



Protecting My Nanny

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Shane Matthews is scorching hot like the Sahara Desert, dripping with wealth, completely forbidden...

And he's my grumpy, infuriatingly sexy boss.

My job is simple—take care of his bambino and stay out of his bed.

But I can't resist him... and neither can he.

His brooding charm, those smoldering eyes and kissable lips... Mr. Irresistible isn't just his nickname.

It's a curse.

When he touches me, I melt into a puddle of pure, aching desire.

Forgetting the danger that shadows my every step.

I'm not the innocent girl he thinks I am.

Behind closed doors, I'm his.

But behind my dark past, there's a Mafia secret that could destroy everything.

If Shane discovers the truth, it could tear us apart.

If the Mafia finds me... I shudder at the thought.

Can we survive my dangerous mafia past that's crept into my present, or will my past tear us apart for forever?

If you enjoy Age-Gap, Forbidden Billionaire Romance books with a touch of Mafia danger then you'll be hooked on this thrilling romance. Grab *Protecting My Nanny*, A Billionaire Age-Gap Romance now and start enjoying this book today.

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Prologue

Nicole

For the life of me, I can't recall what it was that stirred me from my sleep that night. A shout, fleeting footsteps, the slamming of a door—whatever it was, it was loud, brief, and over before my eyes had even fully opened. What I do remember in great detail is the sickening silence I awoke to. My mother and father had spent the entire afternoon talking in hushed tones.

The looks on their faces each time they glanced at me were something I could only describe as unrelenting fear. It was around 9 p.m., just after dinner, when I tucked Giovanni in at my mother's request and laid with him until he fell asleep. Then I went down the hall and snuggled into my own bed. I remember being terrified of a single word I'd heard my mother speak before Maria, our nanny, urged us off to bed that night. And to this day, I swear it's the last word I ever heard her speak: "Sindacato." Her tone was the most frightening part—such sadness and worry, unavoidable and devastating like an oncoming storm.

Awakening alone in my bedroom, the shadows seemed to dance along the walls in the pale of night. I moved my legs to the side of the bed, slid into my slippers, and was about to head for the door when I noticed the fluttering of my balcony window curtains in the cool breeze. Security had demanded we keep our windows locked, and I was sure I had done just that. Anonymous phone calls laced with threats had the entire staff on edge and my parents in a state of total despair. They had tried to hide their ties to the local mobs well enough, but certain things were not able to be hidden at my age.

Outside my room, the hall was quiet and undisturbed. As ordinary as it all seemed, there was an unease in the back of my mind, a soreness in the pit of my throat, and a tremble somewhere deep down, climbing up my spine and making my heart race. I made my way down the hall to the large wooden doors where my parents slept and slowly opened them. There was something in the air of the dark room—a scent I would later come to associate with death, though it was likely a combination of that and the herbal incense my mother would buy from the local market square.

I called out, "Mom... Dad," soft enough to be heard but not surprising. There was no response, only the same chilling silence that had haunted me since I'd woken up. My initial instinct was to turn on the lights, but my intuition told me that wasn't a good idea. Instead, I eased over to the bed. As I neared, I caught a glimpse of my mother's eyes—beautiful, glimmering, and lifeless in the moonlight casting through the window. I saw the red glistening on her head, leaking onto the bedspread and dripping to the floor.

I held my hand across my mouth to stifle the gasp, feeling the air in my lungs suddenly disappear. First came the uncontrollable shivers and convulsions, then a sudden urge to jump backward, realizing my bare toes had sunk into the pool of my mother's blood on the floor. I turned my head and called out to her out of pure instinct. I didn't expect a response, but my heart sank all the same when none came. Quickly, I rounded the bed, eager to see my dad.

My father's body lay half-slumped across the edge of the bed, one arm dangling lifelessly toward the floor, his head twisted at an unnatural angle. His eyes were open but unseeing, staring blankly into the void. A deep gash ran across his forehead, the blood congealing on his skin. I wept, finally uncontrollably, for a moment before my heart jumped again, pounding against my chest.

Giovanni, I thought, still not fully comprehending what I had just seen. My concern for my parents was pocketed, as was any fear that the culprits might still be in the

house. I raced down the hall, my heart pounding, my eyes blurred by tears.

When I reached his room, I opened the door expecting the worst, and felt a sudden comfort. His room was untouched, and from the lump beneath the silk spread on his bed came the sound of a smooth, nasally snore. The most beautiful sound in the world, at that moment. I walked over to him and pulled the covers back, desperate to confirm his safety. Beneath was his soft face, as innocent and beautiful as I'd ever seen him, and for the first time since I'd awoken, I felt a small sense of calm wash over me.

It's just us now. The thought killed my newfound comfort. I had to tell him. There was no one else. I had to tell him our parents were dead and we needed to flee our childhood home right now.

I hesitated briefly, then gave him a gentle shake. Giovanni's snores ceased as his little eyes opened, his hazel pupils fixating on my face. He had a sense of panic, as if he already knew. He sat up, looking me in the face, concern clear in his expression and even the pace of his breathing. He moved closer to me.

"Nicole," he said. "What's happened?"

Puzzled by his awareness that something had happened, I responded, "We have to go, Gio."

I began to speak, but the words got caught in my throat.

"What happened?" Giovanni pleaded. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, Giovanni, but we need to—"

"What happened to you? Your face?" he asked.

My heart fluttered. I stood and turned, looking into the mirror over the dresser beside his bed. There it was—a thumbprint, a bloodied thumbprint, smeared across my left cheek.

Confusion overwhelmed me. I looked down at my hands. Clean. I hadn't touched blood and hadn't—

It hit me. The open window, the eerie feeling in my bedroom. Someone had come to me after they hurt my parents and had touched me in my sleep.

A shiver ran through me, chilling me to the bones.

I turned to Giovanni. "We have to go now. Put on your pants and shoes. We're leaving."

"Where's Mom and Dad?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Gio, listen. I'm in charge right now, and what would Mom and Dad tell you?"

"To listen to you," he said reassuringly.

"Then get dressed."

Without another word, he was up, pulling on his pants and moments later sliding into his shoes. I handed him a jacket from his closet, suddenly wishing I had grabbed one for myself, but there was no way I was going back to my room—not then, maybe not ever. The thought of the killer caressing my cheek as I slept made me want to vomit.

A few moments later, I was grasping his hand and peeking out his door into the hallway. Clear, I told myself as I pulled him from the room and rushed down the corridor, dragging him in my wake. The back door was our best bet; the darkness

could shield us from any potential setbacks.

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I turned to him just as we left the backdoor entrance to the house. "We make for the olive fields and don't stop till we hit town." Giovanni didn't question me; he simply gave his big sister a nod and a small smile.

We spent the night with the Rossis, our neighbors to the south of our estate, who happily took us in. Mr. Rossi even stood watch all night with a rifle in his arms. I tried calling my aunt and uncle all night, but it wasn't until the following day that someone picked up—an officer. He didn't say precisely what had happened, but I knew from his tone and my uncle's involvement in our family's dealings that Giovanni was my last remaining relative, and I would spend the rest of my life ensuring his safety. It was a task I wasn't entirely up to yet, and with the events of last night, I could not handle it alone.

In the Rossi kitchen, I held the phone in my hand, looking at the numbers I'd entered and the large green call button. My mind wouldn't let me press it just yet.

"Darling, you go down this road, and we can't keep you here anymore," said Mr. Rossi. His wife gasped at the statement, her eyes wide with horror as she looked at her husband.

"Sal, we can't..." his wife began to speak.

"We can't afford to be caught up in your business any deeper. We don't blame you for your parents' mistakes and will keep you as long as you need, but you get involved with Aldo, and you're going down the same road. It's your choice, but you won't be welcome anywhere near us again."

He left the room, a stamp of finality on his words. It didn't bother me; I'd known what I needed to do since I'd found out about my aunt and uncle. I pressed the button and put the phone to my face, watching Mrs. Rossi's eyes water, her head shaking left to right, her last hopes of discouraging me fading.

Fifteen minutes later, an all-black SUV waited for me at the end of the street. Aldo had insisted on a face-to-face meeting, assuring me that I would be safe until I arrived. I trusted him enough to believe his words, especially since he had stationed a few men to keep an eye on the Rossi house from a distance. This provided me with a mix of comfort and unease. I understood that nothing came without a price when dealing with men like Aldo. He would undoubtedly want to know how much I knew about his involvement with my parents and what information I had regarding the culprits. But most of all, he would want to assess whether I could be of any further use, as men like him tended to do.

In the back of the SUV, I was greeted by two men—one a stranger, the other quite familiar. Raffaele and I had met through his work with my parents. He often visited our house, engaging in hushed conversations with them in the back rooms. On one occasion, when they were out, he took the time to get to know me. Raffaele was a few years older, undeniably cute, and charming in a way that hinted at danger. Despite the fact that my parents were the ones who brought him into our lives, they would never approve of him. It was ironic—they were involved with him, yet they wouldn't want me to be. We shared a brief, clandestine romance behind their backs, a secret thrill that seemed even more exciting because of the risk.

The other man, I assumed, was Aldo, brother of Pietro and second in command of the crew. Known for his ruthlessness, he was Raffaele's senior. Aldo was calm and collected as he spoke, first offering condolences.

"We'll avenge your parents," he assured me. "It was the Serpenti, and we already have the names of those involved. Your parents were loyal, and we are loyal to

them."

His eyes softened momentarily before turning serious again. "But starting a new life for you and Giovanni is more complicated. Your family still had some debts with us. We're not asking you to pay them back, but we need you to work with us for a bit. In return, we'll ensure you and Giovanni get the new start you deserve."

"I'll do it," I replied instantly. "But nothing violent or degrading, toward me or anyone else. I want a clear timeframe and a ticket out of here."

Aldo nodded. "Where would you like to go, little Nicola?"

The use of my family nickname startled me, but I decided to keep things peaceful. "America. A ticket for me and my brother."

Aldo turned to Raffaele with a smirk. "This one has fire in her. Shame you couldn't keep her." Then he faced me again. "Yes, Nicola, that can be arranged."

Chapter 1

Shane

Late and for some reason overscheduled, I only need a bit of clarity today. I'm perfect at my job; my bank account and investment rankings remind me of that daily.

However, matters of children and their care are as foreign to me as the relationships that lead to them. What I need now is an ally, someone to fill in the blanks of caring for a child. My nephew, Jaime, deserves the best, and I expect no less in a nanny.

Given all he's been through, the hardship of losing both his parents, any person willing to take him on—and receive the generous wages I'm offering to do it—should

be able to stand my simple questioning. This hasn't been the case so far; three of the candidates never responded to requests for a second interview, two walked out midway through the first, and one broke down in tears, locking herself in a bathroom after just a few questions. Kristen, my assistant, thank God, was there to talk her out.

I had cut lunch short upon hearing about the newest candidate, one Kristen has assured me is a perfect fit. Upon entering the office, I find Kristen nestled at her desk before the glass doors marked with my name.

"Mr. Matthews," she greets calmly, as she always does.

"Kristen." I take note of the shadow of a figure sitting in the chair in my office. "I take that to be the perfect girl you alerted me to."

Kristen smirks. "Nicole, yes, sir. That's her."

"Alright, hold my calls till the interview finishes."

"Sir, just a note. I scheduled the meeting with the Atlanta execs for 2:30," she adds.

"That gives me an hour," I say, making my frustration known.

"An hour and twenty, sir, yes," Kristen responds plainly. Too plainly, honestly.

"I can't quite give her a proper interview in that time, can I? I'm sure I told you to hold all meetings until after four today, did I not?"

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"Well, I assumed my pre-interview could cut down on time, and given you've been holding off the Atlanta investors for weeks and the rumors of them considering our rivals as potential replacements, I thought you'd want to take this one as soon as possible. Apologies, sir," she says, even more plainly this time, before planting her eyes back on her computer screen.

I hate it when she's right. "Fine," I let out coldly, heading to my office doors. As I grasp for the handle, I stop myself, taking a deep breath, realizing how lost I truly would be without her.

"Kristen, thank you," I remark.

This time, she smiles. "It's my job, sir. There's no need for thanks. You just keep the paychecks coming," she says, turning back to her screen.

As I enter the office, I adopt my coldest demeanor. The priority of taking care of my orphaned nephew requires diligence on my part—more meticulousness than any face I'd put on when interviewing someone for a job. This is his life, and I'll be damned if he doesn't get the best. Stern and strong, I walk into the office, yet as she stands and turns, acknowledging my presence, I find myself thrown by her perfect smile and wide eyes.

Another charmer, thinking a few bats of her eyelashes will land her the gig.

"Mr. Matthews, it's such a pleasure to meet you," the girl speaks, extending her hand toward me.

Ignoring her charming smile, I keep my armor up and my attitude hard. "Yes," I respond. "Pleasure's all mine. And you're Nicole, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes," she says cheerfully, her eyes and cheeks full of warmth. I grasp her hand firmly, looking into her deep green eyes, before quickly turning and walking around my desk.

"Please take your seat," I tell her as I take the grand leather recliner that sits behind my large oak desk. "I assume you know the job and who I am. So I'll ask you first to explain both those things to me, to the best of your knowledge."

She takes a deep breath. "You're Shane Matthews, CEO of VesiTech. One of the youngest people to ever become a billionaire. You hold the weight of a company that shapes the world on your shoulders. But you're very private—not very personal on social media, no vacation pics, girlfriends, nothing to tell who you really are under the designer suits and glam. But I do know from Kristen that you're a good boss, and from the fact that you're scouting for nannies, a loving uncle. The job... well..."

