister. Didn't she realize that? Why would she want to marry a man that she treated like a sibling?

Then he glanced over at Anna, wondering if she approved of the relationship between Bailey and a man that was so obviously not in her league.

However, Matteo discovered that Anna was watching *him!* Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as thoughts flitted

through her mind. What the hell was going on? And why was Anna wearing a knowing smirk? What the hell was happening here?

“Thanks, Mom!” Bailey announced, setting her half-eaten meal aside. “I think I’m too excited about this news to eat.”

Anna laughed, obviously not taking offense. “I think your news is worth ignoring all of my food for. Why don’t you explain everything to Matteo and hear what he thinks?”

Bailey bounced slightly with her eagerness, shifting so that her feet were tucked underneath her. She took a brief moment to shift her dress so that it covered her knees, but the brief flash of pale thigh was enough to cause Matteo’s mind to nearly explode.

Not because he was interested in his best friend in that way. It was only because he didn’t like the idea of this Tim-ass seeing any part of Bailey. She was off-limits. At least, in his mind, she was.

“What’s your news?” he demanded, shocked by the raspy tone of his voice.

Bailey nervously glanced at Tim and her mother, wondering why Matteo was acting so strangely. But with an encouraging nod from her mother, she turned back to face Matteo, taking a deep breath before starting her pitch.

“Okay, well, Tim and I have been thinking.” She hesitated again, but refused to let Matteo’s grim expression stop her. The idea was solid! If he would only open his mind, she could convince him about the brilliance of her plan. “With your newfound knowledge of product distribution methods and business, plus my marketing capabilities and Timothy’s product,” she paused, smiling at the stunned expression in Matteo’s dark eyes, “what do you think about going into business with us?”

There was a long silence while Matteo stared at her. After years of knowing almost exactly what Matteo was thinking, Bailey was stumped. She couldn't read Matteo and the strange expressions flitting across his rugged features.

Her best friend blinked in confusion, shaking his head as if he needed to clear out the cobwebs in his brain. "I'm sorry, but...what?"

Anna laughed softly and touched Bailey's shoulder. "You haven't told Matteo about the product. Explain what Timothy developed."

Again, Bailey bounced a bit and wondered why Matteo kept glaring at Tim. But instead of questioning him, she focused on her sales pitch. "Okay, so Tim just received his doctorate in chemical engineering. On his own time, using his own equipment, everything stored at my mother's house, Tim has developed a new formula that people could add to their gas tanks that would more than double the fuel mileage of a gallon of gas."

She waited for Matteo's surprise. But when he merely glared at the other man, she continued. "Tim has even tested the additive on several different types of vehicles. Some cars use gas so efficiently with this additive that the increased efficiency was actually two point four-nine times better the vehicle's previous gas mileage." She waited, still trying to read his expression. When Matteo continued to stare back at her, she leaned forward, trying to get him to understand the brilliance of the idea. "Don't you see?" she urged, touching his knee briefly before pulling her hand away. "This could be a massive thing that we could sell and distribute to the world!"

Matteo remained still, but now she could see the gears in his head turning. And he was quickly getting up to speed. Bailey had forgotten how quickly Matteo's mind worked, but seeing him now, she watched as he quickly worked through the possible challenges.

Cautiously, Matteo looked at each of them, even Anna. "And you want to do...what?"

Bailey grinned, relieved that he hadn't rejected her idea completely. He was listening!

"Well, I was thinking that you could use your connections to find a place to manufacture this additive. Tim can continue to perfect the recipe," she turned and grinned playfully at Tim because, of course she'd used the wrong term, "and I will start marketing and building up connections within stores that will allow us to distribute this new product to the world."

Matteo remained perfectly still and Bailey knew that he was thinking through all of the possible issues. He snapped several questions to Tim, who was able to answer them with clarity and confidence.

In the end, Matteo slowly nodded and turned to Bailey. "And your role would be to market this product to stores?"

"Yes," she replied and pulled something out of her purse. "I spoke to Tim about this several months ago and I've been researching possibilities. I know the best stores and the contact people in those stores. I've also worked on how to get the information out to consumers." She went over a more detailed business plan and Matteo had to admit that he was impressed with the thoroughness of the idea.

Then he turned to Anna. She'd been sitting back, watching the conversation. "What do you think?"

She grinned and nodded. "I think it's brilliant actually. What's more, I've added Tim's formula to my gas tank and I've been to the gas station only once in the past month, even as I'm driving the forty miles each way to my job." She lifted one shoulder. "I'm so confident in this product, I'm prepared to sell my townhome and move into something smaller to finance the startup."

Anna poured more of the cheap champagne, handing it to Matteo.

Matteo looked at the trio and Bailey knew that his mind was working overtime. Matteo was absorbing, processing, calculating...he was most likely already making a list of potential clients, or maybe figuring out the best place to manufacture the product so that it can be easily distributed to the stores.

Nodding slowly, Bailey watched, her muscles tight as he asked, "So Anna is the financial backing, Tim has the idea, you most likely have the marketing plan all figured out...What do you need me for?"

She grinned, leaning forward in her excitement. "You're the business guy. You're the one that knows how to coordinate each of the various aspects of our idea."

Matteo liked that. Looking at each of them, seeing the cautious eagerness in their expressions, he silently assessed the risks and benefits. "What about patents?" he asked. His eyes sharpened on Tim. "You haven't submitted anything to the patent office yet, have you?"

Tim swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously at Matteo's harsh tone. "I've started the process, filled out most of the forms, but I haven't submitted anything yet. It's all ready to go. I was just waiting until we had something more solid to move forward with."

Matteo shook his head. "Don't submit anything yet. You'll need to speak with a lawyer and get a contract in place. You'll also want to wait until production is ready to go before the patent and trademark office gets hold of the formula. And you'll need to add something to the formula that will block other companies' ability to reverse engineer the formula." He looked over at Tim and the man swallowed nervously again. "Can you do that? Can you mask the formula well enough that it will take competitors longer to figure out what's in the additive?"

Tim considered that question for a long moment, the intelligence in his eyes masking the nerdy aspects of his appearance. When he lifted his hand to straighten his glasses, he nodded slowly at first. Then, as his smile grew, his nod became more emphatic. “Yes. And I know exactly what to add to the mix that will confuse everyone for...” he paused and tilted his head. “Well, I don’t know how long it will confuse anyone, but I know how to create a masking agent that will at least confuse others until we have the additive on the market. That way, we can stay in ahead of the competition.”

Matteo nodded sharply. “Good.” Then he turned to Bailey. “You’re going to need to triple the number of distribution sites,” he tapped his finger on the business plan papers, “and have them ready to go as soon as production is ready. Plus, you’ll need a much broader social media presence. The best way to get a new product out to the world is through social media. And you’ll need to monitor other marketing sources and ensure that you stay flexible enough to shift once a new way to market comes out. Which will definitely happen.”

Bailey nodded with calm confidence. “I can do that,” she replied, serious now.

He turned to Anna. “How much capital can you get from your house?”

She reached over and pulled out a file folder from her inexpensive, but serviceable purse. “This is what I can get from the sale of my house, plus I have a bit of extra savings I’ve been able to put away over the past six months.”

Matteo surveyed the amount, then thought about the money he’d been squirreling away. He’d been looking for a business opportunity just like this. If Tim’s formula was as good as he said, then this might just be the breakthrough that he’d been looking for.

“I also have this much,” Bailey said and pulled a piece of paper from her purse, handing it over. It was a bank statement and it had a tidy balance.

“And I have this much,” Tim replied, handing over another piece of paper.

Matteo quickly calculated the total amount, adding in his own savings. “With the amount that I have, we might have enough. But we’ll also need to reach out to banks and get funding from them, although we won’t want to do that until after we’ve set up enough of the baseline with the product.”

A high pitched squeal was Matteo’s only warning before Bailey threw her arms around his neck. The force of her excitement knocked them over and Matteo had to move quickly to hold her safe while he took the brunt of their fall.

“You’re obnoxious,” he told her softly, keeping his arms securely around her.

Bailey merely laughed and kissed his cheek before climbing off him.

They all sat on the blanket, tossing out ideas and questions. By the time they drove back to the university to pick up Matteo’s rental and Tim’s ancient car, they had a solid plan in place.

Chapter 1

Six years later...

“You have a meeting with Sherwood Mills in fifteen minutes,” Bailey announced, walking into Matteo’s office without knocking. “And I think you should take me with you this time.”

Matteo looked up from the contract he’d been reviewing and Bailey tried not to squirm as Matteo’s eyes moved over her body. He wasn’t interested in her, she reminded herself. So the flash in his eyes...it meant nothing. They were friends, she reminded herself. Just friends.

“Why should I take you?” Matteo asked, leaning back in his leather chair. “You irritate the man.” He picked up his expensive pen and fiddled with it, tapping it against his shoulder. It was such an odd habit, but Bailey knew why he did it. Old habits were hard to break, she thought.

“We might be a multi-billion dollar company now, but Sherwood will try to reduce the price by nine or ten percent and you will get disgusted and just walk out.”

Bailey watched as Matteo thought about it, then nodded slowly. “He doesn’t need a discounted price,” Matteo asserted firmly. “So of course, I would walk away.”

She grumbled and stepped forward, sitting down in one of the leather chairs in front of Matteo’s desk. Mentally, she sighed, wishing that Matteo could be fat and ugly. Instead, the man was ridiculously handsome with the height and muscles that only made his impressive intelligence all the more enticing!

She’d always thought of Matteo as impressively smart, but after working with him for several years, she understood that his brilliance was off the charts. What would he do if she leaned forward and kissed him? Would he be angry? Repulsed? Would it mess with their...?

Mentally, she chided herself for thinking along those lines. Matteo was just her friend and business partner. There wouldn't, *couldn't*, be anything more between them than a deep, abiding friendship. She'd had this conversation with herself several times over the years, but for some reason, she still...!

Well, it was ridiculous. She had to accept that the man wasn't ever going to see her as anything more than a friend and she would never be his lover. That was it. This was the extent of their relationship. They were just...best friends.

Unfortunately, her heart rebelled at the thought. No matter how many times she tried to think of Matteo as a brother, it didn't work. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a man, and a whole lot more!

"Do I have a stain on my shirt?" Matteo demanded, interrupting her train of thought. He looked down and smoothed his hand over his flat, hard stomach.

Bailey blinked, lifting her eyes back up to his. "I'm sorry?"

He did that stereotypical Spanish gesture that always fascinated her. "You were staring at me as if I had a stain on my shirt."

She blushed and looked away, praying that Matteo didn't notice her pink cheeks. That was happening more and more often, she thought, wondering why it was so hard to hide her attraction for the man lately.

"No, sorry." Except, she wasn't sorry! Not sorry at all! The only thing she was sorry about was the fact that she'd never get to stare at him like she wanted to. If she had her way, Bailey would strip the man naked and order him to stand in front of her so that she could examine each and every muscle on his incredibly tall frame. She'd touch him everywhere, explore all of those muscles, and find out what...!

Clearing her throat, she forced her thoughts back to business. "Sherwood," she reminded him – and herself.

Matteo tapped his pen on his shoulder again and Bailey swallowed a giggle at the disgust on his handsome features. “Sherwood is *un bufon*.” He waved his hand in the air as he unnecessarily translated. “A buffoon.”

Goodness, she loved listening to his accent! His Spanish ancestry was so much a part of him, and it made him even more attractive.

She blinked, reminding herself that he was her best friend. *Just* a friend!

Bailey shifted away from him slightly, straightening her shoulders to try and regain control of her libido. Her mind was veering off topic far too often lately. “Yes, but he is also the chief executive officer of one of the fastest growing car manufacturers. He wants the additive to make his vehicles more efficient and we,” she turned to give him “the look”, before finishing, “want his business.”

Matteo’s lips twitched with amusement. “But not at a ten percent discount,” Matteo asserted firmly.

Bailey chuckled. “Agree. But how about if we don’t alienate him before we have a chance to discuss various business options with him?”

Matteo laughed and it took every ounce of control inside of Bailey not to melt into a puddle of lust. His voice was low and deep and soooo sexy! If Matteo had ever thought of becoming a singer, he could have made millions with his voice.

Granted, he’d made billions with his business brilliance. But that didn’t alter the fact that Bailey loved to listen to his voice.

“We don’t *need* his business.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re right, we don’t. And to be honest, he’s not my big fish. I want him on board because he’ll bring Sustriano and Megalan to the table,” she explained, referring to his competition. “His competitors are three times the size of Sherwood’s operation.”

Matteo leaned back in his chair, regarding her carefully. “Have you ever thought about ditching this business insanity? Maybe retiring to a tropical island somewhere? A place where you don’t wake up at four thirty in the morning and go for a run at five?”

She laughed, folding her arms over her chest as she mock-glared at him. “I slept in this morning.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “You slept until four-forty-five, didn’t you?”

Bailey shifted slightly, her chin tilting at an unconsciously defensive angle. “You don’t know *everything* about me,” she mumbled, confirming his suspicions.

Bailey mentally sighed as Matteo’s dark eyebrow lifted. “We bought the top floor of this building and created two condos, Bailey. You live on the other side of the building from me. We have breakfast and dinner together nearly every night, and often lunch as well. I know when you get into the office every day because you come to my place to steal my coffee before you start working.”

For a brief moment, Bailey considered arguing, but he was right. Instead, she shrugged dismissively. “Your coffee is better than mine.”

He paused to give her that sardonic expression that Matteo was famous for. “Be that as it may, my point is that I know more about you than anyone else in the world. Including your mother.”

“Yes, and I know the same about you. What’s your point?”

He shrugged and dropped his pen onto his desk, indicating that he was no longer contemplating something that irritated him. “I’m not sure I have a point,” he replied. “I guess I just don’t want to deal with Sherwood.”

Bailey stood up and nodded. “You don’t have to attend the meeting. I can handle him.” She turned and headed towards the door to his office and, with a smile in his

direction, added, “And you don’t know *everything* about me. I have secrets.”

“Name one,” he challenged.

She laughed softly and flipped a blond lock over her shoulder. “Well, if I told you, then they wouldn’t be secrets any longer, right?”

And with that, she walked out of his office.

But not before Matteo got a good glimpse of her perfect derriere in her red sheath dress. A very impressive derriere, he thought and contemplated that part of her anatomy for several minutes after she left him. It wasn’t until he realized that his body was reacting to the images flashing through his mind that he forced himself to concentrate on work issues again.

Bailey hurried down the hallway, rushing to her own office.

“You have a...”

“I know,” Bailey called out to her assistant. “Just give me five minutes and then I’ll head into the meeting with Sherwood.”

Bailey hurried into her office and closed the door. Leaning against the solid wood, she closed her eyes, trying to slow her breathing. When the trick didn’t work the first time, she did it again. And again!

Finally, her racing heart slowed and she opened her eyes. “This is getting out of hand,” she told the silence of her office. “You’re going to have to stop interacting with the man.”

But the thought of not seeing Matteo every day made her whole body hurt. The pain was so intense that she pushed the idea out of her mind. It wasn’t even possible to stop seeing Matteo every day, anyway. They worked together and practically lived together.

Pacing the expanse of her office, Bailey fisted her hands at her sides and tried to concentrate. “Okay, so if one option isn’t viable, you’re gonna have to come up with another idea!” Bailey wasn’t sure what the solution to her “Matteo” dilemma was, but this wasn’t working. “This” being the constant ache in her heart when she couldn’t “be” with him.

Turning, she faced the door, an unconsciously determined expression on her face. “You’ve overcome bigger obstacles! You can figure this out!” And with that in mind, she nodded firmly, shook her shoulders like a boxer before a tough fight, and stepped forward.

Pulling her door open, Bailey walked out, much more composed now.

Several hours later, Bailey pushed into her penthouse suite and froze, inhaling the scent of something delicious cooking.

Immediately, her mood lightened and she smiled, all of her previous admonitions to distance herself vanishing. “I hope that’s not the weird fish you made last week!” she called out, tossing her keys into the porcelain dish that her decorator had set right in the middle of her foyer.

Matteo turned the heat under the chicken off, then leaned back against the countertop as he sipped his scotch. Waiting.

When Bailey walked into the kitchen, he had to smother his amusement when she paused in the doorway to kick her heels towards the sofa. “Rough one?” he asked, as he pulled out the bottle of white wine she’d opened up the previous night and poured her a glass.

“Brutal,” she sighed. Pulling herself up onto the stool at her kitchen’s island, she began pulling the pins out of her hair. “Sherwood’s meeting went well. I got the contract signed and he’s on board, *without* a discount, by the way.” She paused, piling the pins on the counter beside the plate that

Matteo had already set out. “But after I left that meeting, a slew of other issues came at me and I just...” she rubbed her temples, trying to release the tension from the day. “I think we need to head down to Aruba again.”

He chuckled in agreement. “It’s been more than a year since your last vacation.” He slid the glass of wine towards her. “I thought when we started this project several years ago that you swore you’d take a vacation every three months.”

She groaned, thinking back to that memory. “Yeah, well, we weren’t expecting the business to explode quite so quickly.” She took a sip of her wine, closing her eyes to savor the complex flavors, then sighed with relief. A moment later, her eyes popped open. “Oh, and Tim has a new idea. He’s working with his team to figure out the last few issues with a new lubricant formula. It will work extremely well with the brake fluid he created last year.”

Matteo nodded, but he was more focused on watching as Bailey pulled the last few pins out of her hair and shook her head, letting the cascade of blond curls tumble down around her shoulders. He wondered what she would look like with her hair spread out over his pillow.

As soon as he realized where his thoughts were going, he turned toward the stove, flipping the chicken again. Breasts. Chicken breasts. He added more white pepper and forced his thoughts away from Bailey’s breasts as they pushed against the v-neck of her red dress.

Damn, he loved it when she wore red! The red dress and her blond locks were a perfect combination.

Of course, every color Bailey wore was perfect. In his mind, at least.

When the chicken was done, he lifted the pan and carried it over to the opposite counter, placing one piece on Bailey’s plate and another on his, then spooning the white wine sauce over each. The next moment, a timer went off and

Matteo pulled broiled asparagus spears out of the oven and placed several on each plate.

“This looks wonderful!” Bailey sighed, waiting until he came around to sit next to her before she started eating. As they ate, Bailey and Matteo discussed the next product rollout and how it could be integrated with their other products.

A half hour later, Bailey put her napkin down and nodded. “That was delicious,” she told him. “Have I mentioned how much I appreciate your culinary talents?”

Matteo rolled his eyes. “Since you have none, yes. You’ve mentioned my talents on several occasions.” He added a chuckle as well as a shake of his head, obviously remembering some of her attempts at cooking. None of which ended with anything edible.

“How are Levi and Sean doing?” Bailey asked as she picked up the plates, rinsed them, and put them into the dishwasher. Levi and Sean were his friends from long ago. They’d met in college and still talked pretty often. The three of them had collaborated on renovating an exclusive clubhouse about an hour outside of Philadelphia. They were all bastards, all rejected by their fathers – and all extremely good men.

“They are doing well. They are finally getting some sleep now that the babies are sleeping through the night, but it’s going to take a while before they trust in the little ones’ new sleep cycles.” Levi had married Clarissa who had just given birth to an adorable little girl. Sean had only recently discovered that he was a father to a tiny baby boy. He was now married to the very lovely Kennedy and the family split their time between Philadelphia and Newsom, Georgia where their son’s honorary grandparents lived.

Bailey paused, one plate hovering under the rushing water as she contemplated the idea of babies. She couldn’t deny the appeal of holding Matteo’s child in her arms, or the very enticing ways one could conceive of that baby!

Matteo had been putting food away, but at her sudden stillness, his eyes narrowed suspiciously on her. “What’s wrong?” he asked, one hand resting on the handle of her large fridge.

Bailey jumped at his question and glanced over at him. “Nothing,” she replied and forced her features to brighten back into a smile. “Nothing. I was just thinking about...” she quickly grasped for a different subject.

Unfortunately, nothing came to mind. As she stared back at Matteo, flashes of a dark-haired baby came to her mind, smiling up at Matteo as they watched their children grow and develop and...well, all of the things she could never have with him.

Because they were just friends!

Bailey realized that Matteo was still watching her – and that she hadn’t moved. She was still holding the plate in her hand, hovering over the dishwasher. Shaking her head, she bent down and placed it between several of the prongs. Mentally, she admonished herself for the revealing error. She had to stop flinching every time Matteo talked about his friends’ babies. Just because she desperately wanted a child of her own, there was no reason to be envious of another person’s happiness.

Bailey looked up to find Matteo still watching her carefully. With forced casualness, she dumped the utensils into the dishwasher and scrambled for a change in conversation. “There’s a new social media group coming onto the market.” She turned to the sink, giving Matteo her back for a moment. That gave her the time she needed to pull herself together again.

Back to business she thought with a mental sigh. However, marketing tactics was a good solution for her wandering thoughts. Bailey mentally patted herself on the back for her quick thinking. She grabbed the dishtowel, but as soon as she looked down at it, Bailey wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with it.

Turning, she leaned against the sink, but she couldn't lift her eyes up to him again. She scrambled for another topic, needing to pull her mind away from the very delicious thoughts that...could never happen.

With a sigh, she thought up a new idea, one that only formed now that she had a moment to breathe. Business. That was a safer topic, she reminded herself. Finally, she looked over at him and forced a smile. "I was wondering if this new social media idea would be geared towards younger kids or the older generations and how we could use it to market more effectively."

Matteo stared at her for a long moment. She was lying to him, but why? What had he said that would cause her to withdraw from him like that?

"What's wrong?" he asked again.

As he waited, he noted the tension building in her shoulders and the stiffness of her spine. A lovely spine, he thought, but obviously, something was bothering her. Bailey sighed and straightened, twisting the dishtowel and looking around. After a moment, she started drying off the marble countertop. "I don't know," she grumbled. "I guess I'm just...a little envious."

