







# Crimson Reign

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** I should be dead the moment the Carusos caged me.

Then Matteo Bellanti stormed in—and claimed me instead.

He's the Syndicate's most ruthless fixer.

Built to break men, not save women.

But when he pulled me from that hell, survival wasn't enough.

Now I'm his to protect.

Trapped in his world.

Forced into his bed for safety... and losing myself with every stolen touch.

He's brutal with the world.

But with me?

He's possessive. Gentle. Addictive.

Enemies want me silenced.

They've put a price on my head—and my daughter's.

But Matteo doesn't share.

Not his woman. Not the family we're becoming.

They'll have to kill him first.

Because he'll destroy anyone who tries to take me away.

Even if it means becoming the monster I never knew I craved.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

1

## Prologue

I thought I knew terror.

I was wrong.

Terror isn't the sharp crack of gunfire that shattered our bedroom window three months ago. It isn't watching my husband's body jerk as bullets tore through him, or the way his blood felt, hot and sticky between my fingers as I begged him to stay with me.

Real terror comes after.

It's seeing your eighteen-month-old daughter's innocent face and knowing the same monsters who murdered her father could snuff out her life without blinking.

It's being forced to sit in this dimly lit room in the Carusos compound, processing their paperwork, knowing one wrong move means Fiona pays the price.

The clock on the wall ticks past midnight. Fiona sleeps peacefully in the makeshift crib they've allowed me to keep in here—a cruel kindness, a reminder of what I have to lose. Her dark curls are damp with sweat, little fingers curled into fists. She looks so much like Mark, it makes my chest ache.

They don't know what I have. What Mark died protecting. The USB drive remains

safely hidden in the place I hid it the night they captured us. Its contents would bring their entire empire crashing down.

But I can't use it. Not while they have me and Fiona under their thumb.

A door slams somewhere in the compound, followed by shouting.

I stiffen, my heart rate spiking. Usually, the night shift is quiet, but something's different tonight. The guards are running, their boots thundering down the hallway outside our room.

More gunshots. Closer this time.

Fiona stirs, and I'm already moving, scooping her up before she can cry. I press her face against my shoulder, humming softly to keep her quiet as chaos erupts beyond our locked door.

Something is happening. Something big enough to scatter the Carusos' usually disciplined soldiers like rats from a sinking ship.

The doorknob rattles.

I back away, clutching Fiona tighter as the lock clicks. When the door swings open, I'm expecting Massimo Caruso's sneering face or one of his thugs.

Instead, I stare into gray eyes that are as dark and merciless as a starless night. A man I've only seen in whispered rumors and newspaper clippings.

The feared fixer of the Bellanti family.

Matteo Bellanti.

Blood stains his expensive suit, but his hands are steady on the gun pointed at us.

And in this moment, as his gaze meets mine, I realize I have a choice to make.

Because sometimes salvation comes wearing the devil's face, and sometimes the only way out of hell is to make a deal with a different demon.

Fiona whimpers against my neck, and I see something flicker in his deadly eyes.

Something that makes me think maybe, just maybe, this demon might be my only chance at keeping my daughter alive.

God help me, I'm about to find out.

2

Matteo

Mercyhasaprice, and I collect mine with interest.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Fifteen years ago, I watched Massimo Caruso walk away from the Commission with his life—a mercy he never deserved. He broke Omertà when the 'Ndrangheta made a move on American territory, and he handed them secrets that weren't his to give.

Supply routes. Safe houses. The inner workings of the Five Families. His betrayal bled the Syndicate dry, costing millions and leaving a trail of bodies.

And what did the Commission do? Strip him of power, exile him to the scraps of the underworld—but let him live.

A mistake.

One I intend to fix.

The silencer on my gun makes a pfft sound as I put a bullet through the skull of the east entrance guard. He drops instantly, the light in his eyes snuffed out before he even registers his death. I catch his body before it hits the ground, dragging it behind the thick hedges that line the compound.

Three down. Ten more to go.

The night air is crisp, carrying the scent of expensive cigars and cheaper cologne. Massimo always had shit taste in men.

I move like a shadow across the manicured lawn, my tailored suit allowing for perfect mobility.

This estate shouldn't exist. Not after what he did.

But Massimo has spent the last few years clawing his way back. Not through respect. Not through alliances. Through force. Through greed.

He's been creeping into protected territories, sinking his claws into legitimate businesses under our protection, using intimidation tactics on civilians—shop owners, old men who've paid tribute for decades, families who should be off-limits.

He's rerouting drugs through corridors he has no right to, stepping on the toes of men who've killed for less. And worst of all? He's stopped paying tribute to the families whose territories he's poisoning with his filth.

No respect. No loyalty. No fucking consequences.

Until now.

My phone vibrates once in my pocket. Valentino's signal that the power to the security cameras will cut in thirty seconds. I count down in my head, positioning myself against the wall of the main house.

Twenty. Fifteen. Ten.

Then the floodlights die, plunging the property into darkness. I slip on my night vision glasses and move.

Two guards panic near the pool house, drawing their weapons as they fumble with their radios.

Amateurs.



I drop the first one with a clean shot to the temple. The second turns toward me before my knife finds his throat, severing his ability to call for help along with his carotid artery.

Twodown. Eight more to go

I wipe my blade on the dead man's jacket before re-sheathing it.

Just last week, his men beat three shopkeepers in our neighborhood who refused to switch their protection payments. One of them was old man Vitelli, who's been making cannoli for my family since I was a child.

No onetouches what belongs to the Bellanti. Which is why I volunteered when the commission said it was time for Massimo to go.

A digital lock secures the side entrance to the house. Against it, I place the small device that Lorenzo acquired from our tech team. Three seconds later, the door clicks open.

Inside, the house is quiet except for muffled voices coming from upstairs. I move through the kitchen, noting the half-empty bottle of Macallan on the counter. His taste in whiskey is superior to his taste in cologne, at least.

A guard appears at the end of the hallway, already drawing his weapon. I fire twice—center mass and he crumples to the ground.

One down. Seven to go.

The voices grow louder as I ascend the stairs, stepping over the expensive Persian carpet.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Massimo's voice isn't among them.

I pause outside the door, listening for the guard. A floorboard creaks to my right, and I pivot, firing once. The guard drops, his gun clattering to the floor.

One more down. But Massimo isn't here.

I kick open the door.

Massimo isn't behind it. But someone else is.

Movement catches my eye—a flash of dark hair as someone ducks behind the large leather chair. I train my gun toward the space, finger steady on the trigger.

"Come out. Slowly."

A woman rises, trembling with fear in her amber eyes. She's holding something close to her chest—a child. A little girl with dark curls, no more than two years old, sleeping despite the chaos.

"Please," the woman whispers, her voice steady despite the fear in her eyes. "I need help."

I keep my gun trained on her, assessing. She's beautiful in that natural way. Long dark hair with auburn highlights, olive skin, amber eyes, no makeup. No visible weapons.

"Who are you?" I ask, not lowering my weapon.

"Elena Martinez." She shifts the child slightly. "This is my daughter, Fiona. We're prisoners here."

I've seen women in these situations before. Massimo has a taste for keeping "entertainment" in his compounds. But something about her doesn't fit that profile.

"I'm sorry for your situation," I tell her, already calculating how to extract them safely before I finish my business here. "I'll arrange for you to be kept safe, given a new life away from here."

I turn to leave, needing to track down Massimo, but her next words freeze me in place.

"I have evidence about the Caruso's human trafficking operations." Her voice drops lower. "Evidence that would be valuable to the Bellanti."

Human trafficking. The lowest violation of our code.

I turn back slowly. "How do you know who I am?"

She gestures toward the desk with its newspaper clippings. The newspaper clippings pin every member of my family to the desk, with my photo prominently in the center. Looks like Massimo has been keeping tabs on us.

"I've been their prisoner for three months," she continues. "I know things that could eradicate them."

I step closer, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. "And what do you want in

exchange for this information?"

"Protection." Her eyes flick to her sleeping daughter. "For both of us. The Caruso will hunt us down if you don't help. They've already killed my husband."

"What kind of evidence?"

"I have it all on a USB drive. Financial records, locations, names. Everything."

Before I can respond, a noise from the hallway alerts me. I push Elena behind me, raising my weapon just as Roberto Caruso appears in the doorway, his gun already drawn.

Massimo's younger brother. His second in command.

"Well, well," Roberto sneers, his weapon trained on us. "The infamous Matteo Bellanti, breaking into our home. And I see you've met our little accountant and her brat."

Elena stiffens behind me, her breath catching.

Roberto's eyes narrow with cruel amusement. "Did she tell you how her husband died? How we made it look like an accident? The man was too smart for his own good, just like his pretty wife."

His finger tightens on the trigger, but I'm faster. My bullet catches him between the eyes, his body dropping to the floor with a heavy thud.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"We need to move," I tell her, already planning a plan. "My men are outside. Can you walk?"

She nods, eyes fixed on Roberto's body.

"Good. Stay close to me."

We make it outside without incident. My team has already started cleaning up, working efficiently in the darkness. I guide Elena to one of the waiting SUVs, helping her into the backseat with her still-sleeping daughter.

I'm about to give orders when Valentino runs up, phone extended.

"Boss, you need to see this."

The screen displays a message sent to every major player in our world.

\$20 million for the woman and child, dead or alive.

With Elena and her daughter's picture right below.

Someone must have tipped Massimo off about our operation before we arrived.

Massimo's allies now know Elena Martinez is with the Bellanti—and they know she's talking.

I look back at the woman in the car, clutching her daughter, waiting for me to decide

their fate.

"Change of plans," I tell him. "We're taking them to my private safe house. No one else knows about it."

"Not even the family?"

"No one," I repeat. "Not until I verify what she knows."

I slide into the backseat beside Elena, nodding to the driver to move. She looks at me with a mixture of fear and hope that makes something uncomfortable twist in my chest.

"What happens now?" she asks quietly.

"Now I take you somewhere safe and you tell me everything," I reply. "And we see if your information is worth as much as the price on your head."

The drive to the safe house is silent except for Elena's occasional sighs and the quiet hum of the engine. Her daughter remains asleep, oblivious to the chaos that just changed the course of her life.

We finally get to the safe house. It's small, practical, and easy to defend.

"This is where we're staying?" she asks, her voice quieter now that we're alone.

"Yes." I shrug off my jacket, setting my gun on the kitchen counter within easy reach. "It's safe. No one knows about this place."

She exhales, tension still clear in her shoulders. "Thank you."

I don't acknowledge the gratitude. Instead, I pull out my phone and dial Nico. He picks up on the second ring.

"This better be important," he mutters.

"It is."

A pause. Then, "Where are you?"

"My safe house. There is a situation. "

There's a brief pause before he responds. "That's funny. You call me when you need something, but when I asked for your help to move a couch last week, you suddenly disappeared."

I rub a hand over my face. "I was busy."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Yeah, yeah. Too busy to help your favorite brother-in-law.”

“You’re my only brother-in-law.”

“Which automatically makes me the favorite.”

I hear a rustle and Isabella's voice filters over the phone. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Nico replies.

A second later, she’s on the line. “Matteo? What’s happening?”

“Nothing you need to be involved in,” I say firmly. “Stay out of it.”

“I can help,” she insists.

“No,” Nico and I say at the same time.

There's a beat of silence, then she mutters, “You both suck.”

Nico sighs. “She’s mad now. Thanks for that.”

I smirk. “You’ll survive.”

“You know she’s going to come with me, right?”

Dammit.



I exhale sharply. "Yeah."

"I'll be there in the morning." His tone shifts, the playfulness fading. "Whatever this is, you good?"

I glance at Elena, who's standing at the kitchen entrance, pretending not to eavesdrop while shifting Fiona in her arms.

"I will be once I figure out what the hell I just walked into."

We hang up, and I turn back to find Elena, who's watching me with a raised brow.

"Eavesdropping is a disgusting habit," I tell her.

She doesn't even blink. "You can't blame me. I need to know what I'm getting involved in."

Yeah, same.

I exhale sharply, already exhausted. "Take the bedroom. I'll take the couch."

She hesitates but nods, disappearing into the room.

I sit back on the couch, gun resting on the table beside me. I don't close my eyes. Not yet.

Because this isn't over...

And before morning, I need to figure out exactly what kind of war I just started.

Elena

Iwakewithascreamdying in my throat. It's the same nightmare.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Mark's shocked face, eyes wide as the bullet pierced his chest, remains indelibly etched in my memory. The terror of that night lives in my bones now.

Every night, the same dream. For the past three months, I watch my husband die again and again and again, every time I go to sleep.

I sit up in the unfamiliar bed, my heart hammering. The clock on the nightstand reads 2:17 AM. Beside me, Fiona sleeps peacefully. At least the nightmares can't touch her.

This safe house is sparse but clean—a modest one-bedroom apartment that Matteo Bellanti apparently owns through some shell company.

It's intentionally small, easier to defend. The neighborhood is quiet, unsuspecting. No one would look for us here.