Her smile fades, and her eyes widen.

Broken already? I haven't even gotten to the heavy questions. How disappointing.

"I guess I'll start with condolences," she says, looking deep into my eyes. "Kristen also told me about your circumstance, and... I think it's just awful. I won't say I know what you're feeling, but I lost my parents not too long ago. I was lucky enough to have been a bit older than Jaime, that poor child." She seems to trail off in thought. "My little brother, like Jaime, wasn't so fortunate. I know the process they go through," she says, looking back up at me. "You don't really know how much it's affected them, or if they ever really get over it. You just smile and try to be there for them as much as you can, but deep down inside, you know you can never replace what they've lost. It's part of what makes me think I'm a good fit for this job. I know a

great deal about dealing with children, and an even greater deal about dealing with grief. I think I can help Jaime, be there for him like I was for my brother, and like he was for me. I think Jaime deserves that, and I think you want it for him."

Looking into her green eyes, I feel my heart begin to warm. She's somehow penetrated my armor. Her words are sincere, her tone relaxing, and her accent easy on my ears. She's fresh to the city, to the country, even, I surmise.

"Your accent—European?"

"I'm from Italy, Mr. Matthews."

"Shane is fine," I correct her. I admire her respect. She is fairly young; early twenties, I guess. Much younger than my 38 years. "Your parents... May I ask what happened?"

She hesitates for a moment. "There was an accident in my village," she begins, then goes into a story about a fire that took her family house. I learned to spot a liar in grade school, a necessary tactic when you swim with sharks as much as I do. Her response feels rehearsed. Her changed tone, shifting eyes, and fidgety hands when she says it tells me she is lying—not about them being dead, that much I can see, hear, and read in her—but the manner in which it happened. She feels the need to fabricate her story, and that draws my curiosity a bit.

I'm not as bothered by her avoidance as I might normally be. Something about her, the way she carries herself—if she's lying, it is likely for a good reason, and I see no need to dig deeper. Not yet, at least.

Her background seems genuine, as far as I am concerned. The job is hers, but I'm not quite ready to tell her that yet. Her perky attitude and cheerful tone annoy me, though I imagine Jaime would be quite taken with it. She'd be good for him. I run her

through the typical questions: her motivations, criminal background, her views on child-rearing and discipline. All are answered well in that cheerful tone that's starting to grow on me.

"I think I've heard enough," I tell her.

She sits there quietly, eyes wide with anxiety. There is something about the green in them, a rare tone I haven't quite seen before. A polished, darkened jade, full of life and wonder. I find myself getting lost in them again, imagining how they'd shine in the moonlight.

Wake up, Shane. No time for daydreaming. Work is your lover. Back to business, I tell myself.

"The job is yours, if you'd like it."

She jumps in her chair, clutching her hands together, trying to hold back her smile and maintain her posture. "Thank you, Shane, you won't regret it," she tells me. It is the first time she's used my name, and it sends a jolt through my chest hearing it come from her.

Get it together, Shane, I tell myself.

I give her a smile. "I have a meeting, but go see Kristen on your way out. She'll give you the details," I say, extending my hand to her. She rises from her seat and grasps my hand. It's warmer this time—she is warmer.

A few days pass and she's at the mansion, getting the rundown from the temp nanny, learning the ins and outs of the large house and the schedule we all like to maintain here. Jaime takes to her instantly, and I notice the immediate difference in his attitude.

Just a week after her arrival, I pass by the two of them in the living room as I head to my home office in the eastern wing for a bit of work and possibly some afternoon football. Clutched in my hand is a beer and a bowl of pretzels. Nicole takes note of me.

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"Jaime, do you want to ask your Uncle Shane if he wants to play a round?" she says, loud enough that she is sure I'll hear it.

Jaime looks up at me. His brown sweater matches his eyes, and the puppy dog slippers I bought him on his first day at the house. He's standing over that board game where the colored hippos try to eat as many balls as they can; I forget the name these days.

He sees my still expression and turns back to her, then gives her a gentle shake of his head left to right.

Smart kid, I think to myself.

As I walk off, I hear Nicole. "Well, maybe one of these days he'll take a few minutes to play with us," she says just as loud, ensuring that both Jaime and I hear it simultaneously.

I feel myself growing annoyed, but still turn and smile at them. "Maybe later, champ," I say, giving a quick glance to Nicole before walking down the hall, holding back my annoyance. At least he's happy, I tell myself.

Chapter 2

Nicole

Caring for Jaime is so much more challenging than I thought it would be. Partly because grief is complicated, and getting past it is different for everyone, and partly

because I oversold my experience when trying for the position. It's true that I cared for my brother for years after our parents died, but Gio was already a teenager then, a detail I left out of the interview. Moreover, he was my little brother, meaning there was an already-established level of respect and trust. I am still a stranger to Jaime; one he is warming up to, but a new face all the same.

I watch him from the comfort of the couch, running his toy cars along the floor. He's mostly quiet in the mornings, which gives me time to read and work on my English. Though, I learn a lot more by simply talking and listening to him or watching his cartoons together. In a way, he teaches me just as much as I do him.

"Oh no," he says suddenly. "We're slipping off the road!"

I look up from my book in shock, realizing what he's reenacting. Quietly, I listen, my heart pounding.

"Don't worry, Mommy and Daddy, I'll save you," he says. He drifts the tiny red car around a toy minivan grasped in his other hand and safely skirts it to the side of the imaginary road.

I pause, unsure of what to say or do. I watch him for a moment. He looks at the car for a while, not saying anything. Then for some reason, maybe because he knows I heard, or maybe because he feels my eyes burning into the back of his head, he turns and looks at me. His big brown eyes are wide.

"I wish I could have saved them for real," he says, and my heart sinks. I put my book down and come close to him, pulling him tightly to my chest.

"I know you do, sweetheart. So do I. But you needn't worry. They are still around, looking down on you from the sky." My eyes water as I hold him close, and suddenly, I'm in Italy again, holding Gio as he cries over dinner. My sad excuse for

pasta reminded him of Mom. We wept together all night.

"Uncle Shane says they're up there, too."

"Does he now?" I say, wiping tears from my eyes.

"Yeah. He says that now they look down on other people and try to save as many as they can from car accidents, so I don't need to be afraid of cars anymore."

"He's right," I say. And at that moment, Shane pops into my head. Maybe he isn't as hard and rough as he seems.

"Do you drive a car, Nicole?" Jaime asks.

"I used to, but not since I left Italy."

"Do you promise to wear a seatbelt?" he asks, pulling away from my chest and looking at me with his big brown eyes.

"Always, sweetheart," I tell him, stroking his soft brown hair and smiling, trying to stifle my tears.

"Thanks for the hug..." Jaime says. "But can I play now?"

"Sure thing, darling," I tell him, loosening my grip and letting him return to his toy cars.

I remember Gio again, asking me where I go each time I leave him, the look of fear in his eyes that I might never return. It makes me miss him dearly, and suddenly, I need to hear his voice.

I have had limited contact with Giovanni since I arrived. Raffaele warned me that the Serpenti were still after us, and any contact could put our lives in danger. I don't know how much of this is true or if it is just another attempt to control me. Aldo has promised to protect me and Giovanni under the Avvoltoi as long as we follow their rules and pay our dues. But the Avvoltoi are just as violent and deadly as the Serpenti, so trusting them completely would be foolish. My only way to communicate with Giovanni is through an emergency number directly to Raffaele, and I know firsthand how manipulative he can be.

What contact I have had since my arrival has been by way of short text messages with pictures of Giovanni attached. Raffaele even sends me pictures of himself as though we still have some romance going when, honestly, the mere thought of him sickens me. Since the last message, it has been a month, and every time I try to call back, there is no connection, probably because they use burner phones.

My involvement with the Avvoltoi has severely limited my ability to contact people back home. The fear of the syndicates has grown, especially as their blood wars continue to ravage Italy. Despite this, my parents have a few trusted contacts, other informants, who might be able to help me reach Gio, or at least provide updates on his well-being. I can only hope they remain loyal after all these years.

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Cisca is my mom's oldest friend. She went into hiding after my parents' death. Before she disappeared, she gave me her number. I call her using a phone app that blocks my number and location. Raffaele taught me this trick before I left Italy in case I needed to contact him.

I call her first, allowing the phone to ring repeatedly, but no answer comes.

Next is Sophia, an old friend from the neighborhood. She's not as trustworthy as Cisca, but as the neighborhood gossip, she's a good source of information. I call the number I have scribbled on an old notebook paper and am immediately greeted by the familiar rasp of her voice.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Sophia... This is Nicolleta... Ludovica's daughter..."

An audible silence remains on the line; I can barely even hear her breathing.

"I lived just down the—"

"I know who you are. And why have you called me?"

"I... didn't know who else to contact. I'm in the South now hiding out, and I just wanted any information... Have you seen Gio around? Or heard anything of him?"

She goes silent again.

"If he's smart, he's hiding like you. No, girl, I know nothing of your brother, nor would I want to. What I do know is that the Serpenti left a message for every soul in this neighborhood to pass on to you—if we are brave enough not to turn you over, that is."

I hesitate for a moment, then finally speak. "What's the—"

"They say they are closer than you think, and if you know what's good, you'll find them and come clean before they find you." She goes silent once more, before adding, "Don't call here again."

The phone clicks in my face, and I'm left with the dead tone of the receiver at my ear. I hang up the phone and call back Cisca immediately. I let the phone ring as long as I can before it eventually disconnects.

Later at lunch, I read Jaime his favorite book while he sits at the table in front of his food. Stirred, afraid, and on the edge of breaking down, I still push on, keeping a happy face on for Jaime. He deserves that much. I look up from the book and notice he's not eating at all but sorting through his food and removing the mushrooms, placing them on a napkin next to the plate.

"You don't like mushrooms, bud?" I say to him.

He shakes his head left to right, pulling one impaled on his fork's end and tossing it atop the pile with the rest of them.

"I'll keep that in mind," I say with a smile, returning to the book. Every muscle in my body and nerve in my head urges me to get on the first flight to Italy and find my brother.

Hold it together, Nicole. Going back won't do anyone any good, I keep telling myself.

I continue with the story. "Lily and Jason walked through the garden toward the lake with only their map and trusty dog Spikey at their side," I say, mimicking my best narrator's voice.

"There's a big garden by my old house. It's got all kinds of flowers. Pink, purple, orange... I used to play there with the kids in my class," says Jaime.

"That's nice. Do you like flowers?"

"Sometimes, but too many give me agogries..."

I smile. "Yeah, I get allergies too."

"Uncle Shane doesn't take me out too much. But I'd really like to go to a park. I don't have any friends here, but maybe I could meet some there."

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Jaime."

"So can we go?"

"We'll see, sweetheart. You let me deal with grumpy Uncle Shane," I say, laughing.

He laughs in return, and for a few moments, all my concerns are lost in his smile. He goes back to his pasta, and I go back to the story.

Later that day I find Shane and tell him my thoughts on Jaime going out.

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"I'm not sure, Nicole," Shane tells me. "He's just lost his parents, this is a new area, and the people here can be... usey..."

"Usey?" I question, glaring at him across the black wood desk of his home office, where Shane sits nestled deep in his black leather recliner.

"I'm not exactly just some banker," he responds. "Not to brag or put anyone else down, but I am a bit known. And people tend to want to attach themselves to me and those around me, sometimes not wholeheartedly."

"Right," I say. "So you don't want him to go out because... you think... children will know he's your nephew and take advantage of him?"

"Not just children, but their parents. Opportunists. I just want him to have friends who are truly friends. I could take him out to the property upstate, where there are plenty of gardens, and I could even arrange for some children to come and play with him, ones we can trust."

"You're not getting this," I respond. "He wants to go out and make friends, not have some arranged for him. He needs to explore the world again, to not be afraid of going out and meeting people. That means trusting them."

"I just feel it's too soon," he responds. "He's still fragile, and people will take advantage of that. I just..."

"You just hired me to help with these kinds of things, right? Do you think I'd let that happen?"

He goes silent, seemingly pondering my proposal.

"He isn't a business, Shane. There is no corporate approach you can use to help him, and you can't micromanage his life from your office across town."

I see his face grow hard; he doesn't like that. Too much, Nicole, I tell myself.

"He needs you to trust me and trust him," I add. "If you really want him to get better, to get on with his life, you need to start letting him live it again."

Shane exhales deeply, then looks me in the eyes. "Fine," he says. "You're right. I trust him and you. I give you full authority on this."

I smile. "Thank you, Shane," I say in my most sincere voice.

"Sure," he responds.

"Well, on another note, you'll be joining us for dinner, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, I think I can work that out," he responds. "But... if you'll excuse me, I need to take a call."

I give him a nod and turn to leave. As I walk out, I stop myself in the doorway and turn to look back at him. "You should try getting out a bit yourself," I say.

He looks at me but doesn't respond. I leave, closing the door behind me.

I find him on my mind again as I walk toward my bedroom. Getting through to him never seems to get easier. There is something there, I think. Something other than his sister or Jaime, something that shuts him down each time I try to dig deeper. A shame—his sharp frame and gorgeous features are all blurred by that cold and

uncaring demeanor he carries. Still, I find myself wanting to touch him each time he's around.

Shane misses dinner again that night—another work call. He paces around the living room as I chat with Jaime about our upcoming park adventure. No matter how hard I try, I can't stop looking at him.