He looked around at the elaborate kitchen that he'd helped her design, even though she never cooked in the space. He was the chef in their relationship. He loved cooking and thought it was therapeutic after a stressful day. He also liked ensuring that Bailey ate something healthy. He knew that, left to her own devices, she'd have a bowl of cereal or a cup of yogurt, meals that didn't require cooking and only needed a spoon.

"You have everything you could ever hope for, Bailey," he pointed out. "What more do you want, other than a much needed vacation?" He lifted his glass of scotch,

draining the glass before he continued, “That you could take at any time, I might add.”

She smiled weakly, then leaned over the wide expanse of the kitchen island. She propped her chin on her raised hands and considered the problem. “I guess I just thought that I’d have a family and children by this point in my life.”

He grunted and stole her glass, taking a long sip of her wine. “You could have that.”

She snorted. “Right. Remember the last guy I went out with?”

He shook his head, preferring not to think about the men she dated. “He was an ass and you knew it from the moment he asked you out at that party.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and I wouldn’t have accepted his offer of a dinner date if you hadn’t told him he was a wimp.”

Matteo set the cut crystal glass down on the marble countertop more firmly than he’d intended and rolled his eyes. “He *was*.”

Bailey’s head moved back and forth before she replied, “I know that, but the poor guy felt so emasculated that I felt sorry for him!”

“Serves you right. You’re not the kind of woman who can tolerate a weak man for very long. You’re strong and ambitious. Weak men feel threatened by you.”

She paused, tilting her head slightly. “Is that the problem?”

He stood up abruptly and moved over to the bottle of scotch she kept in the cabinet just for him. Pouring himself a large dose, he contemplated how to answer her. He knew that, despite her lack of attraction to various men, she was still frustrated by her lack of dating. “Being a strong woman is *not* the problem, Bailey,” he told her firmly, irritated that she didn’t already know this.

Bailey stared at him for a long moment, obviously debating his comment. Finally, she said, “I know that being strong isn’t a problem. I was just asking if...well, if the reason more eligible men don’t ask me out is because I’m intimidating.”

He shrugged, allowing his eyes to move over her soft, feminine figure. She was perfect, *maldita sea!* However, he kept his expression blank as he affirmed, “Probably.”

Her lips twisted with that revelation and she sighed, pushing away from the counter. “Right. Well, I guess we’d better go through some of the issues I came across earlier today. You’re going to need to be involved in some of the negotiations.”

“Why? I thought you wanted to handle all of the negotiations after last year when I—”

She lifted a hand, stopping his recitation of the time he snapped at the lawyers on the opposing side of the negotiating table. “No, trust me. I don’t want to go through that whole debacle again. You’re brutally ruthless, which has driven our massive expansion into markets I hadn’t even dreamed we’d be able to conquer. However, this issue might need a softer touch.”

He grunted, but didn’t argue with her. “So then, why do you need me in the conference room with you next time?”

“Because Bernie Macelvoy asked to speak with me about sending more product to his stores. I told him no initially.”

“Good. We’re not doing business with Macelvoy,” he replied firmly, his eyes hardening with anger.

Bailey shifted on her feet as she closed the dishwasher and turned it on to clean overnight. “I know that we had some...trouble with him during an event last year, but—”

Matteo shook his head. “That wasn’t trouble, Bailey. He sexually harassed you. He cornered you, touched you inappropriately, then he spoke to you in an insulting and

offensive manner and kept on doing it even after you told him to stop. He completely disrespected you and your role in our business.”

“Yes, but...”

Matteo refused to allow her to excuse the man’s behavior. Bracing his arms wide on the countertop, he frowned at her. “Bailey, if he treats you like that, and you’re the president of the company, then how do you think he treats the other women in our company? Or his own company? He has more power over them, which means that he will put them in danger. We cannot do business with men like that. It only empowers them to treat others with the same lack of respect. And most people don’t have the resources that you enjoy. The man abuses whomever he can. Doing business with him is not something we should allow.”

Her jaw clenched and she nodded agreement, her eyes hardening at the truth in his statement. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.” She lifted her chin and nodded. “He called earlier and was very apologetic, which is the only reason I took his call and considered reopening negotiations.” She picked up her wine and led Matteo into the living room where they had both left piles of paperwork. “I wasn’t thinking clearly. Sometimes...” She knew that Matteo was very clear about not doing business with bullies. He’d grown up with two of them. His father had been a brutal, merciless bully to Matteo, then the ass had shipped Matteo off to boarding school where another bully, the headmaster, had taken over.

Bailey shook her head and looked up at him. “I’m sorry and you’re right.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her for a brief moment. But Matteo didn’t allow himself to hold her for very long. The sensation of holding her soft curves against his body was...both heaven and hell.

“Thank you,” she whispered and he felt the vibrations of her soft voice against his skin. “Thanks for being the voice of reason. Sometimes, I get a bit...”

“Soft,” he filled in for her and pulled back. Looking down at Bailey, he shook his head. “You trust people too easily. You want to see the best in everyone.”

“Not true!” she argued and stepped backwards.

He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked an eyebrow at her. “Remember the day that Miles Burnett...?”

“We don’t speak that man’s name anymore!” she hissed, glaring up at him with her finger pointing towards his chest.

He chuckled as they walked over to the sofa and sat down to review documents. “Fine. What about that time you gave money to that politician, only to find out that he had a history of sexual abuse?” he challenged.

“Yeah, that was stupid of me.” She sighed and lifted her tote bag onto her lap, already pulling files out. “However, in my defense, I really wanted to believe in that politician. I wanted to think that he was a good person.”

Matteo picked up her glass of wine and took a sip, then set it back down beside her elbow. “He was a politician, Bailey,” he replied, grabbing his own work, a contract that needed fixing. “Politicians aren’t trustworthy.” He started marking through some of the clauses on the contract.

She laughed, nodding her head. “I know, I know!” For the next two hours, they bantered back and forth while each of them worked on business issues. Finally, Bailey could no longer see the words on the document and she closed the file she’d been working on with a sigh.

“I’m done,” she announced and stood up, taking her now-empty wine glass back to the kitchen. “You still have more to do?”

He nodded, absorbed in the document he was reviewing. “I’ll just be a few more minutes,” he said.

Bailey walked into the kitchen, rinsed their glasses, and put them into the sink since the dishwasher was still running. Then she stared out through the window at the night sky wondering why she felt so...”off” tonight. With a sigh of irritation, Bailey headed back through the large living room of her penthouse condo. With a glance, she noticed that Matteo was still concentrating and she smiled. There was no man as dedicated to the success of a business than Matteo. And she lo...respected him intensely for his dedication, but not so much his ability to thrive on only four or five hours of sleep. Nope, she envied that!

Walking into her bedroom, she cleaned off her makeup and stripped off her dress, hanging it in the closet for her housekeeper to take to the drycleaners. She pulled out a nightgown and slipped the satin over her head, enjoying the way it slid down over her curves.

She wondered what Matteo would think if he knew that only one wall separated them from seeing each other. What would he think if he realized what she wore to bed? Would he laugh at her? Or would he get that tight-jawed look that she’d witnessed several times over the years.

Bailey was extremely good at reading Matteo’s moods and facial expressions, but that jaw-clenching thing was relatively new and she didn’t understand it. It was almost as if he were angry with her, but Bailey knew that Matteo never held back when he disagreed with something she said or did. Nor did she. So, what did that new facial tick mean?

Sighing heavily, Bailey padded barefoot back into her bedroom. Staring at the bed for a long moment, she wondered what Matteo’s bedroom looked like. They’d bought identical condos next door to each other because they appreciated the convenience of having the other close by.

However, Bailey had hired a designer that added more feminine touches to her condo. Her bedroom was done in shades of soft greens with hints of gold. What color had Matteo chosen for his bedroom? Even after all the times she

was in his place, she'd never ventured down the long hallway to his bedroom. Nor had he ever peered into hers.

Was he even curious? And why was she so curious about his bedroom? They were friends! *Just* friends. Was it wrong to wonder about a male friend's bedroom?

Perhaps. She'd never contemplated what Tim's bedroom might look like. She didn't care. Tim was just a friend. So why was Bailey so curious about Matteo's bedroom décor?

And what was he like when he made love to a woman? Bailey was painfully aware of how many mistresses Matteo had enjoyed throughout the years.

However, all of Matteo's girlfriends were the complete opposite of Bailey. Matteo preferred tall, statuesque women. Brown haired beauties, who wore heavy makeup, didn't eat, ever, and had perfected a look of blasé indifference about everything.

Bailey was short and...okay, not fat, but she definitely wasn't as slender as the models that Matteo preferred. She wore only enough makeup to enhance her features, but usually forgot to reapply her lipstick after lunch.

Sighing at her silly contemplation of Matteo's preferences, Bailey slipped between the soft, smooth sheets, turned off the light, and stared up at the ceiling to play her nightly game of "Let's figure out how to get to sleep".

Tossing and turning, she tried deep breathing exercises, meditation, opened the book she'd saved on her phone and, finally, around midnight, fell into a restless sleep. Her rest was disturbed by wild images of some man with dark hair and a jaw with dark scruff.

As soon as Bailey disappeared, Matteo stopped pretending to work, tossing the contract onto the low coffee table. Instead, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, listening to the soft sounds of Bailey as she got ready for bed.

He wondered what she was doing, what she wore to sleep in, and if she slept with a pillow pulled close to her chest or if she preferred sleeping on her stomach. In his mind, he contemplated the benefits of various sleeping positions and different sexual positions. All of them featuring Bailey!

Moments later, Matteo jerked awake when he realized that he'd dozed off on her couch and was dreaming about making love to Bailey. No, not just making love to her, but also sleeping with her cradled in his arms. Yes, that was the actual focus of the dream. The making love...that was a constant theme for his dreams. And yeah, it bothered him that his erotic dreams always featured Bailey. They were just friends, he reminded himself over and over again. The information wasn't really sinking in, he thought with a grimace.

Opening his eyes, he looked around, startled to discover that it was well past midnight and he'd been thinking about Bailey for the past hour.

No, that wasn't true. He was always thinking about Bailey. During the day, Matteo's mind was constantly wondering what she was doing, what meeting she was in and if she was eating enough. At night, he wondered if she was sleeping well or what it would be like to hold her in his arms, to make love with her and hear her moans of pleasure.

Sighing, he stood up and reorganized the papers he'd been working on earlier. He should probably spend a bit less time around Bailey. After he and his previous mistress had broken up, he'd stopped looking for another woman to take... Matteo muttered a curse when he couldn't remember the woman's name. He couldn't even picture her face in his mind. Every time he thought about making love, Bailey's smiling, determined, adorable features beamed up at him.

That was going to have to stop, he told himself firmly.

Leaving the contracts, he grabbed his keys and slipped quietly from Bailey's condo. Matteo whistled as he walked

down the short hallway to his own place. Unlocking the door, he tossed his keys onto a side table, then made his way into his bedroom. After doing fifty pushups, he jumped into the shower, brushed his teeth, then tossed the wet towel into the hamper. Sliding between the sheets naked, he stuffed a pillow behind his head and stared out the large window. He'd had his decorator install blinds and curtains, but Matteo preferred gazing out at the Philadelphia skyline while he fell asleep.

While he waited for sleep to take over, he wondered what Bailey wore to sleep in. As his eyelids slowly grew heavier, he wondered if she'd mind sleeping naked with him.

Chapter 2

“Hurry up, Bailey!” Matteo called out, tugging at his white shirt and adjusting the cufflinks. “We’re going to be late.”

“I’m ready!” she called back, hurrying down the hallway as she finished putting an earring in.

Turning, Matteo’s breath caught in his throat. She was wearing a strapless red gown that clung faithfully to her curves. Wasn’t there a movie about a woman wearing a dress similar to that one? Matteo just wished that he had a diamond necklace to offer her.

Instead, Bailey wore a double strand of pearls, which he recognized. She’d bought the necklace the day after they’d signed the contract with one of the biggest distribution companies in the country. It had been her reward to herself.

He’d also remembered the fury he’d felt as he’d watched her choose the necklace, wishing that he had the right to buy her expensive jewels. He’d seen the joy on her face when she’d fastened the clasp, then looked into the mirror at the jewelers.

She was wearing the matching earrings, he noticed, and his anger eased. He’d bought her those earrings. The small diamonds on the side of each pearl caused the light to sparkle. Bailey wore those pearl earrings often, even during business meetings. The style meant that she could wear them with a business suit or an evening gown and he completely approved of her choice tonight.

“You look lovely,” he grumbled, wishing he could pull her into his arms and kiss her. She’d admonish him about messing up her lipstick, so he’d focus his teasing kisses on her neck and her bare shoulder.

That’s when his eyes moved to her breasts. *Madicion*, they were *magnifica*! Not too large or too small. Her figure

was perfect in his mind. Every part of her was emphatically feminine. Her soft curves, the subtle curve of her stomach, and the lushness of her thighs and hips.

Then she turned to pick up the matching clutch purse and he had a moment to appreciate her bottom as well. The heart-shaped perfection was mouthwatering.

But he didn't have time to contemplate that part of her anatomy, nor should he be looking anyway!

Friends, he reminded himself. They were just friends.

Why was it becoming more difficult to remember that fact lately?

Bailey opened her red velvet clutch purse and dropped the tube of red lipstick into it. But her real purpose was to give herself a moment of breathing space. Matteo looked... magnificent! His broad shoulders were encased in the Armani tuxedo, and he was wearing the gold cufflinks she'd bought him for his birthday last year. His bow tie was perfect and she silently cursed the man's ability to tie a bow tie so accurately. Wouldn't it be nice to walk up to him and have a reason to touch him? If he weren't so perfectly attired, she could adjust his bow tie, using the excuse that it was askew. Then she could let her fingers linger, maybe even slide down over his chest. Her fingers ached to touch him, to discover what all of those muscles underneath his tuxedo felt like.

Just friends, she reminded herself. That was probably the hundredth reminder today. After last night's erotic dreams, it had been a challenge to work with him and not blush. Her mind had definitely forgotten that Matteo was a friend and not a potential lover!

"I'm ready," she replied and turned around. He was doing that jaw-clenching thing again. Why? What had she done? "Am I late?" Bailey glanced at her watch, then back up at him. "I'm actually right on time. What did I do wrong?"

“Nothing,” he replied, then angled his arm, offering her his elbow. “Let’s get this over with.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “You’re the one who insisted that you, me, and Tim all needed to attend this thing.”

He grumbled, then nodded. “I know. And it will be fine. Levi and Sean are attending tonight’s fundraiser as well.”

“Ooh! Did Sean and Kennedy bring Declan with them this time?”

He gave her a sexy half smile as he led her down the hallway. “They always bring Declan with them wherever they go,” he replied, amusement lacing his voice. “The scamp has both of his parents wrapped around his little finger.”

“He’s what, two years old now?”

“Just over. We sent them a set of toys for his birthday two months ago, remember?”

She grinned, thinking of the adorable little man. “Right. I wonder if he’s old enough to play with the games yet.”

“He’s a bright little thing,” Matteo replied. “I’m sure that he’s probably mastered them and has moved back to racing Doxy, their new German shepherd, around the house again.”

She laughed as he reached out to press the call button for the elevator. It was a private elevator, reserved just for the two of them, so the doors opened almost immediately to allow them to step in. They chatted comfortably on the way down to the lobby. Just outside of their building, the limousine driver waited at the curb, the door to the limousine open so they merely needed to duck inside the warm interior.

Ten minutes later, the driver pulled up outside of the hotel. “Why can’t we drive around to the side and sneak into the gala?” Bailey grumbled as she peered at the waiting paparazzi.

He chuckled and stepped out, then bent to take her hand and help her out of the limousine. When they stood on the red carpet, he leaned in and whispered into her ear, “Remember, we like the publicity,” he reminded her. “It’s good for business.”

She hmped and pulled his head back down. “The paparazzi like you, not me! So this isn’t about publicity for the company. This is about finding your next mistress.”

A moment later, she turned and smiled, waving slightly as the flash of white lights nearly blinded her. She was aware of Matteo next to her, but she couldn’t see for several moments. Bailey could feel Matteo’s tight muscles, but she wasn’t sure why he was so tense all of a sudden. He’d been teasing her only moments before.

Still, she walked down the red carpet, smiling at the photographers even though she knew that they were more interested in Matteo.

They were shouting questions to both of them, but one voice rose up above the others. “Are you going to let the Martazen government buy the patent for your fuel additive?” Bailey heard the question, but wasn’t sure what it meant. Why in the world would the Martazen government try to buy the patent? That was out of the question and...and where had that bit of gossip come from?

Bailey kept on walking and smiling, holding onto Matteo’s arm. But she felt his tension increase as well. Had he heard the odd question? She wanted to ask him about it, but knew that this wasn’t the place for such a conversation.

Thankfully, there were plenty of other questions, mostly directed towards Matteo, so that one, weird question went unheard by the rest of the paparazzi cluster. Most of them wanted to know about his latest mistress and if he was upset that she was publishing a new book. Matteo leaned close to her ear and whispered, “Let’s walk faster.”

She smiled and nodded up at him, ignoring the newest round of questions about their relationship. “Bailey - are you romantically involved with your chief scientist?” “Are you having an affair with your illegitimate partner?” “Does Señor del Campo’s father approve of your lifestyle?” And so many more questions were lobbed towards them.

Normally, when she and Matteo arrived at some function, the questions were more benign. So tonight’s odd, shouted questions concerned Bailey, although she held her concerns until they were inside the hotel.

“What the hell?” Matteo whispered into her ear.

She knew exactly what he meant. “That’s the first time I recall a reporter asking about your father.”

He glanced at her, startled. “I was thinking that the question about the Martazan faction might become a problem. They call themselves a government, but they are nothing more than a loosely knit militia that the Spanish government is struggling to control.” He sighed heavily. “Unfortunately, my father is part of that faction. I’ve heard that they are organizing others to join them.” He put a hand to the small of her back, leading her towards the ballroom doors. The gala was already in full swing. The guests were enjoying roving waiters with trays filled with sparkling flutes of champagne, which was lifting everyone’s moods.

“We haven’t had any discussions with your father or the Martazan people. Why would we? And why would a reporter ask us about it, other than because your father is involved,” she whispered back.

He pretended to wave at someone, but in reality, he was using that as a trick that would allow him to lean down and speak more softly in her ear. “My father hasn’t spoken to me in years, nor has he sent any representative of the Martazan faction, even though they are gaining control of large groups of businesses. So where the hell did that question come from?”

She smiled and nodded, pretending to laugh, as if he'd just said something amusing. "We should dig into the issue. Maybe the reporter has some information that we're not privy to."

"I agree," he replied, accepting two glasses of champagne and handing one to her.

She sipped the bubbly liquid, her eyes sparkling up at hm. "I know you hate champagne."

He pretended to sip the stuff and shrugged. "It's fine."

She looked around at the crowd. "You should go speak with Senator Kingman. He hates me since I stomped on his foot last year after he groped me."

Matteo barely glanced towards the group where the senator was holding court. "I'd rather not."

Her grin widened. "He's making noises about banning certain chemicals."

Matteo struggled to contain his disdain as he remembered the senator's feeble attempt to retaliate against Bailey. "Not the ones that would make a difference from an environmental standpoint," he grumbled under his breath, his voice laced with contempt. "The chemicals he wants to ban are pointless, some of them not even used anymore."

"I know," Bailey sighed, her frustration mirroring Matteo's. "He only introduced the legislation because you refused to donate to his reelection campaign."

A bitter taste filled Matteo's mouth as he clenched his jaw, his scorn for the corrupt political system bubbling to the surface. "Your country really needs to figure out how to elect politicians that the voters prefer instead of the elected officials selling their votes to the highest bidder," he spat, his voice dripping with disparagement.

Bailey nodded in agreement, a dismissive shrug punctuating her disdain as she glanced around at the others. "Talk to the Supreme Court," she added with a bitter edge to

her tone. “They’ve declared political contributions from corporations to be ‘free speech’ no matter how much their donations smother the voters’ voices.”

He shot her one of his “Yeah, I get it” looks before Bailey moved off to her right, heading for one of the many bars that had been set up at various points throughout the ballroom. She was making a beeline for the bar so that she could get a glass of scotch for Matteo. She knew that he absolutely detested champagne. She suspected his revulsion for the sparkling wine had something to do with the fact that his father preferred the stuff, but her friend and business partner never confided in her.

Speak of the devil, she thought as a very elegant man that looked shockingly similar to her business partner, stepped in front of her.

She came to a halt and forced her features into a politely blank expression. “Lord del Campo,” she greeted the man, refusing to bow as he’d ordered her to do several years ago when she’d run into him in at a similar event. “What a surprise.” That was honest enough. Plus, she patted herself on the back for hiding her hatred of the man who had psychologically, emotionally, and physically abused Matteo throughout his youth. “What brings you to our side of the Atlantic?” she asked. His appearance answered her questions about why the reporters had asked about the Martazan faction!

The man frowned down at Bailey, but she ignored it and noticed the half-empty glass of champagne in his hand.

“I wanted to speak with you, Ms. Larkin. Please come this way.”

Bailey remained still for a long moment, not surprised when the older man turned and started out of the ballroom. He obviously assumed she would follow him simply because he’d ordered her to do so.

However, Bailey wasn't the type to blindly follow anyone. He really should know this fact by now. If he'd done even a minimum of research into her and her contributions to the company she, Tim, and Matteo owned, he would know that.

But his aristocratic arrogance kept him blind to everything other than his own self-interests.

Shaking her head, she ignored the man and continued towards the bar.

The bartender smiled at her, placing a napkin on the counter in front of her. "What can I get you, ma'am?"

"I need a glass of the best scotch you've got." She eyed him carefully. "And I also know that you have a secret stash for the more important people in the room. I'd recommend that you pull that out for this request."

The bartender hesitated for a moment, then slowly grinned and nodded. A second later, he bent down and reached under the bar, pulling out a bottle of Glenlivet single malt and poured her a healthy portion. When he looked up at her, he winked.