Three months ago, my life was normal. A husband who loved me, a beautiful daughter, a career I excelled at. Now I'm hiding in a mafia enforcer's safe house with a price on my head.

I slip out of bed and pad barefoot to the kitchen, careful not to wake Fiona. I need water.

The apartment is dark except for a soft hallway nightlight. I pause in the living room. Matteo is asleep on the couch, his large frame barely fitting.

His feet hang over the armrest, his arm draped across his face. In sleep, the hard

edges of his face soften. He looks almost vulnerable—not like the man who killed several people just hours ago.

I move quietly, wincing when the cabinet creaks as I grab a glass and take a bottle of water from the fridge.

Mark and I met six years ago at a financial forensics conference in Chicago.

We were the same nerd—detail-oriented, fascinated by tracing money trails. I never believed in soulmates until Mark.

When he got the job at Ashcroft & Partners, we were ecstatic. The prestigious firm offered him twice his previous salary. It was surreal. We bought our first house, had Fiona. Life was good.

Until he discovered the firm was laundering money for the Caruso crime family. His meticulous nature—the very thing that made him brilliant—led him to uncover their entire operation. The human trafficking. The ritual cult. All of it.

I didn't know what he'd found until it was too late.

Until they broke into our home and shot him in front of me.

I set the empty glass of water down and notice a stack of blankets in the hall closet. Matteo must be cold.

Before I can think better of it, I grab one and approach the couch.

I'm about to drape it over him when his hand shoots out, gripping my wrist so tightly I gasp. His eyes are instantly alert, cold, assessing.

“What are you doing?” His voice is quiet, but dangerous.

He has rolled up his black shirtsleeves to the elbows, revealing forearms covered in intricate tattoos—dark spirals and symbols crawling from his knuckles all the way up his arms. More ink peeks above his collar, disappearing beneath the sharp line of his jaw. But what draws my eye are the scars—jagged, puckered burn marks spreading across the back of his hand and fingers.

“I—I was getting you a blanket. You looked cold.”

His eyes narrow.

“Not sure what you’re so worried about,” I retort, surprising myself.

He releases my wrist, sitting up in one fluid motion. His precisely cut dark hair doesn’t even look rumpled despite sleep. “Go back to bed.”

I drop the blanket beside him. “Fine. Sorry for trying to be decent.”

“You’re in a building with a killer who just slaughtered several men. Your concept of decency needs recalibration.”

“Those same men worked for the people who murdered my husband,” I say, rubbing my wrist. “I have a perfectly calibrated sense of decency, thank you.”

My gaze drops to the burns on his hands. “What happened there?”

His angular face hardens. “Work,” he replies, tugging his sleeve down in a practiced motion, covering most of the tattoos, but not before I glimpse what looked like a saint’s face inked into his skin.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"Get some sleep," he finally said, his tone softer. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

I should go back to bed. Instead, I ask, "Do the nightmares ever go away?"

His expression shifts. "No," he exhales sharply. "They change. Sometimes they fade. But they don't disappear."

A cry from the bedroom saves me from having to respond. Fiona is awake.

"Elena." Matteo's voice stops me. "The USB drive. Where is it?"

"Somewhere safe," I reply. "I'll give it to you when I know Fiona and I are safe."

I feel his gaze on my back as I walk away, but he doesn't follow. In the bedroom, I lift Fiona into my arms, soothing her with gentle words until she settles.

"We're going to be okay," I whisper, more to convince myself than her.

Tomorrow, I'll share what I know about the Carusos' operations. Tomorrow, I'll have to navigate a world of killers to secure a future for my daughter.

Morning light filters through the thin curtains. For a moment, disoriented, I reach for Mark before reality crashes back. He's gone.

We're in hiding.

The smell of coffee drifts from the kitchen. I change Fiona's diaper, dress her, and

step into the living room.

Three people turn to look at me. Matteo, dressed in another impeccable suit, stands near the window. Beside him is a striking woman with warm green eyes.

The third man's icy gaze makes my stomach tighten.

The Reaper. Nico Moretti.

"Elena," Matteo says, his voice calm. "This is my sister Isabella and her husband, Nico."

Isabella inhales sharply. "I heard about what happened...." She shakes her head. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

I force a painful smile. "Thank you."

She gestures to several bags on the counter. "Clothes for you and the little one, food, toiletries."

I nod, unsure of what to say. I've seen their files, heard whispers about them while held by Massimo.

Isabella runs the Bellanti family's legitimate businesses. Nico Moretti, once the Moretti family's feared enforcer, married into the Bellanti to seal an alliance.

Massimo gloated that their marriage was a disaster, that the alliance would crumble. But looking at them now, I can see he was wrong.

"Thank you," I say.

Isabella's eyes soften as she looks at Fiona. "She's beautiful. May I?"

I hesitate, then nod. She gently strokes Fiona's cheek.

"We need to discuss security arrangements," Matteo says. "Nico and I will step outside."

The two men moved toward the door, their footsteps echoing slightly as they left Isabella, my daughter, and me alone.

Once they're gone, Isabella guides me to the kitchen table. A cup of coffee sits there.

"He made that for you," she says. "My brother."

I take a sip. It's perfect.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“How did he know I take it this way?”

Isabella smiles. “Lucky guess?”

“I have a son,” she says, playfully poking Fiona’s cheeks. “He’s with my sister today. Having children in this world... I understand your fear, Elena. The constant worry that they might become targets.”

“You chose this life,” I say before I can stop myself.

She doesn’t flinch. “Yes, and no. I was born into the Bellanti family. The business side was my choice. The rest...” She shrugs. “We do what we must with the cards we’re dealt.”

The door opens as Matteo and Nico return. Their expressions are grim.

“We need to see what’s on the drive,” Matteo says.

I take Fiona back from Isabella. “I need your word first. Your explicit promise that you’ll protect my daughter, no matter what happens to me.”

Matteo’s eyes lock with mine. “You have my word. I will protect Fiona and you with my life.”

I retrieve the USB drive from Fiona’s diaper bag and hand it to Matteo. He sets up a laptop.

"May I?" Nico asks, holding out his hands for Fiona.

I raise my brows, surprise coursing through my veins.

I guess having a kid has made him soft.

After a moment's hesitation, I hand her over. She settles against him easily.

Then I insert the USB into the laptop and open the first video file. The room falls silent. Girls being loaded into shipping containers. Massimo Caruso inspecting the "merchandise."

"Human trafficking," I explain. "Financial trails, client lists, routes."

The second folder makes even Nico look away. Ritualistic murder scenes.

"They're part of a Sicilian cult," I explain, fighting nausea. "Mark found documentation linking them to at least thirty missing women."

The final folder makes Matteo and Nico tense. A video of an elderly man. Moments later, Massimo enters—and the man is dead.

"That's Don Vittorio Calabrese," Nico breathes. "Head of the Sicilian Commission."

"Yes," I confirm. "Mark found proof the Caruso murdered him and blamed it on heart failure."

Silence hangs in the air.

"This isn't just about crimes," Matteo says. "This information would make them targets of every mafia family."

I meet his gaze. “Mark died for this. Now it’s all I have to bargain with.”

Matteo closes the laptop. When he looks at me, something like understanding flickers in his eyes.

“You were right to tell me,” he says. “This changes everything.”

“What happens now?”

Matteo glances at Nico, his eyes filled with something I can't decipher.

“Now,” Matteo says, “we go to war.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Matteo

Something is wrong.

Bang!

The sound of glass shattering jolts me awake.

My body reacts before my mind fully registers what's happening. I grab my gun and hurry to the bedroom.

"Elena!" I call out, keeping my voice low but urgent.

Gunshots hit the wall beside me, and I duck, returning fire without hesitation. Two shots, two bodies hit the floor. But there are more coming.

"Matteo!" Elena's voice, sharp with fear. At least she's awake and hopefully unhurt.

I back toward the bedroom, maintaining cover fire as I go. "Get Fiona. Stay low. Move to the bathroom."

When I reach the bedroom, Elena is already clutching Fiona to her chest, the child mercifully asleep.

Elena's eyes are wide with terror, her body trembling.

"Caruso's men?" she whispers.

"Yes." I grab her arm, pulling her toward the bathroom. "Safe room behind the shower tile. Press the third tile from the left, second row down."

More glass shatters in the living room. Heavy footsteps. I count four, maybe five hostiles.

Elena follows my instructions, finding the hidden panel. The door slides open to reveal a steel-reinforced panic room barely big enough for two adults. She hesitates.

"What about you?"

"I'll hold them off. Go."

She shakes her head. "You'll die."

"Not today." I check my magazine. Six rounds left, plus another full clip in my pocket. "Get in the fucking room, Elena."

She cradles Fiona tighter and steps inside.

"Don't open this door for anyone but me or Nico. Understand?"

She nods, her eyes locked on mine. For a heartbeat, something passes between us. Then I close the panel, sealing them inside.

I position myself in the hallway, using the bedroom doorframe as cover. Two Caruso soldiers appear. I don't give them time to aim. Two shots, two more bodies on my floor.

My phone vibrates. A text from Julian: Two minutes out with backup.

Fucking Julian. He should have been here already, monitoring the perimeter.

If Elena and her daughter die because of his incompetence, I'll put a bullet in his skull myself.

Footsteps approach from the kitchen—they've found the back entrance. I'm outnumbered and running out of ammunition.

The first man rounds the corner, and I put a bullet between his eyes. The second grazes my shoulder before my return fire catches him in the throat.

The third man keeps covering, firing blindly around the corner. I count his shots, waiting for the empty chamber to click. When it comes, I surge forward. His eyes widen as I appear. My knife slides between his ribs with practiced precision.

Suddenly, the apartment goes quiet. Too quiet.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Then the front door crashes open.

I spin, weapon raised, only to find Julian standing there with three of my men.

"Boss, I—"

"Shut the fuck up." My voice is deadly calm. "You're three minutes late. You know what happens in three minutes? People die."

"The perimeter looked clear when we left—"

"Your job was to make sure it stayed clear." I step closer. "Elena and her daughter could have died because you weren't where you were supposed to be."

"I'm sorry—"

"Get this mess cleaned up."

I move back to the bathroom and open the hidden panel. "Elena, it's me. It's over."

She emerges with Fiona clutched to her chest.

"Are you hurt?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "We're fine." Her eyes narrow at the blood on my shirt. "You're not."

"It's nothing. Pack whatever you can. This location is compromised."

I call Nico. He immediately answers, "I heard."

"Yeah. Five of Caruso's men. We handled it."

"Bring them to the estate," he says. "It's the most secure location we have."

"Your house?" Since his father's death and his son's birth, Nico has guarded the estate fiercely.

"If they find this safe house, they might compromise your others too."

"Alright", I reply and hang up.

Elena finishes packing. "Where are we going?"

"My brother-in-law's estate. Nico Moretti's property is the most secure place in the city."

"The Reaper's house?"

"Don't call him that to his face," I advise with a hint of a smile. "He pretends to hate it, but secretly, he's flattered."

Outside, two black SUVs wait. I usher Elena and Fiona into the first, getting in after them.

During the drive to Nico's estate, Elena stares at me. "You killed those men without hesitation, like it was nothing. "



I meet her gaze. "Would you rather I'd hesitated and let them kill you and your daughter?"

She shakes her head. "No. Thank you for protecting us."

"I gave you my word and I intend to keep it."

Nico's estate sprawls across twenty acres, surrounded by heavy security. The iron gates open as our convoy approaches, revealing the expansive grounds and imposing stone mansion in the distance.

"This is where we'll be staying?" Elena asks, taking in the pristine landscaping and security cameras positioned discreetly along the perimeter.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Yes. No one gets in or out without Nico’s approval. You’ll be safe here till I take care of everything that’s going on.”

My siblings are already gathered—Lorenzo pacing, Olivia perched on a settee, Angelo by the window. Isabella rises to greet us, taking Fiona from Elena's arms.

"I'll show you to your room first," she tells Elena. "You can freshen up while Matteo briefs everyone."

Once they've gone, Lorenzo rounds on me. "What the fuck is happening, Matteo? First, you disappear for two days, then you call an emergency meeting and show up with some woman and her kid?"

"Sit down," I command, my tone leaving no room for argument. "All of you."

Then, I explain everything—the trafficking operation, the cult, the murders, the betrayals.

Lorenzo explodes from his chair. "This is perfect! We have everything we need to wipe those fuckers off the map."

"And start a citywide war?" Olivia counters. "That's exactly what the feds would love."

"Lorenzo's right that we need to act," Angelo interjects. "But we should be strategic."

I silence them with a sharp whistle. "Enough. We're not deciding anything tonight."

We sleep on it, reconvene tomorrow with cooler heads."

They bid their goodbyes and leave.

Nico holds me back afterward. "Come with me."

I make my way to his study, where he pours his prized whiskey into two glasses.

"You need to be careful, Matteo."

I raise an eyebrow. "I'm always careful."