Chapter 3

Shane

At times, I feel like Nicole is constantly observing my every move. She keeps track of when I come and go and what I do during those times. She expects me to spend time with Jaime when I'm at home, which is understandable. However, she has her own ideas of how much time and how often we should interact. She asks me to join her and Jaime if I'm home for a meal, and I usually agree. But I am a busy man, and my schedule is never predictable, no matter how hard Kristen tries. Meetings and clients span different time zones and hold various work hours. I've got 12 branches to oversee, an R&D division in need of three new supervisors, and a sales team responsible for my entire eastern division, which I've had to silently begin investigating for potential theft. Time with Jaime is vital, but my business is just as crucial to his livelihood as being a parental figure. Besides, that's what I hired Nicole for.

When Vivian was around, I had my Saturdays free. She took Jaime for walks around the estate, and made sure he ate his food and finished his homework, allowing me one day of respite from the busy week. Nicole has other things in mind.

Sometimes, as I walk down the hall, I hear her soft voice through the partially closed door of Jaime's room. She's reading to him, her tone animated and engaging. For a moment, I pause, listening to the story and the occasional giggle from Jaime. It tugs

at something deep inside me—a mixture of gratitude and a pang of guilt. I know I should be the one reading to him, but there's always something pulling me away.

After my morning shower, I make my way down the hall from my master bedroom on the second floor, passing by Jaime's and Nicole's neighboring rooms. Upon her moving in, I offered her the larger room with the private bathroom, but she refused, insisting on being as close to Jaime's room as possible.

I'm expected to at least stop in for breakfast and ask Jaime about his week—another agreeable routine I've become accustomed to. I head downstairs and cross the soft black and white Persian rug of the main hall, enjoying the way it caresses my feet as I head into the kitchen. I look at the wall clock over the kitchen entrance. It is 8:30, and it is just on time. As I enter, I find Jaime and Nicole sitting opposite each other at the long dining table, empty plates in front of them. A spread of bacon, pancakes, eggs, sausages, fruits, and fresh-baked buttermilk biscuits sits before them. There is a third place set up at the head of the table, just in front of them.

"Don't look so surprised," Nicole says. "I didn't cook this." She smiles, and instinctively, I do the same in return. "It's from Ralph's. Jaime said he wanted to do something special for his mom's birthday, and I told him you had said the same."

That was a lie. I certainly had told Nicole no such thing. I had forgotten it was today.

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"So," Nicole adds, "we ordered some of her favorite breakfast foods. My treat."

I stand there silent, not quite sure what to say.

"You do need to eat breakfast, right?" Nicole asks. "And I'm sure you are at least a little curious about your nephew's week... our trip to the park... perhaps if anybody is being too usey."

"Let's eat," I say, smiling at Jaime.

The pure joy of me saying it lights up his face. It's a smile that fills me with happiness and shame all at once.

I sit at the table, where a steaming cup of black coffee sits beside my empty plate.

Nicole looks at me and smiles, then looks at Jaime. "Shall we pray?" she asks.

"Pray?" I question.

"Yes," she says, looking back at me. "We pray."

It's definitely not something his mom taught him, but I hold my tongue for now. I'll have some words with her later.

"Okay," I agree, bowing my head before the food.

I enjoy breakfast. It warms me up to Nicole. I also love seeing the smile on Jaime's

face. It reminds him of times with his parents, I assume. After breakfast, I leave for my office. We agree to have dinner together. Meanwhile, Jaime and Nicole go for a walk.

I sit at my desk in my office, watching them from my window. They are heading down the woodland trail, and I can't help but notice how much she cares for Jaime. Even after they disappear down the road, I find myself thinking of her. The beautiful green of her eyes, and how her smile shines brighter than the morning sun. I'm thinking of her more and more each day, maybe even too much.

That evening, I go downstairs to find Nicole and talk to her about the praying. Our family is Catholic, so I don't necessarily have a problem with it. However, it should be discussed and not taken lightly by a nanny. As I enter the kitchen, I hear her singing in Italian while stirring a sauce on the stove. The song sounds old, traditional, and beautiful. I quietly observe her from behind, captivated by her voice and graceful movements. She doesn't notice me, so I take a moment to appreciate the scene. Despite wanting to speak, I remain entranced by her voice and the way she dances while stirring the sauce. The afternoon sunlight highlights her curves and hips.

Intoxicated by her presence, I can't look away. I imagine walking up behind her, smelling her neck, and expressing my desire for her. I picture her reaching back to stroke my face, pulling me closer until our bodies press together. I fantasize about how her butt feels, how her tight jeans would look sliding off, and how soft her skin would be underneath. But then reality hits me when she drops her spoon on the counter. I snap out of it, realizing that she's the nanny, and I'm becoming a walking cliché. I compose myself and swiftly leave the kitchen, needing to be in my office. I seek distraction in work, because all I can think about right now is her backside.

I spend the rest of the night in the home office, looking through financial reports and project proposals, trying my hardest not to think of Nicole. I watch as 7:00, our planned dinnertime, comes and goes, half-expecting a knock at my door, to which I

plan to pretend I am busy. But it doesn't come. What does come is a text from Nicole.

Attached is a picture of Jaime sitting before a large dish of homemade lasagna. The caption reads:

Dinner?? We're waiting.

I hesitate to answer, but then respond:

Sorry, Nicole. I've got an emergency meeting. Please tell Jaime the same.

I feel tempted to add a sad face emoji. What are you, Shane, a college student? I tell myself. I send the message emoji-less.

No response comes.

I can't shake the guilt. When I finally look up, it's past 8:00, and the house is eerily quiet. Just as I begin to relax, my door swings open, and Nicole stands there, arms crossed, her face a mix of frustration and determination.

"Shane, we need to talk," she says, stepping into the room without waiting for an invitation.

"I'm busy, Nicole. This isn't a good time," I respond, not looking up from my screen.

"Really? Because it seems to me you've been 'busy' avoiding dinner and avoiding Jaime," she retorts, her voice rising.

I finally look at her, feeling the tension build. "I have responsibilities, Nicole. My work supports this household. It ensures Jaime has everything he needs."

"Everything he needs?" she scoffs. "Like what? A roof over his head? Food on the table? Those are the basics, Shane. Jaime needs more than that. He needs you."

My patience snaps. "I hired you to take care of him, Nicole. To be there when I can't. Do you think it's easy running a company? Providing for everyone here?"

"And do you think it's easy for Jaime to lose both his parents and then have an uncle who treats him like an afterthought?" she fires back. "You're not just paying for his expenses, Shane. You're supposed to care for him."

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"That's enough," I say, standing up, my voice cold and stern. "You don't know anything about my relationship with Jaime."

"Because you barely have one!" she yells. "You think throwing money at him makes up for being absent? He needs love, attention, a family. Not just a nanny."

"Get out," I say, pointing to the door. "I won't be spoken to like this in my own home."

"Fine," she says, her eyes blazing with anger. "But remember this, Shane: Jaime won't remember the toys or the house. He'll remember who was there for him. And right now, that's not you."

She storms out, slamming the door behind her. The silence that follows is deafening. I sink back into my chair, the weight of her words hitting me hard.

She's right, a voice inside me whispers. But I push it away, focusing on the anger and frustration instead. How dare she accuse me of not caring? I've sacrificed everything for Jaime. But as the minutes tick by, the anger fades, replaced by a gnawing doubt.

I glance at the framed photo on my desk—Jaime, smiling brightly, holding a soccer ball. I remember taking that picture, one of the rare weekends we spent together. I remember his laughter and the way he looked up at me with admiration.

Am I really that bad of a guardian? I wonder. Nicole's words replay in my mind. She's upset everything in my life, making me question my choices and my priorities. But deep down, I know she's touched on a painful truth.

Determined not to let my desire for Nicole interfere with my duties, I make a silent vow: I won't let her distract me, and I won't let these feelings get in the way of my work or my responsibility to Jaime. But as I close my eyes, trying to focus on the spreadsheets in front of me, the image of Jaime's disappointed face and Nicole's fiery eyes linger, leaving me more unsettled than ever.

Chapter 4

Nicole

"Alex has so much energy," I tell Annette. We watch him and Jaime playfully slap plastic red and blue swords beneath the monkey bars.

"Chatty and charming," Annette says. "Just like all the Robertson men." She feigns exhaustion as she takes another sip of coffee. "They make for good lawyers, and even better liars." I decide not to delve too deeply into the meaning.

Jaime looks happy—not just for a boy who lost his parents a few weeks back, but truly happy.

"Thanks for coming," I say. "I know it was short notice, but we..."

"Oh, come on, doll. There's no need to thank me. We love Jaime, and having a pretty young girl to hang out with de-ages me," she jokes. Annette is about 10 years older, but you can't tell with her smooth skin and fit figure. She has the look of elegance, someone whose style could elevate any brand she wears.

Jaime met Alex a week ago at a park a few miles from the estate. The two quickly took a liking to each other and played all day, so naturally, Annette felt compelled to chat with me. It was her idea, actually, to have a playdate. And just in time, too. I was worried that Shane's missed family time would hurt Jaime so much that I'd stopped

promising him appearances altogether. Annette and Alex were highly dependable for playtime. She was a full-time mom who'd retired early to raise her son.

"It's me who should be thanking you, really," says Annette. "Jaime is such a good boy, and any distraction that keeps Alex from tearing down the city is a blessing to me."

"Well... Jaime is sweet, but far from an angel. Soon they'll be plotting their destruction as a team."

Annette laughs at that. It's my first official mom joke.

"I love your accent. Whereabouts in Italy are you from, doll?"

"Naples," I say reflexively. Damn, I think. The lie I've practiced is Florence.

"Really?" Annette asks instantly. "Is it rough there? You know, a month ago, I wouldn't even know where it was. But my feeds have been blowing up about the gangs from there."

That was news to me.

"Oh, it's just like here, really. It all depends on the city and the kind of company you keep," I say. "I mean, it's a man's world. For us, each place is just as dangerous as the next."

"You got that right, doll. That's why we girls have to look out for each other," Annette adds. "Oh, I can't wait to show you around to the other moms," she says, pulling out her phone. "That reminds me, what's your handle on InstaSnap?"

"Oh... I don't have an InstaSnap or anything, really."

That was a lie; I use one social media platform—SnapFace. My private account has few contacts and contains fake pictures and made-up information.

"Really? A pretty girl like you would be a star, and it's a good way to meet some new people in the city," Annette remarks.

"Oh, I'm not interested in making friends or updating everyone on my life."

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An actual truth, I think to myself. My social media life is keeping tabs on the old neighborhood and its people. If anything were to happen to Giovanni, SnapFace would likely be the first place where I could see the news.

"Wait, so no InstaSnap or SnapFace, nothing?"

"No, I just try to avoid them." I hesitate, thinking of a good reason why not. And then it comes to me: Why not use a bit of truth? "I had an obsessive ex who nearly ruined my life, constantly trying to keep tabs on me. I decided a year ago to give it a rest for a few years, or until I feel comfortable again."

"Say no more, sweetie. We've all been there. We'll just talk through text. Please promise to send me pictures of you and Jaime now and then."

"Of course." I smile.

"If you don't mind me asking, the ex... was this here or back home in Italy?"

"Italian guy," I respond. "Back home. He helped me after I lost my parents. I'd dated him before. I knew he wasn't good, but... he was there. A shoulder to cry on, made sure I ate, helped me and my brother out, and me being dumb, I fell back into it."

"You ain't dumb, honey," Annette responds. "I've done it before. Did he talk you down? Hit you?"

"Both," I say. "He said I wasn't giving him enough attention. It started with yelling and outbursts of anger for no reason. Then it escalated to shoving and pushing. One

day, when I made a sarcastic comment, he hit me. I ended things right then and there."

"Hmm... They're everywhere, huh?" says Annette. "Well, at least you were smart enough to move on. Unfortunately, I can't say there's much of a better selection here."

Annette's phone rings, drawing her eyes to the illuminated screen. "Speaking of low-quality men," she says, looking up from her phone. "It's time for his dad's monthly playdate to start." She smiles, then raises her eyebrow as if an idea has come to her. "I'm dropping him off with his dad in an hour, and I'll be free the whole night after..." Her eyes widen. "You wouldn't be interested in being happy for an hour or three?"

"I... what's that?"

"Happy hour, doll... half-priced drinks. Free, if the bartender thinks you're cute enough."

"I wish. I've got to make Jaime's dinner, and his uncle's working late."

"Uh, well, next time, doll. I'll get you out someday, no worry," she says slyly, a half smile across her face.

I get up to call for Jaime, but she gestures me down.

"Relax, hun, I'll reel them in," says Annette. She gets up and crosses the park, returning with Jaime and Alex walking in front of her.

"Hey guys," I say to the boys. "You two have fun?"

Alex looks full of joy as he nods his head. "Ms. Nickel, can Jaime come to a sleepover with my dad?"

"Yeah, can I?" Jaime adds.

"Hmm," I pretend to think about it for a moment; the answer is no, of course, but I don't want to seem too cold. I look to Annette, who shrugs her shoulders.

"Not tonight, boys, but I promise to ask Uncle Shane about it next time... How's that, bud?" I say to Jaime.

"Ok," he says with a smile.

"We've got to go," Annette adds. "You two say goodbye."

The boys turn to each other and slap hands, palm to palm, then backside to backside. They end with a hug, and my heart melts instantly.

Annette smiles. "See you soon, doll," she says to me. Then she brushes back Jaime's hair. "Bye, Jaime," she says sweetly. Annette and Alex turn and start down the path to their car, giving a final wave as they walk away.

Our car arrives at the park as the rain starts. In the backseat, Jaime talks about his day and his connection with Alex. It's nice to see him so excited. But Annette's comment about her social media blowing up is bothering me. I grab my phone and start looking for news articles or posts about the syndicate and Naples.