"You rock," she whispered, taking the scotch and adding a ten dollar tip into the glass off to the side.

Taking the scotch, she started to head back towards Matteo, wanting to warn him that his father was here. She and Matteo would most likely leave the gala quickly. Matteo had a very strong antipathy towards his abusive father.

"Mrs. Larkin!" a hard voice called out from behind her. Several other groups stopped speaking and turned, searching for the autocratic disruption.

Sure enough, the Marquesso del Campo stood several feet away, his body literally shaking with rage. "I asked to speak with you in private!" He even turned, gesturing towards the doorway, but this time, he glared at her, silently demanding that she obey his command.

Bailey shrugged and moved closer to the hateful man. She lowered her voice and leaned into him in a conspiratorial manner. “Actually, you didn’t ask, you commanded.” She gestured to the other groups that were still watching, eagerly anticipating a scene that they could recount to their “friends” tomorrow. She ignored them, pretending as if they weren’t there. “And if you ask anyone here, they’ll tell you that I never react well to commands.” There were several knowing chuckles from the on-lookers but Bailey didn’t bother to look around. She kept her eyes trained on the arrogant bastard.

The man’s features turned an interesting shade of red. “This is a *private* matter.”

She shook her head, ignoring the soft curls that tickled the back of her neck. “I have nothing to discuss with you. In private or in public.” She tilted her head slightly. “I’m guessing that you’re angry that your factory in Selitia is about to go out of business. And you want Matteo to step up and take control.” She grinned at the man’s startled expression, which confirmed her suspicions, and shook her head again. “Apparently, you think that your legitimate son doesn’t understand how to run a business with the same finesse that you have done for the past several decades. Am I right?”

The man’s face suffused with angry color. “This is not a conversation that I will have in public.”

She stepped closer. “Ah, but you were more than willing to humiliate your child during his years at boarding school, right? All those years ago, you spoke to Headmaster Daniels and urged him to find any possible reason to punish Matteo, because *you* had an affair outside of your marriage that resulted in an illegitimate son.” Her temper fired as she remembered the stories Matteo had told her. “And despite the fact that Matteo had nothing to do with your errors, you felt the need to punish him simply for existing. Now, you are aligning yourself with a rebel group that, *perhaps*, has plans to overthrow the Spanish government?”

There were several startled gasps from the surrounding eavesdroppers.

The man was literally sputtering with rage. “You are nothing but a secretary! You report to my son and I will have you fired for your impertinence!”

She chuckled and moved closer, lowering her voice now. “Actually, I own thirty-three percent of the business. So no, I’m not a secretary, nor can you wield your non-existent power through Matteo to have me fired.” She lowered her voice even more. “Isn’t that what’s making you so angry? That you can’t control Matteo?”

The furious marquesso looked around, then downed the rest of his champagne in a single gulp. “He should come home and work with the family business!” he hissed, smoothing a hand over his still-flat stomach. “He is needed at home.”

Bailey laughed bitterly. “You mean, your legitimate son is a waste of space when it comes to business. You thought that you could step back and release control to your legitimate son and enjoy retirement.” She paused, tilting her head as if contemplating the man. “But your legitimate son is *so* bad at business that he’s allowed the drug cartels to infiltrate your distribution lines, using them as a means for getting their illegal products to their customers.” She shook her head when he started to deny it. “Don’t lie to me. The vast power of the internet means that we get Spanish news here in the United States.”

The arrogant man sliced his hand through the air as if he were trying to dismiss her comments. “My son should be home where he belongs. With his family!”

She pursed her lips together for a moment, as if contemplating that statement. Then she took a breath and said, “You ripped Matteo from the arms of his mother, threatened to revoke her parental rights if she didn’t allow you to send Matteo off to boarding school here in the United States. Is that what family does?” She paused, waiting for the marquesso’s

reaction. When he simply glared at her, Bailey continued. “She was devastated at not having her son in her home, but you didn’t care. All you wanted was to have your illegitimate son out of sight, so that your wife and legitimate son weren’t forced to endure the shame of *your* mistake. However, Matteo and his mother are the ones that suffered. Is *that* what family does?” She moved back a step, unconcerned if anyone overheard her next comment. She ignored the threat of violence in the man’s eyes as she continued. “And now you need someone intelligent to come in and fix the royal mess that you and your legitimate son have created.” She shook her head.

“You will not speak about my son in this manner!”

She sighed. “Mr. del Campo,” she started again, purposely not using his title, “you don’t really understand. When Matteo was a teenager, his life’s ambition was to bankrupt you. But now that he’s older and wiser, Matteo no longer wishes to bankrupt you. He doesn’t care about you at all. You’re not even a blip on his radar. He’s banished you from his thoughts.” She could see that the man was nearly apoplectic with rage, but didn’t care. “He is an amazing success, and he did it without your help. Meanwhile, you inherited your wealth and you never expanded beyond what your ancestors created.” She leaned forward and whispered, “In other words, you’re a pathetic and complete failure!” She stepped back again and continued in a normal tone. “Now it’s your legitimate son’s turn and you know that he’s going to destroy everything that centuries of privilege gave you. He’s going to bankrupt your businesses, or at least the ones that remain, and there’s nothing you can do to stop him!”

“Bailey!” a deep voice called out.

Bailey turned, recognizing the voice. Sure enough, Matteo stood behind her. She straightened her shoulders and smiled welcomingly at him. “Oh, you found me!” She extended her hand with the scotch, not surprised when Matteo took it while still frowning at his father. “Your father is going to demand you fire me for my impertinence. He thinks I’m

your secretary.” She moved to Matteo’s side, relieved when his arm wrapped protectively around her waist. “Such a silly man.”

Matteo frowned at the man who looked shockingly similar to him in so many ways. Other than the flush of rage suffusing the old man’s face, they might have been twins. Except for the age, of course. But Matteo was still surprised by the similarities. He remembered his father being larger than life, on the few occasions that the old man had bothered to come by to speak to him or his mother. Now they stood eye to eye.

Matteo tightened his arm around her, pulling her closer to his side. “How in the world did he get the idea that *you* are a secretary?”

She shrugged and Matteo was momentarily distracted when her soft breast pressed against his chest.

“I suspect that it’s just his misogyny coming out to bite his butt.” Then she turned, looking up at him. “Does it matter?”

“Matteo!” his father snapped. “I *will* speak with you in private.”

Matteo stiffened slightly. For a long moment, he surveyed his father. There was a bit of tension around his eyes and a tightness in his compressed lips. Instead of obediently following his father, he turned and, with Bailey by his side, moved deeper into the crowd.

“That man...!” Bailey grumbled as they walked away.

“Levi and Sean just arrived,” Matteo commented casually, as if he hadn’t just had an awkward confrontation with his abusive father.

Bailey looked at up him, wondering how he could be so blasé. Ricardo del Campo was a monster! And he was here

now, demanding that his son return back to Spain to save the family from financial ruin.

But as she watched, Bailey realized that Matteo wasn't as blasé about the interaction as she'd assumed. Underneath Matteo's calm façade, he was tense and angry, and something more. Almost as if he were waiting for...something? She wasn't sure what Matteo might be waiting for, but before she could analyze the thought further, Matteo was ambushed by his two best friends.

"Damn man!" Levi burst out, grabbing Matteo by the shoulders and pulling him into one of those bro-hugs. "It's been too long since you've come out to annoy us at the club!" Matteo chuckled and then was hugged by Sean, who made a quietly inappropriate comment that caused Levi and Matteo to laugh.

"You're a sick man," Levi commented, slapping Sean on the back.

"And proud of it," Sean replied, then stepped back, pulling Kennedy, his pretty wife who was currently rolling her eyes, into his arms. "And she loves me all the more for it."

Kennedi, a cute brunette with a fiery attitude and a warm smile, moved in and hugged Matteo, then laughed as she hugged Bailey as well. "I can't believe that you still put up with this guy. Does he *ever* relax?"

"Never!" Sean and Levi replied at the same time.

Matteo remained aloof, as if he were above the fracas. But Bailey noticed that the tension from moments before was gone, replaced with wry humor and a genuine affection for these two men.

"Where's Clarissa?" Bailey asked Levi.

Levi looked around, able to see more since all three men stood taller than most of the crowd around them. "Here she comes," he replied. "Martha and Joe tagged along." Martha and Joe used to be Clarissa's housekeeper and groundskeeper, before she sold the massive house that Clarissa

inherited from her father. Now Martha spent her time cooking massive amounts of food for the local shelters. And Joe grew the fruits, vegetables, herbs, and flowers that Martha used in her recipes. The couple acted more like parents than employees to Clarissa. They even lived on the farm out in the country with Levi and Clarissa and their two kids, although Joe and Martha had their own home. They doted on their “grandkids” just as biological grandparents would.

Martha and Joe, however, were currently out on the dance floor, doing some sort of swing step to the big band music.

With a playful smile, Levi took Clarissa’s hand. “Let’s show the old folks how it’s done,” and then they were out on the dance floor, swinging right along with Martha and Joe. Moments later, Sean and Kennedy joined in. But it wasn’t until the music slowed down that Matteo escorted Bailey onto the floor. The eight of them were having such a great time, laughing and being ridiculous, that they didn’t even care about the other guests in the ballroom. Well, seven of them were laughing. Matteo was too dignified to get wild with his dance moves, even if Bailey kept trying to tempt him.

The group only stopped when the band took a break. En masse, they gravitated towards a relatively quiet corner of the ballroom. Teasing and joking as a waiter arrived with drinks, scotch for the men and martinis for the ladies, who all preferred something more elegant than champagne.

It was about an hour later when Bailey looked up to see Tim heading towards their group.

Tim had filled out significantly over the past several years. He now worked out just as hard, if not harder, than Matteo and it showed. His tuxedo was filled out to perfection with all of his muscles perfectly displayed under the tailored suit. Plus, he had a more determined, hard, cynical look in his eyes these days. The excitement he’d felt at his initial discovery so many years ago had waned as he’d learned that the world wasn’t a fair place in which to create and innovate.

There were constant threats of theft to his formulas and he'd gone from a smiling, eager young scientist to a contemptuous, determined businessman.

Tonight, however, his normally perpetual scowl was replaced by something more intense. Even Matteo noticed it. She felt his hand on her arm as they waited for Tim to approach.

Behind Tim stood another tall man, his presence exuding an aura of menace that sent shivers down Bailey's spine. There was a darkness to the man that unsettled her deeply, a feeling she couldn't quite shake. Instinctively, she leaned into Matteo, seeking refuge in his comforting embrace. Without hesitation, Matteo wrapped his arm around her, a protective gesture that eased her sense of alarm, if only slightly.

Tim exchanged words with the menacing man, gesturing towards their group. The man nodded sharply and began striding purposefully towards them, but his attention was suddenly diverted. His gaze snapped to the right, where Mandy, the director of her own accounting firm, was approaching from a different direction. Clarissa rose to her feet, waving eagerly at Mandy, who responded with a radiant smile, her hazel eyes sparkling with warmth.

A chuckle escaped Matteo's lips as they watched Mandy's eyes lock with those of the newcomer. There was an undeniable electric shock between them, a palpable tension that crackled in the air. But instead of the usual smiles of attraction and anticipation, their expressions were filled with a fierce intensity, as if they were poised for battle rather than romance.

"Interesting," Matteo remarked, his tone tinged with intrigue.

Beside him, Levi stepped up and muttered something under his breath, his words barely audible. "The title falls hard!"

Unfortunately, the urgency in Tim's demeanor demanded their attention, pulling their focus away from the captivating chemistry unfolding between Mandy and the enigmatic newcomer. Despite the allure of the moment, the pressing matter at hand required their immediate attention. "What's up?" Bailey asked, reaching out to hug Tim as he joined their group.

He grunted slightly, then stepped back as well, doing the bro-hug thing with Matteo.

"We have a problem," he explained.

"A problem?" Matteo echoed. "What's wrong?"

Tim shook his head. "I'll explain later," he said, then angled his body slightly, bringing the stranger into the group. "Everyone, this is Sheik Zahir bin Aristi of Sidrina. He and I went to university together at the University of Virginia," he explained, referring to his old alma mater.

"You can't...?" Matteo began, but stopped at their friend's intent gaze.

"Not here," Tim interrupted. "But Zahir has more details."

Sean and Kennedy inched closer, as did Levi and Clarissa. "Why don't we get out of here?" Levi suggested quietly.

Martha nodded, leaning against her husband. "I think we should all head back to the house where I can whip up something to eat and everyone can speak more openly."

The group agreed and moved en masse to the exit, much to the chagrin of the gala's organizer, who was in a panic as she watched the most important guests of the night leaving before the fundraising even started.

Bailey made a mental note to send a donation to...she wasn't sure which charity this event was for. In her mind, tonight had merely been an excuse to do a little networking and to connect with her friends again.

Now, however, she wasn't sure what was happening. Tim was worried, more concerned than usual. And there was a sheik in their midst? An *actual* sheik? She glanced over at the man that was trailing along with them. As soon as she saw the man's profile, she realized who he was. "That's...!"

"Exactly," Matteo replied.

"I'll catch up with everyone later, then" Mandy called out, waving as everyone moved towards the exit. Bailey glanced back at the lovely woman who had built up her accounting firm into a powerhouse over the past few years. The woman had left a wildly unethical firm in order to create a new one that provided much better customer service. She was brilliant at taxes, and also shockingly adept at finding the numeric "needle" in a financial haystack and spotting financial predators.

Tim turned, spotting the young beauty. "We might need your expertise," he said to Mandy. "Would you mind coming along with us?"

She hesitated and Bailey caught Mandy's nervous glance towards the tall, dangerous looking man. He was staring right back at her and there was an intensity in his gaze that didn't bode well for Mandy's resistance.

She hesitated once more, glanced over at the other man and, whatever passed between them, convinced Mandy to agree. "Yes. Of course. I'll follow everyone to Levi and Clarissa's place."

As Bailey observed the silent exchange between the stranger and Mandy, she couldn't help but feel a surge of tension crackling in the air. The intensity in the stranger's eyes was unmistakable, his gaze locked in a silent challenge with Mandy's defiant stare. Bailey fought to suppress a smile, her lips twitching with amusement at the unspoken confrontation unfolding before her.

Glancing up at Matteo, Bailey saw the reflection of her own intrigue mirrored in his eyes. The atmosphere around

them seemed to thicken with anticipation, each heartbeat echoing with a sense of foreboding. It was as if they were standing on the precipice of something momentous, a clash of wills that threatened to engulf them all.

Unspoken words hung heavy in the air between them, a silent dialogue that spoke volumes. Bailey could feel the tension coiling tightly within her, a knot of apprehension and curiosity that refused to be ignored. And as she exchanged a meaningful glance with Matteo, she knew that they were both acutely aware of the brewing storm on the horizon, a storm that threatened to engulf them all in its wake.

She felt a tremor of...something indefinable pass between herself and Matteo, but Bailey quickly looked away. When she looked up, Clarissa and Kennedi were watching her – and Matteo! What in the world? Why did her friends look so smug?

“Ignore them, *querido*,” Matteo muttered in her ear. And just like that...poof! Her concerns disappeared. What was it about his deep, sexy voice and any uttered words in his lilting accent that made her concerns disappear?

Chapter 3

Martha arrived first, immediately pulling out food. She was known for her decadent muffins and seemed to always have batter in the freezer, a mystery Bailey couldn't solve. As everyone gathered around Clarissa and Levi's large farmhouse island, with warm muffins and both tea and coffee brewing, Bailey felt like she was in heaven.

"Martha, these are the best muffins I've ever had!" Bailey whispered, awestruck by the cranberry-lemon combination. Because they were right out of the oven, the butter melted into the muffin halves, making the treat even more scrumptious!

Martha glowed at the compliment. The older woman loved watching people enjoy her food. She'd graduated from the Culinary Institute of America, the premier culinary school in the United States, when she was younger, and cooking was her passion.

While everyone filled their bellies with Martha's excellent cooking, Tim paced along the expanse of the large kitchen. The stranger, the sheik, stood back from everyone, watching the people sitting around the island as if he were confused by the camaraderie.

Mandy plunked another muffin onto her plate and shot a glare across the kitchen at the stranger. "The new guy is confused," she announced with a challenging look at the man. "He's probably never been inside a kitchen before."

There was another intense glaring match between the two combatants until Tim sighed. "Zahir has been inside of a kitchen before, Mandy," he assured her, bracing his hands on his hips. "He's just never seen a large group of people who are so trusting of each other."

There was a grunt and Bailey assumed that the sound came from Zahir.

“Have a muffin and take a seat,” Kennedi called out, grabbing one of the small plates off of the stack that Martha had set in the middle and sliding it across the island countertop. The man’s quick reflexes caught the plate and, carefully, almost as if he worried the stool might explode, sat down. The basket of muffins was passed to the man and he eyed them for several moments, then selected a raspberry-white chocolate muffin.

“Can we get down to business?” Tim snapped.

“Go ahead,” Levi replied, then took a bite of a muffin top.

Everyone turned to look at Tim, waiting for an explanation.

“Someone broke into my lab this week,” he began. “Also, a few days ago, there was an attempt to bypass the security system. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, assuming that it was just one of the staff members who’d worked the entry locks incorrectly.”

“Why would you assume that?” Matteo asked, obviously concerned.

Tim’s jaw clenched for a moment, then he said, “Because that’s exactly how it looked on the login report. As soon as I noticed the breach, I spoke to our security guys. They looked through the reports and that’s the conclusion that they came to as well.”

“Did they review the video?”

Tim nodded. “Yeah, and at the time of the login anomaly, no one came in or left my lab.”

“But you think there’s a connection between the attempt to bypass the security system and the break-in?” Bailey asked.

He nodded sharply, then pointed his chin towards Zahir. “He and I were roommates at university. He studied economics and political science, with a minor in chemistry. He was in a few of my freshman and sophomore classes.”

“They don’t need the whole history of our friendship,” Zahir replied, almost bored now, but he’d finished his muffin and was considering another.

Tim chuckled. “I know that you value your privacy, but everyone in this room needs to understand why you’re here. Why you can, and should be, trusted.”

The man lifted his dark eyes from the basket of muffins and looked at Tim with incredulity. “That’s a new one,” he muttered.

Tim laughed again. He turned to the others and explained, “Zahir doesn’t trust easily either. He doesn’t know your histories, so he isn’t aware of the struggles that we have endured to get to this place.”

“I know the history of everyone in this room,” Zahir argued. His dark eyes moved around the island, only pausing when his gaze clashed with Mandy’s again. “And I respect each and every one of you for what you’ve gone through to become a success.” He then turned to Tim again. “Should I continue?”

Tim nodded in agreement. “Go for it.”

He put a chocolate muffin on his plate and separated the top and bottom carefully as he said, “Two days ago, a strange fellow, who claimed to be a representative of your company,” he looked directly at Matteo, “offered me the formula for your original fuel additive.” He carefully spread a pat of butter on the warm muffin as if he hadn’t just dropped a bombshell among the group sitting around the kitchen island.

“What?” Bailey gasped. She looked over at Matteo to see his reaction and saw that his face was blank.

Matteo then turned to Tim. “Was the formula compromised?”

Tim immediately shook his head. “No. After Zahir told me what happened, I checked and discovered that the formula we keep in the vault had been moved.” He looked around at the others. “We don’t keep the formula for any of our products on a computer or in the vault. And we have several factories that produce only a portion of the product. It was Matteo’s idea to divide up the production of the additive and it’s actually brilliant. For each of our products, we have four or five factories and each factory adds something to the barrels before those barrels are shipped to a packaging plant so that no one person has the entire formula. The final product is then packaged into the consumer containers that are then shipped off to the retail stores.”

“That’s smart,” Levi commented.

“So, what’s the problem?” Kennedy asked, always one to get right to the problem so she could fix it.

“She’s right,” Clarissa agreed. “Is the problem merely that the fake formula was stolen from the vault?”

“No,” Tim replied with a shake of his head. “It isn’t that.” He ran a hand over his face. “The vault sits to the side of the lab and holds a bunch of false formulas. The safe is just a decoy. The real formulas are stored in a different area of the lab.”

“Again, what’s the problem? If the formulas are safe and the factories haven’t lost any product, why are you so concerned? And is this even about the formulas for your product? Or is something else going on?”

Tim lifted his hand, trying to slow the flood of questions.

“If it was just a question about someone trying to steal a formula, then that would be one thing. But right before I was about to leave for the gala tonight, the police showed up. Apparently, the guard that works the first half of the night shift was attacked earlier this evening. He was bashed over the head and rendered unconscious. I saw him at the hospital and

he's fine," he announced, forestalling concerns from around the room, "but he said that two people were trying to break into the lab." He turned to Zahir. "Would you tell them the rest?"

Zahir clapped his hands together, brushing off the crumbs from his third muffin. "I was visited by someone who was accompanied by one of my ambassadors. They told me that they would sell me the formula to your fuel additive if I was willing to finance the building of a factory that could produce the product in my country. They said that they knew how to manufacture the additive for less money and could undercut your prices by more than half." He paused, letting that news sink in.

There was a long moment of silence.

Finally, Matteo summed up the problem. "So right now, we have someone who broke into our lab, stole an ineffective formula that isn't even complete, hit someone over the head and approached a foreign leader who isn't going to help him out." He looked around at the group. "Did I sum up the problem effectively?"

Tim's jaw clenched slightly before he added, "The thief works at the lab. It's an employee."

That sent a wave of shock throughout the group.

"Why do you think that?" Bailey demanded, her face paper white.

"Because whoever attacked the guard knew to wait until a very specific time of the night when the guard was running checks in the hallways."

"Why would we...?"

Tim held up his hand. "The checks are random and are dictated by our security system. The guards on duty get an electronic signal that cues them to do hallway checks. In theory, they are random, but since a computer generates the times, they are only random in our eyes. Obviously, there is a mathematical formula that generates those times."