"Not with enemies. With the woman." He takes a sip. "I recognize it because it's how I looked at Isabella before I admitted to myself what she meant to me."

"That's different—"

"Just remember, in our world, the people we care about become weapons our enemies can use against us."

As if summoned, Elena appears in the doorway, wearing fresh clothes that make her look smaller, more vulnerable.

"Isabella put Fiona down for a nap," she explains. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Not at all," Nico says smoothly. "I was just leaving to check on my wife."

Once he's gone, Elena steps into the study, her eyes taking in the leather-bound books and guns.

"Your daughter is settling in, okay?" I ask, trying to ignore the way the evening light

catches in her hair.

"She's adaptable." Elena wraps her arms around herself. "More than I am, probably."

I say nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"I need to ask you something," she says finally. "And I need you to be honest."

I nod once.

"Will you teach me how to defend myself?" The words come out in a rush. "I want to protect Fiona if it comes down to it. I can't always rely on you or your family being there."

I study her face, surprised by the request. "It won't be easy."

"I don't need easy. I need to keep my daughter safe."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

After a moment's consideration, I nod. "We can start tonight, after dinner. The east wing has a training room."

The training room is sparse and functional—mats covering the floor, mirrors along one wall and various equipment organized neatly along the other.

Elena meets me here dressed in workout clothes.

"First rule: forget everything you've seen in movies. Real self-defense isn't pretty or fair."

She nods, her expression serious.

"Second rule: you're smaller than most attackers will be. Use that to your advantage rather than trying to match strength."

I position myself behind her, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from her body. "If someone grabs you from behind—"

My arms encircle her, and immediately I realize my mistake. Her scent—something floral with an underlying sweetness that must be uniquely hers—fills my senses. I exhale sharply, my breath hitting the soft curve of her neck.

She goes still in my arms, her breath catching.

"You—" My voice sounds rough to my own ears. I clear my throat. "You want to drop your weight like this—"

I guide her through the movement, hyperaware of every point where our bodies connect. When she successfully breaks my hold and spins to face me, her cheeks are flushed, and there's a sheen of sweat on her skin.

"Like that?" she asks, her voice slightly breathless.

"Yes. Good." I step back, putting the distance between us. "Now we'll practice strikes. The most vulnerable points on an attacker are..."

The door swings open, and Isabella walks in, her eyebrows shooting up as she takes in the scene.

"Sorry to interrupt your... training," she says, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Elena, Fiona's asking for you."

Elena nods, oddly flustered. "Thank you. I'll go to her now." She hesitates, glancing back at me. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Same time," I confirm.

Once she's gone, Isabella turns to me with a knowing smile. "Well, well."

"Don't start," I warn.

"Start what? Pointing out the obvious? That you're falling for her?"

I busy myself with re-wrapping my hand wraps. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. She's under my protection. That's all."

"Matteo." My sister's voice turns serious. "I've known you my entire life. I've seen you with dozens of women. But never have I seen you look at any of them the way

you look at her."

"And how do I look at her?" I challenge.

Isabella's smile turns soft. "The same way Nico looks at me."

The simple statement hits me with unexpected force. I want to deny it, to laugh it off as ridiculous. But lying to my sister has never worked.

Instead, I remain silent, which Isabella correctly interprets as confirmation.

"Be careful, brother," she says quietly. "Not because I disapprove, but because I've never seen you care for someone that isn't family. It might not end up well. "

The realization settles over me that my sister might be right.

And that, more than any Caruso hitman, is what truly frightens me.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Elena

A week has passed since Matteo brought us to Nico Moretti's estate.

I expected it to feel like another prison. Another place where I was someone else's problem, existing under someone else's protection.

Instead, I've found something I never expected in a mafia compound—comfort.

Fiona has taken a surprising liking to Matteo. She follows him with wide eyes whenever he's around, tugging at his sleeve when she wants to be picked up.

And even more surprising? He lets her. I've caught him more than once absentmindedly balancing her on his arm while talking to his men, like she's always belonged there.

Then there's Julian Salvatore, one of Matteo's men, who has an undeniable soft spot for my daughter. I often find him sneaking her sweets late at night. When I tease him about it, he only smirks. "She's got good taste. Can't say no to a girl who likes chocolate."

I'm still trying to wrap my head around this place, these people. Matteo is supposed to be dangerous. Brutal. But he's not the only one defying expectations.

Like Isabella.

She and I have spent most mornings together, and despite her last name, she's



nothing like the image I had of mafia women. She's warm, sharp-witted, and effortlessly kind. Today, we're in the kitchen, hands dusted with flour as we shape dough into neat circles.

"I can't believe you know how to bake," she says, watching as I roll out dough.

I laugh. "Why? Because I was married to an accountant?"

"No, because you're calm about it," she replies. "Matteo treats cooking like a war zone. He acts like he's defusing a bomb every time he uses the stove."

A deep voice cuts in behind us. "I heard that."

I glance over my shoulder to see Matteo leaning in the doorway, arms crossed.

Isabella grins. "Good. Maybe you'll learn something."

Before Matteo can retort, the kitchen door swings open wider, and Nico Moretti walks in with a small boy perched on his hip. The child is the spitting image of Isabella, with the same striking green eyes and a mop of dark curls that bounce with each step his father takes.

"Someone's been asking for his mama," Nico says with a warm smile, his eyes softening as he gazes at Isabella. The little boy reaches out eagerly, his chubby hands opening and closing.

"Adrian!" Isabella's face lights up as she quickly wipes her flour-covered hands on her apron. "Come here, my little prince." She takes him from Nico, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

Nico slides an arm around his wife's waist, dropping a casual kiss on her temple. "He

woke up from his nap insisting on finding you. Apparently, Papa isn't good enough when there are cookies being made."

"Smart boy," Isabella teases, adjusting Adrian on her hip. "He knows where the real magic happens."

"Just like his mother," Nico murmurs, his eyes filled with something that makes Isabella's cheeks flush slightly. "Always knowing exactly what she wants."

Matteo steps forward, ruffling his nephew's curls. "Hey, campione. Want to play with your favorite uncle?"

Adrian squeals in delight, reaching for Matteo with grabby hands. "Teo! Up!"

"The kid has good taste," Matteo says smugly as he takes Adrian, tossing him gently in the air and catching him, eliciting delighted giggles.

Isabella watches them fondly before turning to me. "I'm sorry about the interruption. Adrian has Nico's timing."

"And his mother's determination," Nico adds with a proud grin.

I smile warmly. "I can see that."

From the living room adjoining the kitchen, I glance at the baby monitor showing Fiona fast asleep in her toddler bed, her little chest rising and falling steadily. At least one child is getting their nap today.

Matteo turns to me, Adrian now contentedly playing with his collar. "Our Father wants us all at dinner tonight."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I pause mid-roll. “Me too?”

“Yes.”

The idea of sitting at a table with his entire family makes my stomach tighten.

I've heard stories about Luca Bellanti. Both good and bad. And honestly, although Isabella and Matteo have been kind so far, I know I don't belong.

Isabella nudges me. “It won't be that bad. Just a meal with a bunch of overbearing men who think they run the world.”

“Sounds delightful.”

She laughs, but Matteo just watches me. “Be ready by seven.”

By the time we arrive at the Bellanti estate, my nerves are a tangled mess.

The dining room is warm, brighter than I expected, filled with the sound of conversation and laughter. It's not what I imagined from a mafia family.

There's no tension, no cold calculation. Just people who seem... happy.

Luca Bellanti greets me first. He's an older man, commanding, but with a presence that doesn't feel oppressive.

“I'm sorry for what happened to your husband,” he says, voice sincere. “And I want

you to know—you and your daughter will be safe with my son.”

I nod, unable to find the right words.

Throughout the meal, I’m introduced to the rest of the family. Olivia is warm, effortlessly charming, and within minutes, she’s got Fiona giggling in her lap.

Lorenzo, on the other hand, is harder to read. He’s not unkind, but there’s something distant in his gaze, like he’s evaluating whether I belong here.

Then there’s Angelo.

He’s handsome, in the way men who know they’re handsome usually are, and his smirk is the kind that suggests he’s used to getting what he wants.

“If Matteo’s going to hoard all the interesting women, he should at least share,” Angelo remarks, leaning toward me. “What do you say, bella? Need a tour of the estate?”

I open my mouth to respond, but Matteo speaks first.

“Back off.” His voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it. A warning.

Angelo raises his hands in mock surrender. “Relax, brother. Just being friendly.”

Matteo’s stare doesn’t waver.

Angelo smirks but leans back in his chair, turning his attention elsewhere.

The rest of dinner passes smoothly.

After the meal, I slip outside for some air. The night is cool, and the stars are so bright. I wrap my arms around myself, exhaling slowly.

“Cold?”

I turn to see Matteo watching me from the doorway.

“No,” I whisper, shuddering.

He steps closer anyway, shrugging off his jacket and draping it over my shoulders. His scent clings to the fabric—clean, crisp, with a hint of something darker.

“Thank you for protecting me and my daughter,” I say quietly.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

He watches me, his gaze unreadable. “You have got to stop thanking me. I gave you my word and I intend to keep it, regardless of whatever is in store for us.”

I swallow, the weight of his words settling in my chest.

I take a step back, intending to put some space between us, but my heel catches on a stone. Before I can fall. Matteo’s hand shoots out, gripping my arm and pulling me against him.

For a moment, neither of us moves.

His chest is solid beneath my hands, his grip firm but careful. I look up, and our faces are closer than they should be.

His gaze drops to my lips.

I don’t know who moves first, but the air shifts, and suddenly, we’re leaning in—

A sharp knock from inside shatters the moment.

Matteo steps back immediately, his expression unreadable as he turns toward the door.

Valentino appears in the entrance, his face tight. “Boss, we’ve got a problem.”

Matteo’s entire demeanor changes in an instant.

He's no longer the man that looked at me with desire a few seconds ago.

He's a Bellanti again.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Massimo's on the move.”

Matteo exhales, tension coiling in his stance. He looks at me once before turning away.

The moment is gone.

And I'm not sure we'll ever get another one.

6

Matteo

The underground room beneath Club Velvet is dimly lit, the scent of whiskey and burning cigars thick in the air. It's neutral ground—one of Isabella's establishments.

A place where the Bellanti Syndicate's fixers meet to decide the things that never make the headlines but shape the city, nonetheless.

When I step inside, they're already seated around the long mahogany table.

The five men who hold the strings behind our family's operations.

They don't get their hands bloody in alleyways or leave bodies in dumpsters.

They operate in the shadows—dealmakers, strategists, manipulators.

They glance up, sharp eyes assessing. No greetings. No pleasantries. We're here to handle a problem.

I stride to the head of the table and drop a USB drive onto the polished wood. The small device looks almost insignificant against the backdrop of crystal tumblers, scattered documents, and the distant gleam of a few loaded firearms.

"This," I say, voice steady, "is everything we need to burn Massimo Caruso to the ground."

A beat of silence. Then—



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Bruno Jareto, the oldest among them, leans forward, eyes narrowing. At fifty-six, he's been running the gambling side of our operations longer than I've been alive. He is old school, razor-sharp, and has a temper that can either set a room ablaze or be wielded like a weapon.

"So what the fuck are we waiting for?" He exhales cigar smoke, tapping the ash onto the tray beside him. "We leak it all. Let the bastard drown in the weight of his sins."

Predictable. Bruno prefers brute force.

"We do that," Stefano Testa interjects, ever the diplomat, "and we bring a hurricane of heat onto all of us."

At sixty, he oversees our legitimate businesses, and is the man responsible for keeping our public face clean.

He has pressed his suit, and his cufflinks gleam. A stark contrast to Bruno's rolled-up sleeves and perpetual scowl. "The Commission won't tolerate that level of scrutiny. We need to be smart."

"Smart?" Julian Salvatore, the one who controls our street territories, scoffs. He's got an easy smirk, but his eyes are sharp, always watching. "Smart is eliminating a threat before it festers."

I don't let my expression shift. Julian is useful, but I don't trust him.

He's too slick, too quick to play both sides, and he's been on my radar ever since he

arrived late back at the safe house.

I make a mental note to have Valentino put eyes on him.

The argument ignites from there, voices rising as half the table pushes for immediate action while the others urge restraint. I don't intervene. Not yet. I sit back, arms crossed, listening as the debate spirals.

Giovanni Costa, who runs our weapons trafficking, finally speaks up. He's the most calculated of the bunch, always weighing every angle before committing to a course of action.

"Matteo," he says, voice measured, "what's your play here?"

I let them stew a moment longer before I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table.

"We're fixers," I say quietly, my voice cutting through the noise. "Not butchers. We use a scalpel, not a sledgehammer."

Silence falls.

I tap the USB drive once. "We leak pieces of the trafficking operation. Just enough to put pressure on Massimo. Make him paranoid. Make him come to us. The ritual killings and the Commission Don's murder? We hold on to those. They're our insurance."

Valentino exhales slowly and nods. "That's a play we can control."