One story catches my attention: "New York City Police Investigate Series of Violent Crimes Tied to Italian Crime Family." The article details a series of violent incidents in the past few months, all linked to the Avvoltoi syndicate. A new task force is being assembled to crack down on their activities.

Raffaele comes to mind immediately.

After we broke up, I called Aldo when Raffaele threatened our protection. Aldo sorted things out with Raffaele, making it clear that any harm to us would come back to him. That was a lesson I learned from my father: For every egotistical bully that tries to control you, there is always someone more egotistical trying to control everyone. The syndicate despises loose cannons, especially when they work for them and threaten their reputation. Still, Raffaele had always promised he'd get me back. He'd be the one to establish the family overseas, and I'd be his queen once he did.

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It all makes sense now. "We'll see you soon," was the message he'd sent me in his last text, one I thought was innocuous.

He's doing it, and he'll have me right where he wants me.

It's sports day at Jaime's school, and I arrive bright and early, seeing the kids just as they run onto the field and line up with their classes. Each class has a distinct color, Jaime's being lime green. I settle in the bleachers with the other parents, sipping a coffee to combat the morning chill. Shane has promised to make an appearance, even going as far as to tell Jaime directly, though what time and how long has not been made clear.

I watch Jaime shyly stand among his classmates as they talk and strategize about the day's events. He's only been there a few months, and his new kid syndrome is plain to see. I know how he feels; maybe that's why we've bonded so easily.

He keeps mostly to himself as they start the events, but this changes once they get to the relay race. Jaime takes off in a burst of speed for his race. I've never seen him run so fast, and apparently neither has his class. He easily wins the race, and is greeted with cheers and hugs by his team as he returns to their sitting area. I feel pure joy watching him smile as the other children high-five him and slap him on the back. I look around for Shane, but he's not there, and I promise myself I won't do it again. Today is about Jaime. I push Shane from my mind and focus.

Jaime goes on to win the potato sack race after that, and some strange sport where they carry an egg on a spoon. I guess it's an American thing. His bond seems to grow closer with the students each time. A few of them even come to ask him to play when

the games pause for the picnic lunch with parents. Still no Shane, and I hate myself for thinking of him.

Shane arrives just as they begin the closing games, rushing to my side.

"Hi, sorry," he says.

"Hi," I say. I don't give him the courtesy of any more words.

"How's he doing?"

"You can ask him soon," I say. "There are only two events left." I say it as coldly as I can.

He sighs. "Look, I know I'm—"

"I'm going to the vending machine for a soda," I cut in before walking away from him.

I watch the rest of the events with Shane in silence, using my best efforts to suppress my anger and support Jaime. After the final games, the children all gather with their classes and listen while the principal reads the results over the loudspeaker. Jaime's class wins second place for their grade and jumps for joy at the sight of their large silver trophy. Jaime is ecstatic, and even more so to see his uncle in the crowd afterward.

"Could you just say something to me, please?" Shane pleads. "It's not good that he sees us like this."

My anger hits its limit as I turn to him. "What's not good is him seeing you show up late or just be absent for everything, Shane. Each time you do it, you show him how

little he means in your busy schedule."

"I can't—"

"Yeah, you can't get anyone else to cover you. With all the money and people under you, you can't make one event on time." I scoff.

"It's going to get better. I'm just adjusting to—"

"We're all adjusting, Shane. We do it together, but you'd rather throw money and excuses at everything."

"You just don't listen to any—"

He pauses, staring at someone behind me. I instantly know it's Jaime.

Jaime's face crumples, and I see the hurt in his eyes. The anger in me dissolves as guilt floods my chest. Shane looks pained, his eyes softening as he watches his nephew.

"Hey, buddy," Shane says, bending down to Jaime's level. "You did amazing today. I'm so proud of you."

Jaime's lip quivers, and he looks between Shane and me. "Are you two mad at each other?"

I force a smile, pushing aside my anger for Jaime's sake. "No, sweetheart, we're just talking. How about we go out for an early dinner at your favorite restaurant? What do you think, Shane?"

Shane nods, his expression softening. "Yeah, let's go celebrate. How about it, Jaime?"

Jaime's face brightens, and he nods eagerly. "Can we go to the place with the big pizzas?"

"Absolutely," Shane says, standing up and ruffling Jaime's hair.

We drive to Jaime's favorite restaurant, pretending everything is okay. The tension between Shane and me simmers under the surface, but we focus on Jaime, listening to him talk about his team and how fun the sports day was. Despite the anger and frustration, I find myself drawn toward Shane, and I am mad at myself for this.

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As Jaime devours his pizza, Shane and I exchange glances, a silent truce forming between us for Jaime's sake. The evening passes with laughter and stories, and for a moment, everything feels almost normal. But as we head home, I know the unresolved tension is still there, waiting to resurface.

Despite everything, I can't help but feel a pull toward Shane, a dangerous attraction that I know I need to fight. Jaime's happiness is what matters most, and I can't let my emotions get in the way of that. But as I watch Shane interact with Jaime, I can't deny the part of me that wishes things could be different.

Chapter 5

Shane

Kristen enters my office at 8 a.m. sharp, holding a grease-stained box with a Reuben bagel in one hand and a large black coffee in the other. "Good morning, Shane," she says. She rarely calls me Shane, so it's refreshing when she does. It's like a nice little gift, a break from her usual all-business demeanor.

"Good morning, Kristen. Thanks, I'm starving," I reply, taking the bag and coffee from her over the desk.

"You're welcome, sir," she responds. "Would you like me to go through today's agenda now or after your breakfast?"

"Actually, I need you to clear my schedule until about 3:00 today. I have a meeting with Jaime's teachers, so I'll be leaving in an hour or so."

"Sorry, sir," she says. "You have a meeting with the investors from Atlanta at 10 a.m. It's the one I reminded you of yesterday and the day before."

"Damn. That's today," I sigh, feeling exhausted. "I've been putting off the meeting with his teachers for weeks."

Kristen stands by, arms crossed, awaiting my next request.

"Sir, you could send Oliver in your place. He seems knowledgeable about your pitches and ready to take it on."

"No, Atlanta's too important to pass off to anyone."

"Of course," Kristen replies, though I sense disagreement.

"I'll call Nicole and have her go to the school in my place. Give me a moment, would you?"

"Sure, sir," Kristen replies, leaving the office and closing the door behind her.

I dread calling Nicole, already imagining her response. I dial the number, and after just two rings, I hear her voice.

"You can't go to school, can you?" she says instantly, no hello and no hint of emotion.

Part of me is upset that she feels comfortable talking to her boss like this. But mostly, I feel ashamed and sad. I'm taking over her morning and disappointing her at the same time. I tell myself that I'm busy, and it's her job.

"Yes. Sorry to ask this of you, but could you..."

"Yes, Mr. Matthews, I kept my morning free in expectation. I'll update you on how your nephew is doing by the close of business. Enjoy your day, sir," she says coldly.

"Look, Nicole. I'm sorry, this is..."

"Anything else?" Nicole interrupts.

"No... that's all. Thanks a—"

"Of course," she cuts in.

The phone call ends, and I feel her tolerance for me has as well.

I press the reception button on my phone. "Kristen," I say.

Kristen returns to the office and stands in front of my desk. "Sir," she says, waiting.

"I contacted Nicole," I explain, "and she's agreed to go to the school. However, I don't think she's very happy with me now. What do you think? Should I get her a gift card? Maybe worth 500 dollars?"

"I'd suggest doubling that, sir," Kristen says.

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"Alright," I agree, "you pick the brand. You probably know more about her preferences than I do, at this point."

"That's a great idea, sir. Perhaps we should also include an apology with the gift card," Kristen suggests.

"Uh, yeah," I stumble over my words, "just make sure it says, 'I'm sorry for taking up your morning and missing another of Jaime's events.' And please arrange for it to be sent over sometime today."

"Sure, sir. Do you want me to send it here so you can give it to her in person?"

"No..." I look at Kristen's face. She wears a stern look, indicating that it wasn't a request. I exhale deeply. "You're right, I'll give it to her myself."

"Sure thing, sir. So you won't be needing the apology letter?"

"No, I'll tell her myself."

"Very good, sir, but you should plan what you want to say," says Kristen. She turns to leave the office.

"And Kristen," I call out. "Contact Oliver and ask if he's free to assist me on this investor meeting."

"Yes, very well, Shane." This time, she smiles.

"Thank you, Kristen."

"It's what you pay me for, sir."

It takes everything in me to stay composed and focused as we discuss financial forecasts, market analyses, and strategic plans for the next quarter. Several investors join the call, each with inquiries and questions. While maintaining an engaged demeanor, my mind wanders to Jaime and Nicole. Asking Oliver to take the lead turns out to be the best decision I made this morning. He presents our projections clearly, addresses investors' concerns calmly, and even injects some enthusiasm into the room. He has the charm and quick wit of someone who has been doing this much longer than the five years he's worked for me. With me mentally checking in and out, I owe the success of the meeting to him.

The investors leave the call individually until the video conference screen is blank.

I sigh and turn to Oliver, who looks up from his laptop just opposite me at my desk.

"That deserves applause, Oliver," I say to him. "And a drink." I reach into my desk and pull out an aged bourbon I keep for only special occasions, along with two glasses.

"Thank you, Mr. Matthews, really... but I probably shouldn't. I've got to get back down and..."

"Really? I was planning to give you the rest of the day off. If you'd like it?"

"Yeah. And... I'll definitely take that drink."

I give him a smile, then open the bottle and pour a double shot into both glasses. The rich aroma of aged bourbon fills the room, adding a touch of warmth to the moment.

"Pardon my asking, but is everything okay, Mr. Matthews? You seemed a bit distracted today."

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "Yeah. I guess you noticed. I've recently become a parent... guardian... whatever you want to call it. And I'm learning that while I'm good at business, I've still got a lot to learn about children... and women, I guess. You were my hero today, Oliver." I hold my glass up in the air. Oliver grasps his and taps it to mine with a clink. "Your efforts won't go unnoticed. You can expect to be hearing from me again soon."

Oliver smiles, taking a sip of the bourbon. "Thank you, Mr. Matthews. But honestly, you should thank yourself. I've learned everything from watching you."

"Really? All that from watching me?"

"Yes, sir," Oliver assures me. "I always prepare for the big meetings by looking back at some of your past conference videos and speeches. There's always wisdom to be found in them."

"Well, that is surprising. It's good to know I'm doing some good in the world, I guess."

"The past holds a lot of wisdom," Oliver continues as he sips at his bourbon. "When I want to know how to be a good husband, I think of my uncle. My father wasn't around much. And when I want to think about being a good parent, I think of my mom or watch old family videos. Most of the guidance you need in life has already been given to you. Even if it's through doing the opposite of a bad example, you just need to open your eyes, look back, and remember it," Oliver says, finishing his bourbon.

I share a final drink with Oliver and thank him before he happily leaves the office for

the day. I sit alone for a while, gazing out the window toward the mountains peeking out over the city's southern edge. There is a place there, a place I haven't been for some time, and if I really want to take a look back in time, it's where I need to go.

The old house at 26 Maudry Lane hasn't changed much since I last saw it. It doesn't look like it's aged at all; in fact, it looks newer. The front exterior is half-painted, with a fresh coat of white stretching from the left corner to just past the door. Claire could have afforded a professional, but she was always the type to do things herself. I pull the key from my pocket, the one I've been holding on to since the funeral. I walk up the three steps and onto the porch. The old swing we used to sit on has been replaced by something more modern, but a swing all the same. I remember Claire and I sitting in it in the summertime as kids, eating watermelon and challenging each other to see who could spit the seeds the farthest.

Inside, most of the furniture is new but familiar at the same time. Where the old grey couch with black pillows was, a new, larger one made of fine leather sits, the colors almost exactly the same. The dining table is the same, though it's been sanded and polished to a shine, and new cushioned chairs have replaced the old hard ones we sat on as children. I hear echoes of our voices talking about our days as the nanny served us dinner, and I see Claire standing over my shoulder, helping me with my homework. Mom and Dad were always busy, always handling business, but Claire was always there. I remember how hard it was on her, how she vowed never to treat her children that way, and I vowed never to have any.

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I make my way upstairs. What was once Claire's room is now Jaime's. The boyband and popstar posters have been replaced with superheroes and anime characters. My room is now a guestroom. However, I find several boxes in the walk-in closet marked with my name. She could've thrown them all away, but she didn't. I think to myself that she knew I'd come back someday.

One of the boxes is marked "Shane/Claire/Family," and it seems to call to me. Within are family albums of us, our parents, Jaime, and his father, Mark. But it's the digital camera among it all that is the true treasure. I power it on and immediately go to the file marked "Jaime Memories." I watch for about an hour videos of varying lengths of Claire, Mark, and Jaime. Claire teaches him to tie his shoes, takes him to school on the first day, and teaches him to ride a bike. I see what Jaime is missing—it's the same thing I was missing for a long time. I realize for the first time that Claire was much more than a sister to me; she was what I needed, and what Jaime has lost: a loving parent.

I sit on the floor, surrounded by memories, letting the emotions wash over me. The pain of losing Claire feels fresh, like a wound that never quite healed. I feel the weight of my responsibilities as Jaime's guardian more than ever. I have to be more than just an uncle to him, more than just someone who hands out money or ensures his nanny is doing her job. I have to be there for him in the way Claire was for me.