Bailey lifted her hand, still confused. “Okay, I still don’t see why you think that it’s someone inside the company,” Bailey argued.

Matteo put a hand over hers. “I’m guessing that the guard was attacked at the moment he was going through one of the electronically controlled doors. In other words, the person would have gotten the same electronic signal. So they are either an employee or they are somehow connected to an employee. Most likely, they are an employee because fingerprints control the security in our laboratory. The only way the intruder could have gotten the computer generated signal is if they had the correct fingerprint to allow them through the exterior doors.”

“So we have two problems;” Bailey summarized. “One is that we have an employee attempting corporate espionage. And two, if this person approached you, Your Highness,” she said in acknowledgement of Sheik Zahir, “then they have probably approached others who might also have the resources to manufacture and distribute a less effective product.”

Tim sighed heavily, bracing his arms wide on the countertop. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

Matteo eyed Tim for a long moment, then said, “I get the impression that you are more upset about the fact that the person attempting to steal the formula might be an employee, than the rest of the issues in this situation.”

Tim looked at Matteo, longtime friends and colleagues. Then he nodded slowly. “Yeah, I think that’s it. The people in the lab...they are all hand selected by me. I know their backgrounds.” He turned to explain to the others in the group. “I follow promising kids from high school through college and I have funded their educations in several cases, through my foundation. I hire almost exclusively through that funnel, but I don’t get angry when students I’ve helped prefer to work for a different organization.”

“But these are your protégés, no matter where they end up working, right?” Clarissa asked, always the sensitive, understanding one in the group.

Tim paused, the muscles in his jaw tightening before he nodded. “That’s true. I don’t care where they work. As long as they succeed. A lot of them come from poverty and have had huge obstacles put in their path. It’s...important...to know that they are breaking the cycle of poverty. All it takes is some money to help them escape and create a good life for themselves.”

Clarissa raised a finger. “I have to disagree with you on that point,” she interjected. “Having come from poverty,” she looked around the room, “I know that it’s not *just* money that helps someone get out of that cycle.” Her eyes returned to Tim. “Money is important, but you also believe in those kids. You don’t just give them money. You mentor them. You guide them through the process to get out of that poverty.”

Kennedi nodded slowly, understanding dawning. “And that makes this personal, doesn’t it?”

Tim’s fingers curled into fists. “Yes, I suppose that’s the crux of my anger.” He took a deep breath, trying to calm his fury.

Matteo nodded, ready to form a battle plan. He turned to Bailey. “Is it just a coincidence that my father suddenly appears at the same time that someone is trying to steal our product formulas?” he asked.

There was a round of stunned comments with that announcement, then several people offered suggestions and additional observations.

Finally, Matteo’s voice rose above the conversation, pulling everyone’s attention. “I think that the first step is to look into every employees’ financial situation to look for connections to my father.”

“Or Antonio,” Bailey interjected, referring to Matteo’s half-brother. “Rumors indicate that Antonio is the reason for

Ricardo's financial troubles these days.”

Matteo nodded. “You're right, of course.” He turned to Mandy. “Can your people start that investigation? And do it quietly so we don't spark a panic?”

Mandy straightened up and nodded, her intelligent gaze sharpening as she mentally worked through the details in her head. “Absolutely. I can get my team started first thing tomorrow morning. I've developed a good process for forensic accounting that will get you answers fast.”

Matteo nodded his thanks. Then he turned to Levi and Sean. “I think that the next step is to get intel on who is looking to buy or sell corporate secrets, specifically in the gas and oil industry. We could start at the club. Several of our members are CEOs of the largest oil and gas companies, both here and in Europe.”

Levi and Sean both smiled, but it wasn't a friendly expression. Their smiles were...triumphant.

Levi turned to Zahir. “Are you any good at poker or other games of chance?”

The man, already dangerous looking with a straight face, transformed into a man ready to do battle. “Absolutely!” he replied. “I'm assuming that I'm going to become a member of a certain club that resides in the rural area of Pennsylvania?”

Zahir was referring to “TBC,” which most people thought was an acronym for “The Billionaire's Club”. But in reality, the three original owners, Levi, Matteo and Sean, had been born illegitimate and had all been treated horribly by their fathers because of that status. The club was secretly called “The Bastards' Club”, in honor of their birth status as well as the bastards who were members of the club. In one sense, the term “bastard” was used for familial legitimacy. In another sense, it referred to the generally unethical men who congregated at the club to gossip and share insider trading

with each other, as well as to brag about their mistresses or complain about their families.

Levi and Sean both chuckled. “You guessed correctly.” Levi then turned to Matteo. “I think that you should remain scarce for a while. We don’t want the culprit to get spooked when you walk into the club.”

Matteo sighed, but then slowly nodded his agreement. “That’s fine.” He turned to Bailey. “We can work on discovering who the culprit inside the company is.”

Bailey nodded as well. “That sounds like a good plan.”

Kennedi lifted her hand and everyone turned to look at her. “Because of my work as a supply manager at the brewery, I can check in with some of my distribution connections and find out if someone is looking to ship secret products via the oil and gas industry channels. There have to be regulations on shipping this type of product, right?”

When Matteo nodded, Clarissa spoke up. “I can snoop around from my end and see if there are any factory permits that are pending. Everyone knows how difficult a permit to build a factory is to obtain. There are numerous levels of approvals.”

Everyone turned to Tim. He still looked upset about the whole issue.

Matteo spoke up first. “Tim, why don’t you have a few casual chats with your staff? Nothing official, but just find out if anyone is hurting for money or if something happened in the laboratory that might have caused resentment among the technicians.”

Tim huffed a bit, crossing his arms over his chest. “I pay everyone on my staff almost twice what they’d earn somewhere else. Other companies are cheap when it comes to scientific knowledge. I’m not! There’s no financial reason for anyone on my staff to sell out the team!”

Matteo shook his head. “That’s exactly why you need to talk with your staff. We don’t know if someone has a sick relative that needs expensive medical care or is dealing with some sort of financial crisis.” He looked over at Mandy, acknowledging her expertise. “Mandy will be looking at the finances of the team members, but perhaps there is a family member or friend that wouldn’t necessarily pop up on our radars, someone that suddenly needs a large amount of money.”

Tim frowned at Matteo, but quietly accepted his assignment. “Fine.”

Matteo turned to the newest member of their group. “And you…”

Zahir looked up from examining one of the muffins. He was obviously fascinated by their ingredients, but when he looked at Matteo, he appeared to focus on the present problem. “What can I do to help?”

“You can go with Levi and Sean to the club and play poker. With your presence, you might spur some excitement around the club and get people talking about possibilities in various industries. That could prompt additional conversations and confidences. Maybe someone will want to impress you with their knowledge. Or perhaps you might recognize the person that approached you previously.”

“I can do that,” Zahir replied. “But is that *all* you need me to do? Just show up and play games of chance?”

Levi chuckled, but it was Sean who spoke up. “You’d be surprised at how challenging it is to focus on a hand of poker while also listening to someone reveal their corporate secrets,” Sean explained.

Zahir stared thoughtfully at the man for a moment, then his grin widened. “I will relish the opportunity to expand my gambling skills.”

It seemed as if everyone might leave after that, but Martha set a beautiful, cheesy casserole in the middle of the

counter along with a large serving spoon and forks. The entire group sighed with delight, and started digging in. The cheese and chicken were in a thick, creamy sauce with potatoes. It was delicious. Wine and beer were brought out and everyone continued brainstorming, tossing out additional ideas for capturing the culprit, as well as speculation as to why someone would commit such a crime.

Martha beamed happily, watching everyone enjoy her food. Zahir eyed the casserole skeptically until he tried a bite, then he was just as curious about the casserole ingredients as he had been with the muffins. Levi and Clarissa held hands under the countertop. Sean and Kennedy moved their stools closer so that Sean could put his arm around her waist while Kennedy rested her hand on his knee.

And interestingly, Mandy stole irritated glances towards Zahir and Tim finally relaxed enough to sit down and enjoy the food.

Meanwhile, Bailey watched everyone around the table, truly grateful for their help, but also wishing that she could be happily paired up as well. If she happened to glance at Matteo, Bailey forced her eyes quickly away. That path could only lead to heartache, she reminded herself.

Chapter 4

Matteo looked around, standing still and taking in the sights and sounds of the laboratory. The quiet, dim room was lit only by the security lights and the hallway lights coming in through the laboratory door's window. It was almost peaceful here at night. After the chaos of the charity event and then the delicious dinner, the current silence was welcoming.

Still, he wasn't here to explore the pleasures of silence. Matteo wanted to figure out what the hell was going on in his company! It was one thing to have a competitor try to steal one's corporate assets. Matteo, Tim and Bailey had set up an excellent security system to prevent outsiders from stealing their secrets.

But an employee? He couldn't believe it. The headquarters staff was small compared to the support staff at the various factories around the country. And Tim's laboratory technicians and staff had always seemed fanatically loyal to him and the corporate mission.

Looking around, he surveyed the work areas, the supply closets, the chemical storage areas, and the desks. Everything was locked down. Standing still, in the middle of the lab, he tried to put himself in the mindset of a corporate spy. What would he do? How would he get the information?

The vault, the decoy vault, was an obvious place to start. But the thing was massive, built to appear intimidating even to the most advanced thieves.

Since Matteo wasn't a criminal, it was difficult to think like one. But he closed his eyes and thought about his father and half-brother. What would they do in this situation?

And that brought the other question that had been lingering in the back of his mind. After decades of silence, why had his father suddenly appeared at the gala?

Was his presence in town at the same time that someone was trying to steal corporate formulas just a coincidence? Or was there a more menacing explanation?

He'd have to speak to Bailey about that. He'd bounce the idea off of her and...!

Someone was here!

Matteo couldn't see anyone, but he could sense another presence. He'd left the lights off, so that he could see the environment in which a criminal would work. He wanted to experience and see the same things.

At this moment, he didn't know who was trying to break into the lab, but they weren't being particularly stealthy about their intrusion.

The light footsteps clicked along the tile hallway. Then there was a beep as someone waved a security badge against the electronic lock. The heavy, steel door opened, then slowly, quietly closed. Too quietly. Someone was holding the door, silencing the closing snick as much as possible.

A woman?

Matteo moved back into the shadows, wanting to hide from whoever was coming into the lab. He wanted to catch the person in the act.

The person moved quietly and Matteo was now certain that the burglar was a woman. What was also evident was that the person was familiar with the layout of the lab. She moved easily through the workspaces, as if anticipating the stools and desk corners, as well as the delicate glass test tubes on the various countertops.

The woman walked over to the vault and, almost casually, spun the handle. Was she testing the vault to see if it was open? That was odd.

The woman then turned, abandoning the vault. Matteo would have thought that a real criminal would have put a bit more effort into trying to open it.

Then the woman turned and...!

Muttering a curse, Matteo stepped out of the shadows and Bailey yelped in surprise.

“Matteo!” she gasped, putting a hand to her chest as she tried to catch her breath. “What are you doing in here?”

He shook his head. “The same thing you are, apparently.”

She made a sound and looked around. “I was trying to figure out what it was like down here at night.” She sighed. “It’s quiet in here, isn’t it?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” he replied, amused by the way their minds worked sometimes. “When Tim and his team are in here, there’s an energy that is hard to miss.”

She laughed. “Tim’s intensity can be...,”

“Exhausting,” he finished, fisting his hands on his hips.

Bailey nodded. “Exactly. He’s so laid back when he’s outside of his lab. But when he’s in here, in his element, Tim can be overwhelmingly intense.”

Matteo looked around. “Any ideas?”

She twirled around, then shook her head with exasperation. “Not a clue.” She huffed a bit, crossing her arms over her chest. “We’ve had others try to sell our corporate secrets before,” she muttered. “But for some reason, this feels...personal.”

“I get that feeling as well,” he replied, then shoved his hands into his pockets. “And I suspect that it’s because my father is somehow involved.”

“Or that a stranger, someone with diplomatic connections, approached Zahir? That’s a new aspect of this issue as well. The other times someone tried to steal a formula, they only wanted to sell it to the highest bidder.”

“Why does this person want to set up a factory to manufacture the product? Why not just sell the formula and let the buyer produce and distribute the product?”

“Exactly,” she agreed, then tilted her head backwards, looking up at Matteo. “Is it possible that your father doesn’t have anything to do with this?”

He turned, facing her. The dim light made her look... softer. More subtle. Sexier.

“I don’t know,” he replied, his voice deeper. Did Bailey notice the new timber of his voice?

She licked her lips. And was her breathing a bit heavier now?

“It’s...definitely something we should...consider.”

“I agree,” Matteo replied. “Never overlook the obvious.” Or the subtle, he thought, watching her eyes carefully. Sure enough, her eyes moved to his mouth.

Was Bailey wondering what it would be like to kiss him? He was damn well wondering that himself!

But they were just friends.

Right?

She dragged in a long breath and he heard the ragged sound of it.

“We’re missing something, aren’t we?” he asked, his voice lower now.

“We are?”

Matteo nodded, pretty sure that they weren’t talking about the corporate espionage anymore. But what, exactly, were they talking about?

Before he could ask, there was another click of the lock.

He glanced at Bailey and she was already looking up at him. With a jerk, he lifted her into his arms and carried her

bodily into the shadows. Wrapping his arms around her, he tried to shield her with as much of his body as he could. Whoever was breaking into the lab now was not going to hurt Bailey! Matteo couldn't accept the thought of her not being in his life, not only as a business partner, but as...more! More than just a friend, he thought. More of everything!

Bailey couldn't believe how shockingly good it felt to be in Matteo's arms. And as she stood there, holding her breath as they waited for the intruder to come down the hallway and enter the lab, she wondered if she was the only one that was aware of the heat sizzling between them. The man was deliciously hard in all the right places!

Turning her head, she pretended to look around the lab. But in reality, she wanted to press her cheek against his chest. He felt so good, so...absolutely, perfectly, wonderful. And she definitely hoped that the intruder...what? What did she want to happen?

"Damn it!" a familiar voice hissed through the darkness.

Bailey felt Matteo's arms tighten, then he recognized Tim's voice as well.

"What the hell are *you* doing down here?" Matteo snapped at their partner.

Tim swung around at the same moment that Matteo hit the light switch. Tim seemed startled, then his eyes narrowed as he noticed Bailey standing so close to Matteo. A moment later, their friend's handsome features broke into a grin.

"Don't!" Matteo growled. "I got here first, then Bailey came down to investigate. Both of us..." he gestured to Tim, "...apparently, all three of us were trying to figure out how someone obtained confidential information."

"Bad information," Tim corrected.

“I know, but the fact that someone acquired a formula for one of our major products, even if the formula won’t work, is still a problem.”

“I know,” Tim sighed and fisted his hands on his hips, looking around. “I still can’t believe that one of my team members did this.”

Matteo glanced at Bailey, hesitated, then nodded.

Bailey turned to face Tim. “We were just talking about how Matteo’s father unexpectedly showed up at the gala tonight,” she announced. “What I didn’t mention to the others was that Ricardo announced that he wants Matteo to return to Spain and take over the family business.”

Tim’s jaw went slack and he stared at Matteo. “I thought you hated your father. I thought he was a bastard who tore you away from your mother when you were just a kid!”

“That’s correct,” Matteo replied with a dry, disinterested tone.

Tim bristled with anger and confusion. “So, why the hell would your father show up all of a sudden, without warning and tell you to come back to help them....?” His question faded to silence.

“That’s exactly the conclusion that Bailey and I were coming to when you arrived.

Tim’s eyes narrowed. He glanced over at the area by the wall where they’d been hiding only moments ago.

“Right,” he replied. A moment later, he breathed in while rubbing his forehead. “I don’t think we’re going to figure out anything tonight.” He turned again, looking around. “I’m going home.”

And he left, Bailey and Matteo stood quietly in the lab, but this time with the lights on.

“Are you ready to head upstairs?” Matteo asked, referring to their condos on the top floor.

Bailey nodded, trying to appear casual. Trying to appear as if her world hadn't just shifted. Correction, trying to appear as if she weren't desperately trying to restrain herself from throwing herself back into Matteo's arms. He'd felt so... perfect! She wanted to feel him like that again. To feel the strength and power of him, his heat and the secure sensation of his arms wrapped around her so protectively.

But they were just friends, she told herself firmly. This was Matteo. They'd been friends for...ever!

"Right. We should get to bed." After those words were spoken, Bailey gasped, and peeked over her shoulder to see how Matteo took her comment. "I mean...we should...uh...get some sleep."

One of those annoying dark eyebrows lifted. "Yes. Sleep is exactly what we need."

Bailey wanted to look at him again, to see his face so that she could determine if he meant that he wanted something else right now.

But she didn't have the courage to confront the strange vibes she was getting. Better to get some sleep. It was late... or early. Everything would be back to normal tomorrow.

Matteo watched until Bailey was inside her condo and the door closed. He even waited to hear the ding that would let him know that she'd activated her security system.

Once she was safely inside her condo, he headed into his own. Setting the alarm, he tossed his keys onto the table, then moved deeper into the penthouse. Stripping off his clothes, he didn't bother to turn on the lights as he contemplated the events of the night.

Bailey, he thought as he stared out at the night sky. Had she felt the frisson of sexual tension? Was she ready to take the next step in their relationship?

Was he?

Hell yes! Until this moment, he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge his growing need for Bailey. But now, remembering the heat in her eyes, the current of electricity that had passed between them, he knew that she was just as aware.

Would she act on it?

No. He knew his best friend too well. Bailey would bottle up these feelings forever, if he let her. If she hadn't ever shown an interest, he would have left things alone. But she'd revealed herself tonight.

Now he decided he was going to act on their mutual feelings. Their attraction for each other had been sizzling for so long, but tonight had been his first glimpse that she felt it as well. It was time to face the reality and move to the next phase.

And it was time to speak with his father. To find out if he really was the bastard who had tried to steal his company's secrets.

Chapter 5

“We’re going to be late!” Bailey called out, dumping her purse on the floor by the door as she made her way into Matteo’s kitchen for coffee. “I had some more ideas about last night!” she yelled, grabbing two travel mugs from the shelf and filling them with freshly brewed coffee. She added cream and sugar to her own, leaving Matteo’s black.

She felt better today. Much more grounded. Last night in the lab had been a fluke. Just fatigue and confusion. It hadn’t been sexual awareness that she’d seen in Matteo’s eyes. It had been...just...exhaustion after a long day and strained revelations. That was it.

That was...!

Matteo walked into the kitchen in just a pair of slacks that were zipped up, but still unbuttoned. Bailey couldn’t help but stare. The sight of Matteo’s magnificently bare chest stole her breath away.

Wow, was all she could think. She remembered pressing her cheek against his chest last night, but this...this... was so much better!

Sort of. Why hadn’t she ever seen him like this before? Had they never gone swimming together?

Obviously not, or she would have been prepared for those rippling muscles. She wouldn’t be standing here with her mouth hanging open as he came towards her.

“Wha...what are you doing?” she whispered, leaning back against the counter as he stopped less than an inch from her.

“You poured this for me, didn’t you?” he asked, reaching around her for the travel mug filled with black coffee.

“Yes,” she replied back, but her voice cracked. Bailey licked her suddenly dry lips, trying to remember...to

remember...?

“You have a coffee maker in your place.”

Oooh! An easy answer. “Your coffee is better.”

He chuckled. “Bailey, you buy the exact same brand of coffee.” He took a sip, still watching her. Still so close she could feel the waves of heat coming from him.

Nice, broad shoulders too!

“Bailey?”

“Umm...” she pulled back more, trying not to touch him. Because if her fingers came into contact with his tempting skin, Bailey wasn’t sure she’d be able to stop.

“You’re not wearing heels.”

Heels? He was talking about shoes? Matteo was standing in front of her, shirtless, talking about her shoes?

“It’s Saturday,” she reminded him, then mentally patted herself on the back, proud of herself for such an intelligent comment.

“True,” he replied, nodding. “And we have a meeting with what’s-his-name in ten minutes, don’t we?”

Time? Was time actually moving? With his chest still so temptingly close to her fingers, Bailey wasn’t sure.

Then he turned and started back toward his bedroom. “I’ll finish getting ready,” he called back over his shoulder. “Can you make me a bagel?”

Bailey released all of the air from her lungs while her eyes lingered on his butt. She had to admit that the man had an excellent butt! And because he wasn’t wearing a shirt, Bailey could see the muscles rippling over his back when he lifted his arm to rub his hair dry with the towel.

With a mental groan, Bailey was just about to rip her eyes away from Matteo, but before she had a chance, he turned.

Caught! Bailey's face turned a deep shade of red when he stared back at her. Thankfully, he didn't comment. Instead, he turned and continued walking down the hallway, disappearing into his bedroom.

Bailey sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Get a grip, woman!" she whispered. These moments of staring, of mentally undressing him and, even worse, the erotic dreams she had been having nearly every night starring her best friend, had to stop! It was bad and wrong and... a shiver raced through her body when she remembered last night's dream. His mouth and fingers had driven her so wild in her dream that Bailey had woken up with a hungry ache between her legs that was hard to ignore.

Matteo stood in his closet and pulled down a shirt, then realized he had already put one on. With a muttered expletive, he hung the second shirt back up and started buttoning the one already draped over his arms and shoulders. As he buttoned it over his chest, Matteo's mind focused on Bailey's reaction moments ago. Her gaze had been a nearly physical caress! The heat from her eyes had pressed against his skin and, at the last moment, he'd looked back to confirm that she was still watching him.

Lifting the coffee, he took a long sip of the scalding hot liquid and wondered what his next step should be. Today's walk into the kitchen had been a good first step, but he needed more. *Infierno*, his body needed a hell of a lot more.

Paciencia, he told himself. He needed to be patient.

After getting dressed, he went out to the living room, carrying his travel mug of coffee with him. He found Bailey sitting on his couch where she was already reviewing a document.