Bruno doesn't look pleased, but he doesn't argue. He knows that challenging me when I've decided is unwise. Julian leans back, feigning boredom, but I don't miss

the way his fingers tap against the table. Calculating.

Giovanni merely studies me, then the USB drive, before giving the smallest incline to his head.

Approval.

Stefano adjusts his cuffs, exhaling sharply.

I rise to my feet.

With a firm tone, I announced, "The decision has been made. Now we wait for Massimo to take the bait."

After the meeting, I take the back exit of the club, stepping into the chilly night air. The streets are quiet at this hour, save for the occasional headlights cutting through the darkness.

My father texted me to meet him at Nico's estate. I head straight there, my mind already shifting to the next problem. He wouldn't come all the way here to meet unless it was important.

Low light cloaks the estate by the time I arrive; the security detail gives me a curt nod as I pass.

I barely make it through the front door before I see him—Luca Bellanti, my father, seated in one of Nico's leather chairs like every inch of a Don that he is.

Nico stands near the fireplace, arms crossed, jaw tight. His usual smirk is absent, which means this conversation won't be pleasant.

“Matteo,” my father greets, his voice carrying a weight of authority. “Have a seat.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I didn't. "You said it was urgent."

He studies me, then nods toward Nico. "Tell him."

Nico sighs, running a hand through his dark hair before speaking. "Word is spreading. Other families are asking why we're putting so much effort into gutting the Caruso." His gaze sharpens. "Some think we're making a power grab."

"Let them think what they want," I say flatly.

Luca shakes his head. "It's not that simple. If the Commission believes we're stepping out of line, they'll get involved." He levels me with a look. "And that's a war we don't want."

I grind my teeth. This is the problem with our world—power shifts like sand, and if you're not careful, it buries you alive.

"We move carefully," Luca continues. "Play this like a chess game, not a street fight."

I nod, understanding the weight of his warning. We're treading a fine line, and one wrong move could bring the full force of the Commission down on us.

A sound from the hallway catches my attention—Elena's voice, soft but clear as she hums to Fiona while getting her ready for bed.

My father notices my shift in focus. His expression changes—not to disapproval, but

to something else. Something thoughtful.

Then he says something I don't expect.

“Sometimes the most honorable path isn't the easiest one.”

I stiffen, meeting his gaze. He doesn't elaborate. He doesn't need to.

Without another word, he rises, nodding once before heading toward the door. Nico lingers for a second, watching me with something that almost looks like amusement before following him out.

The door clicks shut behind them.

I exhale, turning toward the hallway.

And I see her.

Elena stands near the kitchen, two steaming cups of coffee in her hands. She hesitates, then steps closer, offering one to me. “Thought you might need this.”

I take it, fingers brushing hers briefly. “You make a habit of listening in on conversations?”

She smirks, unbothered. “Not my fault you were talking loud enough to hear.”

I huff a quiet laugh, shaking my head as I take a sip.

She leans against the counter, growing serious. “Your father... what he said. What did he mean?”

I don't answer right away. Instead, I look at her—the woman caught in the middle of a war she never asked for. The woman who's been through hell and still stands strong.

“He meant that doing the right thing doesn't always make life easier.”

She studies me for a moment. Then, quietly, she says, “I have nightmares.”

I glance at her. “About your husband?”

She nods, gripping her cup tighter. “Every night. I see him dying. I hear the gunshots.” A shaky breath. “Sometimes I wake up, and for a second, I forget he's gone. And then I remember.”

I set my cup down. “I know what that's like.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, searching. “You do?”

I hesitate. “I watched my mother place a loaded gun against my sister's head, threatening to kill her.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Elena's lips part slightly, her expression softening. "Matteo..."

I shake my head. "It was a while ago. But the nightmares don't care about time."

For a moment, we just stand there, drinking our coffee in silence.

Then, because I don't know what else to do, I say, "If you ever need someone to wake you up from them... I'm here."

Something flickers in her eyes, but disappears quickly.

And for the first time since I met her, she looks at me like I might be something other than a killer.

7

Elena

I jolt awake to a sound that makes my blood run cold.

It's not the usual nightmare—Mark's body hitting the floor, gunshots echoing in my ears. No, this is real. This is now. This is my daughter's cry, but not her usual fussing.

This sounds wrong.

I'm on my feet before I can think, racing down the hallway to Fiona's room, heart hammering against my ribs. When I push inside, my throat closes up at what I see.



Fiona is thrashing in her toddler bed Matteo bought, her tiny face flushed scarlet, limbs flailing weakly as she struggles to draw proper breath. When I lift her, her skin burns against mine.

"Oh God," I whisper, cradling her against my chest. "Matteo! "

In less than a minute, Matteo fills the doorway, barefoot and disheveled from sleep, but his eyes are sharp and alert.

"She's burning up," I tell him, my voice breaking. "Something's wrong."

He's beside me in three strides, pressing his hand to Fiona's forehead. His jaw tightens. "I'll call the doctor."

Thirty minutes later, the family doctor arrives and examines Fiona with careful hands, his frown deepening as he checks her breathing, pulse, and the angry rash blooming across her chest.

"She needs a hospital," he says finally. "I can't treat her with what I have here. Her fever is dangerously high, and I'm concerned about her respiratory rate."

A hospital means leaving the safety of the estate. It means exposing ourselves when there's a target on our backs.

But there's no choice. Not when it's my baby.

"We go," I say, looking at Matteo. It's not a question.

He nods once. "Five minutes. Bring only what you need."

The unwelcoming white walls and the smell of harsh cleaning solvents fill my

nostrils as we make our way into the hospital's emergency room.

I haven't let go of Fiona once, not in the car, not during check-in, not even when the nurses tried to take her for tests.

How many gunshot wounds and knife injuries has Matteo had treated in places like this? The thought makes me dizzy. Or maybe it's the fear and exhaustion.

"Miss Elena?" A doctor approaches, clipboard in hand. "We need to run some tests. I'll need you to let the nurse take your daughter."

I hesitate, my arms tightening around Fiona's warm body.

"I'll be right outside," Matteo says quietly at my back. "Nothing will happen to her."

I finally place Fiona into the nurse's waiting arms. "I'll be right here, baby. Mommy's right here."

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

The nurse gives me a reassuring smile as she takes my daughter away, and I have to fight the urge to snatch her back. Matteo places his hands on my shoulder, silently comforting me.

"I need some air," I manage finally. "Just... five minutes."

Matteo sighs, but a look of understanding flashes across his face. "I'll have Valentino stay with you."

The night air is cool against my skin as I step into the small courtyard. Valentino keeps a respectful distance, his eyes constantly scanning our surroundings.

That's when I notice it. The too-casual way a man in scrubs is leaning against the wall. Expensive leather shoes instead of practical nursing clogs. A slight bulge beneath his uniform.

My body reacts before my mind can catch up. I duck just as he reaches for something at his waistband.

"Gun!" I shout, but it's too late.

Valentino goes down instantly, blood blooming across his chest. The assassin turns to me next, his face emotionless as he raises the weapon again.

My hand finds the small blade Matteo insisted I keep with me.

His voice echoes in my head.

Close the distance if you can't run. Aim for vulnerable spots. Throat. Eyes. Don't hesitate.

The assassin isn't expecting me to charge him. His eyes widen as I lunge forward, my body remembering the movements Matteo drilled into me.

The gun fires again, but I'm already inside his reach, the bullet grazing my arm. I slash upward with the knife, catching him across the face.

He snarls, dropping the gun to grab me by the throat. His fingers dig in like iron bands, cutting off my air. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision.

Don't panic. Use his strength against him.

I go limp suddenly, making the assassin overbalance. As his grip loosens, I drive my knee up between his legs with every ounce of strength I have.

He doubles over, and I slash again with the knife. The blade sinks into his neck, hot blood spilling over my fingers as he gurgles.

Even wounded, he lunges for me. I stumble backward, tripping on Valentino's body.

Bam!

A shot rings out. The assassin jerks once, a perfect red hole appearing in his forehead, before he collapses.

Matteo stands in the doorway, gun extended. Then he's across the space in seconds, pulling me to my feet.

"Elena," he said, his usually gruff voice filled with relief. "Are you hurt?"

"Not mine," I say, gesturing to the blood. "Except—" I glance at the graze on my arm.

His eyes move to the knife still clutched in my bloody hand, and something shifts in his expression. Something like pride.

"You fought back," he hisses.

"Like you taught me."

His eyes meet mine, a storm of emotions I can't name. Relief. Rage. Something else.

Then, with no warning, he pulls me against him and his mouth claims mine in a kiss that's desperate and hungry and tastes like fear and relief.

I should push him away. I should remember who he is, what he does.

Instead, I kiss him back, pulling him closer as if I could crawl inside the warmth and safety of him.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

It's the sound of running footsteps that breaks us apart.

"We need to move," he says, voice rough. "Now."

"Fiona—"

"Already being transferred."

Within minutes, we moved through the hospital while they loaded Valentino into a separate vehicle for emergency treatment.

By the time we reach the new hospital—a private facility with military-grade security—I'm swaying from exhaustion and blood loss. But I refuse to let go of Fiona, who has finally fallen into a deep sleep, her temperature down.

"Pneumonia," the new doctor tells us. "Severe, but we've caught it in time. She'll need to stay for forty-eight hours."

I sink into the chair beside her hospital crib, relief making my knees weak. Matteo stands guard by the door, his posture rigid, eyes constantly scanning.

"Get some rest," he tells me. "I'll watch over her."

We stayed for two days. When Fiona is discharged, her color has returned, and she breathes easier.

The drive back to Nico's estate is quiet, surrounded by an escort of armed men, while

Fiona sleeps peacefully in her car seat.

It's only when we're back behind the walls, Fiona settled in her crib under Isabella's watchful eye, that I find myself alone with Matteo again.

He's in the study, issuing orders over the phone. When he spots me, he ends the call.

"She's asleep?" he asks.

I nod. "The doctor says she should sleep through the night. The fever's completely gone."

Relief flashes across his features before he schools them back to neutrality.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with all we haven't said.

"About what happened at the hospital," I start. "The kiss."

His posture stiffens slightly. "I shouldn't have done that. Not there. Not then."

"But you don't regret it." It's not a question.

"No."

"I feel like I'm betraying him," I admit quietly. "Mark. Everything he was. Everything we had."

"I understand."

"Do you?" I challenge, suddenly angry. "My husband is dead. I watched him die. And now I'm standing here with—" I break off.

"With a killer," Matteo finishes, voice flat.

"No. That's not... I don't see you that way. Not anymore. And that's the problem."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, followed by something that looks almost like hope.

"I don't know what this is," I continue, gesturing between us.

"It's not Stockholm syndrome, if that's what you're thinking," he interrupts. "You're not a victim, Elena. You're a survivor. And I didn't kidnap you, I rescued you."

The memory of the knife in my hand, the assassin's blood on my skin, flashes through my mind.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"I'm not asking for anything," Matteo says quietly. "I know it's too soon. I know it's complicated. What happened... it wasn't a mistake. Not for me."

I close my eyes. "I need time."

"You have it. All the time you need."

"Thank you. For understanding. For keeping us safe."

His expression softens. "Always."

At the doorway, I pause. "What happens now? With the Caruso?"

A cold smile curves his lips. "Now we cut off their oxygen. Their money."

His phone rings. "That's Angelo."

He puts the phone on speaker. "You're on with Elena and me."

"Matteo," Angelo's voice comes through. "I cracked it. The encryption on the Caruso's financial network. You were right—they've been moving money through shell companies. As of twenty minutes ago, they can't access a single cent. I've locked them out of everything."

A slow, predatory smile spreads across Matteo's face. "What happens to men like the Caruso when they can't access their funds?"

"They panic," I answer, understanding dawning. "They make mistakes."

"Exactly. Now we wait. "

8

Matteo

Igroanasmycockpulses like velvet steel in my hand. The release draws a snarl from my lips as ropes of hot cum spray against the tiled wall of the shower before dripping heavily to the floor. I lean an arm against the tile and rest my forehead on it. My chest heaves as I watch the last of my fantasy swirl down the drain.

It's the fourth time I've done this since that kiss with Elena.

That was eleven fucking hours ago.

Since then, since that first taste of her swollen, full, soft lips, I've pictured her in a dozen different fantasies.

Stretched out on my desk, holding her knees up against her magnificent tits as I drive my cock into her.

Bent over, whining for more as I pump gallons of hot cum up her ass.

On her knees in my shower, swallowing every drop from my swollen cock head like a good girl.

I knew bringing her further into my world would be problematic. I knew it would throw me, given the confusing swirl of emotions I have for her.

But I'm not sure I adequately prepared myself for the hurricane of destruction she's already bringing into my head and thoughts.

I towel off after the shower before heading into my walk-in closet to dress for the meeting with my men.

My jaw tightens as I stare at the surveillance photos spread across my desk, each one another component of the trap I'm setting.

Girls with hollow eyes. Shipping manifests with coded destinations. Bank transactions laundered through a dozen accounts.