I stand up and carefully repack the box, taking the camera with me. I walk through the house one last time, feeling closer to Claire than I have in years. I make a silent promise to her: I will do better. I will be there for Jaime, just as she was there for me.

Back in my car, I take a deep breath and head home, determined to start being the

guardian Jaime deserves. I can't change the past, but I can honor Claire's memory by being the best parent I can be for Jaime.

Chapter 6

Nicole

By the time I give Jaime dinner, I've read the message at least a hundred times, pacing back and forth across the soft Persian carpet of Shane's living room. My eyes are glued to my phone screen, my thoughts racing. Jaime looks up from his plate, sensing my unease.

"Are you okay, Ms. Nicole?" he asks, his big round eyes full of concern.

I force a smile. "I'm fine, Jaime. Just a bit tired."

But I'm far from fine. The message gnaws at me, each word a tiny, insistent whisper in my mind. Why now? Why this message? What are they hiding?

"Are you sure?" Jaime asks again. "Is something wrong? Where's Uncle Shane?"

Come on, Nicole. You've got a traumatized kid you're working up. I stop pacing and calm myself, giving Jaime my full attention.

"Your Uncle Shane is fine, bud," I reassure him. "He's probably on his way home now, and if he doesn't arrive by the time you sleep, I'll send him in to check on you. Okay?"

"Okay," Jaime says, going back to his dinner. I have a bone to pick with the absent-minded uncle, but the biggest thing on my mind now is this text I've received from Gio.

The message is simple:

Hi Nicola, I've missed you dearly. All is well back home. I've finally gotten a job and met a girl who adores me. I think it will be some time before I'm ready to come to America, but don't worry. Things couldn't be better for me here.

I analyze every word and phrase of the text for a sign, symbol, or signal. The only revelation I've come to is both the most important detail and the most frustrating: There is no way that Gio sent me this text.

There are several issues with it, the first being that it doesn't resemble my brother at all. The tone is dismissive, and the wording is off. It's too casual and vague, which is entirely unlike Gio. The author—who I suspect is Raffaele—writes as if Gio and I frequently communicate when, in reality, we haven't spoken in almost a year. The phrases and wording used would deceive no one who truly knows him. Gio is straightforward, reserved, and concise. He would have, at the very least, asked how I was doing or requested that I call him back.

Fake texts are not uncommon for me. I've asked Raffaele to speak with Gio a few times before. Sometimes, he's complied, finding a way to connect me with Gio, even if it was just for a few moments. Those conversations kept me content, knowing he was alive and able to speak. This is sometimes the best I can hope for, given our situation. Other times, I've received what I thought was a fake text, but even those messages usually came with a picture to reassure me. This time, it's different. It feels like an attempt to deceive me more than a white lie meant for comfort—it feels like something is being covered up, and that scares me.

I have an urge to uncover the truth, but I can't show my fear to Jaime. Frantically making phone calls in Italian won't help either of us. My priority is to protect him and maintain normalcy. I need to calm down and accept that calling now might not be beneficial. I take a deep breath and try to focus on the present. We'll sort this out

when the time is right. For now, the grieving child and absent uncle need to take priority.

"How about we play a game after dinner?" I suggest, hoping to distract both of us.

Jaime's face lights up. "Can we play hippos?"

"Sure," I say, relieved to see him smile.

As we play, his laughter fills the room, momentarily easing the weight on my shoulders. But deep down, I know this is only a temporary reprieve. The truth about Gio still looms.

Just after 8 p.m., I hear the door open and the security box beep. Shane rushes in and finds me on the couch, sipping coffee. The blend is bitter and distinct, much better than the store-bought stuff I'm used to, but to me it still doesn't compare to the beans we get in Italy. Still, I've had about four cups this evening.

He stops in his tracks when he sees me, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. I can see he wants to say something, but there's an apprehension in his eyes. I'm ready to let loose on him. This is only the latest in a long line of missed events important to Jaime, and he's given the same excuse each time. But there's something in his expression—a genuine concern—that makes me pause. It softens my resolve just slightly, even makes me a bit sympathetic to him and, I hate to admit, a bit attracted.

"I'm not going to give you any excuses," he starts, his voice steady but laced with regret. "I've missed another important moment in Jaime's life and selfishly taken away your time; there's no excuse. I'm sorrier now than I've ever been; I can't take it back, but listen, I—"

I raise my cup to my face and take a sip of coffee, and he stops mid-sentence.

I set my empty mug on the coffee table and dive right into my rant.

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"I don't really understand how you expect him to get used to this situation, or you, if you refuse to be around. He needs you to be involved and attentive. He needs you to bond with him. And each chance you get, you throw it away for work, or whatever you're doing. You've missed his school events, you've not done anything with him outside of the house, and you can barely even make it home in time to have dinner with him. And I see the sadness in his eyes each time I tell him you're not coming. You're his last living immediate family, Shane, and his legal guardian—those are big responsibilities."

I don't hold back. I tell him how much he's missed, naming every developmental hurdle Jaime has crossed and how much each of them meant to him. I talk about how his absence affects Jaime's development and recovery, how he needs him more than he'll ever need me, and how he doesn't know a single friend, classmate, or teacher involved in his life.

For five minutes, Shane listens attentively, his gaze unwavering. He even agrees with me verbally on certain points, nodding his head or softly murmuring his assent. He seems like some imposter, and I jokingly wonder to myself if the Avvoltoi have also sent me a fake Shane. He doesn't interrupt the entire time, and when I'm done, he's still standing there, his demeanor unflinching. His straight, serious face is as beautiful as a sunset falling into an ocean horizon.

He waits a moment to ensure I've finished, and only when he's certain I've settled does he begin to speak again.

"You're right," he says quietly, his voice calm but heavy with emotion. "I've failed Jaime. I've failed you. And I can't apologize enough for that."

He takes a step closer, his eyes locking with mine, and for a brief moment, I see something vulnerable in them—something real.

"I know it seems like I don't care," he continues, his tone earnest. "But I do—more than you could know. I've been so caught up in... everything, trying to keep it all together, that I've lost sight of what's most important. Jaime needs me. And I need to be there for him, not just as his guardian, but as his family."

His words catch me off guard. I expected defensiveness, excuses, anything but this genuine admission. His words disarm me, and for the first time, I feel like I'm seeing the real Shane—the one who has been buried beneath the weight of his responsibilities and regrets.

"I don't know how to fix this overnight," he admits, his voice softening. "But I promise you, Nicole, I'm going to try. For Jaime's sake. And for mine."

His sincerity is palpable, and it stirs something in me. Maybe, just maybe, he's finally ready to be the guardian Jaime deserves. But it's going to take more than words—it's going to take action. And I'm going to make sure he follows through.

I nod slowly, feeling the tension in the room begin to ease. "Okay, Shane. I'll hold you to that. Jaime deserves nothing less."

He nods in return. "I want to check on him and tell him goodnight before it gets too late," says Shane.

"He's waiting for you," I say.

A faint smile curves his lips as he leaves and heads into the hall, but the weight of the moment still lingers between us. There's a long road ahead, but for the first time, I believe that Shane is ready to walk it.

I feel some relief; Shane's promise, whether temporary or not, offers a small comfort. It allows me to focus on what's going on with Gio. I find myself drawn to review what got me here with the Avvoltoi, like a detective retracing steps. I need to make sense of everything to understand how things spiraled into this chaos.

What I remember is that things weren't good within the ranks of the Avvoltoi when I left. Raffaele's crew, among a few others, were looking to branch out and expand, causing tension among the bosses. I was front seat for the entire thing, delivering packages or dropping off vehicles—whatever odd job they assigned me to pay off my and Gio's debt.

I recall nearly being recognized by a member of the Avvoltoi while we were out in public. Raffaele quickly snatched me away, hiding me in some dark corner until the danger passed. It was the first time I ever doubted our safety with the Avvoltoi. That moment made it clear how precarious our situation truly was. It was a stark reminder that our fates could change at the drop of a hat. We had no friends to trust, no home to hide in—no one except each other, and it was this that drove me to collect some insurance against the Avvoltoi.

As I leaf through the pages, my mind races with the implications of holding on to this information. It's a lifeline, a last resort, and yet it's also a noose around my neck. My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. I freeze, my heart pounding. Slowly, I turn around and see Shane standing in the doorway. A wave of emotions crashes over me. Did he see the document? How long has he been watching me?

And what's even more confusing is his presence in my doorway. I don't think he's been in my room like this since he showed me the house, and now, inexplicably, I feel a surge of emotions I can't quite place. There's an attraction mingled with fear, and it's unsettling.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I was just... sorting through the... mess that is my life." I force a smile, hoping it hides my unease.

I quickly turn and slip the dossier into a drawer, struggling to maintain my composure.

"Sorry to interrupt. The door was open, so..." Shane's voice trails off, almost as if he's unsure of himself.

"It's fine," I respond, trying to sound casual.

"I just wanted to thank you for all you've done. I know it hasn't been easy with me."

I nod, my heart beginning to calm. There's a sincerity in his tone that makes me believe he's genuinely trying.

"I actually had a chance to revisit some lost... history of mine," he continues, his expression thoughtful, though I have no idea what he's referring to.

"Shane... it's fine," I say gently, cutting him off. "You've said enough tonight, and it's seemed genuine. Why don't we read Jaime a bedtime story?"

He hesitates for a moment, then nods. "Well, yeah. I came to fetch you because he's requested just that."

I smile, feeling warm in the moment that eases the lingering tension. Together, we head to Jaime's room, and for the first time in a long while, things feel... almost normal.

Chapter 7

Shane

It's Saturday, and it's my first time going to the park with Jaime. Despite it being her day off, Nicole offers to join us. I accept and offer to pay her, but she refuses. I make a mental note to add it to a bonus in the future. "Look how excited he is," Nicole whispers to me. We watch as Jaime aims and shoots his bubble gun across the sandbox. The younger children chase and pop the bubbles.

"I love how happy he gets just bringing joy to others," Nicole says warmly, adoringly.

"It's humbling," I respond. Only an hour since we left the estate, and I'm already realizing how much I've missed in Jaime's life. His interests, opinions, likes, and wants—there's a whole person in front of me I never fully saw. In my eyes, he was always my cute, innocent little nephew who needed protection and guidance. I see now how little he actually needs those things, and how much he resembles Claire.

It's just half an hour after we've arrived. Jaime's friend Alex and his mom, Annette, join us. It seems like this happens often on Saturdays, because Nicole and Annette have become good friends. As the kids play, we all chat. Annette comments on the beautiful day and complains about the increasing traffic as she subtly smiles and exchanges signals with Nicole. I can't help but wonder if she suspects a romantic connection between us and is discreetly encouraging Nicole. I play along and pretend to be oblivious to their secret communications.

Jaime and Alex play monster hunters and invite me to join; I agree to play the monster. I yelp and holler in pain as they tap me with their plastic swords, falling to

the ground and rolling around until I'm covered in loose grass and debris.

"I just can't watch this anymore," Annette shouts, covering her eyes as she and Nicole watch on with smiles on their faces. "What you're doing to that Balenciaga is breaking my heart," Annette jests, referring to my soiled shirt. The boys are happy, and so am I, and the bright smile across Nicole's face is the cherry on top.

We play for about an hour before Annette and Alex have to leave. The boys say their goodbyes, as do Annette and Nicole. Both parties encourage us to do it again, with me included. I feel warm and welcomed into the group despite my previous absence.

After they're gone, Jaime requests we walk to the dog park just across the road. As we enter, he points to a brown cocker spaniel with a white nose covered in tan spots.

"Our neighbor Jack, at my mom's house, had a dog just like that one," he says. Memories of the old house and boxes filled with videos of Claire and Jaime flood my mind. "Jack's dog was a rescue dog," Jaime adds. "Mom said if we ever get one, we should get a rescue dog too." Nicole glances at me, urging me to say something. She had previously mentioned his desire for a dog, but my response has always been that it wasn't the right time.

"We'll need to do some planning, buddy," I say. "But it's definitely something I'll think about. Would you be willing to wait a week or two, let me check on something, and then we can talk about it afterward?"

His face lights up. "Sure. Thanks, Uncle Shane!"

As he finishes speaking, he spots an enormous black Doberman nearby and rushes over to pet it. The owner, an older woman, gives a loving smile as he approaches.

"Hey, Jaime," the woman says, her voice warm and familiar.

"Hi, Mrs. Dugan," he replies, placing his hands gently on the Doberman's head. "Hey, JoJo," he says to the dog.

"Woah," Nicole says, catching my attention. Her green eyes are fixed on me, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "Are you sure you're the same Shane Matthews who hired me?" she teases.

"No, he's taking a break for a little while. You get me just temporarily."

"And how long is 'a little while'?" Nicole asks.

"Just until he rises from his coffin, down in the crypts below the manor," I joke.

"Aww, that's too bad," she says. Her smile, voice, and stare all at once send my heart fluttering.

"You've got such beautiful... eyes. I mean... they really complement your dress today." I fumble through the sentence like a middle school kid asking for a date.

Damnit, Shane, you had to make things awkward. You should be focused on Jaime, not this, I think to myself.

She smiles. "Thanks, Shane," she says before turning her attention back to Jaime. I decide not to talk for a while after that.

"This is really helpful to him," she says, gesturing toward Jaime as he strokes the dog's head. "He's usually excited to see Alex or JoJo, but today, there's just this extra spark in him, and I know it's because you're here."

"Thanks. I'm happy to be having some effect. It should have been this way from the beginning."

"Hey," Nicole says, locking eyes with me. "This is still the beginning." She playfully pokes a finger into my shoulder. "And you still have all the time in the world to keep it going."