"I know that we usually work on Saturdays, but I'm going to suggest something *loco* today."

Bailey lifted her eyes to him and Matteo noticed the sudden tension in her body. Was it because she was sexually aware of him or because she worried she wouldn't like what he was about to say?

"I'm always cautious when you start speaking in Spanish," she teased.

He blinked down at her. Spanish? "What do you mean?"

She laughed, tilting her head backwards to maintain eye contact with him. "You use Spanish in the same way that I use chocolate. It's a fall back to something comforting." Her head tilted slightly. "What's going on?"

He shrugged, then said, "I think we should cancel our meeting and avoid work today. The Philadelphia Flower Show is happening today. Why don't we take the day off and go stroll through the flowers and exhibits, get some lunch, and try to decompress after last night's revelations?"

She nodded slowly, considering his words. "You think if we're away from the office, from work pressures, we might relax enough to find a solution or have a revelation about the thief?"

Not even close, Matteo thought. "That too," he replied, not lying, but not telling her the whole truth, which was that he wanted to spend some time with Bailey away from the office. He was tired of fighting his attraction to her. He wanted to explore...more.

Bailey grinned. "I think that's a brilliant idea."

"You have to promise me one thing though," he warned.

"What's that?"

He glared at her. "The last time you went to a hardware store, you came back with a bunch of ideas for gardening."

“What’s wrong with that?” she asked, her lips twitching slightly.

Matteo leaned down so that he could look her in the eye. “What’s wrong is that we live on the top floor of a building in downtown Philadelphia. You can’t grow a farm, raise chickens, or adopt a cow while living in this building.”

Bailey grimaced. “Good point.” She sighed and slapped her thighs. “Fine. I promise I will fight the temptation. I’ll just...” she shrugged and sighed dramatically, “take pictures of all of the creative ideas and pretend I don’t long for a farm where I can grow our own fruits and vegetables, and raise baby chickens, and...”

“Do you even know *how* to raise chickens?” he challenged, handing her the bag she’d left by his front door. Matteo pulled out his cell phone, texting their assistant so that he could reschedule the meetings this morning.

“No clue,” she replied, peering into the bag and pulling several file folders out, putting them on his foyer table. “But I could learn. And wouldn’t it be fun to go out the backdoor of one’s house to grab fresh eggs for breakfast?”

“*Diablos*, no!” he muttered, holding the door for her. “I don’t know where our eggs come from, *querida*. I prefer to assume that they arrived magically in the fridge.” They stepped into the private elevator and stepped back as the doors closed. Matteo pressed the button that took them down to the parking garage. “Thinking about the alternative is just...” he shuddered. “No.”

“You don’t like thinking about the fact that your eggs came from chickens?”

The elevator doors opened smoothly and he put a hand to the small of her back, letting her step out of the elevator first. “I don’t like thinking about the part of the chicken the egg comes out of.”

He pressed the button on his key fob, unlocking the doors to his sleek sedan. Before she stepped into his car, she

turned, looking up at him. “You know, it comes out of the same place a woman’s...well, you know,” she replied, blushing at the intimate subject.

He grinned and lowered his voice. “Ah, but I truly enjoy thinking about that part of a woman’s anatomy.” When her cheeks turned a darker shade of red, he laughed softly. “In fact, thinking about that part of a woman is one of my favorite pastimes.”

“You’re...!” she muttered something but her brain shorted out .

He threw back his head, laughing at her discomfiture as she ducked into his car. He closed her door and walked around to the driver’s side, still chuckling.

For the next three hours, Bailey felt as if she were in heaven. There was no work pressure. There weren’t any interruptions of her day. She walked beside Matteo through the display of flowers, awed by some exhibits and amused by others.

For lunch, they chose to stay inside the show’s area and eat from the food trucks. There were several options to choose from and, while Matteo got various food options, Bailey visited the beer truck and brought back four draft beers for them. By the end of lunch, Bailey was no longer stressed by Matteo’s random touches. In fact, as the afternoon continued and they walked down the long line of vendors at the show, she inched closer to Matteo, enjoying the warmth of his touch and the excitement of being near him.

There was the massive “mushroom,” which was really a wooden support system that held the most foul smelling mushroom system she’d ever encountered. Further on, there were flower “dresses” which were flowers supported by a chicken wire frame that formed a gloriously beautiful dress. They also walked through a tent that contained fascinating

examples of various succulents, ferns, various hostas, and dozens of other plants that neither of them could name.

And throughout the afternoon, Bailey stayed at Matteo's side, amazed by how nice the day turned out to be.

When they finally finished touring the displays, they left together, shoulder to shoulder, back to his car in the enormous parking lot.

"How about dinner out?" he suggested.

Bailey looked up at him, then grinned. "How about dinner back at my place with a bottle of wine so that we don't have to worry about driving home afterwards?"

Matteo nodded his agreement and they drove back to their building. While Matteo navigated the heavily trafficked streets of Philadelphia, Bailey put in an order from their favorite Italian restaurant, ordering the pasta and chicken with garlic bread that they both loved.

Sitting in Matteo's living room, Bailey pulled her plate of pasta closer. "Oh, this is delicious!" she whispered, closing her eyes to savor the delicious flavors. "I think that pasta should be considered manna from heaven."

Matteo rolled his eyes, setting his now-empty plate down on the coffee table. He pulled her feet into his lap. "I believe that you've mentioned that once or twice before."

Bailey groaned, carefully setting her plate next to his as he pressed his fingers into the arch of her foot. "You do that so well! Have you ever thought about becoming a masseuse?"

"I doubt that you'd like it if I had my hands on other women all day, would you?"

"Hell no!" she snapped before she realized what she was admitting. When her words replayed in her mind, she froze. As did his hands.

"Relax, Bailey," he teased as his fingers pressed more deeply into her foot. "Close your eyes. It's been a stressful

week, so try to relax.”

Chapter 6

Bailey woke up feeling unusually warm. Lifting her head from the unexpectedly firm pillow, she looked around. But the darkness around her wasn't familiar. It was as if...had she fallen asleep on her sofa? Looking around, she started to move, only to have strong hands stop her from shifting off of...the sofa? Nope. She wasn't on the soft cushions of the sofa. She was lying on top of...Matteo!

"You okay?" his deep, husky voice came through the darkness.

Bailey wasn't sure. She was lying on top of him and he felt so incredibly good!

"Yeah," she replied. "I should—"

She stopped when his strong, warm hand slid up the bare skin of her back.

"You feel good," he told her, his legs shifting.

Bailey gasped as his hands moved again. The electric shock of his hands on her bare skin was...amazingly good! So good, she couldn't control the gasp, or the moan as his hands roamed higher.

"You don't like that?" he asked.

She closed her eyes, trying very hard not to let him know how much she enjoyed him touching her like that.

"It's...different," she whispered into the darkness.

"I want you, Bailey," he told her. "Can you tell?"

He didn't shift his hips, but she felt the throb of his erection against her stomach.

"But we're friends," she argued, then moaned when he moved his legs, her hips now cradling his erection against her core.

“I think we could be friends,” he sat up just enough to kiss her gently, pulling away after too short of a taste, “and lovers.”

She licked her lips, staring down at him. Goodness, she wanted that! The thought of becoming his lover was so tempting. “Can we really do that?”

“Yes,” he promised. “We can do anything we set our minds to.”

“But...what if we can’t make it work as friends *and* lovers?”

“We can,” he assured her softly, his hands still trailing along her skin. “But if you don’t want to risk it, just say the word, and I’ll get up and leave. You can sleep alone and we’ll never speak of it ever again.” He moved, then kissed her again. “But if you’ve ever been curious to find out what it would be like between us, then why not explore this?”

She moaned and kissed him back. It was just a brief kiss. A barely-there kiss. When he pulled back Bailey stared down at him, shocked at how good it felt to be held like this. “Because I’m scared of losing you as a friend,” she admitted honestly.

“I know,” he said, not agreeing with her, but not disagreeing either. “But if we’re careful, I think we can make this work.”

There was a long silence following his suggestion. Matteo stared into her eyes, waiting for her to agree with him, or push him away. Outwardly patient, Matteo waited, trying to read her thoughts through the slight changes in her facial expression. Normally, her beautiful eyes were an easy way to read her mind, to know exactly what she was thinking. When she was in a meeting, Bailey’s thoughts and emotions were carefully hidden. It was only when they were alone together that Bailey relaxed enough to let down her guard.

But the combination of dim lights and her blank features meant that Matteo couldn’t see what she was

thinking. At the most important moment of their relationship, he couldn't tell what she wanted.

So it was a huge relief when she lifted her hands to his throat, her soft, delicate fingers touching the bare skin above the neckline of his shirt and she leaned in, kissing him gently. Tentatively!

Taking over, he deepened the caress. This was their first real kiss and he wanted to show her exactly what he was feeling. He wanted to be gentle, to ease them into this.

But at the first taste of each other, a raging inferno exploded between them. Their kiss was nothing like the sweet, coaxing kiss he'd intended. Instead, it was hot and heavy, demanding everything from both of them. A dam had burst and there was no holding back the raging flood of lust.

Clothes went flying. Matteo couldn't touch her enough. Every part of Bailey was softer and more alluring than the last. He wanted to taste her and feel every inch of her body against his skin.

When he finally had her naked, he kissed his way down her neck, her shoulders, his hands cupping her breasts. He loved the appealing sounds coming from Bailey when his thumbs rubbed over the tips of her nipples. And that sound increased his need to taste those delectable tips. When his mouth finally closed over one, Bailey arched into his mouth, pressing her breast deeper and he sucked harder, nibbling at the tip while his other hand explored her other breast. But it wasn't enough. He needed to taste both. Moving to the other breast, he teased that one until she cried out.

With a smile of...he wasn't satisfied. Not by a long shot. But hearing her cry out like that set something inside of him to an urgently burning, aching need. He wanted to be inside of her. He wanted to thrust into her tight, hot sheath, but he also wanted to feel her come apart on his tongue. He wanted to taste her climax and know that she was his.

Moving lower, he kissed and nibbled his way over her soft stomach, loving every inch of her. She didn't have rock hard abs like one of his mistresses. Nor did she have bones sticking out, like so many of the other women he'd had sex with over the years.

Bailey was completely different and so perfect, his head spun with desire. Moving lower and lower, he reveled in how soft and sensuous she was. Every touch of his mouth or his hands against her skin elicited additional cries and demands for "more".

Bailey was losing her mind. Correction. She was mindless already. Everywhere he touched her, she wanted to scream. And she needed to touch him, to ground herself with her fingers against his bare skin. Every touch, every ripple of his muscles under her fingertips was a revelation. She wanted to know every inch of him. She wanted to taste him and see if she could drive him as wild as he was making her.

But before she could do any of that, his mouth closed over that throbbing nub. She hadn't anticipated this. Looking down at him like that, watching him look at the most secret parts of her body as if he'd been invited to a gourmet brunch, made her pause. But only for a split second.

And then she was screaming out his name, her fingers diving into his thick, dark hair as her body throbbed with a climax so intense, she could barely breathe.

So when he lifted up and braced himself over her, she couldn't contain the shocked laugh. Looking up at him, she realized that he'd already sheathed himself with protection and was waiting for her to come back to the present.

With a tenderness that she'd never felt before, she lifted her arms to pull him to her. Lifting her legs, she encircled his waist. "I need more," she whispered before kissing him with all of the passion within her.

Slowly, Matteo pressed into her and she gasped at the size of him. Or maybe it was because it had been so long since she'd had sex, his gentle thrusting into her body was more of a shock than she expected. Most likely, it was a combination of both and she inhaled slowly, trying to relax her muscles so that she could take all of him into her body.

“You okay?” he asked, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

She smiled, maybe, and nodded. “Yeah. I’m more than okay.” Then she lifted her eyes to his. “Are you?”

He froze, then threw back his head, laughing while saying something soft and melodic in Spanish. But he spoke too quickly for her to translate. Or maybe she just couldn’t focus on his voice just now. Either way, she had no idea what he’d said, and she enjoyed the way he felt as he pressed deeper into her body.

“That feels...” she hesitated, gasping and shifting her hips, “incredible.”

He groaned and pressed deeper, tightening his arms around her. When he was fully inside of her, he hesitated. “Good?”

She wanted to laugh, but her body was no longer sated. Her body needed him to move.

“Matteo, I need...” she rolled her hips, unconsciously telling him exactly what she needed. He moved faster, sliding in and out of her body and every thrust felt like another shock to her system. Clutching at his shoulders, she used his body to leverage her hips higher, bringing that nub to a closer angle. And that was all it took to send her pleasure skyrocketing all over again. Her body shook as another climax washed over her. With every thrust, there was another wave of pleasure and she couldn’t even cry out any longer.

He sped up, thrusting harder and harder and Bailey was so lost in pleasure, all she could do was hold onto him as her anchor.

When he collapsed on top of her, his face buried against her neck, Bailey wrapped her arms around him, needing...something more. Tears burned in her eyes and she closed them, not understanding why she would cry at a moment like this, but unable to stop the riot of emotions welling up within her.

When he lifted his head and looked down at her, his dark eyes shifted from triumph to concern in a flash.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, his voice gruff.

She laughed and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Nothing,” she admitted. Another hiccupped laugh. “I know, it sounds ridiculous and hysterical, but...” she laughed again. “I just can’t seem to stop.”

He grunted again and pulled slowly out of her. Kissing her forehead, he said, “I’ll be right back.”

Matteo disappeared into the bathroom and Bailey couldn’t stop her eyes from appreciating his butt. The man had a ridiculously gorgeous butt!

She heard the water turn on and realized that he was cleaning up. Wiggling around, she pulled a blanket over her, not sure what would happen next. This was Matteo! She’d just had sex with Matteo and...wow! It had been a thousand times better than she’d dreamed.

He came back out of the bathroom and flipped the lights off. As he came back to the sofa and lifted her into his arms, she noticed that he was already erect again. Her eyes widened and he chuckled as he carried her into her bedroom. “Relax,” he teased, pulling the comforter away as he slipped into the bed and pulled her into his arms. “I’ll wait until you’ve recovered before I tempt you again.”

Bailey licked her lips, not certain he needed to wait. However, she wasn’t sure if fatigue or sexual desire was stronger. A loud yawn announced her present state.

“Go to sleep,” he urged. “This isn’t over.”

Bailey hoped that was true. She wasn't sure where this...next phase...of their relationship was heading, but having his arms wrap around her gave her a feeling of security she'd never known before. She loved feeling his body press against her back. And it was the nicest feeling in the world to fall asleep in his arms.

Chapter 7

“What the hell do you want? And why are you in my office?” Matteo demanded of his father.

Ricardo del Campo spun around, his irritation clear on his face. Matteo wasn't sure if the irritation was due to the lack of a greeting or the fact that he'd chosen to speak in English instead of their native Spanish.

“You've done extremely well for yourself,” Ricardo replied stiffly, pulling himself up to his full height as if to increase his physical presence...or because he was offended. But Matteo was two or three inches taller than his father. Plus, Matteo had muscles and worked out regularly. Ricardo was a lazy aristocrat that considered sweating to be a peasant's lifestyle.

The man looked soft and...troubled.

“What do you want from me?” Matteo demanded. But he had absolutely no intention of helping his father in any way. He just wanted him out of his office. Plus, he wanted to hurry back to Bailey. Ricardo had sent a message early this morning asking to meet with Matteo.

“I wished to speak with you in private.” He swished his hand through the air, almost as if he were waving a wand so that the world would do his bidding. “I explained this to your secretary several days ago, but obviously, she isn't particularly good at her job.” He shook his head. “I don't know how you've become so successful with such incompetent help, Matteo.”

Matteo sat down in the chair behind his desk without offering his father a seat. “I don't have a secretary,” he admonished his father. “My assistant's name is Matt and he's extraordinarily good at his job.”

“No!” his father snapped, irritated that his son was being so obtuse. “The other one! The female. Pretty girl.

Blond hair and a bright, teasing smile.” Ricardo jerked at his slacks and sat down in one of the chairs. “I wouldn’t mind having someone that lovely in my office as well.”

Matteo’s eyes hardened. “If you are referring to Bailey Larkin, then you’re absolutely wrong. She’s one of the owners in this company. You have been told this before.”

His father looked nonplussed. “Well, that’s rather... adventurous of you. But I understand. You threw her a bit of responsibility.” He nodded patronizingly. “Still, she’s a lovely little thing.”

Matteo was disgusted by Ricardo’s sexist attitudes. “Bailey is a huge part of why this company is so successful. Without her expertise, our company couldn’t operate as smoothly and efficiently. Her marketing skills are exceptional and her ability to read people is extraordinary,” he replied, thinking of how Bailey had pegged Ricardo as an arrogant bastard perfectly on their first meeting. She was the first person, besides himself and his mother, who had seen through the aristocratic façade to see the real man underneath the pretensions.

He waved a dismissive hand. “I didn’t come here to discuss the girls you choose to have in your life.”

“Why are you here then?” He thought again of Bailey and how she was probably just waking up. He would have loved to see her wake up in his arms. To kiss her and watch her get ready for the day. They’d been friends for so long, knew each other so well in some ways. But he didn’t know if she liked really hot showers like he did, or if she preferred warm water. What type of shampoo did she use? And did she look as sexy in the shower as he assumed?

He wanted to know everything about her. Every moment of her day. Not to mention, he didn’t know her body well enough. After last night, his appetite was only whetted. He’d need more, possibly the rest of his life, to get to know every aspect of her body and mind.

And that sounded like an excellent way to spend the rest of his life!

“You’re not paying attention!” Ricardo snapped.

Matteo blinked and looked across the desk at his father. He looked angry. Twenty years ago, that would have caused some concern. The Marquesso owned almost every business in the small village, plus the old man controlled the supply routes in and out of the village. Ricardo adored controlling his little fiefdom and refused any change that would alter that control.

Matteo shrugged, unconcerned with his father’s irritation. “You’re correct. I wasn’t paying attention.”

His father huffed and shifted on his leather chair. “How the hell did you build such an empire if you’re constantly distracted?”

Matteo chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t insult people that need my help, for starters.”

Ricardo’s chest puffed up. “I don’t need your help!” he snarled.

“Then why are you here?”

“I just told you! It’s time for you to merge your company with mine, so that you and your brother can—”

“No.” Matteo didn’t wait for his father to finish. There was no chance that he would merge this company with his father’s or brother’s holdings.

Obviously, Ricardo was stunned that someone would defy him. His mouth went slack, but he rallied quickly. “No? You’re not going to join the family firm and develop your company into the powerhouse that it could and should be?”

Matteo eyed his father carefully, his instincts screaming that something was seriously wrong with this conversation. Not just the fact that his father wanted to have something to do with him. But there was something odd about his father’s demeanor.

“No, I absolutely don’t want to merge my company with the mess that Antonio has created of your empire. From what the news reports say, Antonio has nearly bankrupted the company. There are other rumors that he’s running illegal drugs through your distribution centers.”

“That’s a lie!” Ricardo bellowed, his face turning red. “Who has told you these lies? That bitch of a secretary?”

Matteo ignored his father’s outburst. “Now you’re just being insulting, which indicates that you are a weak, insecure excuse of a man.” He shook his head. “Very sad. You used to come across as all-powerful and strong. Now, you’re just...” Matteo let his eyes move over his father’s jacket. It looked new and expensive. Ricardo considered it his responsibility to uphold the image of the wealthy aristocrat at all times. “Pathetic,” he finished finally.

Ricardo jumped out of his chair. “You will not speak to me in that tone!” he roared.

Matteo looked up at the man, astonished that his father could be so easily riled. “Or what?” Matteo asked softly. “You’ll order the headmaster to punish me? Try to starve me again? Isolate me in a cold, dark room?”

Matteo had been anticipating a denial of that old allegation. But Ricardo waved the abuse accusations away. “Those lessons made you stronger!”

Matteo’s mouth thinned. “So you admit it. You ordered Headmaster Daniels to punish me.” He tilted his head slightly. “I’d assumed it was true. And this only confirms that you always were an abusive bastard.”

“You are the bastard!” Ricardo snarled. “But as my son, you are now required to return to your village and take up the responsibilities that come with being of my blood!”

A movement in the doorway caught his attention and he turned, noticing Bailey for the first time. “Good morning, my dear,” Ricardo called out pleasantly.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” she replied, starting to step backwards.

Matteo stood up and came around his desk. He took her hands before she could disappear down the hallway. “You’re not interrupting anything except my father trying to strong-arm me into doing what he wants.” He glanced over at the nearly apoplectic man. “He’s seems to think he can command me to do what he wants and actually expects me to obey.”

“He did?” Bailey asked, leaning against his side and mirroring his tone.

Matteo liked that. He liked having her weight against his body and he definitely liked the soft blue dress as well as the silver accessories. Bailey always looked gorgeous.

“But he’s leaving now,” Matteo asserted. He turned to look at his father. “I don’t think that we have anything further to discuss.”

Ricardo seemed to calm down slightly, but at Matteo’s dismissal, his fury came roaring back. He couldn’t hide his indignation, as he jerked the sides of his sports jacket, huffed a bit, then added another glare.

“You are *my* son. You *will* come home and merge your resources with my companies.”

Matteo barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

“I don’t think so,” Bailey replied firmly. She leaned more heavily against Matteo as she spoke, verbally and physically showing that she supported him. “We have a fabulous staff that live here in Pennsylvania. Our factories and distribution hubs are here as well.” She felt Matteo stiffen and her grin widened. “Then there’s the bigger problem.”

“Get rid of the problem!” the older man snapped.

“It’s you,” she replied and stepped away from Matteo. She stepped up to his father and extended her hand. “It was a

pleasure finally meeting you the other night. I've pictured you several times while getting to know your extraordinary son." She shook the man's hand while also leading him over to the door. "However, I don't see the horns that I'd always expected. And you're not nearly as decrepit as I'd pictured either."