And at the center of it all—Massimo Caruso.

"You're sure about this intel?" I ask Valentino, who stands beside me despite the bandages visible beneath his shirt. The bastard took a bullet for us days ago, yet here he is.

"Positive, boss." He taps one photo. "Massimo will be there personally to oversee the arrival."

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I nod, cold satisfaction settling in my chest.

Elena was right. The trafficking operation isn't just business for Massimo—it's personal.

His signature. His pride.

His weakness.

And he'll be there in person, unable to resist.

"Leak this to the Verratti family," I say, sliding several documents across the desk to Valentino. "Make sure it reaches Ronaldo directly."

Nico's eyebrows lift. "The Verrattis have been looking to expand into that territory for years."

"Exactly. They'll move immediately, and Massimo will defend his operation personally." I check my watch. "We'll be waiting."

"The men are ready," Julian says from the doorway. "We move tonight."

I straighten, mentally calculating contingencies, escape routes, potential collateral.

"I'm coming with you."

The voice from behind Julian stops my thoughts. Elena stands in the hallway, posture

straight, and her chin lifted in that stubborn angle I recognize.

"No," I say flatly.

She steps into the room. "I wasn't asking permission."

Nico, Julian, and Valentino exchange glances, then silently retreat, closing the door.

Cowards.

"This isn't a debate, Elena."

"You need someone with a knowledge of financial movements while setting a trap for Massimo." She cuts me off, placing her palms on my desk. "You need someone who understands forensic accounting, who can follow the money trail in real-time."

Her eyes burn with determination that both infuriates and captivates me. The same look she had when she plunged a knife into an assassin's throat.

"It's too dangerous."

"More dangerous than being left behind when a mole in your organization could compromise your safe houses? More dangerous than sitting here while you walk into what could be a trap?"

That lands like a punch. She's not wrong. I still haven't found out who leaked our location at the hospital.

"Besides," she continues, softer, "I need to do this. For Mark. For Fiona. For myself."

I search her face for fear or hesitation. There is none. Just resolve and a hunger for

justice that mirrors my own.

"If I agree, you follow every order without question. You stay by my side. And at the first sign of trouble, you get out. No heroics."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "I think I've used up my hero quota for the month."

"This isn't a joke."

"Do I look like I'm laughing?" She straightens. "I know what's at stake. I've lost almost everything to these people."

"Fine," I relent. "But you'll wear a vest, and you'll be armed."

She nods, victory flashing in her eyes.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

As she turns to leave, I add, "Elena." She pauses. "If anything happens to you out there..."

Something softens in her expression. "It won't."

"Thermal imaging shows fourteen heat signatures inside the warehouse," Nico reports, pointing to real-time feeds. "Four more patrolling the perimeter."

"Any sign of Massimo?" I ask, scanning the images while watching the dockyard.

"Not yet. But the shipment arrived twenty minutes ago. If your intel is correct, he'll show soon."

I glance at Elena, focused on her laptop. "Anything on the money trail?"

"They've been scrambling since we froze their accounts," she says. "There's activity through shell companies in Dubai and Macau. They're consolidating emergency funds."

"Which means they're desperate. Good."

"Vehicle approaching, northeast entrance," Julian's voice crackles. "Black Escalade, tinted windows."

Elena and I tense, watching as four heat signatures exit the vehicle, one notably larger.

"That's him," Elena whispers, recognition and hatred in her voice. "Massimo."

"All units, stand by," I order. "Wait for my signal."

The plan is simple: let the Verrattis create chaos, then isolate Massimo from his guards.

But the explosion that rips through our position comes without warning. Alarms blare, comms erupting with shouts.

"It's an ambush!" Nico yells. "They knew we were coming!"

The realization hits like a hammer. The mole has struck again.

"Move!" I grab Elena's arm. "Secondary position now!"

Outside, the night has transformed into a war zone. I push Elena ahead, keeping between her and the gunfire.

The second explosion hits closer. The concussive wave slams me into a container. The world goes silent, replaced by ringing.

"Elena!" I call out, my voice muffled to my ears.

Through the haze, I see Nico bleeding from his forehead. Valentino is also down, but moving. Two men not moving at all.

But Elena is gone.

"Valentino! Where is she?"



He points toward a gap between containers, where scuff marks show signs of struggle.

"Get to extraction," I order. "Get the men out."

"Matteo-"

"That's an order!" I snarl, not looking back. There's no time for debate. No time for anything but finding her.

I follow the trail through the maze, every sense heightened. A woman's shout sends me sprinting, and I round the corner to see two men dragging Elena toward a van.

Icy rage focuses on every thought. My first shot drops one man instantly. The second turns, reaching for his weapon, before my bullet takes him in the throat.

The third uses the vehicle for cover, returning fire. Elena drives her elbow into her captor's ribs.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"Stay down!" I shout, breaking cover.

I close the distance, knocking the third man's gun aside and driving my fist into his solar plexus. His face meets my knee with a crunch.

"Who's the mole?" I demand.

He laughs through bloodied teeth. "You're already dead, Bellanti."

Bang!

A shot rings out. He slumps with a hole in his forehead. Elena stands with my backup pistol extended.

"He was reaching," she says simply.

I scan her for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head, but I see the bruise forming and her torn sleeve.

My jaw tightens. This is all my fault.

Tires squeal. A black Escalade speeds away, escorted by motorcycles weaving through containers.

Massimo is escaping. Again.

"Dammit!" I slam my fist against a container. "He's getting away!"

Elena grabs my arm. "We can still track him. The financial trail—"

"Will go cold immediately. Someone warned him, Elena. One of my people."

"Then we'll find the mole and use them to get to Massimo."

On the drive home, the night's failure weighs on me. Massimo escaped. We lost men. They nearly captured Elena.

"This wasn't your fault," Elena says quietly beside me in the car.

"The hell it wasn't," I growl. "I insisted on moving tonight. I let you come. I can't find the mole in my organization."

"Matteo—"

"Don't." My voice comes out sharper than intended. "Just... don't."

The rest of the ride passes in tense silence. By the time we reach the estate, my anger has crystallized into something cold and deadly.

Nico takes charge of the wounded men, conferring with our doctor in hushed tones. I storm past them all, heading for the study.

I need space. I need to think. I need to plan exactly how I'm going to dismantle Massimo Caruso piece by bloody piece.

I don't realize Elena has followed me until the door clicks shut behind her.

"You should get checked out by the doctor," I say without turning, pouring myself a generous measure of whiskey from the decanter on the desk.

"I'm fine." She moves into my line of sight, refusing to be dismissed. "You're not. "

I laugh, a harsh sound with no humor in it. "What gave it away?"

"Matteo." She steps closer, undeterred by my tone. "Look at me."

I do, against my better judgment.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Even in the aftermath of violence, with dust in her hair and a bruise darkening on her cheek, she's beautiful in a way that cuts through all my defenses.

The sight of her—alive, unbroken, standing tall despite everything—makes my chest ache with emotions I've spent a lifetime avoiding.

"You really don't want to be around me right now, Elena," I warn her, voice low. "I'm not fit company for anyone, least of all you."

"You don't know that." She takes the glass from my hand, sets it down on the desk. "You don't know what I want or what I need."

Something in her voice makes my pulse quicken. "And what is it you need?"

Her eyes hold mine, unflinching. "The same thing you do." She steps closer, erasing the careful distance I've maintained since that kiss at the hospital. "A way to feel something besides fear and rage. A reminder that we're still alive."

I shake my head, even as every fiber of my being aches to pull her into my arms. "Elena, you said you needed time. After everything that happened tonight—"

"Time?" She laughs softly. "If there's one thing I've learned from being involved with the mafia, it's that time waits for no one." Her hand comes up to rest against my chest, directly over my thundering heart. "Tonight, I almost died. You almost died. We both nearly lost everything."

"That's exactly why we shouldn't—"

"It's exactly why we should." Her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt. "I'm tired of waiting for the right moment, Matteo. I'm tired of pretending I don't feel what I feel."

The last of my restraint crumbles as she rises on her toes, bringing her face closer to mine. "And what is it that you feel?" I ask, voice rough with wanting.

"Try me," she whispers against my lips, "and find out."

It's all the invitation I need. My hands find her waist, pulling her against me as my mouth claims hers.

This kiss is nothing like our first—it's deeper, hungrier, fueled by adrenaline and the desperate relief of survival.

She responds immediately, arms twining around my neck, body pressing closer, as if trying to eliminate any space between us.

I walk her backward until she meets the wall, pinning her there with my body as our kisses grow more urgent. My hands trace her curves, as if reassuring me she's fine, that she's here, that this is real.

"I thought I lost you tonight," I murmur against her skin as my lips trail down her neck. "When I couldn't find you after the explosion—"

"But you found me," she breathes, fingers tangling in my hair. "You always find me."

Her words unleash something primal in me, a possessive hunger that's been building since the moment I first saw her.

I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the desk, sweeping papers and books aside with one arm.

As I lay her down, a moment of clarity breaks through the haze of desire. I pause, searching her face for any sign of hesitation or doubt.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask, needing to hear it, needing to know this isn't just shock or adrenaline talking.

Her answer is to pull me down to her, reclaiming my mouth with a ferocity that matches my own. "I've never been more sure of anything," she whispers against my lips. "I need this. I need you."

The last threads of my control snap at her words.

I release her and make my way to the chair behind the desk.

Taking a seat, I pat my lap and gesture her forward. "Come here."

Elena's eyes widen and for a moment I think she's going to back out, but she moves forward and plops her ass on my thighs.

I grip her thighs with my hands, my fingers brushing through the hem of her skirt. "Lift your fucking skirt."

She shivers, her face heating as her mouth falls open, almost like she's shocked. But then she's biting that damn bottom lip again as her hand drops to the hem of her skirt.

She lifts it as my gaze slides down to where her soaked panties cling to every little detail of her wet, swollen pussy.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Elena reaches down, and before I can stop her, she's peeled her shirt off and tossed it away, her smallish, braless tits beneath it high and perky. My jaw grinds as I watch her rosy-pink nipples pucker under my fierce gaze.

"Good girl."

She whimpers.

"Now show me just how messy your greedy little pussy is for me."

Elena is shuddering and panting heavily. Her face flushes as if sunburned, and her nipples harden as her fingers slip beneath the gusset of her panties.

She pulls it to the side, and my gaze lands on her sweet, pink, puffy littlepussy.

"Take them off."

She's trembling as she reaches back and pulls down the skirt zipper.

I slip a hand into my pocket, and her eyes blaze when I pull out a switchblade and flick it open.

She gasps as I slip the blade into the waistband of her panties, her skin prickling against the cold steel before I deftly cut one side and then the other, slicing them off and then tossing them away.

I grind my teeth as my eyes sweep over her nakedness. She blushes, but she doesn't



cower, or flinch, or try to hide herself. Instead, she melts against me, pushing my shirt from my shoulders and dipping her mouth to mine.

Before she can kiss me, I grab her hair in a fist, snarling and yanking her head back. My mouth drops to her soft neck, and she shudders and whimpers when my teeth rake over her earlobe and nip at the tender skin of her throat.

“I don’t fuck gentle, Elena,” I rasp darkly.

“I don’t want you to,” she whimpers, shuddering as I open my pants and pull out my swollen, rock-hard cock.

She lifts from my lap just enough for me to shove my pants and boxers down and then settle the fat head of my dick against her slick little cunt.

Elena’s eyes widen, her mouth falling open as I grab her hip and center my cock with the other hand.

“So big...” she blurts quietly, almost to herself as she stares down at me.

“Make it fit. Take all of it.”

She whimpers, shuddering on top of me. Slowly, I can feel her sinking down and easing her weight onto me. I groan as her pink lips open for me, kissing my swollen head and letting me in. She pushes down again; her face scrunching up and her breathing growing ragged.

Her arms wrap around my neck, like she’s hanging on for dear life, as she sinks down another inch.

“Oh fuuuuck...”

“Make it fit, Elena,” I growl. “Let me feel that wet little pussy open up for me. If you think you want—”

“I want it.” She drops. Instantly, half of my cock sinks into her, and a strangled cry of pleasure explodes from her mouth.

“Oh, my fucking GOD...” she blurts, shuddering and moaning.

My hands grip her hips and her ass.

My mouth claims hers, swallowing her whimpers and moans as I slowly guide her down further and further, feeling every single inch sink into her impossibly tight, slick heat as she opens up for me.

Until finally, I feel her ass against my balls.

“Good. Fucking. Girl,” I growl into her ear.

She’s shaking and groaning, her body writhing and her hips grinding on my lap with every inch of me buried in her to the fucking hilt. Her face tenses up, her brows caving as she chokes.

I flinch, frowning for a second. “Fuck, are you ok—”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Oh GOD!” she spasms, her nails digging into my back and her mouth slamming into mine as she cries out. Her pussy clamps down around me, strangling my cock as she sobs into my lips.

She’s coming.

I haven’t even started fucking her yet, and she’s coming all over my cock.