I smile. So much wisdom for someone so young. She'd be a great partner, be it in business, parenting, or life.

Our car arrives just after 5 p.m., and Nicole and Jaime decide it's time I try Bricktop's Burgers, their favorite stop on Saturdays after the park. We decide to take the drive-thru and eat at home, but they can hardly wait to leave the parking lot before gobbling down their fries.

"These are so good," I say, stuffing a few into my mouth.

"Mom loved these, Uncle Shane. She's probably so happy to watch you eat them now," Jaime says.

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Nicole and I both pause, waiting for the comment's aftermath. But he just keeps on smiling and stuffing fries in his mouth. There is no silence, no distant thoughts, no tears.

"Hey, Nicole. Next weekend, should we take Uncle Shane to Vito's Pizzeria?"

"You sure he's ready? We can't show him all our spots," Nicole jokes.

Jaime pauses, mimicking deep thought. "Yeah, I think it's okay," he finally says.

We share a look and enjoy the rest of the ride home.

Nicole and I share a cup of coffee after reading Jaime his bedtime story. Though I can't do it every night, stories are becoming a routine when I am home. However, Nicole and I spending time alone afterward is something new.

"You're sure I can't compensate you for today?" I ask. "I mean, don't take it wrong; we enjoy your company, and you are always welcome to come. I just don't want you to feel... I don't know..." I search for the right words.

"Shane, you've already said that, and I've already told you I'm fine. Today was... nice. I enjoyed it."

"Okay," I say. However, I still intend to give her a bonus down the line.

I nod, trying to keep the conversation going, but I realize I don't know what to talk about. I know so little about her, really. She's good with Jaime; she's intelligent and

capable. Yet, an entire part of her life is a mystery to me. I've been so focused on Jaime and my own shortcomings as his guardian that I've barely stopped to consider Nicole's own situation.

I decide to test the waters a little. "You know, I think today was one of the best days I've had in a long time. But I have to admit, I feel like I'm playing catch-up with you and Jaime. You two are like a well-oiled machine."

She laughs softly. "We've had some time to get used to each other."

"Yeah, I can see that. But I barely know you, Nicole. I mean, I know a lot about Jaime, but I hardly know anything about you." I try to keep my tone light, casual, but I can tell by the way she shifts slightly in her seat that I've touched on something sensitive.

Nicole gives me a sideways glance, her smile fading just a little. "There's not much to know, really," she says quietly. "I'm just a girl from Italy who ended up here, trying to make a new life."

Her answer feels rehearsed—it reminds me of her interview. This was expected; everyone holds things back in an interview, but the first time, I wondered just how much she was holding back. She's always been guarded when it comes to her past, but it's only now, as I sit here looking at her, that I realize how little I've really asked. I've been so wrapped up in my own problems, I haven't noticed hers.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," I say gently, not wanting to push her. "But if you ever do want to talk... I'm here."

Nicole gives me a small, grateful smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Thanks, Shane. That means a lot."

"So, Annette is really something," I say, changing the subject.

Nicole laughs. "She is really the best. She prides herself on being my 'crazy American sidekick,' as she calls it."

I smile.

"She's so free with her words and thinking. And gorgeous—you wouldn't even know she was older than me. And don't ever tell her I said that," Nicole adds, laughing as the words leave her mouth.

"You're pretty gorgeous yourself, I'd say," I add, not even realizing what I've said.

"Yes, yes, and you are handsome. We all know it," she jokes.

I try to bring it back with a bit of humor. "You know, you're not making this easy for me. I was trying to flirt there, and you're being all mysterious. How's a guy supposed to keep up?"

She chuckles, a genuine laugh this time, and for a moment, I've lightened the mood. But then, just as quickly, her laughter fades, and she goes quiet. Her gaze drops to her cup, and she wraps her hands around it as if drawing warmth from the porcelain.

I'm confused. One minute she's engaged, teasing, even, and the next, she's closed off. It's like watching a door swing shut; I don't know what to make of it.

For the first time, I'm really considering the possibility that Nicole's running from something in her past—something she's not ready to share. The look on her face is one of anxiety, and it makes me worry for her. I want to ask, to dig deeper, but I don't want to push her too hard—not tonight.

Before I can say anything more, Nicole stands up, setting her cup down on the coffee table. "I should probably get to bed," she says, her voice a little too brisk. "We've got that early morning visit to Jaime's doctor tomorrow."

I'm a little disappointed, feeling like I've pushed her too much, or maybe not enough. I can't quite tell. But I nod, standing up as well. "Yeah, of course. We should both get some rest."

We just stand there for a moment, and neither of us is moving to leave. There's a tension in the air, something unspoken that lingers between us. It feels like neither of us is ready to say goodnight, but the circumstances push us toward it anyway.

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"Goodnight, Nicole," I say finally.

"Goodnight, Shane," she replies, giving me one last lingering look before she turns and heads upstairs.

I watch her go, feeling a strange mix of emotions. There's something there between us, but it's wrapped up in so much else—secrets, regrets, responsibilities. I know I want to get closer to her, but I also know that doing so will mean confronting whatever it is she's hiding.

As I turn off the lights and head to bed, I can't shake the feeling that tonight was a turning point. Something has shifted, and I am still determining where it's going to lead. But I know one thing: I'm not ready to let go of whatever this is. Not yet.

Chapter 8

Nicole

I gently tuck Jaime into bed, noting the weariness etched on his face from his long day at school. The soft glow of the bedside lamp casts a warm, soothing light across the room. As I begin reading the story he's chosen, his eyes grow heavier with each word. He's already asleep before I reach the halfway point, his breathing soft and steady.

Closing the book, I look up and find Shane standing in the doorway, watching me. He doesn't say anything, but his gaze is intense. He's soaked from the rain, his dark blue shirt clinging to his muscular chest, making it impossible not to notice.

"Shane, I didn't know you were here," I say, my voice low to avoid waking Jaime.

"I was just enjoying the story," Shane replies, his eyes still fixed on me.

"You're all wet."

"Yeah, it's pouring outside."

I glance out Jaime's window, finally noticing the rain running down the glass. How did I not see it before?

"Do you want to have a cup of coffee with me?" he asks.

"Don't you want to change first?"

"Nah, it's just a bit of water. I'd rather warm up first."

"It's a little late for coffee," I respond, hesitating. "I think I'm a bit..."

"Oh, come on. I know how much you love coffee. I've already started brewing it. Don't make me waste the beans," he says with a teasing smile.

"Okay," I agree, unable to resist. A cup of coffee won't hurt.

Leaving Jaime peacefully asleep, I follow Shane to the living room. Two steaming coffee mugs wait for us on the table near the couch. As I settle onto the sofa beside him, the calming aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills my senses. The rain continues its rhythmic dance against the windows, creating an intimate backdrop that feels almost surreal. Shane takes a slow sip from his mug, his eyes never leaving mine. An unspoken tension between us has been building for weeks, and is now impossible to ignore. Under his gaze, my pulse quickens, and the warmth of the coffee does little to

calm the rising heat within me.

"You know," Shane begins, his voice low and smooth, "I've been thinking a lot about what you said the other day... about being more present for Jaime."

I nod, a strange mix of emotions swirling inside me. I'm glad he's taken my words to heart, but the intensity in his eyes makes it hard to focus on anything else.

"I meant it," I reply softly, cradling the mug in my hands. "He needs you, Shane. You're the only family he has left."

Shane reaches over, placing his hand on mine. The touch is gentle, but it sends a jolt through me. "And what about you, Nicole?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper. "What do you need?"

The question catches me off guard. I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. The room feels smaller, the air thicker, as if we're the only two people in the world. I'm suddenly aware of how close he is, the way his body leans toward mine, the warmth of his hand still resting on mine.

Shane leans in closer, his breath warm against my cheek. "You don't have to hide anything from me," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. "I'm here... if you want me to be."

My heart races, my mind a whirl of conflicting thoughts. I should pull away, remind myself of the boundaries we've carefully maintained, but the pull toward him is too strong, the desire too overwhelming.

I look into his eyes, seeing the same yearning reflected back at me. It's a moment of surrender, a recognition of the feelings we've both been denying. Slowly, I lean in, closing the distance between us. Our lips meet, softly at first, but the kiss quickly

deepens. Shane's hand slides up to cup my cheek, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pulls me closer. The mug slips from my grasp, forgotten, as I wrap my arms around him, pulling him against me.

Shane's hands begin to roam, tracing the contours of my back before sliding under my shirt. I shiver at the contact, my body responding eagerly to his touch. The world outside fades away, leaving only the heat between us, the intoxicating pull of desire. But just as Shane's hands start to slide lower, I gasp, pulling back suddenly. My breath comes in ragged pants, my heart pounding in my chest as I stare at him, the reality of what we're about to do crashing down on me.

Shane's eyes are dark with desire, but there's also a hint of concern. "Nicole?" he asks, his voice husky. "Are you okay?"

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I almost say no. I almost tell him we can't do this. I almost do as I've told myself I would if this situation ever came about. Almost. But then I push myself forward, rejoining his lips with mine. I feel the wetness of his shirt pressing against my own, the grasp of his hands on the small of my back as I pull him closer. I fumble with the buttons of his shirt, needing to see and touch the muscles that have been tempting me this whole time. As I undo the last button and open his shirt, his lips trail down my chin and onto my neck. The warmth of his mouth against my skin sends shivers through me, and his hands slide up my thighs. This is it, I think—no turning back now. I grasp his pants, undo the button, and slide down the zipper, all the while feeling the elastic of my panties sliding over my buttocks. The warmth of Shane's bare body presses against mine, his arousal brushing against my inner thighs. He looks into my eyes once more, and as he kisses me, I feel my legs part before—

I wake up, the dream dissolving into the soothing symphony of raindrops falling on the balcony outside my window. The gentle taps echo in my bedroom as I clutch my pillow, my body still hot from the vivid dream. The look on Shane's face, the heat of his breath, are too fresh in my mind for me to move. I lie there with my eyes closed a bit longer, wanting to savor the feeling before reality takes hold.

Eventually, I turn and glance at the clock on the nightstand. I panic at first, realizing how late I am when I see the clock reads 9 a.m. Jaime's breakfast. But as I swing my feet over the bedside and hover them over the furry white slippers resting on the carpet below, I realize this Sunday is my day off. I go with my first instinct and instantly fall back, sinking into my pillow and shutting my eyes. But a tiny, nagging voice in my head urges me up.

I should check on them, I think to myself.

Normally, when I take time off, Shane calls the old nanny to watch Jaime. But lately, he's been managing entire days by himself. He's getting better at this guardian thing, though he still needs a little help now and then.

I slide out of bed, slip on my cozy slippers, and make my way to the bedroom door. Before stepping out, I quickly glimpse myself in the mirror—something I rarely bother to do this early unless I've someplace to be. Mornings used to be only Jaime and me, but now, with Shane here, the dynamics have shifted, and as a result, so has my routine. As I step into the upstairs hall, a soft, ethereal gray light filters in through the windows, creating a serene ambiance that reminds me of my parents' house in Italy. I've always loved rainy days.

I hear Shane's voice downstairs in the dining room, though it's muffled. Curiosity gets the better of me, so I quietly go to the kitchen and peek through the doorway. There he is, helping Jaime with his homework. Jaime is at the dining table, focused on his notebook and science textbook while Shane patiently guides him.

My heart and mind are always in turmoil, and I constantly worry about my brother Giovanni. But in this moment, I find a fleeting sense of peace. Seeing Jaime so happy and content while bonding with his Uncle Shane brings a warmth I haven't felt in a long time.

Shane suddenly turns and catches me watching. I offer him a smile, and he responds with a broad, welcoming grin that radiates genuine joy just from seeing someone. It's disarming, and I quickly retreat into the kitchen, closing the door behind me.

There's something different in Shane's eyes lately. His glances linger longer, and they carry a sincerity that wasn't there before. They're enchanting, almost magnetic—inviting me in, tempting me to get closer. It's getting harder to ignore. I've done my best to avoid being alone with him or staring too long, careful not to give him the wrong idea. But with the urges and dreams getting stronger and more

frequent, resisting feels like going against my very nature.

I know I can't keep hiding my attraction to him forever. The urge to flirt back is becoming a need, and the desire to let my guard down grows stronger with each passing day. But my thoughts are too heavy, weighed down by the situation with Giovanni. I'm here to settle a debt, not to complicate things by getting involved with my boss.

As if the universe is giving me a sign, my phone buzzes in the pocket of my black satin pajama bottoms. I glance at the screen—an unknown number. My heart races. I quickly leave the kitchen, pressing the answer button just as I reach the stairs, afraid the call might disconnect if I let it ring too long.

"Hello," I say, my voice a mix of anticipation and fear as I hurry up the stairs, desperate for the isolation of my bedroom.

"Ciao. Is this Nicola?" a female voice responds in Italian. Relief washes over me; it's a good sign. "I was worried to call you back. It's Francesca. Are you okay to talk?" the woman asks.

"Yes," I answer, my voice trembling slightly with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. "Please, Francesca, have you heard anything about Giovanni? I really need to know."

There's a pause, and I hold my breath, fearing the worst. "No, not in some time," Francesca finally says, her tone careful. "But I have a friend who knew your parents. She says she saw him about three months ago in Siena, one of the few places the Serpenti avoid."

I exhale, relief washing over me like a wave. Three months—it's not as recent as I'd like, but it's better than the silence I've endured for nearly nine months.

"I've checked the lists of the dead and missing," Francesca continues, her voice steady, trying to reassure me. "Giovanni's name isn't on any of them."