"Horns?" the man gasped, looking over his shoulder while still blindly following Bailey. "What the hell is she talking about?" he demanded of Matteo.

However, before anyone could answer, Bailey had him outside of Matteo's office. Thankfully, his assistant was already at his desk. "Matt, would you please escort Mr. del Campo out of the building?" she asked prettily. "And if he doesn't leave, feel free to call security. They also have my permission to call the police and have him arrested for trespassing if he doesn't exit the premises expeditiously." She started to walk back into Matteo's office while Matt lifted the phone. "Oh, and if he causes problems, I sincerely hope that our security team treats him just like they would any other intruder," she looked over at Ricardo, speaking to him for a brief moment, "Our head of security is a former FBI agent, who loves taking care of recalcitrant people by pinning them to the ground and handcuffing them." She turned back to Matt. "Security has my permission to ensure that Mr. del Campo is removed in any manner necessary."

Matt grinned, eagerly dialing the security office's phone.

"How dare you!" Ricardo huffed furiously.

Bailey didn't even bother to look back as she went back into Matteo's office and closed the door. She flicked the lock so that the sound reverberated in the reception area.

Then she turned to say something to Matteo, but he was already there. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply.

Bailey gasped, startled by the ambush. She wound her arms around his neck, remembering last night when he'd made love to her and she held onto him just like this. Moaning, she leaned into him, her body on fire.

His arms circled her waist and he pulled her firmly against him. "You are magnificent!" he mumbled against her lips before kissing her again.

"Matteo!" she gasped, feeling his hands roaming over her body.

"You wore a dress today," he growled, pulling back and looking down at her flowing dress. "I used to hate it when you wore dresses to the office."

Bailey was trying to catch her breath, but his hands were everywhere and he kissed her as if he might die if he stopped. She loved every second of it.

"Why would you...?"

Before she could finish her question, she had her answer. Matteo lifted her up and set her down on his desk, then pulled her forward to the very edge of his desk and spread her legs so that his hips, and more specifically, his throbbing erection, pressed against her core.

"Matteo!" she gasped, shifting closer. Her thighs tightened around him and she wiggled, desperate to have him inside her. That need was like a throbbing, insistent ache low in her belly.

"You drive me wild!" he whispered, then nipped at her nipple before suckling the tip. She gasped, not sure how he'd gotten the top of her dress pulled down. And where in the world had her bra gone? Matteo's passion was overwhelming and she loved it!

She wiggled closer to the edge of the desk, her fingers sliding down his shoulders, over his muscled chest and rock hard abs. Fumbling, she ignored his belt and moved lower, freeing his erection. Stroking him, he paused his torment on her nipples to enjoy her hands caressing his erection. For

several moments, he thrust into her hands, hissing at the pleasure.

“I need to be inside you. Now!” he hissed, reaching into his pocket for a condom. After tearing open the package, he smacked it into her hand, then they both watched as she rolled it down over his shaft.

“Thank you!” he groaned, then pulled her closer to him, angling her backwards so that she had to grab his shoulders again for balance. “You’re mine! You realize that, *si?*”

Bailey moaned as he slid into her heat. “Matteo!” she gasped, adjusting to take all of him.

“Say it, Bailey. You’re mine!” He thrust all the way into her, then held her hips still, gazing down into her eyes. “Say the words, *querida!* I need to hear you say them.”

“I’m yours,” she repeated, looking into his dark eyes, understanding what he needed to hear.

Matteo started moving, slowly at first, but with increasing speed and pressure as they stared into each other’s eyes. Just before Bailey knew she was going to climax, she gripped him harder, moaning as she said, “You’re mine too, Matteo!”

And that took him over the edge and they climaxed together, both fighting to give the other more pleasure as their bodies shuddered with release.

For long moments afterwards, they were both still, shocked by what had just transpired.

Matteo pulled back, his hands gentling as he held her securely in his arms and looked into her eyes.

“That was incredible!” she whispered, then kissed him lingeringly. That seemed to be exactly what Matteo needed to hear. He sighed, his body relaxing as the remaining tension drained from him.

“I didn’t mean to make love to you right here on my desk,” he told her with a self-deprecating chuckle as he looked around. “At least you locked the door.”

She grinned and kissed his shoulder, even though it was still covered by his suit and dress shirt. It didn’t matter. She still needed to touch him and show him how happy she was.

He pulled slowly out of her and Bailey immediately felt...bereft. However, she was very aware of the fact that they were in his office during business hours.

“I should...” she stammered out, feeling odd now that his arms weren’t around her. But she pointed towards his doorway. She’d already walked around his desk, eager to get back to her office.

Matteo sighed heavily and grabbed a tissue to take care of the condom before he straightened his clothing. Then he looked down at the ground and grinned.

“You might need these,” he told her, stopping her retreat. Her panties dangled from his finger, and he waited for her blush. It was quick in coming and he chuckled as Bailey stomped back over to him. But when she reached for the bit of satin and lace, he lifted the article higher, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her in close again. “I took them off of you,” he grumbled with a low voice. “I’ll put them back on.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she replied back, a bit breathless and her smile almost shy, and a bit hopeful.

He grinned. “It would be my pleasure.”

Her lips twisted slightly. “I think we’ve both had enough pleasure for this morning,” she replied, but she licked her lips.

“How about if I make it a prelude to later?”

She contemplated his offer, then shook her head. “Nope. If you put them back on me, then I won’t be able to concentrate all day. And I have several important meetings, plus we’re meeting with Tim later, for updates and coordination.”

Matteo listened and, initially, he wasn’t going to give in. But at her point about not being able to concentrate...he rather liked that idea. But she was right. They had work to do.

“How about if I give these back to you now, but I get to pull them off again later?”

She turned pink at his offer, but nodded eagerly. “Deal,” she whispered, then grabbed for her panties.

Matteo sat down in his leather chair and enjoyed watching her walk to the other side of his desk. There, she bent and slid the panties up her legs. It was a highly erotic moment. He couldn’t wait to watch her take them off later tonight. He hoped she would do the exact same moves when she took them off.

He felt like a bit of a cad for watching her so closely, but in reality, there was no way he could look away from her little show. He was already too turned on and he’d been craving Bailey for too long to leave even a small bit of knowing more about her undiscovered.

Still, Bailey got her revenge as she walked to the door. She didn’t just walk, as she’d done in the past. With their relationship on a different level now, she...sauntered. Yes, that was the only description for the way she walked. Those lush, sexy hips swayed as she moved. And when she had one hand on the doorknob, she turned and looked back over her shoulder at him. It was just a glance, but there was a wealth of promise in those beautiful eyes of hers.

His body hardened painfully and he nearly groaned out loud.

However, as soon as she opened the door, Tim stood in the now-open space, his hand lifted in the air as if he were about to knock.

Matteo quickly got his body back under control and Bailey straightened her shoulders. That sexy, I've-got-ideas smile hastily disappeared. But Tim was an observant man and he caught the expressions on his business partners' faces before they had a chance to hide them. A huge, triumphant grin spread across his face and he folded his arms over his chest.

"So it's finally happened?" he asked, his gaze moving from Bailey to Matteo, then back again. "You two figured it out?"

Bailey self-consciously smoothed a hand over her stomach. "Figured what out?"

Tim laughed and reached out to hug her, adding a friendly kiss to the top of her head. "That you two are madly in love with each other," he finished. He released Bailey and stepped into Matteo's office. "I'm so happy for you both." He walked around Matteo's desk and hugged him as well, then stepped back and swiveled his eyes, taking in both of them. "Unfortunately, I have some new images to review." He looked over his shoulder at Bailey. "I know that you have meetings, but can you delay them for a few minutes? I need you two to see these pictures. Tom and I reviewed the security footage yesterday and came up with this." He laid several grain images on Matteo's desk. "We don't have a good facial image, so Tom isn't able to run the image through the facial recognition software, but he thinks we can try to mesh several of the images we have together with some video images from other security footage from different buildings along the streets. If we can get enough partial images of this person, then we can form a full image."

Matteo looked at the picture, his gut tightening in his stomach. "No need," he replied. "I know who this is."

Tim looked surprised. “How the hell do you know this person?”

A new voice interrupted the group. “Because he is from our village.”

Everyone turned to look at the newest intruder to Matteo’s office. There was an audible gasp from Bailey as she and Tim noticed the astounding similarities between the man in the doorway and Matteo. The two men weren’t twins, but they were definitely brothers. The dark, almost black hair, tanned skin, and aristocratic features were telltale markers that Bailey and Tim noticed immediately. And if the man’s aristocratic nose wasn’t a sure giveaway as to his identity, the similarity to the previous visitor would have offered the needed clues. Plus, the man’s whole demeanor shouted “aristocrat”.

“Antonio,” Matteo greeted the other man flatly.

His half-brother stood in the doorway, surveying the group. His face was completely devoid of emotion as he stepped into the room, nodding politely in Bailey’s direction.

“You must be Bailey Larkin,” Matteo’s half-brother said. Instead of shaking her hand, Matteo’s ass of a half-brother lifted a dark eyebrow, obviously reading the stunned reactions from the other three people in the room and guessing that his presence wasn’t appreciated.

Bailey stepped back, glancing at Matteo.

“Your father was just here,” Matteo replied, not standing up nor offering his hand in greeting. It was an insult that didn’t go unnoticed, but Antonio didn’t react. He stepped deeper into the office, looking directly at his half-brother.

“I know our father was just here.”

“*Your* father,” Matteo corrected. “He was never my father.”

“He *is* your father,” Antonio challenged, bracing his feet wide, as if he were expecting a battle.

Matteo ignored his half-brother's body language. "He was the sperm donor. Nothing more," he said, tapping his pen against his shoulder. That was the only indication that Matteo was upset by the other man's presence.

Antonio tilted his head slightly with acknowledgement. "Fair enough." He looked at the other two in the room. "May we speak privately?"

Matteo shook his head. "These are my friends and business partners. Whatever you have to say will be said in front of them." He leaned back, glaring at the man with such similar features. "Just so you know, Father has ordered me to merge my business with yours and return to Spain. He says that I'm to take up my rightful place in the family business."

Antonio's only reaction was a slight lift of a dark eyebrow. The gesture was so similar to Matteo's that Bailey couldn't hide her gasp. He glanced at her sharply, then returned his attention to his half-brother. "What do you want? Besides stepping down so that I can take over as he insisted."

The only reaction visible on the other man's features was a slight tightening of the muscles around his mouth. "Did he?" He nodded slightly. "That was very...arrogant of him."

"If you and your father are trying to destroy me by selling the formula of one of our products, you're going to be--"

Antonio lifted a hand, stopping Matteo's next words. "I have no doubt that your formulas are secure," he interrupted.

"They are," Matteo assured him. "So, what are your plans?"

Antonio shrugged. "I have no idea what my father's plans are, but mine are to fix the company he's nearly destroyed."

"Is that so?" Tim interjected, moving to the side of Matteo's desk in a show of solidarity. "So, you're not trying to sell the formula to Sheik bin Aristi of Sidrina?"

“Zahir?” Antonio echoed, clearly confused. “What the hell does Zahir have to do with any of this?”

Bailey’s mouth fell open in surprise. “You know him?”

Antonio nodded sharply. “Yes. I’ve done business with him in the past. We met at a soccer game several years ago. He’s a good man. Tough and merciless when it comes to protecting his country’s interest, but very fair.”

Bailey stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she watched the man carefully. “So you know nothing about someone trying to sell our formulas to Sheik bin Aristi?”

“*Diablo!*” He huffed a bit, shifting on his feet. When he looked back at Matteo, he shook his head. “No!” He even sliced his hand through the air. “I vow I had nothing to do with anything illegal.” He moved over to the window, shoving his hands into his pockets. “In fact, I’ve done everything I could over the past two years to stop *my father’s* illegal activities.”

He turned and faced the room. “My father is losing control of the villagers and he is becoming desperate. The people in his village are rebelling against his harsh, sometimes brutal, domination. He’s even closed down the main access roads into the village on several occasions, stopping food supplies from being delivered.” He shook his head. “Our father is...angry. And he’s aging. He doesn’t want anyone, especially me in particular, being better at anything. But he’s losing his grip on reality. I’ve noticed that he doesn’t always remember things. He loses his keys when they are in his hands. He no longer reads because...” he sighed. “I think that he’s suffering from dementia, but he won’t admit it. If that’s the reason, then the problems started about two years ago. I was working in London at the time, running the office from there. I started to notice very strange activities happening. Then I discovered that there were some illegal activities. The police started questioning me and then Interpol visited me in London.”

He looked out the window again. “I have tried several times to take control of the company. But he’s...countered every move I make.” He turned to look at Matteo. “I know that you don’t owe me anything. Our father is...he’s losing and he will do anything he can to regain his power.”

“By selling my company’s secrets to the competition.” Matteo’s tone was uncompromising.

“Apparently,” Antonio replied. “However, if you have proof, I’ll bring that evidence to the Spanish authorities. You can press charges, if you like. I don’t have any loyalty to my father. He was a brutal man during my childhood, so I won’t stand in your way if you discover something that will put him in prison.”

Matteo was startled by his half-brother’s announcement, but he didn’t have time to dwell on the issues at the moment. He had to focus on the present. “I want that man out of my life and out of my company.”

Antonio nodded. “I will do what I can to help make that happen.” And with that, he angled his head in a slight bow, a demonstration of respect, then left Matteo’s office.

Matteo watched him walk away, an internal battle raging inside of him. All of his instincts were telling him to trust his half-brother. But decades of abuse and neglect, not to mention resentment of Antonio’s easier childhood were hard to ignore. But...Antonio had said his childhood hadn’t been easy!

What did that mean? What had Ricardo done to Antonio?

Just as the elevator pinged, indicating that the elevator had arrived, Matteo stood up and moved to the door. “Do you play poker?” he asked, stopping Antonio from getting onto the elevator.

Antonio, startled, looked back at Matteo. He nodded sharply, clearly not understanding why he’d asked.

“I’m a member of a private club,” Matteo said by way of an explanation, then stepped towards his half-brother. “I’ll pick you up. We’ll play poker tonight. It’s the least brothers can do together, right?”

Antonio’s eyes narrowed, obviously sensing a trap. But he lifted his chin, his glaze clear and focused. “*Bien*. What time?”

“Eight o’clock.”

He nodded sharply. “I’ll be there.”

He stepped onto the elevator and pressed the button.

Tim and Bailey waited until the elevator closed before turning to Matteo.

“What’s your plan?” Tim asked.

Matteo’s smile was almost...eager! “We’re going to play poker tonight. I’m guessing Ricardo will also show up.” He turned to Tim. “And with your friend, Zahir, there as well, we should have a lively round of poker, don’t you agree?”

Tim’s confusion melted into understanding. “You think Ricardo and Antonio will speak with Zahir about selling the formula and we can get the evidence that we need to prove that your father was the one who stole the formula?”

Matteo nodded. “I think it’s an excellent possibility.”

Tim laughed as he walked out the door. “Tonight is going to be a hell of a night!”

Bailey turned to look at Matteo. She saw the anticipation in his eyes and inched closer to him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, touching his sleeve.

He looked down at her, then pulled her into his arms, then down onto his lap as he resumed his position behind his desk. Sitting on his lap, she turned so that she could see his face. “I can’t read your expressions right now. So, I don’t know what’s going through your mind.”

He slid his hand along her thigh, but didn't touch the bare skin under her dress. "My biggest regret is that we won't see each other tonight. I had several new ideas."

She laughed and kissed him lightly. "I think getting more information on your father's criminal efforts is probably more important."

He stared at her, his eyebrows pulling together. "Is it?" he challenged. "Part of me wants to ignore the issue of the company. I want to be with *you* tonight. What we started last night is—"

Her hands gently cupped his face. "Not temporary," she asserted firmly. "I'm not going anywhere." Her thumb stroked his cheek. "If you want to ignore last night, that's one thing. But I don't. I like where this is going. But we both need to agree."

"I agree," he told her firmly. "I want this to work between us." He turned his head, capturing one of her fingers. She gasped and he chuckled at her reaction. When he looked at her, he said, "Will you wait up for me tonight?"

"Yes," she promised and kissed him sweetly.

"Good!"

With a sigh, she stood up and left the office. At the doorway, she paused, one hand resting on the open door. "But I want to hear about absolutely everything that happens. Understood?"

He nodded, his eyes moving over her figure. "I will tell you everything."

Chapter 8

Matteo walked into the club and headed straight for the administrative offices. He found Emily, the club manager, in the hallway. “Is everything ready?” he asked.

“Everything is set up and ready. I have Maggie, Ann, and Melanie on the schedule tonight. They are my best wait staff and know exactly what to do.”

Matteo nodded. “That’s perfect. Thank you. And they know to—”

“They will hover around your father until they hear something important,” she assured him.

“Good,” he replied with a nod.

“Do you want us to refresh his drink often?”

Matteo considered that for a moment. “Sometimes, people reveal more when they are sober, thinking that the other person is drunk and they could gain more concessions that way.”

Emily grinned. Most of the club members assumed Emily was a member of the wait staff instead of the club manager, simply because she was a woman. Whenever there was a lapse in staffing, Emily jumped in and helped out, even with the wait service, which helped encourage their assumptions. Emily never clarified her role as the club manager, preferring to allow them to assume she was simply a staff member.

The members also knew that Levi, Matteo, and Sean were the owners. And since one or more of them were usually around the club to help out with the running of the daily activities, as well as overseeing the members, any complaints came directly to them, even though it was Emily who resolved ninety-nine percent of the issues.

“I’ve got my team ready to listen in and we’ll gauge their conversations to determine if we should fill up their drinks or hold back,” Emily offered.

Matteo nodded. “That sounds perfect. *Gracias.*”

“Sure thing!” she replied and turned on her heel, walking down the hallway to her office and then to the staff break room to brief the team members.

It was peaceful here at the moment. There were a few club members ensconced in the reading room, perusing the latest newspapers. The club still subscribed to the paper versions of the various news outlets since so many of the members preferred to read actual papers instead of getting their news online. Expensive, French brandy, private label wine, beer and scotch was being consumed while the members relaxed in deep, leather chairs. The food and alcohol were flowing, although at a slower rate than what would be imbibed later in the evening.

Matteo walked through the gambling tables and into the billiards room. There were four billiards tables set up. If one looked out through the windows, green pastures and tall, stately trees shimmered in the late evening sunshine. There were horses grazing in the fields to the right, but the horses weren’t for riding. They were rescue horses that Emily had found at auctions and had convinced Levi, Sean, and Matteo to purchase and allow them to roam in the pastures that weren’t being used for anything else.

Emily’s heart was rather soft, Matteo thought. But she was amazing at managing the club. What used to be an almost defunct club for members who liked to spend their afternoons and evenings gambling and sexually harassing, sometimes even assaulting, the club staff members, had been transformed into a smoothly operating business that brought in enormous profits from the member dues, which had quadrupled since Levi had inherited the place.

Matteo was proud of the club now. It had been such a dump when the three of them had first decided to transform it.

Levi had wanted to renovate the club simply to snub his obnoxious, entitled half-brothers. Their father had built up a sporting goods empire with retail stores all over the United States and Canada. But after their father passed away, the legitimate brothers had run the business right into the ground. Their business had gone into receivership last year and the brothers were still trying to get Levi to bail them out, or just to let them become club members so that they could pressure the other members, most of whom were chief executive officers for some of the largest companies around the world, as well as leaders of various countries. But Levi refused to let his half-brothers enter the club. The brothers had even taken Levi to court, saying that he was illegitimate and, therefore, unworthy of inheriting anything from their father. However, their emails and comments after their father's passing, all witnessed by others, had been presented to the judge. The brothers had ridiculed Levi for his inheritance, saying in front of witnesses that the club was Levi's "punishment" for being illegitimate.

The judge had sided with Levi and tossed the lawsuit out of court. Now the brothers were throwing money at additional bad investments, trying to weasel their way back into power.

It wouldn't happen. Levi's machinations ensured that his half-brothers never had a chance. Just as the half-brothers had constantly put obstacles in his path years earlier. Karma could really be a bitch, Matteo thought.

Sean had faced similar struggles with his father, who resided in Ireland as the Earl of something or other. Recently, a troubling issue arose, involving sex trafficking, which Sean's father and half-brother had become involved in after their Irish factory closed down. Prior to their involvement in human trafficking, the only viable business remaining for the Irish earl had been a small village pub and a brewery that supplied several pubs in the vicinity.

Whenever Sean's father attempted to acquire a brewing company in the United States, Sean intervened and purchased the company before his father could seize it. Little

did Sean know that these breweries would become a front for the earl's human trafficking operation. With each thwarted distribution effort, the earl sank further into debt to the ruthless individuals running the trafficking ring.

Everything fell apart when Sean acquired a brewery in Georgia. That marked the breaking point for the earl's endeavors.

Sean and Levi were now free from the machinations of their fathers and brothers. Would Matteo be through with his father and brother's efforts after tonight? Would he get enough evidence to toss Ricardo out of the United States? Or would the man still attempt to pressure Matteo into moving his company to Spain?

Matteo worked out a plan in his mind, just in case this wasn't the end. He knew several contacts within the Spanish government that could help him. He just needed to keep his father busy, his focus on something other than Matteo taking over and fixing whatever mess Ricardo had created.

Matteo turned away from the view, mentally reviewing his plan. But his thoughts kept returning to Antonio's claim earlier today. Could Matteo have been wrong about Antonio all these years? Matteo had always assumed that Antonio had been the treasured son, the entitled heir that was pampered and spoiled all his life.

But what if Antonio had been just as miserable growing up? What if Ricardo had abused Antonio just as he'd done to Matteo?

Or was Antonio lying about trying to extricate himself and the family business from the clutches of criminals?

Matteo couldn't answer that question. On the one hand, he'd grown up resentful of the love and affection that everyone assumed a father shared with his son. Matteo couldn't dismiss that resentment after a single conversation.