When I realize that, I swell even bigger and harder inside of her. I groan, gritting my teeth and grabbing her ass.

I slide her up, feeling the way her greedy little pussy clings to me like it never wants to let me go. And then, slowly, I pull her right back down, impaling her on my swollen dick as she moans wildly.

“Matteo...”

“Such a gorgeously. Fucking. Tight. Pussy,” I groan, punctuating each word with a thrust of my hips as I drove into her.

She’s so small compared to me, and yet she’s so womanly it drives me insane.

The way her hips flare and her tight ass cheeks fill my hands. The way her back arches and her nipples drag electrically over my chest muscles. The way her long dark hair spills over her shoulders and into her eyes, begging me to wrap it in my fist.

Which is exactly what I do.

I tangle my fingers in her hair, gripping her ass with my other hand and lifting her up and down.

The sounds coming from Elena's lips are nothing short of demonic, her high-pitched whines of pleasure echoing through the office as she bounces on my cock.

"Such a good girl," I rasp into her ear, losing myself as her pussy swallows my cock over and over. "Taking every inch... making it fit in that tight little pussy."

"Am I doing a good job...?" she whimpers, her lips brushing my ear. "Daddy?"

Holy fucking hell.

In one motion, I'm on my feet, her legs wrapped around my hips as I crush my mouth to hers. She squeals, breathless, clinging to me. I kick off my pants and carry her to the desk.

And then—I start to truly fuck her.

I know it's been a while for her. I know I should be as gentle as I can. But that's fucking impossible when she's writhing against me like this and milking my cock with her tight little cunt so eagerly.

Not when she's urging me, and egging me on, and moaning even louder the harder I fuck her, until I'm nailing her to the fucking desk as her fingernails rake down my back and her moans fill my ears.

"Is this what you wanted, baby girl?" I hiss, bruising my lips to hers. "Is this what you've been waiting for?"

"Fuck yes!" she shrieks, her body wrenching and shuddering as she cries out with

another orgasm.

I keep pounding into her, pushing both of us further and further back on the desk until we're right across the desk. I reach down, gripping her hands upward in an iron grip as I roll my hips and plunge my cock into her sweet heaven over and over again.

Elena is right there with me, raising her hips to meet every thrust. Digging her nails into my back with her ankles locked behind me. Arching her spine and urging me on as I kiss her fiercely.

I drop one hand to her jaw, gripping it tightly as she twists her head and moans as she sucks my thumb into her mouth. She rolls her tongue over it, her eyes wild and fierce as they lock with mine.

"Come for me, Elena," I growl, demanding it as a savageness I never reveal comes roaring to the surface. "Be a good fucking girl and come on that fat cock."

Elena's eyes filled with lust as they roll back. Her face heats as her mouth falls open and a wrenching sob bubbles from her chest.

"Your pussy is all mine, baby girl," I snarl savagely, "Now, and fucking always. There won't be any other man. Do you fucking understand me? "

"Yes, Daddy!" she chokes as she moans.

"No one else will ever fucking touch you. No one else will ever taste this pretty pussy. No one else will ever feel you fucking come all over their cock. Never."

I sound possessed. I feel insane, like I'm actually losing myself and all control as I drive into her.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Now come on this big fucking cock like a good girl.”

It's like pulling a trigger. Elena erupts as she comes, like I'm watching a hurricane make landfall behind her eyes. She arches her back, screaming in pleasure, before I slam my lips to hers and swallow her release. I roll my hips and bury every inch of me deep in her clenching, milking, rippling pussy until there's no holding back.

I come like a gunshot, my whole body jerking and clenching as my cum fucking explodes out of me. Rope after rope spills deep into her sweet pussy as our tongues duel and my arms wrap around her.

Now, I'm never letting her go.

9

Elena

"Just a few discrepancies in some offshore accounts I'd like you to look at," Julian says, his smile warm and reassuring as he bounces Fiona gently on his hip. "Nothing urgent, but I'd appreciate your expertise."

I watch as my daughter giggles, reaching for Julian's face with her tiny hands. At a year and a half, she's becoming more expressive every day, her personality blooming despite everything we've been through.

"Sure," I tell him, checking my watch. "Matteo's in meetings with Nico all morning, anyway."

Matteo ...My thighs clench. The way he fucked me yesterday.... I've never had sex as intense as that before.

Julian nods, shifting Fiona to his other hip. "Perfect timing, then. The security shift change happens in about twenty minutes. I've set everything up in the west wing study."

"I thought we usually worked in the main office?"

He shrugs. "The west study has better natural light. Easier on the eyes when going through columns of numbers."

Something about his casual tone triggers a faint warning bell in my mind, but I dismiss it. Julian is one of Matteo's most trusted men—and Fiona adores him.

"Let me just grab my laptop," I say.

"No need," he replies quickly. "I've printed everything out."

Ten minutes later, we're walking through the less-frequented corridors of the west wing.

The study Julian leads me to is smaller than the main office, with tall windows that flood the room with morning light.

We set up a playpen in the corner with some of Fiona's favorite toys.

I move to the desk, leafing through the documents while Julian closes the door behind us. "What exactly am I looking for?" I ask, reaching for a folder.

The sound of a lock clicking makes me freeze.

When I turn, everything changes in an instant. Julian is no longer the smiling, gentle man who sneaks my daughter chocolates.

His face has hardened, and he's holding Fiona with one arm while his other hand presses a gun against her tiny head.

"You're looking for a way to keep your daughter alive," he says quietly.

My blood turns cold. "Julian, what are you doing?"

"What I should have done weeks ago. The cameras in this wing have been disabled. You're going to do exactly as I say, or I'll put a bullet through her head."

I force myself to breathe, to think. Fiona's eyes are wide, confused by the sudden tension, but not yet afraid.

"Why?" The question comes out as barely more than a whisper.

"Business. The Caruso made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Deliver you to them, and I get a seat at the table."

"Matteo trusted you."



## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

His laugh is harsh. "Matteo is a fool who thinks loyalty can't be bought."

He gestures toward a bookcase. "Did you know there's an entire network of tunnels beneath this estate? I've spent months mapping the ones that remain."

My mind races, calculating distances, options. If I could reach the desk, dive under it...

"Don't even think about it," Julian warns. "Two of my men are waiting in the tunnel. We'll use the baby as insurance until we're clear. Then you'll both be delivered to Massimo."

Rage unlike anything I've ever known courses through me.

"Julian," I say, forcing my voice to remain steady, "you know Matteo will hunt you to the ends of the earth for this."

"By the time he realizes you're gone, it'll be too late. Move toward the bookcase. Slowly."

I take a single step, then another, mind whirring. Create a distraction. Use your surroundings. Target vulnerable points.

"How long have you been working for the Caruso?" I ask, taking another measured step.

"Long enough." He adjusts his grip on the gun. "Massimo recognized my potential

while Matteo kept me running errands."

Another step. I'm getting closer to the desk. "So it was you who leaked our position at the hospital. And at the docks."

Pride flickers across his face. "Among other things."

Fiona chooses that moment to fuss. The distraction is small, but it's enough. Julian glances down at her for just a fraction of a second.

I lunge for the desk, throwing myself over it. My hand immediately finds the panic button Matteo installed beneath the desktop edge—a silent alarm, connected directly to him and security.

"Get back here now!" Julian roars, but I stay down. I hear Fiona wail, the sound tearing at my heart.

"You can't shoot me," I call out. "Massimo wants me alive."

"I don't need to shoot you. But I can hurt the baby."

"Hurt her, and you're worth nothing to the Caruso."

"How did you find the tunnels?" I ask, buying time.

"I found old blueprints in the estate archives. Been exploring them for months."

Every second he talks is another second closer for help to arrive. I risk peering around the edge of the desk. Julian has moved toward the bookshelf, still holding Fiona and the gun.

"You won't get away with this," I say, slowly rising but keeping the desk between us.

"I already have." He shifts Fiona to his shoulder, using his free hand to pull at something on the bookshelf. A section of it swings outward, revealing a dark opening.

The study door suddenly explodes inward with a thunderous crash.

Matteo stands in the doorway, his face twisted in fury, gun raised. Behind him, I glimpse Nico and several other men, all armed.

Julian backs toward the tunnel entrance. "Stay back or I'll kill her!"

"You're already dead, Julian," Matteo says, his voice terrifyingly calm.

"I have men in the tunnel," Julian warns.

"You mean the men Valentino found ten minutes ago? They will not be joining us."

Confusion flickers across Julian's face. "You're bluffing."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"I've been watching you for weeks," Matteo continues. "The change in your behavior. Your sudden interest in the old wing of the estate."

"The camera feeds you disabled?" Matteo takes another step. "I had backups installed when you started spending so much time in this wing."

Julian's eyes dart frantically between Matteo and the tunnel entrance. I inch around the desk, my focus entirely on Fiona, waiting for an opening.

"Lower your weapon, Julian," Matteo commands. "It's over."

For a moment, everything hangs in perfect, terrible balance. Then Julian makes his choice.

He swings the gun away from Fiona toward Matteo, and I move.

I cross the distance in three quick steps, driving my right palm up under his extended arm while my left snatches Fiona from his grasp. The gun discharges, the bullet embedding itself in the ceiling as Julian stumbles backward.

Matteo is on him before he can recover. One moment Julian is struggling; the next he's on the floor, Matteo's knee pressing into his chest, gun pressed under his chin.

I turn away, cradling Fiona against me, murmuring soothing words as her cries gradually subside.

"Get him to the warehouse," Matteo tells Valentino. "I want to know everything."

Hours later, I sit in my room. Fiona is finally asleep in her little bed beside me, which I asked to be brought to my room after her illness and despite my exhaustion, I can't sleep.

The door creaks open and Matteo enters quietly. His knuckles are bruised and blood dots his shirt. Our eyes meet, and neither of us speaks.

"Did he talk?" I finally ask.

Matteo nods. "Eventually."

I rise from my chair, moving to stand beside him. "Tell me."

"It's worse than we thought. The Caruso have infiltrated the Commission itself. Three of the nine members are blackmailed or bought. Massimo is planning to assassinate the remaining heads at the next meeting."

"When?"

"The feast of San Gennaro. Tomorrow night. All Commission heads will be there."

"Can't you warn them? Cancel the feast?"

He shakes his head. "If we cancel, we tip our hand. If we warn individual members, word could get back to Massimo."

"So what do we do?"

"The feast goes on as planned. It's our best opportunity to present the evidence and eliminate everyone involved. This ends tomorrow night. One way or another."

Sighing deeply, I make my way to the bathroom and bring back a dampened towel, cleaning the blood from his knuckles.

"This isn't your fault," I say quietly.

"Julian was one of my most trusted men. He was here, with access to you, to Fiona."

"You can't control everyone's choices. Your instincts saved us today."

A noise from the bed interrupts us. Fiona is awake, staggering.

Matteo lifts her gently into his arms. "Hey, little one. You should be sleeping."

Fiona studies his face, then reaches out, patting his cheek with her tiny hand.

"Papa," she says clearly.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I watch as Matteo's expression transforms—shock, followed by something so vulnerable it makes my chest ache.

"She's never said that before," I whisper.

"I'm not—I don't—"

I place my hand on his arm. "It's okay."

His free arm wraps around me, pulling me against his side. I rest my head on his shoulder, looking down at my daughter sleeping peacefully in the arms of New York's most dangerous man.

Tomorrow will bring violence and bloodshed. But tonight, we are simply a man, a woman, and a child, finding shelter in each other against the darkness.

And somehow, against all odds, it feels like home.

10

Matteo

The San Gennaro feast is in full motion. Red and gold banners hang from the rafters of the ancient palazzo, flickering candlelight casting silhouettes against centuries-old stone walls. Commissioner members and their entourages fill the grand hall, laughing over something.

I adjust my platinum Bellanti crest cufflinks and scan the room. My men are positioned strategically throughout—Bruno near the eastern entrance, Valentino by the kitchens. Everyone is in place.

"Nervous?" Elena's voice comes from beside me, soft enough that only I can hear.

I turn to look at her, still unsettled by her presence, despite having lost the argument hours ago. Her deep burgundy dress hugs her curves before flowing to the floor, and she has elegantly swept up her dark hair.

"You shouldn't be here," I say, once again.

Her chin lifts slightly. "I earned the right to see this through. To look him in the eyes when he falls."

She's right. After what Julian nearly did to her—and to Fiona—Elena deserves whatever closure she seeks.

Her eyes drift to where Don Vincenzo, the eldest Commission member and de facto leader, holds court, as he meets my eyes and nods. The man is dressed impeccably in a tailored black suit, a glass of champagne in one hand, his signature gold watch gleaming.

Three Commission members, whom Julian confirmed were compromised, hover near him.

"It's starting," I murmur to Elena.

Don Vincenzo raises his glass, immediately commanding attention. "Friends, family," he intones, his voice carrying the weight of his seventy years. "Let us honor the feast of our patron saint as we have for generations."