The words should comfort me, but instead, they leave me feeling as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, the ground beneath me unstable. I'm not any closer to finding him, but at least he's not on one of those lists. It's a small victory in a sea of uncertainty.

"Thank you, Francesca," I murmur, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Nicola," she says softly, "this is good news. It means he's likely in hiding, and you wouldn't want him to be seen right now, not with how things are here. The violence has spread from Naples. It's bad, Nicola. The Serpenti are trying to control everything, and they're ruthless. They're wiping out anyone who stands in their way."

A shiver runs down my spine. The danger back home is more real than ever, and Giovanni is right in the middle of it. I have to find him before it's too late.

"Francesca," I say, my voice firm despite the fear gnawing at me, "your friend—can you contact her again? I need any information she can find about Giovanni."

There's a brief silence before Francesca replies, her tone serious. "I can try, but you have to understand, Nicola, asking about people like your brother, especially now... it's dangerous. The Avvoltoi and the Serpenti are like ghosts, lurking in the shadows, ears everywhere. Even talking about them could put us at risk. And these things... they cost money."

"I understand," I respond, the urgency in my voice undeniable. "How much will it take?"

"We won't discuss that over the phone," Francesca replies, her voice lowering. "But I'll see what I can do. I'll tap some shoulders and find out what's possible. This

number is good?"

"Yes," I confirm. "Call me anytime. I'll get the money. Just... please find him."

"I will try, Nicola," she promises, and there's a softness in her tone that almost makes me feel like I'm back home, safe. "But remember, be careful. Stay out of Italy. Things are too dangerous now."

"Thank you, Francesca," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "And... how are you? I'm so sorry I'm caught up in my own things; I didn't ask."

Francesca pauses momentarily, then replies, "I survive, staying off the streets at night. Doing some favors for the wrong people now and then. But you know my family—we fear no one."

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"I'm glad you're doing well," I say, a wave of guilt washing over me for not asking sooner.

"Me too. And you make sure you keep doing well. Stay out of Italy, and I will try my best to find your brother."

"I'll be waiting for your call, and I'll get the money."

"I know. Goodbye, Nicola."

The phone clicks off. I walk out of the closet and collapse onto my bed, the weight of the conversation pressing down on me. My savings are depleted, and while Shane pays me well, it will be a while before I have enough to make a difference. I need the money now.

I lie there, staring at the ceiling as the weight of the conversation with Francesca sinks in. My thoughts spiral, my anxiety mixing with relief, leaving me feeling both grounded and unmoored. Giovanni might still be safe, but for how long? And what will it take to find him?

A soft knock on the door pulls me from my thoughts.

"Yes?" I call out.

"It's me," Shane responds.

"You can come in," I say.

Shane steps in, his presence filling the space with a quiet warmth. "Hey," he says, leaning against the doorframe with an easy smile. "You okay?"

I push myself up to sit on the edge of the bed, trying to shake off the heavy emotions. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just... a lot on my mind."

Shane nods, his gaze lingering on me as if he can see right through the facade I'm putting up. "I noticed you watching earlier... when I was helping Jaime with his homework. You were standing there, looking like you wanted to say something."

His observation catches me off guard. I force a small laugh, hoping to brush it off. "I was just making sure everything was going smoothly. You know, focused on Jaime."

He steps closer, the distance between us shrinking. "Focused on Jaime... or something else?"

The way he says it, with a slight tilt of his head and a softness in his eyes, makes my heart skip a beat. I can feel my defenses starting to crumble. "Shane, I..."

He doesn't push. He waits, giving me space to find the right words. But I'm unsure of what to say. I like him more than I should. But there's too much at stake.

Finally, I admit, "I'm just worried about my brother." My voice comes out quieter than I intended. "I haven't heard from him in a while, and I feel like I should do more to help him."

Shane's expression shifts. He seems to understand, and he's concerned. "I get it. Family is important. It sounds like you're carrying a lot on your shoulders."

I nod, grateful he doesn't pry too much. He's curious, sensing there's more to my story. Instead of pressing, he offers a hopeful smile. "If you need to talk, I'm here. No

pressure."

I return his smile, but it feels forced. "Thanks, Shane. That means a lot."

He hesitates as if there's more he wants to say, but then he changes his mind. Instead, he brings up a new topic. "I know this might come out of nowhere, but if you need an advance on your pay, I can arrange that."

His offer surprises me, and I can't help but wonder if he knows more than he's revealing. "An advance?" I ask.

He leans back slightly and confirms, "Yeah. In case your brother needs help, or for any other reason. I understand how stressful things can get."

I pause for a moment, then agree with a nod. "Actually, that would be really helpful. It's for... just in case something comes up with Giovanni."

Without hesitation, he assures me, "Of course. I'll take care of it tomorrow."

"Thank you, Shane," I say, my voice filled with genuine gratitude.

"Don't worry about that," he says, waving it off like it's no big deal. "Just focus on what you need to do."

We stand there momentarily, the silence between us comfortable yet heavy with unspoken words. Finally, Shane steps back a bit. "I should give you some space," he says.

"Yeah," I agree, watching as he turns to leave. But before he does, he glances back at me, his eyes filled with something I can't quite place—something between hope and hesitation.

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"I'm around if you need me," he says softly.

"Thanks, Shane," I reply, my heart still racing long after he's gone.

The weight of everything starts to settle in. My thoughts drift back to Giovanni, the uncertain future, and the complicated feelings I have for Shane. I don't know how this will unfold, but one thing is clear—I'm in deeper than I ever planned to be.

And there's no turning back now.

Chapter 9

Shane

I feel like I'm changing for the better. My bond with Jaime has strengthened, and I'm connecting with people more. Jaime and Nicole have taught me to trust again, to accept help, and to let others take the lead sometimes. One such person is Oliver, who's become somewhat of a protégé. He shows promise and potential, and instead of feeling intimidated by the younger, possibly smarter, department head, I find myself intrigued and eager to mentor him.

Our lunch training session is in full swing. The office buzzes with quiet efficiency, the hum of the air conditioner blending with the clatter of keyboard strokes. The smell of reheated lasagna and freshly brewed coffee fills the room.

"Selling the product is easy," I say, my tone measured as I look across the desk at Oliver. He's seated with a plastic container of microwaved lasagna in front of him, a

plastic spork in hand. His eyes are focused, but I can see the wheels turning in his head. "What you're really selling is the promise. The promise is the key; it unlocks their interest, trust, and loyalty. The catch is that they'll only buy into your promise if you've already sold them on you—through your pitch or the company's reputation. The product just needs to be useful to the client. And even if it's not, the promise can convince them that it is."

Oliver nods thoughtfully, pausing to jot down my words with a small pencil in his notepad. His hunger to learn is palpable, and I know he's on the right path to mastering the intricacies of this business. Beside him, Kristen is typing away on her laptop, capturing every word as it's spoken, her fingers moving swiftly over the keys. She's always thorough, ensuring nothing is missed.

The room is quiet except for the occasional tap of Kristen's keyboard and the soft whir of the air conditioning. Oliver looks up from his notes, curiosity evident in his eyes. "So what's the best example of a promise you think you've sold or are currently selling?" he asks, genuinely interested.

"The best promise," I reply, leaning back slightly in my chair, "is one that comes from understanding the customer's specific needs. It's about listening more than talking. If they've had a data breach in the past, I promise them that our product can prevent that. But it's not just about security—it's about peace of mind. If they suffer from a bad reputation, I show them how our services can help rebuild trust through reliability and a strong public image. For instance, if a client has dealt with subpar providers who missed deliveries or failed to meet deadlines, I don't just tell them we'll do better—I introduce them to our satisfied clients who can vouch for our track record. The key is not to promise that we will never make mistakes—that sounds desperate. Instead, I assure them that we are better than anyone else on the market because we have systems in place to ensure those mistakes don't happen."

"Think of it this way," I continue, leaning forward slightly, "every pitch—" My

phone buzzes on the desk in front of me, interrupting my train of thought. Nicole's name flashes on the screen, and a sense of unease settles in my chest.

"One minute," I say, picking up the phone and stepping out of my office into the outer lobby. "Hello," I answer.

"Shane, Jaime's had a bit of an accident. He's fine, but we're at the hospital now."

My heart drops in my chest. "What happened?"

"Something at school—playing with some other kids. His injuries are minor, okay? I don't want you to panic."

I can hear the concern in her voice, but her reassurance does little to calm the rising fear in my chest. "Which hospital?" I ask, already heading toward the elevators.

"Silver Oak Medical. We're on the third floor now."

"I'm on my way," I say, hanging up the phone.

I open the door to my office, my mind racing. "I need to run; Jaime's had a minor accident."

Kristen immediately looks up, her expression concerned. "Of course, Mr. Matthews."

Oliver echoes her concern. "Yes, take care."

"It's small—no need for concern," I add, trying to reassure them as much as myself. They both give me a final farewell as I close the door and head for the elevators.

I take the quickest route to the hospital, weaving through midday traffic. The streets

blur as I speed toward Silver Oak, trying to convince myself that everything is fine. Nicole would have alerted me if something were seriously wrong, but the familiar rush of anxiety gnaws at me. The race against traffic, the destination—it's too much like before.

Claire. I've done this before, recently even, and that's why my heart is pounding, why I can't stop myself from speeding. I keep telling myself he's fine, but the words bring no comfort. I need to see him.

The anxiety worsens as I reach the hospital. My heart races as I step out of the elevator onto the third floor. The sterile smell, the beeping of machines, the low murmurs of hospital staff—it's all too familiar. I keep expecting the worst, to see that same doctor once again telling me they've done all they can, that there's nothing more they can do.

I approach the nurses' station, ready to ask for Jaime's room, but then I hear her voice.

"Shane." Nicole's voice is soft but steady as she gestures to me down the hall.

She must see the worry etched on my face, because as soon as I reach her, she places a hand on my chest. "Shane, he's fine," she says, her touch grounding me, pulling me out of the panic. "He's got a minor fracture to one of his fingers; it will heal, and he'll be fine." Her words are calm and reassuring—exactly what I need to hear. Somehow, she always knows what I need to hear. And it works. I feel myself begin to calm down.

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Nicole turns to the chair behind her, where Jaime is asleep. His small form is peaceful, his left middle finger wrapped in a splint. There's also a black bruise on his right eye, which I hadn't expected.

"Was he fighting?" I ask, my voice edged with concern. "Why's he all beaten up?"

She exhales, her expression serious. "From what Jaime says, some of the other boys have been bullying him and a friend. Today, they finally stood up for themselves."

"They've been being bullied? And no one knew—not even the teacher? Did Jaime tell you any of this?"

"No," Nicole snaps, her tone defensive. My questions have clearly agitated her. "If he had, I'd have told you."

"How could no one notice? Not you, not the teacher? What do I pay you all for?" My frustration spills over, my worry for Jaime turning into misplaced anger.

"Shane, you're upset. Calm down," she says, trying to soothe me.

But I can't shake the guilt. "I should have noticed," I mutter, more to myself than to her. My mind races with the thought that maybe I've been too distracted by Nicole, or maybe she's been by me. Perhaps boundaries need to be reestablished—for Jaime's sake.

"Can we go? Let's get him home," I suggest, eager to put this behind us.

"He's got one more doctor to see, then we need to pick up his prescription, and then we can go," Nicole replies calmly. "Shane, go get some air or something to snack on. Let him sleep awhile, okay?"

I nod, her words finally breaking through the fog of anxiety. As I step away to get some air, I can't help but replay the events in my head, wondering if I could have done more or if there was more I should have seen.

When I return, Jaime's seat is empty, and Nicole is nowhere to be found. I feel a knot tighten in my stomach, until a doctor steps out of a nearby room, spots my confusion, and approaches.

"You with Jaime?" she asks.

"Yes, I'm his uncle," I respond.

"Shane Matthews," she says, recognizing my name. "I read an article about you in the Daily. They're in there," she adds, gesturing to the room she just left. "Jaime's going to be fine. It's just a minor fracture, which should heal in about four to six weeks. Just ensure he goes easy on that hand, and give him some children's ibuprofen if he feels any pain. Bring him back in six weeks so we can check up on him and make sure everything's healing properly."

"Thank you, doctor. We'll do that," I say, relieved as I head toward the door.

As I push open the door, I see Nicole sitting by Jaime's bedside, speaking to him softly. I pause for a moment, listening to their conversation.

"Jaime, you could have told us about this," Nicole says gently.

"I wanted to, but I also wanted to handle it on my own," Jaime replies, his voice

small.

"Why did you think fighting was the solution?" she asks, her tone filled with concern.

"I tried talking first, but they wouldn't stop. They said my parents were drunk driving and that they were in hell. They picked on Nick, too, and he's like, my only friend. So... I remembered a story my mom told me about how she and Uncle Shane stood up to some kids who were bullying them because their parents weren't home. I just wanted to be strong like them, so I pushed one of them. Then they all jumped on us."

"Jaime, I know you just wanted to stand up for yourself, and I know bullies can say really mean things that make you angry or hurt. You should always defend yourself, but you can't start fights."

"Are you mad at me?" Jaime's voice wavers with worry.

Nicole instantly embraces him in a way that reminds me so much of Claire. "No, not at all," she reassures him.

"What about Uncle Shane?" Jaime asks, looking toward the doorway.

Nicole glances at me knowingly—she's been aware of my presence the entire time. I step into the room, making my way over to them.