However, he'd heard the sincerity in Antonio's voice. Was his half-brother not involved in the corporate espionage

or the drug trafficking through their companies in Spain? Or was he neck deep and just better at manipulating a person's emotions?

Matteo shook off the numerous questions. He'd come up with several ways to prevent his father from interfering in his business and that's what he needed to focus on tonight.

Still, he pulled out his phone and sent a text message to Tim and Bailey, suggesting that they meet to discuss more ways to protect their company. And for tonight, he needed to discover if his father, or his half-brother...or both...were the culprits in the latest attempt at corporate espionage.

Ricardo scowled at his son. "You *will* do this!"

Antonio shook his head. "I won't. That's illegal and I'm sick of cleaning up after you," he told his father. His scowl deepened as he continued, "If you continue down this path, I will not only bring enough evidence to the authorities to bury you. But I will also resign as president of *Del Campo Industrias* and you can return to the office and run the business yourself."

His father's jaw went slack. "You wouldn't!"

Antonio nodded, his angry glare unrelenting. "Oh yes, I will. Don't push me, Father. You've been a dictator for far too long. I'm either running things now, or I'm gone. You decide."

Then he walked out.

Ricardo watched his son, bile rising up in his throat. Antonio was his pride and joy. Would he truly walk away from his birthright?

Ricardo snorted and shook his head. "Not a chance!" His son was just emotional after visiting with his half-brother.

Si, his spies had told him Antonio had visited Matteo, arriving at the office almost immediately after Ricardo departed. The indignity of the visit still rankled, but Ricardo

was certain he could eventually convince Matteo, his bastard son, to move his corporate assets to Spain. Then he'd work with his Spanish contacts within the government to pass laws limiting foreign investors. Once those regulations were in place, and the two other partners had been eliminated, Ricardo could then vote himself in charge of the new board of directors. He'd give himself a generous salary and, eventually, Ricardo could simply step in and take over from Matteo. The little girl and the scientist could be evicted from the country, sent back to the United States with their tails between their legs. And he'd keep all of that delightful money from them too. No need to give them a salary if they weren't allowed to work in the industry.

Yes, it was wonderful plan. And even better, he'd have access to more chemical factories. He'd eventually shift Matteo's factories over to manufacturing the newest designer drug one of his chemists had created. Recently, he'd gotten the drug dealers to start handing out samples at the clubs around Europe. Now that the customers were becoming hooked on the new drug, the dealers were clamoring for more of the product.

Ricardo estimated that it would take him less than six months to transition the factories to manufacturing his drug instead of the pathetic fuel additive. Who needed a more efficient fuel? Gas was cheap enough. At least, he assumed it was. He had no idea since his chauffeur was the one who filled up the limousine. Ricardo never drove himself anywhere. He felt it was beneath him to drive himself. Besides, the villagers enjoyed knowing that their lord and landowner was wealthy enough to be driven around the village in style.

His son didn't abide by this rule. His son, his legitimate son, was a failure when it came to maintaining appearances! Antonio obviously didn't realize that the villagers needed to be reminded of their lord's power and dominion over their meager lives!

Ricardo texted his spies. "*Follow my son.*"

Then he sat back and poured more of the excellent vermouth provided by the hotel. He looked around, surveying the suite. It was fine, but definitely not up to the standards that he would require if he were in his home country. Spain was much better at lavish luxury. The Americans were so tacky! He hated leaving Spain, but in this case, in order to get his plans moving more quickly, he'd ventured out of his comfortable ancestral castle to visit his bastard son.

Ricardo had to admit that the low-life bastard was doing well for himself. If Ricardo hadn't seen his bastard son's name in the 'one hundred wealthiest men in the world' article, this plan might not have occurred to him. Before that article, Ricardo had assumed that Matteo was working for some corporate entity as a mere lackey, earning an adequate salary and living a life of quiet mediocrity. He'd been pleasantly surprised to discover his bastard might have some value. Ricardo enjoyed using people to advance his own causes. He enjoyed the privilege that his title afforded him, the entrée into various establishments that others were denied. And it was all because of his illustrious heritage, which allowed him to live this life.

His phone pinged and he checked the message, not sure who would be bothering him at this time of the evening. As he read the message, his eyes narrowed. "What the hell is 'TBC'?" he demanded. And why was Antonio going there?

He flipped his phone over to the internet search and smiled as he realized that TBC was "The Billionaire's Club". Apparently, Antonio had been invited to join this illustrious club! And no one had bothered to offer Ricardo membership? His temper boiled, but Ricardo tamped down on his fury, trying to come up with a plan.

Then he remembered he'd ordered his private detective to spy on Antonio. He was forgetting things more often, he realized, wondering if he should contact a doctor about it.

But Ricardo dismissed the issue. His memory wasn't the problem. His mind was perfectly fine! It was just a blip because he'd deviated from his routines. Back home, everything was steady and his possessions were right where he left them. And if they weren't, then he'd speak to his wife.

Agrandecimente, his wife had passed. He forgot that occasionally. But every time he remembered, the thought sparked a moment of joy. The woman had been an ugly hag, intent on spending all of his money on shoes and manicures. Pointless woman!

Focusing on the present, he remembered that his son, his *real* son, was visiting a billionaire's club. Neither of them had reached that level of financial security, but if Antonio followed Ricardo's instructions with the factories and the new product, then they would reach that level in two, perhaps three years.

Thinking of the billionaire's club, Ricardo stood up and smiled, smoothing his slacks. "I should be there with him," he announced to the silence. However, before he left the hotel suite, he sent a message to one of his employees. Just to be safe, he thought.

Chapter 9

“He’s here,” Levi whispered into the microphone that connected to Matteo, Sean’s, and Emily’s earpieces.

“Got it,” Emily replied, drifting easily through the gaming room. “There are three empty chairs at Antonio’s table.”

“We don’t want Ricardo with his son,” Levi replied back. He scanned the security monitors. “Zahir is ready.”

He turned to look at the ruler who was lounging in a chair, speaking with someone on his cell phone. But at Levi’s glance, Zahir ended his call.

“Is it time?” Zahir asked, bending to examine the activities displayed on the monitors. “That is the man who approached me recently,” he said, indicating Ricardo who was stepping into the club. “He’s the one who offered to sell me Matteo’s formula.”

Levi’s smile turned grim. “Then it’s time to teach him a lesson.”

Zahir chuckled. “I like your style,” he replied. “And I’m glad we’re on the same side.”

Levi grinned. “We’re relieved that you brought this issue to us. Matteo is a good man.”

Zahir straightened, jerking the cuffs of his dress shirt. “I’m quickly discovering there are a few ethical people in the world.” He looked directly at Levi, then at Sean and Matteo. “Normally, I’m very cynical about the motivations of the people I meet.” He nodded once, but the gesture encompassed all of them. “I’m honored to assist you with this operation.”

Matteo stepped forward and clapped Zahir’s shoulder in a friendly fashion. “And I am honored that you are willing to help me.”

Zahir put a hand on Matteo's shoulder. "I'm not just helping you. I'm helping all of us who are sick of the political and financial machinations that are making our world divisive."

With that, he left the security office with Sean at his heels. The plan was that Sean would introduce Zahir to several of the other club members, specifically the heads of the largest oil and gas companies in the United States. Emily would move in and lead Ricardo towards that table as well.

Matteo watched, trying to remain calm. He had no doubt that his arrogant father would incriminate himself. He was just that type of man. He lived in a small village with his title and his castle and he was literally the law for the villagers. He controlled every aspect of their lives, so why wouldn't Ricardo assume he could also control the events unfolding today? And Ricardo probably believed he could control Matteo's life, now that he'd remembered he had a second son.

He remembered being a teenager, lying on that cold, hard floor in the attic and thinking about all the various ways he would get back at his father. He'd imagined several plots to destroy the man's businesses, to convince the villagers to ignore the man's dictates, to expose his cheating ways to his wife.

And then a little sprite had whispered under the doorway. Bailey had saved him that night. She'd appeared in his life and shown him compassion.

Suddenly, Matteo just wanted to be done with this so that he could hurry back to Bailey. Her beautiful blond hair and those eyes that always sparkled up at him. She'd been there every day of his life since that fateful night. She'd encouraged him, befriended him, and now...now, she was his lover.

Memories of their one night together flashed through his mind. One night during which he'd spent too much time sleeping and not enough time showing her how much she meant to him. And then that one interlude on his desk. An interlude that would linger in his mind for years to come! He wanted to make more memories on that desk! Yes, he would definitely have to try that scene again. Perhaps late at night though, when they were assured of not being seen, he could reenact that scene, along with a few twists and tricks.

Levi snorted. "You have that look on your face," he announced as he returned to staring at the monitors.

"What look?" Matteo demanded, moving to sit beside him.

"The look that tells me you've finally realized you're madly in love with Bailey."

Matteo started to snort, but realized that the sound would be mere habit. He'd denied his feelings for Bailey for so long that it would be hard to break those habits. Besides, Levi was the second person to notice, so maybe he needed to control his expressions a bit more.

But now, thinking about her soft smile and the way that she'd literally created their company, created the secure life that they now enjoyed, not just for themselves, but for the employees in their company. She was the one who'd argued that salaries should be above average. Bailey was the one that demanded better health care benefits and paid maternity leave, not just for the women, but also for the men who wanted to stay home and bond with their newborn children.

She'd created the kind of loyalty and devotion within the organization that had built the company into a powerhouse. Matteo would have instituted average salaries for the various industries and average benefits. Bailey was the one that had demanded more. She'd been right in so many ways!

And now, she was his!

“Concentrate, man!” Levi snapped, jolting Matteo back to reality. “We need you focused tonight, not dreaming about Bailey.” He glanced at Matteo. “She is very sweet and beautiful, and I’m relieved that you two have *finally*,” he emphasized the word, “realized your feelings. But tonight is about taking down your sperm donor.”

Matteo sat up stiffly and nodded. “You’re right,” he replied. “When do I go downstairs?”

“In a few minutes,” he said, turning back to the monitors. “Emily is leading Ricardo to the poker table with Bernard and Clark.”

Matteo’s features turned grim. “Those two have been hounding Tim to give them his formulas for years!”

Levi grinned, looking over at Matteo. “That’s why we specifically encouraged them to show up tonight. If anyone will take the bait, it’s going to be those two. Zahir is entering...now,” he said with grim satisfaction. “He’s going to glance over to Antonio but...” he nodded again. “Good. Antonio is walking to the table with Sean while Zahir is sitting down with Ricardo.” Levi grunted with approval. “They’ll be in your father’s line of sight, but Antonio will be far enough away that he can’t hear what is being said.”

Matteo leaned in closer to the monitor. “Ricardo will be furious that his son disrespected him,” he said with confidence. “He will consider it a slap in the face and will work even harder to embarrass his son.”

Levi nodded. “That’s the plan. If Ricardo is angry and distracted, he won’t play well. He’ll lose more money and will be more likely to offer the formula to Zahir to earn back his losses. We’re also hoping that he’ll offer the formula to Bernie and Clark.”

“Is there any way to hear the conversation?” Matteo asked.

“Absolutely,” Levi assured him, twisting one of the knobs, revealing the usual sounds of a casino, “but you need to

go downstairs and start playing poker or billiards. If you go into the billiards room, make sure that you're in your father's line of sight."

Matteo stood up, eager for this to be over. "Right," he replied with a chuckle.

Levi looked up at him. "Sorry. You already know this."

Matteo smacked Levi's shoulder in a typical American fashion. "I've known you long enough to understand that you are incredibly thorough, my friend."

The two looked at each other, understanding and powerful friendship shimmering in that look. Then Matteo turned and left the room. It was show time, he thought as he descended the stairs.

Ricardo watched as his son sat down at a different table, not even acknowledging his sire. The insult was infuriating! He'd have to discipline his son somehow. But the ways he'd used when the boy was a child, locking him in his room without food, whipping him, or, even better, public humiliation, weren't realistic options now. Ricardo knew he would need Antonio's intelligence when he adjusted their business interests. The boy might try to think independently, but Ricardo knew that he could reign in his son's loyalty. He just hadn't thought about doing it in a while.

Now was the time, he decided. He'd punish his son in the most public way possible, then take control of the business once again. Antonio could run the businesses as a vice president, but with very tight controls.

"So, Your Highness," Ricardo began, tossing out the two of diamonds and tapping the green, felt table for another card, "have you had a chance to consider my offer?"

The two oil and gas executives had already perked up, eager to impress the royalty sitting at the table. Ricardo made a mental note to submit his name for membership to this club.

He'd never heard of TBC before, but apparently, it was a worthy operation. Here he was, sitting next to royalty. As he should be, Ricardo thought with satisfaction. As a Marquess, he was a Spanish aristocrat with a title going back centuries.

He was basically royalty, he figured. So, he and Sheik bin Aristi were equals.

Okay, perhaps not equals, but close enough. Closer than anyone else at this table.

The stupid Americans had disdained aristocratic titles when they'd formed their country. Such a pity, he thought and tossed in a poker chip. He wasn't exactly sure how much money was in the pot for this hand, but he didn't care. He'd lost two hands and won one. He figured he was relatively even. Besides, if he could get Sheik bin Aristi on board with his plan, and if he could bring the executives on board as well, he'd be rolling in money! And money meant power. That was what made life worth living; power and control. He loved control! He delighted in having his villagers bow to his commands and his son cowering.

Although, Antonio hadn't cowered in several years now, he suddenly realized. He'd have to fix that. Antonio was his son, Ricardo thought. If he threatened to take away control of the business, Antonio would be in a panic, desperate for his hefty salary and the control that came with running the family businesses.

Yes, it was definitely time to rein in his son and punish the boy's disrespect.

"Are you in, Ricardo?" Clark prompted.

Ricardo glanced down at the pot. He'd been pondering his next move and had lost track of the game. The large mound of poker chips was a bit daunting, but looking down at his hand, he saw two kings. Kings always won, he thought and tossed more chips onto the pile. He was a king and this hand would be his. The amount in that pot might even pay for the new roof that the castle needed.

“Call,” Zahir said, laying out his cards.

Ricardo looked at the hand and silently groaned. Three twos? How the hell had the man gotten a winning hand?

Clark and Bernie chuckled, throwing their own cards onto the table with a shake of their heads. “Good job!” they replied, leaning back in their chairs. One of them signaled the waitress.

Ricardo ignored the waitress. She was pretty enough, but he preferred establishments that dressed their women in more appealing outfits. The black pants, white shirt, and maroon vest didn’t show enough skin. He’d have to discuss the wait staff’s work attire after he became a member.

“Good job!” he said to the other man, swallowing his fury at losing.

Sheik bin Aristi collected the chips and started stacking them.

This was his moment, Ricardo decided. “Let’s get back to my offer, shall we? With the oil reserves in your country, owning the formula we discussed would greatly increase your profits, don’t you think? You could control the supply, even get rid of the formula, if that would help.”

Sheik bin Aristi didn’t even pause as he continued to stack his chips. “I’m wary of where you got this formula. And will it even work? Is it the *actual* formula? Many companies have multiple, hidden formulas to counter theft.”

Ricardo chuckled. “Never fear, the formula is real.”

“What’s this formula?” Clark asked.

Ricardo’s sense of power increased exponentially. “I obtained the formula that Larmpo Industries has built their entire corporation around.”

Clark and Bernie both looked cautiously around the large room, assessing the proximity of possible eavesdroppers. Thankfully, they saw Matteo was in the

billiards room, a safe distance away. Both men leaned in, nearly salivating at the thought of getting their hands on the precious formula that had driven down their company profits. “How the hell did you get your hands on that formula?” Bernie hissed.

Clark was just as interested. “We’ve been trying to negotiate with Larmpo for years. We’ve offered them a king’s ransom to stop producing that additive!”

Ricardo glanced over at Zahir, who was casually leaning back in his chair, but listening intently. Another surge of power washed over Ricardo and he nearly preened with satisfaction.

He suppressed the sensation, promising himself that he’d preen later.

“I...obtained...the formula with help from an insider. Or at least, he claims to be an insider. I don’t know, nor do I care.” He flicked his fingers as if brushing away dust. “I just know that the formula is real. It was obtained directly from the vault in the laboratory.”

Clark licked his lips. “How the hell did you get the combination to the vault?” He glanced over at Bernie, then at Ricardo. “We’ve tried to get that formula ever since it was first introduced, but we’ve never managed to break into the vault.”

“And how do you know that the formula isn’t a fake?”

Ricardo chuckled. “It’s real. My chemists are testing the formula now.”

Clark’s bushy, silver eyebrows shifted closer together. “They are only testing the formula?” he grumbled in a low voice. He looked carefully around, spotted Matteo well out of earshot and continued in a quieter tone. “When will you know if the formula is the same?” The man turned and glanced at Antonio’s table. “And what about your son? What’s his role in this negotiation?”

Ricardo shrugged. "I have confidence in my chemists as well as in the person who...obtained...the formula," he assured the man, then glanced at Antonio. When he swiveled around again, Ricardo feigned disappointment. "And my son does not have the gastrointestinal fortitude for such...arrangements."

Bernard licked his fleshy lips hungrily. Both men leaned in, eager for more details. "If what you've got is real, then I want it. I'll pay whatever the hell you ask."

Clark nodded fervently. "I'll contribute as well. We want that additive off the market." He turned to Zahir. "Your Highness, are you interested in this operation as well?"

Ricardo eyed the fourth member of their poker game as the sheik finished stacking his chips. The man was grotesquely muscular, but Ricardo supposed that women liked that. The guy was taller than Ricardo, which irked him, but he kept a polite, almost disinterested expression as he waited for Sheik bin Aristi's response. Of course the man would want to get the additive off the market. Extending the gas mileage for every gallon of fuel ate into the country's profits by reducing the amount of fuel needed. It was basic math!

"Although my country is still heavily invested in fossil fuels, I have also instructed the universities to research solar, wind, and other green energy alternatives," he explained, then looked at each man in turn. "The future of energy isn't in traditional fuels, gentlemen." He turned to Ricardo. "However, I would be interested in hearing more about this formula you have..." he hesitated briefly, then finished, "obtained."

Ricardo heard the sound of the plastic poker chips clinking as Zahir lifted a stack of chips and let them fall through his fingers onto the green, felt table. The sound grated on his nerves, reinforcing the fact that he'd lost a significant amount of money tonight. However, the eagerness of the two buffoons sitting across the table was promising. The only

unknown factor in his plan was the sheik. He was more... reserved. Cautious.

Ricardo respected that. He also knew that the man's cautiousness might make him into a stronger ally. Strategic thinking was needed now.

"Can I refresh anyone's drink, gentlemen?" a female voice asked.

All four of them turned to see a very pretty waitress. Unfortunately, she was covered from her neck all the way down to her toes. Pity. Once again, Ricardo wondered why the owners didn't enforce a sexier uniform for the waitresses. Men deserved a bit of beauty to enjoy while they were conducting business.

They ordered another round of drinks, and Ricardo was nearly salivating at the potential. A drunk man was more likely to commit to his offer.

They played another round, and Ricardo gritted his teeth when he lost another few thousand dollars. The play was deep in this ridiculous club! Why did the damn chips have to be worth so much money?

It didn't matter. Bernard and Clark were now on their fourth drinks. The sheik was only on his second, but that probably wouldn't matter. He had more to lose if people slowed their fossil fuel usage. Sheik bin Aristi knew where his money was made.

"So, when can we have this formula?" Bernard demanded. "I'll want to submit a patent for it." He tossed another chip onto the pile. "And I have a guy in the patent office who will back date the application. Once it's approved, we can stop Larmpo from manufacturing the additive." He glanced over at Clark. "As soon as the additive is off the market, then we can get fuel usage back up to previous levels."

"Here you go, gentlemen," the waitress interrupted.

Startled by the interruption, Ricardo glared at the waitress, furious that she'd interrupted the conversation at

such a critical point in their “negotiations”.

He waited until she left, ignoring her when she stood against the wall. He’d already dismissed her from his thoughts. She was only a woman, after all. They were flighty things. However, he glanced at the woman and thought that she might be a good distraction for later in the evening. He wouldn’t mind stripping her bare and making use of her body, but he doubted she had the intelligence to understand the conversation. Business issues were outside the realm of the female mind.

Refocusing on the discussion, he began his pitch, “For one million dollars, I’ll grant you the right *to view* the formula,” he emphasized to the group of men. “Each of you. One million dollars.” He didn’t want any confusion. “And if you want exclusive rights to the formula, it will go to the highest bidder.” All three men were leaning in and listening intently. “Bidding will start at one hundred million dollars.”

With that, he stood up and walked away, taking his lone, blue poker chip with him. It was worth about a thousand dollars, and he wasn’t giving that up. He estimated that he’d lost about ninety thousand over the last three hours. But he was absolutely confident that he’d have three million dollars in his bank account within a few days.

“Have you heard enough?” Levi asked, glancing at his friend. Matteo had spent only about ten minutes in the billiards room. The point was to be seen, to irritate Ricardo. Then he’d returned to the security office, wanting to watch his father’s antics.

Matteo rubbed his forehead. “I cannot believe he is so arrogant. He literally just admitted to corporate espionage in front of witnesses!” He looked at Levi. “Is he daft? And we have him on video stating this!”

Levi chuckled. “From what I saw, he truly believes that he can get away with his crimes.”

Matteo sighed and shook his head. "I still need to find the person my father hired to break into the vault."

"True, but that should be easy enough to do."

Matteo's eyes narrowed. "Why do you say that?"

Levi grinned. "Because your father's credit card was declined."

Matteo straightened with outrage. He looked at the security monitors, watching as his father strutted out of the club as if he owned the place. "Why the hell did you give him poker chips then?"

Levi grinned. "Because we wanted to trap him with his own words."

Matteo sighed and relaxed back into the chair. "You're right, of course. I apologize for not thinking clearly."

Sean stepped into the office and looked at his friends. "Did it work?"

Antonio was right behind him and Sean moved deeper into the room. Zahir was with him and the room, normally a relatively large space, felt miniscule with five extremely large and muscular men in it.