The room quiets, all eyes on the old man. I position myself with a clear view of both entrance and exits.

"Before we begin," Vincenzo continues, "I must address a matter of grave importance to all families represented here."

"Three weeks ago," Vincenzo says, his voice hardening, "information came to light regarding the death of our brother, Don Ares Greco."

A ripple of murmurs moves through the crowd. Greco's death six months ago had been attributed to heart failure—sudden but not suspicious for a man of his age.

"Matteo Bellanti has brought evidence before this Commission that suggests otherwise."

Vincenzo gestures toward me, and suddenly, all eyes shift my way.

I step forward, feeling Elena move slightly behind me. "What I present tonight will disturb you," I begin, "but the truth must be known if we are to preserve the foundations upon which our world stands."

Before I can signal Valentino, the large wooden doors burst open, and a dozen armed men flood into the room.

"Nobody move!" shouts the leader, a burly man with a scar down his cheek.

The room freezes. I lock eyes with Elena, silently urging her toward the column, but Massimo's voice cuts through the tension.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"I apologize for the dramatic entrance," he says calmly, stepping inside, "but it seems Matteo Bellanti was about to present some... creative storytelling." His eyes find mine. "I couldn't allow such slander to go unchallenged."

"What is the meaning of this?" Don Vincenzo demands. "Weapons drawn at a Commission gathering? This is unforgivable, Caruso!"

"What's unforgivable is the conspiracy to destroy a founding family," Massimo replies smoothly. "Bellanti has been plotting against me for months, fabricating evidence, turning my own men against me."

I scan the room, assessing options. Bruno is no longer in the hall, likely rallying our men from outside. Valentino stands frozen by the control panel. Elena has slid partially behind a column, but she's still too exposed.

"You speak of evidence," I say, keeping my voice level, buying time. "Let the Commission see it for themselves and make their judgment. That's our way."

Massimo laughs. "There will be no judgment today except mine." He nods to his men. "Secure Bellanti and his woman. Kill anyone who interferes."

Two soldiers move toward us, weapons trained on my chest. Suddenly, Elena rushes forward. One man grabs for her, but she's quicker, ducking under his arm and slamming the heel of her hand into his throat. In that moment of distraction, I strike.

My fist connects with the second man's jaw. I feel his bone crack as I twist, ripping the gun from his grip. He crumples as I spin, weapon now in hand, looking for

Massimo—but he's already moving behind his bodyguards.

The room erupts into chaos. Commission members dive for cover as gunshots ring out. My men emerge from their disguises, engaging Massimo's forces. Tables overturn, glass shatters.

"Elena!" I call out, losing sight of her in the chaos.

A bullet grazes my left arm, blood immediately soaking my sleeve. I grit my teeth, focusing on the threat. Massimo stands near the main entrance, partially shielded by his remaining men. Our eyes meet across the chaos.

"It's over, Massimo!" I shout. "Your men are falling. Surrender now!"

His response is a bitter smile as he raises his hand, revealing a small device with a red button. "If I can't have it," he says, "neither will you."

A detonator. Fuck!

Commission members, family leaders, and innocents fill the palazzo. I can't let them die.

Before I can move, Elena launches herself at him with feral intensity. The impact sends them both crashing to the floor; the detonator skittering across marble tiles.

I'm running toward them instantly. Elena and Massimo grapple on the ground, her elegant dress now torn and bloodied. She's fighting as good as she can, but Massimo is stronger.

As I reach them, Massimo pins Elena beneath him, his hands closing around her throat. I don't hesitate—the butt of my gun crashes down on his skull. He slumps

forward, unconscious, and I pull Elena free.

"I'm fine," she gasps. "The detonator—"

I locate it several feet away, crushing it beneath my heel. Around us, the fighting subsides. Massimo's men, seeing their leader fallen, begin to surrender.

Valentino approaches, blood streaming from a cut above his eye but otherwise intact. "Palazzo is secure," he reports. "Five of our men wounded, none critically. Three of the Caruso's were dead, the rest captured or surrendered."

"The Commission?" I ask, still holding Elena close, unwilling to let her go.

"Safe. Don Vincenzo is in the secure room below with the others. They're waiting for you."

I nod, looking down at Massimo's unconscious form. "Bind him. Tightly. Post our best men as guards."

As Valentino carries out my orders, I turn to Elena, examining the bruises forming on her neck, the cuts on her arms. "You could have been killed," I said, my voice trembling.

Her eyes meet mine, fierce and unapologetic. "So could you. But we weren't."

"You are fucking crazy," I exhale, pulling her closer, holding her close and feeling her heart race against mine.

An hour later, the Commission members sit in a semicircle, facing Massimo Caruso, who is now conscious and bound to a chair.

Elena stands beside me, gripping my hand tightly.

I present our evidence methodically: video footage of Massimo poisoning Don Greco, medical reports confirming the synthetic toxin, financial records showing bribes to the compromised members, and Julian's testimony detailing Massimo's plan to eliminate the entire commission.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Don Vincenzo rises slowly. "Massimo Caruso, you stand accused of the most grievous violations of our code. The verdict is unanimous. The sentence, death."

Massimo laughs coldly. "If I die, I've still won. You'll never know who else was involved. The rot goes deeper than you can imagine."

"That's where you're wrong," I counter, nodding to Valentino, who brings forward a final folder. "Your personal ledger. Every name. Every payment. Every secret."

For the first time, I see genuine fear in Massimo's eyes.

Don Vincenzo takes the ledger, his expression grim. "This changes nothing about your sentence. But it ensures your legacy will be one of complete failure."

He turns to me, extending his hand. "Bellanti, today you have preserved the very foundation of our world. The Commission is in your debt."

"Considering today's events," he continues, "the Bellanti family shall henceforth stand as a special ally to the Commission itself. When we have need, we may call upon you—no questions asked, no debts counted."

It's a position of immense power, and also immense danger.

"The Bellanti family is honored," I respond, "and we accept this responsibility."

Nearby, Massimo watches this exchange, his face twisted with hatred. As two of my men move to take him away, he locks eyes with me one last time.

"If I fall," he snarls, "I'm taking you with me, Bellanti."

It happens so fast. He swiftly takes down two of my men and his hands move inside his jacket.

I'm already drawing my weapon when I see the flash of metal, the gun appearing in his hand with practiced speed. I have time only to register that his aim is perfect, that the bullet will find me before I can fire, when Elena moves.

She lunges toward one of my men standing nearby, snatching the gun from his waistband with a fluid motion I didn't know she possessed. Before Massimo can squeeze his trigger, Elena fires—once, twice, three times.

The shots echo through the hall like thunderclaps. Massimo stumbles backward, his unfired gun clattering to the marble floor as his hands clutch at his chest. Three perfect hits. Center mass. His eyes widen in disbelief as he looks at Elena, blood already seeping between his fingers.

"That's for my husband," she says, her voice cutting through the silence that follows the gunshots. "And for everyone else you've destroyed."

Massimo Caruso, terror of the southern families, falls to his knees and then forward onto the cold stone floor. The last breath rattles from his lips as a pool of dark crimson spreads beneath him.

No one moves for several heartbeats. Then Don Vincenzo steps forward, looking from Massimo's body to Elena, who still holds the gun steady in her hands.

"The woman has more courage than most men in this room," he says finally. "And better aim."

Hours later, when we finally leave the palazzo, the night air is cool against my face. Elena walks beside me toward the waiting car.

"You saved my life tonight," I tell her as we slide into the backseat.

"You've saved mine more times than I can count."

"That was different. I'm trained for this."

"And I'm a quick study." A small smile touches her lips. "Besides, I couldn't let him take you from me. From Fiona."

The car pulls away, carrying us back to the estate. Elena leans her head against my shoulder, exhaustion finally claiming her.

I wrap my arm around her, drawing her closer. After what happened tonight, my family has once again gained unprecedented power tonight, securing our position for generations.

But as I feel Elena's breathing against me, I understand that the greatest power I possess has nothing to do with the Commission or family alliances.

It lies because Elena and Fiona are safe, and they are mine to protect. Everything else—the blood, the politics, the empire—is secondary to that essential truth.

As the car carries us home through the darkness, I make a silent vow that nothing will ever threaten my family again.

The thought should feel like a burden, an impossible promise in our world.



## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

Instead, it feels like purpose.

11

Elena

The Bellanti stateshines under the evening sky.

I smooth down my silky emerald dress—a gift from Matteo.

Three weeks have passed since I put three bullets in Massimo Caruso's chest.

Three weeks since the Commission elevated the Bellanti family to unprecedented heights.

Three weeks of attempting to process what my life has become.

Fiona squirms in my arms, her little hands reaching for the sparkling chandelier above us.

"Beautiful, right?," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her dark curls.

The Caruso empire has fallen completely. Matteo's men were thorough in their dismantling of Massimo's organization.

Those who served him loyally now occupy cells in a special prison facility—a place from which there is no escape.

They redistributed those who only followed orders to various families and are now strictly monitoring their loyalty.

"Elena!" Luca Bellanti's voice booms across the room as we enter the main reception hall. He strides toward us, his silver hair gleaming under the chandeliers.

"Don Bellanti," I greet him with deference.

He waves away the formality. "None of that tonight. This is a celebration!" He reaches out to gently chuck Fiona under the chin. "And how is my favorite little principessa?"

Fiona hides her face against my shoulder, peeking out with one shy eye.

Luca straightens. "Matteo is with the Calabrese brothers in the study. Business before pleasure, unfortunately. But he should join us shortly."

"In the meantime," he continues, offering his arm, "allow me to introduce you to some people who are keen to meet the woman who put three perfect shots in Massimo Caruso's heart."

For the next hour, I walk through a sea of power players in the syndicate. Capos with weathered faces and calculating eyes. Their elegantly dressed wives with diamond-hard gazes. Business associates whose handshakes linger too long.

Through it all, I maintain the delicate balance of deference and dignity that my position requires.

When Fiona grows restless, Isabella appears, offering to take her to the nursery where Adrian is. I smile and hand her over.

With Fiona upstairs, I scan the room for Matteo, who's been absent for over an hour.

"He won't be much longer," a voice says from behind me.

I turn to see Lorenzo, the family's enforcer. With everything that has happened, we haven't had time to speak to each other.

He shares Matteo's strong jawline and sharp gaze, although his eyes are green. His hair is slicked back in a man bun, revealing the tattoos that sneak up to his neck.

"Oh, hi. I don't think we've properly introduced ourselves."

He smirks, his gaze assessing but not unfriendly. "We both know each other and you've made quite an impression on my family."

"I didn't intend to," I say honestly.

"No, I don't imagine you did. That's what makes it interesting." Lorenzo studies me over his champagne.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

"Every woman who's ever pursued Matteo has done so with apparent intentions. Position. Power. The Bellanti name. I vetted them myself, but none were suitable."

"And have you vetted me as well?"

"Thoroughly. From the moment I saw you at Nico's estate."

"And what conclusion did you reach?" I ask.

"That you're either the best thing that's ever happened to my brother, or the most dangerous. I haven't decided which yet."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive," I point out.

That earns me a genuine smile. "No, they're not. Which is precisely why I wanted to have this conversation."

He gestures toward a set of French doors leading to a smaller terrace, away from the main gathering, and I follow him outside.

"My brother is in love with you," he states bluntly.

"I know," I reply simply.

"Do you? Because Matteo doesn't fall in love. Ever." He observes me. "Our father told Matteo this morning that he's considering stepping down. Passing leadership of the family to him."

"So soon?"

"The Caruso situation altered the timeline." He fixes me with an intent stare. "Do you understand what this means? For Matteo? For you?"

"It means he'll become Don of the Bellanti syndicate. And if I stay with him, I'll become Donna."

"Exactly. The Donna isn't just a wife, Elena. She's the heart of the family, the keeper of its secrets. In some ways, her power extends even beyond the Don's."

"I'm aware."

"Are you? Because once my father makes this decision public, there's no turning back. Not for Matteo, and not for you if you choose to stay with him." He leans forward, his eyes intense.. "This life—our life—itwasn't your choice. You could still walk away. Take your daughter somewhere safe, start over."

"I killed a man three weeks ago," I say finally. "Three bullets, center mass. I'm already in this world, Lorenzo. The only choice left is whether I embrace it fully or live in denial of what I've become."

"And which do you choose?"

"I choose your brother. Everything else—the title, the responsibilities, the dangers—those I accept as part of loving him."

Lorenzo nods once, decisively. "Good answer."

The door behind us opens, and Matteo appears, his expression shifting from surprise to wariness.

"Everything alright?" he asks.

"Perfect timing," Lorenzo says smoothly. "She'll do," he murmurs to him before disappearing inside.

Matteo watches him go. "Should I be concerned about what just happened?"

"I believe I just received the Bellanti brother's seal of approval."

He snorts. "From Lorenzo? That's interesting."

He then reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear with gentle fingers. "I'm sorry I was gone so long. The Calabreses needed more convincing than expected."

"Did you succeed?"

"Of course. How's Fiona?"

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Upstairs sleeping. Isabella took her to the nursery.” I study his face in the moonlight, noting the new lines of tension around his eyes. “Your brother mentioned something interesting. About your father.”

Matteo stills, his expression carefully neutral. “Did he?”

“He said your father is considering stepping down. Passing leadership to you.” I watch his reaction closely. “Were you planning to tell me?”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Of course I was. I only found out this morning, and I wanted to discuss it with you privately. Not in the middle of a family gathering.”

“Why not?” I ask, genuinely curious. “It’s good news, isn’t it? Recognition of everything you’ve accomplished.”

“It’s... complicated.” His gaze shifts to the gardens below, the vast Bellanti estate stretching into the darkness. “Being Don isn’t just a title, Elena. It’s a target. On me, and by extension, on anyone close to me.”

Understanding dawns. “On me. On Fiona.”

“Elena—” He hesitates. “If you stay with me now, you’re not just choosing a relationship. You’re choosing to become the Donna of the Bellanti syndicate. To step fully into a world you never asked to be part of.”

“Is that what you’re worried about? That I’ll run now that things are becoming

official?"

"I'm worried that you shouldn't have to make this choice at all. Your husband was killed because of his indirect involvement in our world. And now I'm asking you to walk straight into the center."

"You're not asking me anything," I point out. "Actually, you seem to be trying to dissuade me from something I haven't even been offered."

"I'm trying to give you an out before things go further between us."

"So thoughtful of you to decide what's best for me."

"What I'm trying to say is that being with me means accepting my world completely. The power, yes, but also the violence. The constant vigilance."

"You don't think I know that already? Matteo, I killed a man three weeks ago. I'm already in this world."

"That was different. That was survival."

"And this would be a choice. That's what scares you, isn't it? That I might choose this life—choose you—and then regret it."

"It's a life of crime, Elena," he says bluntly.

"It's a life of family," I interrupt. "Of protection. Of power used to shield those you love. Yes, there's darkness in it. But there's darkness in me too."

"You deserve a normal life after everything you've been through."



"Normal is a luxury I lost the moment Mark died. But you gave me something better. You gave me and Fiona safety. Respect. A place to belong."

"And what if I fail you? What if I can't protect you the way I promised?"

"Then we'll face it together. That's what family does."

"I love you," I say, the words falling from my lips with startling ease. "I'm in love with you, Matteo Bellanti, and if you think you can scare me away with talk of danger and crime and responsibility, then you don't know me at all."

He stares at me, his hand tightening on mine. "You're certain? Because once I hear those words, I won't let you take them back. I won't let you go."

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"I love you," he says, the words rough with emotions. "God help me, I've loved you from the beginning."

"I love you too." the words are barely out of my mouth when he swallows them, kissing me like he needs to survive. I respond with equal fervor, pulling him closer until there's no space left between us.

A soft sound from the doorway breaks through our moment. Isabella stands there with Fiona in her arms, drowsy but awake.

"She woke up and wouldn't settle. I think she wants her mama."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I take Fiona, who snuggles close with a contented sigh. Over her head, my gaze finds Matteo's, the intensity of our interrupted moment still vibrating between us.

He moves closer, patting Fiona's back. She turns her head, blinking sleepily up at him before reaching out one small hand toward his face.

"Ba," she murmurs drowsily, patting his cheek with clumsy affection.

Matteo freezes, his eyes widening. He catches her tiny hand in his, pressing a kiss.

"Yes, piccola," he whispers. "I'm here."

Fiona smiles dreamily before her eyes flutter closed again. Matteo looks up at me, his expression stripped of all its usual walls.

In this moment, watching this man, who will soon be one of the most powerful figures in our world, looking at my daughter with such undisguised love, I understand with perfect clarity that there are no more decisions to be made.

Choice, not fate or obligation, has set the path before us. By love.

We are already a family. Everything else—the titles, the responsibilities, the dangers—is secondary to that essential truth.

The Donna of the Bellanti syndicate.

It's a role I've never imagined for myself, yet now it fits like a second skin.

This is who we are now. This is who I choose to be, and I don't regret any bit of it.

12

Epilogue

Fourmonthslater

Matteo

Blood drips from my knuckles, splattering on the marble floor of the Commission chamber. The copper scent mingles with gunpowder and fear. Four bodies lie at my feet—Caruso's last desperate loyalists who dared try to kill me at another Commission meeting.

Seriously, they are as dumb as Massimo.

"Is this all of them?" I ask, my voice calm.

Valentino nods by the chamber door. "All accounted for, boss."

I turn to the twelve powerful Commission members gathered around an ancient table. They had asked for my presence to deal with the last batch of Massimo's men, when we were suddenly attacked again.

Meeting my father's gaze, I announce, "Apologies for the interruption, gentlemen. Please, continue with the sentencing of Caruso's remaining men."

After a long silence, Don Vincenzo clears his throat. "I believe this matter has resolved itself rather... definitively," he says, his hands folded.

He turns to my father. “Luca, it appears your son handles threats to our order with remarkable efficiency.”

My father’s lips curl into a subtle smile. “He always has.”

“The Commission recognizes the rightness of Bellanti control,” adds Don Vitale, his gold rings catching the light as he gestures to the bodies. “These fools have hastened not only their own demise but that of any who challenge the new order.”

“New order,” my father repeats thoughtfully as he stands, commanding every eye in the room. “Perhaps more new than you realize, my friends.”

He approaches me with measured steps. For thirty years, my father has ruled our syndicate with brutal precision, earning the title of the country’s most dangerous man. Now, he studies my face as if memorizing it one last time.

“I had planned to wait until things quieted,” he says, his voice filling the silent chamber. “But the time has arrived sooner than expected.”

He removes his heavy gold signet ring—a symbol of his decades-long authority. The Commission shifts, understanding the importance of the moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“Matteo, my son,” he proclaims before the gathered dons, “I name you Don of the Bellanti syndicate. All that was mine is now yours to command. All loyalties sworn to me transfer to you.”

He places the ring in my palm. “May you lead our family with strength and wisdom.”

I close my fingers around the ring, metal warming my skin. This moment—groomed for since birth—feels surreal.

“I accept this responsibility,” I reply evenly. “I will protect our family and its interests with my life.”

I slid the ring onto my finger; it fit perfectly, as if it were always meant to be there. The Commission members rise in respect, acknowledging the power transition.

“Matteo Bellanti is now our Don,” Don Vincenzo declares. “May your reign be long and prosperous.”

My father steps back to his traditional place beside me, and in that instant, the power dynamics of our organization shift irrevocably.

I glance down at the men who thought to assassinate me in front of the most powerful criminal leaders. Their blood seeps into the marble—a new layer in the foundation of Bellanti power.

“Clean this up,” I order Valentino. “And prepare transport for the Commission back to the estate. I believe we have a celebration to attend.”

Later, at the Bellanti estate, music and conversation pulse like a heartbeat. Crystal chandeliers cast a golden light over family members and allies gathered to celebrate my father's retirement and my appointment.

Elena enters, and I catch sight of her immediately. How could I not?

The blue dress that I picked for her clings to her curves, making her eyes sparkle like jewels. Fiona hangs on her hip, my daughter's dark curls bouncing as she surveys the crowd with curious eyes.

My daughter. Though biologically she may not be mine, in every important way she belongs to me—just as her mother does.

Elena's gaze meets mine and her lips curve into a smile. Four months ago, on the terrace outside this very hall, I confessed my love to her, and she confessed hers to me.

Since then, she has become a formidable force within our family, earning respect for her intelligence and loyalty.

Whispers spread about her—the woman who put three perfect bullets in Caruso's heart, who stands unflinchingly beside the Bellanti heir.

Don Bellanti now, I remind myself, feeling the ring's weight on my finger.

Elena makes her way toward me, greeting some relatives on the way. Fiona waves excitedly, nearly toppling from Elena's arms in her eagerness.

"Careful, tesoro," Elena murmurs as she adjusts her hold on our squirming daughter.

I close the gap, taking Fiona into my arms. She presses a sloppy kiss on my cheek

and exclaims, “Papa!” God, I will never be tired of hearing that word from her.

“Hello, princess,” I say, inhaling the sweet scent of baby powder. “Are you being good for Mama?”

She babbles and buries her face in my neck. Over her dark curls, I catch Elena’s knowing gaze.

“Everything went well at the Commission?” she asks quietly.

“Better than expected,” I reply evenly. “I’ll tell you later.” Shifting Fiona to one arm, I reach for Elena’s hand with the other. The signet ring catches her eye, and she whispers, “It has happened?”

I nod. “My father felt the timing was right.”

Her expression shifts to pride, concern and something deeper. She squeezes my hand. “Then tonight is an even bigger celebration than planned.”

Before I can respond, my sister Isabella appears with Nico close behind, her bump barely visible in her golden dress.

“Matteo,” she greets, kissing each of my cheeks. “I heard about what happened. Something about a commission meeting gone sideways?”

“News travels fast,” I observe dryly.

“There is blood on your sleeve,” Nico murmurs. “You didn’t have time to change?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

I glance at the faint stain on my cuff. “Other priorities.” I nod to my father, standing quietly with Don Vincenzo across the room.

Isabella’s eyes narrow. “Something has happened, hasn’t it? Something big.”

“Your brother has had an eventful day,” Elena adds gently, squeezing Isabella’s hand. “As have I.”

My father catches my eye and nods. It’s time.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I say, my voice carrying over the crowd. The room falls silent. “Tonight, we honor my father’s leadership.”

I step beside him, the signet ring gleaming. “Today, before the Commission, my father stepped down as Don. After thirty years, he passes this legacy to me.”

A murmur of surprise and approval runs through the hall.

My father steps forward. “My son has proven himself in every challenge. Under his leadership, our enemies have fallen, our alliances strengthened, and our future secured.” Turning to me, his pride is unmistakable. “The Commission recognizes him as Don Bellanti. I ask you all to do the same.”

Don Vincenzo raises his glass. “To Don Matteo Bellanti—may your reign bring prosperity.”

Glasses rise in acknowledgment as I incline my head in acceptance, feeling the



weight of loyalty and expectation.

“I am honored,” I say simply. “And one more announcement makes this night even more significant.”

I extend my hand to Elena. She approaches with Fiona on her hip. “Elena,” I announce loudly, “has agreed to stand with me as Donna Bellanti—to be my wife, my partner, and the mother of my children: Fiona, and the child she now carries.”

Her hand finds mine as murmurs sweep the crowd. “I hope I have your blessings.”

“To The Bellantis!” Lorenzo yells, holding up his champagne glass.

“To The Bellantis!” The room roars.

Hours later, after endless congratulations and conversations, Elena and I escape to our private wing. She kicks off her heels, removes her earrings, and remarks, “Don Bellanti suits you.”

I remove my jacket and reply, “Donna Bellanti suits you, though you’ve filled that role unofficially for months.”

She smiles and unpins her hair, letting it fall in soft waves. “The women know it. The men are still catching up.”

I cross to her, my hands resting on her waist. “How are you feeling? The baby—”

“Is perfect,” she assures me, leaning back against me. “Just making his presence known with morning sickness.”

I caress her still-flat abdomen protectively. “A boy, do you think?”

She teases, “Does the mighty Don have a preference?”

“Only that they’re healthy and have your eyes,” I answer honestly.

She laughs softly. “You say that now, but I’ve seen how you are with Fiona. Soon, you’ll be wrapped around our baby’s finger.”

I can’t deny it. Fiona changed something in me the moment Elena placed her in my arms. The fierce protectiveness I’ve always felt for my family now extends to this tiny being—even if not by blood.

A soft knock interrupts. Elena answers and returns with Fiona.

“The nanny said she couldn’t sleep. Mind if she sleeps with us?”

“She’s my daughter too, Elena. You don’t have to ask.”

“Come here honey,” I coo and carefully take her from Elena, placing her on the bed, in between her mother and I.

Minutes later, in darkness, Elena’s hand finds mine, and she murmurs, “You were attacked by Massimo’s men at the commission, weren’t you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 10:49 am*

“I’m not surprised you’ve pieced it together,” I whisper. “Yes—Caruso loyalists. The last of them. It’s over now.”

She is silent for a long moment, her thumb tracing circles on my hand. “Does it ever end? There will always be someone who wants what you have.”

I tighten my grip. “There will always be threats. But none like Caruso. I dismantled his network completely. I will protect you, Fiona, and this baby. You will be the most protected family in the country. I swear it.”

Her reply is simple and sure: “I know.”

In that quiet moment, as I watch Fiona’s gentle sleep and gaze at Elena—the woman who has become the center of my existence—I realize that after a life built on blood and fear, I now have something worth dying for.

Something worth living for and I will bedamned if I let anyone take that away from me.

I pull Elena closer, brushing my lips against her forehead and Fiona’s.

For them, I will rewrite the rules of our world. My empire and my heart belong to the same queen now—and I will burn this city to ashes before I let either fall.

The End