Zahir's eyes were sharp as he looked around the room. "You got all of that on video?" he asked.

Levi nodded, still grinning with satisfaction. "Every word of it."

Sean already had his phone out, dialing a number. "I have a friend at the district attorney's office," he explained. "I'll ask for a meeting and we can show him the evidence."

Matteo stood grimly off to the side, his arms crossed over his chest as he accepted the reality of the situation. "We'll need to move quickly. I suspect that he'll return to Spain where he can await the money he's so eagerly anticipating."

Antonio nodded. "Matteo is right. My father feels more secure in his village where there's only one road in and

out. We need to stop him before he leaves the United States. Otherwise, he'll be able to get away too easily.”

“I don't know him as well as you do,” Matteo pointed out. “I agree that he'll try to head back to the safety of Spain as soon as possible. But do you believe he'll go back to his home and the castle?”

Antonio considered that question, then shook his head. “I believe he'll do anything to avoid the humiliation of an arrest. But I also know that he wouldn't do anything that might harm the castle. It's the outward symbol of his power and status.” He thought about it for another moment. “Although, it might also be the best place for him to hide. The building is ancient. There are tunnels and hidden entrances that have been built into the basement and bedrooms. It would be easy enough for him to escape, or just sequester in one of the many hidden rooms if he felt threatened.”

Everyone in the room nodded their agreement of that assessment.

Sean stepped out of the room, talking to someone on the phone. Matteo looked at his watch. He started to say something, but Emily entered the room. “Your guy approached two others before he left. I overheard him telling them that he had a formula that they will want to bid on.”

There was a communal sigh of frustration. “That's going to interfere with our membership dues,” Levi grumbled. “I'm going to double them for everyone who has a wonky moral compass.”

Matteo grunted while the others chuckled. Sean stepped back into the room. “Send the video file to this address,” he said, then texted the contact information to Levi. He then turned to Matteo and Antonio. “Are you both prepared for the ramifications of what will happen next?”

For the first time in his life, Matteo faced his half-brother without anger and resentment. “I don't consider that man to be my father,” he explained. “His abuse over the years

was...” he stopped when Antonio’s features shifted to surprise. “What?” Matteo demanded. “You thought he just left me alone? I was his bastard son. He hated me from the moment I was conceived.”

“How the hell did he abuse you? You were sent off to boarding school!” Antonio snapped. “You got away from the bastard!”

Matteo realized that Antonio’s fury was real, that what he’d said earlier, about Ricardo’s abuse, might be true. So he told his half-brother what his father had done to him, even with an ocean separating them.

“He had me stuffed into an attic room by the headmaster of that boarding school. I was often denied food, water, blankets...there was no mattress to sleep on and the headmaster ensured that I wasn’t released until after the dining hall had closed, forcing me to skip meals regularly.”

Antonio’s demeanor changed. “Besides beating me whenever he felt the need, Father used to shove me into the castle’s dungeon for the smallest infractions. No food or water either.” Antonio’s jaw clenched. “He said it would make me stronger. He said depriving me of basic human needs would make me into a man.”

The two men stared at each other. Matteo was the first to react. “I had a savior who snuck food to me.”

Antonio’s eyes widened. “The woman I saw you with earlier?”

Matteo nodded, his lips curving into a slow, satisfied smile. “She’s my business partner. And will become my wife as soon as I can get a ring on her finger.”

Levi and Sean chuckled knowingly. “About time,” Sean muttered under his breath. To the rest of the men, he explained, “Matteo and Bailey have been nearly inseparable for as long as we’ve known them, even though both tried to pretend that their relationship was merely friendship.”

Zahir stepped into the room, listening to the conversation and observing the men. Finally, he spoke up and said, “Are all of you beaten down by women?”

“Beaten?” Sean laughed. Then he shook his head. His Irish accent thickened as he explained, “Ah, Your Highness, there’s no beating when the right lady comes along!”

Levi nodded his agreement and Matteo’s thoughts immediately turned to Bailey and how she’d been such an amazing person ever since the first day he’d met her. He looked at his half-brother, finding a kinship with him finally. “*Una mujer hermosa con un corazon generosa,*” he intoned. “She will make your life worth living.”

Zahir and Antonio both rolled their eyes. But they didn’t argue.

Chapter 10

Bailey stared at the vault, then looked around the room. “How did they get in?” she whispered, still confounded by the mystery.

She glanced up at the ceiling, noting the security cameras. She gave a little wave, knowing that the head of security was in the security office. Then she wandered around, determined to figure out how to make the laboratory more secure.

“Find anything?” a male voice asked.

Startled, Bailey jumped, then sighed with relief when she saw Tim coming towards her.

With a hand over her heart, she tried to breathe slowly to ease the surprise. “Nothing,” she admitted.

Tim moved to stand beside her. “I’ve gone through all of the possibilities over and over in the past few days, trying to figure out how someone could have broken in here and stolen the formula.”

“Matteo and I have done the same. Everyone on the security team has tried to figure it out as well.”

Tim shook his head, looking up at the high windows. “The only way into this room is through the doors.”

“And the doors are locked. The locks only release when someone uses their security badge,” Bailey continued.

Tim sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “We’ve checked with everyone and none of the staff’s security cards were used. I can’t figure out how someone got in here without using an employee badge.”

She turned slowly and looked up at him, working through possibilities in her head. “Do you think that the vault was opened during the day when the staff was here?”

Tim considered that probability for a moment. “Opening the vault would be a pretty major interruption to everyone’s day. The door is two feet thick and the combination is twenty-four characters long.” He walked over to the steel handle. “Even on the rare occasions that I open this door, I have to bring my cheat sheet with me. And that file on my computer is encrypted. Even if someone were to find the file with the security code on it, the numbers won’t work as is. Only I know what to add and subtract to the numbers on my cheat sheet to release the lock.”

There was a long silence as both of them looked around. “What are we missing?” she finally asked.

Tim looked down at her, then around at the lab. “Maybe he doesn’t have anything?”

She bit her lip, nodding. “That’s possible. But from what Matteo has seen, his father seemed confident that he had a formula, even if it’s not the correct one. And we don’t keep the formulas anywhere but in there.”

“I’m certain he doesn’t have the correct formula. The documents I keep in the vault are all fakes.”

There was a loud bang, then the sound of glass shattering.

Tim and Bailey spun around, shocked to find Ricardo standing in the lab. And he was pointing a gun at them! Since it wasn’t working hours, the lab was lit only by the security lights, which added an extra touch of menace.

“What the hell are you saying?” he growled, his voice low and terrifying.

Tim immediately stepped forward, pushing Bailey behind his back.

Bailey froze for a brief moment, but then moved to Tim’s side, needing to see what was going on. Perhaps her curiosity was going to get her hurt, but she couldn’t seem to suppress the need to see what was happening. Or maybe it

was a basic human instinct to try to watch a threat approaching.

Tim moved again, trying to shield her from Matteo's father, who was moving steadily closer.

As silently as possible, Bailey pulled open the drawer on one of the workstations behind her. She wasn't sure what was in the drawer, but anything that they could use as a weapon would be better than nothing.

Her fingers closed over something with a pointed tip. A pen? Or some sort of instrument? She'd barely gotten through chemistry with a C average, and lab equipment was foreign to her.

But she picked up the object and slipped it into Tim's hand. His fingers curled around it, but he didn't take his eyes off Ricardo as the other man moved between the tables.

"You're going to give me the correct formula," Ricardo stated firmly. He spoke with absolute conviction that his command would be followed.

"I don't have the complete formula," Tim replied.

Ricardo snorted. "You're the man who created the chemical. I know that you have it in your head." He moved closer. "You're a brilliant scientist. I'm sure that you will remember all of the ingredients." He gestured at the vault. "If the formula I got out of there isn't correct, why the hell do you have that thing in here?"

"Just for show," Tim explained, moving sideways as Ricardo shifted as well. Tim moved the sharp object in his hand as Ricardo shifted his grip on the pistol.

Tim didn't take his eyes from Ricardo as he moved towards the vault.

"Is it on a computer somewhere?" Ricardo demanded, his lip curling with fury. "You *will* get me that formula!"

"I can't," Tim replied, his voice smoothly confident. "I created the original formula over a decade ago. Not even I

can remember everything that went into the end product.” He shrugged and kept moving, keeping Bailey behind him and hiding the hand that was gripping the pen/knife/mysterious object.

“Then I will bring you back to Spain and keep you in my dungeon until you remember,” he declared, his tone implying that his solution was obvious.

“He doesn’t have a passport.” Bailey nearly choked on that claim. Tim traveled all over the world with ease. The man spoke at conferences, interviewed potential scientists, and conferred with various companies regarding a wide range of business and personal issues. No passport? What a load of baloney!

Ricardo sneered, obviously believing Tim. “I’m a Marquesso,” he scoffed. “I can get both of you through security easily.”

Tim shifted again, keeping himself between that madman and Bailey.

Bailey kept her eyes on Ricardo while her hands remained lightly on Tim’s waist, trying to anticipate where he would move next. She was trying to remain behind Tim, because she suspected her friend was trying to maneuver them towards something that could help them.

That’s when she remembered the security cameras. She glanced up at the ceiling, but Ricardo scoffed. “Your security team is watching a loop, *mi querida*. They have no idea that I’m here.”

Bailey’s heart sank. If the security guys were watching a loop, then Ricardo had help. She seriously doubted that Ricardo had the technical knowledge needed to create a video loop, much less install it. That meant that Ricardo wasn’t the only intruder to their building.

“We seriously need to update our security measures!” she whispered to Tim.

He nodded, but the movement of his head was only perceptible to Bailey. He shifted again, ostensibly because Ricardo was moving as well. He stopped at a worktable. He tapped her hand and she squeezed his waist, letting him know that she understood his silent message.

As quietly as possible, she pulled out another drawer as they inched by the workstation, trying to keep Ricardo a certain distance away from them. Sure enough, Bailey felt around and found several scalpels in the drawer. She pressed them into Tim's hand, and took a couple more for herself. She wasn't exactly sure what they could do with them, but she felt a smidge safer now that she had something sharp in her hand.

Still, Ricardo kept the gun pointed on them. So she still wasn't sure what they could do with the scalpels and pens. It's not like they could...!

Bailey saw something flash across the room. A split second later, something was sticking out of Ricardo's cheek!

Ricardo screamed in pain and shock, but he didn't drop the gun. Another flash, and there was a scalpel sticking out of the hand that, only moments before, had been holding the gun. The weapon was now on the floor while the older man gripped his bleeding hand, still not sure what was going on.

Neither did Bailey, for that matter.

And before she could remember to breathe, Matteo and three members of their security team pushed through the laboratory doors. The security team guys had their weapons drawn and aimed at a still-screaming, profusely-bleeding Ricardo. He was yelling in Spanish, words that Bailey hadn't ever heard before. And as soon as she saw Matteo, she threw herself into his arms.

"You're safe!" he muttered, pulling her close and burying his face in her hair as he pulled her close.

"I'm fine," she whispered back. "Thanks to Tim."

Matteo released her and straightened, looking behind her at the tall man who was casually cleaning the lenses of his glasses.

“What did you do?”

Tim shrugged, as if he hadn't just taken down a mad gunman. “Just a bit of knife throwing.” He glanced back at Ricardo over his shoulder, who was still screaming and swearing, clutching his wounded hand. The scalpel in his cheek was still there and Bailey felt a bit nauseous as they watched the security guards handcuff him.

Bailey's mouth fell open. “Just a bit of knife throwing? Where in the world did you learn to throw knives?”

He looked over at the man, then back at Matteo and Bailey. “No where. I just...watched a few videos about knife throwing. Then today, I calculated the speed and direction needed and...flung them in the right direction.”

Bailey and Matteo stared at their friend and partner, then Bailey laughed and walked over to hug him. “You're amazing!” she told him.

Tim hugged her back, then she stepped out of the way so that Matteo could do the same. The two men slapped each other on the back. Hard.

“I owe you,” Matteo whispered to Tim.

Tim grinned at Bailey, then shook his head. “No, you don't. Years ago, Bailey saved me,” he explained. “I was lost until she gave me direction with my idea.” He smiled and bumped his fist against her chin playfully. “Today was my way of paying her back for giving me the life I never thought I'd have.”

Bailey blinked back tears. “You're brilliant, Tim,” she told him firmly.

He shrugged her statement away. “I just know how to mix stuff together to make something useful.”

They laughed, considering that his “mixing stuff up” had created their entire empire. She hugged him again, then the police arrived. After that, it was chaos as several detectives showed up and took statements, Ricardo was taken to the hospital with two police officers escorting him. The whole time, he kept demanding that Matteo stop the “nonsense” and that he was merely there as a friend to help them with their “failing” business.

However, the district attorney was already involved, plus, there were reporters outside of the building, recording the ignominious transport of a “powerful” Spanish marquess being carted off with a scalpel still sticking out of his cheek. None of the paramedics wanted to take the scalpel out, just in case it was holding back the blood flow.

The story made international headlines, which Bailey and Matteo snickered at in Bailey’s penthouse condominium. Matteo cooked dinner, then took her to bed, making love to her until she was screaming his name. Only after that did he give her the release she craved. Only when he was assured that there wasn’t a scrape or bruise anywhere on her beautiful body, did he let her collapse on top of him. And even then, he still needed to touch her, to stroke her soft skin to keep assuring himself that she was unharmed.

“You’re going to have to marry me,” he announced as their breathing finally slowed.

They were surrounded by darkness, but neither could tell what time it was. It could be eight o’clock in the evening, or it could be just before dawn. They were too focused on each other to care about silly things such as time.

However, his words caused her heart, which had been relaxing just a moment ago, to speed up to its previous rapid rate.

“Excuse me?” she whispered, turning her head so she could look at him. Since she was draped over the top of him, she was able to look right down into his handsome features.

“Marry me, Bailey.” His fingers dove into her hair as he cradled her head with his big strong hands. “Marry me and let’s make a family together.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Under a few conditions.”

“What’s that?” he asked, sitting up and shifting so that she was underneath him.

“If our children get into trouble, you won’t *ever* put them in an attic.”

He froze, then kissed her lightly. “Never. No attics!”

“And they will always get a meal.”

“Every meal. I will cook for you, and our children, every night. We will become fat with the amount of food I will prepare every night. And no matter what they do, no matter how naughty they act, I will *never* deny them a meal,” he vowed.

“Thank you!” she whispered. “I didn’t think you would, but I needed to make that clear.”

“Anything else?”

She considered her next request for a moment, and then just blurted it out. “I want to get to know your half-brother.”

Matteo stilled, his hands freezing on the small of her back. He looked at her, his mind going in a thousand different directions. Then he nodded. “*Si*. This will happen,” he promised.

Bailey grinned. “Good. Then yes. Let’s get married and have a dozen children!”

She laughed as he kissed her again, her laughter muffled by his lips. When he lifted his mouth this time, he said, “I love you, Bailey.”

Her heart melted with his words. “I love you, too.”

Epilogue

Bailey watched as Kennedy, Clarissa, Mandy, and Emily walked down the center aisle of the beautiful church. The sun shimmered through the stained glass windows and she peered around the ladies to catch a glimpse of Matteo. When she spotted his tall, handsome form standing impatiently at the front of the church, her heart melted for the man who had been her friend for so long.

“Your turn,” the wedding coordinator whispered.

Bailey stepped out and beamed as the congregation stood. She couldn't see the others now, but knew that Matteo was standing at the front with Levi, Sean, Tim, and Antonio by his side. Even Zahir had flown in for the ceremony, although he was in the congregation. Bailey noted that the immaculately dressed sheik wasn't watching her as so many of the others were. Instead, he was staring at one of Bailey's attendants. Which one? Was he interested in Mandy or Emily? She wasn't sure, but she lost track of the thought as she stepped up to Matteo. When he took her hands and gazed down at her with the scorching heat in his eyes, she couldn't think about anything other than this man.

They'd been friends for so long, but now...now he was her lover. And her fiancé.

“I love you,” she whispered to him.

He squeezed her hands and they moved closer. The minister hesitated, then proceeded with the ceremony.

Bailey didn't hear much of the words, too fascinated with this man. But when the minister finally said, “You may kiss the bride,” she didn't hesitate. Stepping forward, she lifted her face to him. Moments later, she was lifted into Matteo's arms. Gone was the formidable and formal man she'd known forever. In his place was a voracious lover who didn't care that he was wrinkling her silk dress.

Nor did she. This was her husband now! Her husband!

“Finally,” he groaned as he slowly released her, letting her feet touch the floor.

Bailey laughed and turned her beaming face to the cheering crowd.

A message from Elizabeth:

I had to ruminate on Matteo’s story for a bit. I wanted him to be quiet and pensive – which is why I paired him with Bailey. I love the matching of a quiet, stern man with a vivacious woman! I hope that the characters came across accurately in my writing.

As with every story, could you take just a moment to leave a review for me? Here’s a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!

As usual, if you don’t want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com. I answer all e-mails personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don’t be offended if I don’t respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.

Elizabeth

Keep scrolling for a sneak peek at the next book in The Billionaires Club series titled “The Shiek’s Kiss”.

Excerpt from “The Sheik’s Kiss”

Release Date: April 19, 2024

Click [HERE](#) to get Mandy & Sheik Zahir’s story!

“I apologize for arriving on your doorstep without any notice. However, I have need of your services.”

Services? Was he...? Did he think she was...?!

Her eyes narrowed up and she stepped backwards. “I’m an accountant, Your Highness,” she snapped, instantly picturing him making love to her. And because that image was too... enticing, her voice came out a bit sharper than she’d anticipated. “Those are the only services that I offer.”

He tilted his head slightly. “Exactly.” There was a slight curling of his lips as he stared at her. “What services were you thinking I needed?”

Mandy’s lips pressed together but she didn’t answer him. “Would you like to come inside?”

“I would be honored,” he replied, his voice deep and his dark eyes laughing at her.

She ignored his amusement as well as the heat burning in her cheeks. Glancing around him, she spotted several men in dark suits and strange bulges under their coats. “Do they need to search my house first?” She looked up at him. “I highly doubt there are any assassins inside, but maybe they should check first.”

He chuckled without a backward glance at his bodyguards. “I think it’s safe enough.”

Still, she hesitated. Not because she thought there was anything dangerous in her house. But because she considered HIM to be dangerous. To her!

Knowing that she didn't have an alternative since her new company depended on referrals to stay in business, Mandy nodded and fumbled with her tote bag, looking for her housekeys. "Fine. But if anyone jumps out of a closet and attacks, then I'm not going to be responsible for kicking their butts!"

While Zahir chuckled at her warning, Mandy turned to unlock her front door. Pushing the door open, Mandy headed straight to her kitchen. Without hesitation, she stuffed the bag of faux-groceries into the pantry, then pressed it closed, praying that he didn't ask her what she'd bought at the store.

Those dark, penetrating eyes glanced at the now-closed door, then into her hazel eyes, one dark eyebrow lifting in inquiry. "You don't need to put any of those groceries into the fridge?"

Mandy's mind immediately thought about the precious cherry vanilla ice cream. But one look at those dark eyes and she quickly shook her head. There wasn't a chance in hell that she was going to dive into that bag of embarrassing wanna-be food to extract her ice cream. She'd just let it melt and...hey, even melted ice cream was delicious. After a root canal, a failed car inspection, and discovering that her driver's license needed to be renewed – a task that would most likely take more than half a day standing in line at the department of motor vehicles – she wasn't in the mood for yet another humiliation.

"What can I do for you, Your Highness?" she asked.

He leaned against the counter, his arms crossing over his chest. The movement only brought her attention to the straining material. His muscles bulged underneath the suit jacket and...why was the man wearing a suit on a Saturday? In her world, Saturdays were spent in leggings and sweatshirts. Hence, her less than flattering ensemble at the moment. Somehow, she resisted the urge to smooth her hand

over her hair, even though the odds were that there were defiant locks sticking out in odd directions.

“I need your professional assistance,” he began.

Mandy’s head tilted in confusion. “You don’t have accountants on your staff?”

“Yes,” he replied quickly. “Of course, I have a whole department of accountants.” He sighed and she realized he wasn’t completely comfortable with the conversation. For some reason, that gave her a small pang. “The job I have in mind needs more of a forensic accounting service. And I’d like to keep this personal and separate from state business.”

Mandy’s wariness dissipated. This project sounded intriguing. Mandy straightened up and looked at him curiously. “Okay. I love digging into numbers and finding the secrets that people are trying to hide.” It was one of her favorite things to do, in fact. “Who do you need me to dig into? And what secrets do you think they might be hiding?”

“I don’t know who yet, and I have no idea what kinds of secrets they might be hiding.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “There are actually two situations I need help with, although one is more of a front for the other.” He stood up and looked out through the small window over Mandy’s kitchen sink. There was a long silence, then he turned around and blurted, “I have ended my engagement.”

That was startling news. Mandy ignored the spurt of joy that was her first reaction. But she quickly remembered that his breakup shouldn’t be cause for celebration. At least, not her celebration.

Pasting on a concerned expression, Mandy said, “I’m so sorry, Your Highness. Ms. Nasiri is a lovely and talented woman. I thought the two of you would...”

She stopped because she didn’t know the other woman. Hell, she didn’t even know this man. So how could she possibly have an opinion on their relationship? Trying to come up with

a benign response, she said, “Well, the two of you made a beautiful couple.”

He turned back, his mouth twisted into a derisive twist. “Yes, well, that’s probably true. But with new information discovered about my previous fiancée, I suspect that whatever offspring we created would have been spoiled brats.” He sighed and fisted his hands on the countertop of her tiny kitchen. “I need to find a new wife and I need you to help me.”

She almost laughed at the absurdity of his request. “You need me to help you find a new fiancée?”

“Sort of,” he replied, then shook his head.

**Click [HERE](#) to get Mandy &
Sheik Zahir’s story!**