"I'm not mad at you either, bud. I know it wasn't your fault," I say as I squat down and gently lift his chin to examine his bruised eye. "That's not so bad," I add with a smile. "You know, your mom and I only fought when we had to. But when we could walk away, we did. We never let their words make us angry, because we knew that if we did, they would win. Maybe you and Nick can try ignoring them next time. Bullies sometimes stop once they realize their words can't hurt you."

"Okay, Uncle Shane," Jaime agrees, nodding.

"So, what do you say, slugger? Bricktop's Burgers?" I suggest, lightly tapping his jaw with my fist.

"Shane!" Nicole huffs, her expression clearly disapproving of the gesture.

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"Actually, I'd rather just go home. Can we all watch a movie together?" Jaime asks, his voice hopeful.

"Sure, but only if Nicole's up for it. You're welcome to take the rest of the night off, if you'd like," I say, turning to Nicole.

Nicole puts a finger to her chin, mimicking deep thought with an exaggerated "hmmm," while Jaime watches her expectantly.

"She's going to say yes," Jaime says confidently, a smile creeping onto his face.

"Yeah, you know me so well, don't you?" Nicole says, playfully tickling his stomach.

She looks up at me, her eyes soft and sincere. "Let's go home," she says, and the words feel like a promise, one that I desperately want to believe in. The look she gives me confirms it. I know now that I want her to be home for me and Jaime, and for us to be hers.

At home, the atmosphere is light and warm, filled with the comfort of togetherness. We settle in the living room, Jaime curled up between us on the couch as the movie begins. Despite the weight of the day's events, a sense of peace washes over me. As I watch Jaime laugh at the screen, I realize how much I've changed—how much we've all changed. We're not perfect, but we're making it work, and that's what matters.

As the movie plays, I glance at Nicole more often than at the screen. There's something about how she's settled in, her arm draped casually over the back of the couch, that feels so natural and right. My mind drifts to thoughts of what this could

be—what we could be—if we let it.

Unexpectedly, Nicole leans in closer, her voice low and teasing. "You know, Shane, you're pretty good at this whole family thing," she says, a playful glint in her eyes.

"Only because I have the best teachers," I reply, my voice matching her tone. The warmth between us feels electric, and for a moment, everything else fades away.

We share a smile, the kind that lingers longer than it should, and I feel a flicker of hope that maybe—just maybe—this could be something real.

But just as quickly, Nicole pulls back, the moment slipping away like sand through my fingers. Her gaze drops to her hands, and she clears her throat, the playful ease from before now replaced with something more guarded.

I'm left wondering, once again, if this could ever be more than just a passing thought. Can we really make this work, or is it all just wishful thinking? The questions swirl in my mind, but for now, they remain unanswered.

As the credits roll on the movie, Jaime's eyelids grow heavy, and soon he's fast asleep between us. Nicole carefully scoops him up, cradling him against her chest as she carries him to bed. I watch her, my heart full but my mind still clouded with uncertainty.

Chapter 10

Nicole

Despite the fight and fracture, Jaime returned to school after just two days. Sitting on my terrace balcony, I savor a peaceful moment, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the air as I gaze out at the sparkling pool and lush rear garden. The

sitting area, though small, exudes comfort. The couch is so cozy that it's hard to believe it's meant for the outdoors, and the small glass table is the perfect spot for a cozy, even if lonely, morning breakfast. I breathe in the fresh air and watch the pool's surface ripple at each gust of the morning breeze. It's as if it's inviting me. It's lovely, tranquil, and peaceful... until my phone begins to vibrate.

I gaze at the glowing screen. Annette.

I pick up. "Hey Anne, how's your morning?"

"Good. I've been reading up on the latest gossip about your billionaire bachelor daddy."

I chuckle. "What are you going on about?"

My phone dings with a message.

"Just sent it," Annette says.

I put her on speakerphone to check the message. It's a link to a news article from an online site called The Daily Whisper. The title reads "A Peek Into the Life and Loves of Billionaire Shane Matthews."

"You find it?" she asks excitedly.

"Yeah," I reply.

"What do you think?"

"I haven't read it yet," I tease.

"Well, I have. Did you know he dated Balina Porter?" Annette asks with a hint of excitement in her voice.

"I don't even know who that is. And no, we don't talk about who we've dated."

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"Well, you might as well, because everyone else is studying up on just how single he is."

"It's no big deal, Annette," I say, trying to downplay it.

"Sure it isn't," she mocks. "So, are we going to go through this thing or what? I've got all morning, and I can save you some time, seeing as I've already read it."

I exhale deeply, mulling it over.

"Come on, you know you want to," Annette says.

"I've got so many other things I could be doing..."

"Like what?" she challenges. "Jaime's back at school, and you told me you were going to sit on your balcony and sip coffee today. That's what you're doing, right?"

"Yeah," I admit reluctantly.

"Well, you need some 'you' time," Annette adds.

"You meanyouneed some 'you' time," I clarify.

"Exactly! And this kills two birds with one stone," she jokes.

"Why are you so interested in this?" I question, already suspecting her answer.

"If something happens to you, your billionaire will need someone to pick up the pieces," she says, laughing heartily.

I can't help but laugh too.

"Ugh," I groan. "You're so bad for me. Fine, let's do it."

Annette wastes no time jumping right in.

"Okay, so you really should check out the third paragraph first—that's where things get interesting," Annette says.

I begin reading through the article as I sip my coffee, with Annette narrating to me over the phone. It's the kind of article I've read a million times before, the type I'd usually skim through without a second thought. But today, I'm analyzing every word. The writer lists his likes and dislikes; while they get a few things right, most of the information is misinformed assumptions. The dating section is detailed, mentioning a few famous names, including one I actually recognize. I find myself more intrigued than jealous, and seconds after reading, I'm probing Annette and the internet for information about his exes, shamefully comparing myself to them.

"This feels weird, Annette. Is this too much?" I ask, feeling a pang of guilt.

"Please. It's weird if you don't do it these days. It's what everyone would do. Besides, he's your boss—do you think he hasn't dug into your life and the people around you?"

Her words strike a chord. The thought of Shane finding out about my past, about the people I've dealt with, the things I've seen and stayed silent about, and the things I've done to get here—it terrifies me. How would he and Jaime look at me then?

We spend about an hour going through the article and discussing the relationships

described within when Annette decides she is ready to deliver her verdict.

"You're definitely not his usual type. These girls are mostly wildcards, the kinds that grew up way too fast from seeing way too much when they were young. A far stretch from our sweet little Italian farm girl," Annette jokes.

Oh, Annette, if only you knew the truth, I think to myself.

"I think you're different; that's why he likes you."

"Who said he likes me?" I ask.

"I do," Annette responds. "And you like him too. It was the most obvious thing from the time I first met him."

"What? So he's tired of wild, cool, celebrity girls and looking for a farm girl now?"

"Yeah, either he sees something in you that's special enough to change his type, or he's just looking to try his hand at something new for a while. Either way, enjoy it. Even if it's just a fling. Just wait to start getting your hopes up for a future until you're sure which one it is. I hate to say it, but he does have options, and this article just gave him a lot more."

"Wow, that really helps me, Annette," I say, my tone playfully sarcastic.

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"I just don't want to see you get hurt. It happens to the best of us. Anyway, I've got lunch soon, need to get ready, but I'll see you this weekend, right?"

"Yeah. Later, Anne."

"Bye, Doll," says Annette before the line goes blank.

It's the first time I can remember Shane and I being home alone together, and for some reason, I find myself nervous to leave my bedroom. I finally make it downstairs around lunchtime to find Shane sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter, scrolling through his phone as he sips coffee.

I decided to come right out and ask him about the article. Perhaps if I frame it as a joke, he won't think I'm taking it so seriously.

"Shane Matthews is a cunning businessman," I say, approaching him from behind. The line comes directly from the article. I continue. "But he lacks resolve when it comes to dating," I mock, smiling the entire time. "Ohh, burn," I add.

"Ahh, not you, too," he says, smiling. "My phone has been blowing up with people taking digs at me all morning."

I wonder to myself just who these people are, but don't dare to ask; Annette's words have started to stick in my head.

I let it go, heading to the cupboard to retrieve a coffee mug, placing it in Shane's state-of-the-art coffee maker and pressing the espresso button. Shane goes back to his

phone, and we enjoy a moment of comfortable silence.

"It's from an interview I did a few months back, before... Claire, Jaime, and you. They wanted someone single and successful, and since I'd broken up with Balina, they had an eye on me. It was actually supposed to be released months ago, but they withheld it, given everything our family was going through..."

He's explaining himself unprovoked, and I secretly like it.

"Shane, you don't need to explain yourself..."

"I know. It's just... I was in a different state of mind then," Shane says. "I've never really taken dating seriously; I'm too involved with work, I guess. So..."

There's more there—I can feel it—and part of me wants to peel back each layer to learn all I can. But the voice in my head tells me to refrain. You know, the more you learn about his past, the more he'll likely want to know about yours, I think to myself.

I imagine having to tell him about Raffaele, the violence, and the things I had to do for the Avvoltoi under his watch. And suddenly, I'm thinking of Giovanni. Where is he?

"Nicole?" Shane calls.

"Sorry," I say, snapping back to the present. "I really need some coffee before I let the day pass any further." Just as the words leave my mouth, the coffee machine dings, and I see clouds of steam wafting from my mug.

"Want to join me?" Shane offers. I'm tempted, but I'd rather not, with Giovanni or Shane's exes on my mind.

"Maybe later," I say. "I think I'll take this one in bed."

Shane gives me a smile and returns to his phone as I ascend the steps.

After a coffee and a quick nap, I finally submit to the in-ground swimming pool beckoning me from the backyard.

I change into my red two-piece swimsuit, head downstairs, and approach the glass doors to the back patio when I see Shane. He's doing laps in the pool, and when he stops to surface for air, all my thoughts freeze on him.

I imagine him close to me, his body pressed up against mine, the taste of his lips, the feel of his arms and muscles wrapped around me. I remember we're home alone, and that if he were to loosen the strings on my bikini and let it fall to the floor, no one would be around to watch. I'm watching his hands as he strokes the water's surface, imagining them slowly caressing my neck, working their way downward as I stroke his chest and do the same. A sensation stirs within me, a tingling warmth, and I realize I've been standing there, watching him through the glass doors, for too long.

The pool will have to wait—I can't be around him like this. I turn and head back to my room.

I'm happy to see Jaime; his smile and school stories always bring me joy and help me forget about the complexity of my predicament. After school, he returns, and we immediately get started on his nature diorama for art class. He's drawn out the whole thing in detail, explaining it to me as we sit at the dining table. But my thoughts are still on Shane.

"Hey, Nicole, are you listening to me?" Jaime shouts, and I realize I'm a million miles away.

"Yes, of course, buddy."

"This is important, Nicole. I need you to focus," Jaime insists.

"Buddy, I promise I'm 100% focused on you." But that's a lie. How can I be, when Shane is all I can think about? I wonder if it's too much. Am I losing myself? Am I falling for him? And if I am, is it a violation of my duty to Jaime?

Chapter 11

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Shane

John from HR ends the meeting as he always does.

"Before I go, are there any questions or concerns you might have for me?" he asks.

"Nothing now. As always, thanks for your hard work," I reply.

"A pleasure, Mr. Matthews. I'll file the employee commentaries along with your responses right away. You have a wonderful day," John says with a smile. Standing, he gathers his laptop, tucks it into his bag along with his notepad, and extends a hand to me across the desk.

We shake hands, and he heads out. Kristen steps in before the door can close, closing it behind her. Always prepared, she has her laptop in hand as she takes the seat John has just vacated.

"Any major concerns?" Kristen asks.

"A few of the employees feel they'd like to see me more involved like I used to be... you know, before Jaime."

"They mentioned your nephew?"

"Not directly, but they alluded to it. As far as they know, I'm still grieving for Claire. But they also noted that meetings used to be more frequent and productive, and that things have changed since I lost my sister."

"What do you think?" Kristen asks, her tone professional but filled with concern.

"I'm stuck dividing my time between Jaime and the office," I admit. But in the back of my mind, I know there's a third distraction, one that I can't quite shake off.

"Shane, maybe it's time to let someone help you out with this. To choose a number two."

"Kristen, there's..."

"I know that trust comes hard for you, but this is what people do when they take on a family," Kristen says, her voice firm yet understanding. "Delegating duties is a regular part of business, especially for a CEO. Shane, your dedication is admirable—no one could run this company the way you do. But you're only one person. You need a right hand, someone you can trust to handle the day-to-day operations, keep the employees motivated, and give you the time you need with Jaime. Perhaps a certain executive you've taken under your wing?"

"You mean Oliver," I say.

"He seems to know things well enough, and you seem to actually like him."

"It's a lot of responsibility... I'll think it over."

"I know you have a history with these kinds of things," Kristen continues. "Trust is hard-earned with you, and for good reason, I'm sure..."

"I'm just cautious of our reputation. The staff and our company all rely on leadership they can trust, and..."

"I get that, sir," Kristen interjects. "I know, but consider if maybe you're being a bit

too hard to win over. That's all I ask. Trusting someone, especially after a betrayal, always takes a bit of self-sacrifice as well."

I exhale deeply, knowing she's right—again. "Thanks, Kristen. That's all for now."

"Okay, sir," she replies, leaving the office.

As I lean back in my chair, thoughts of Robert suddenly pop into my head. Memories of all the times he was there for me, supporting and backing me up. Strangely enough, Oliver reminds me so much of him. Both ambitious, smart, and capable individuals. These qualities made Robert an exceptional partner, but unfortunately, according to the FBI reports, they made him an even better criminal. The mere thought of him now sends my blood boiling as I reflect on the trust we once shared and how swiftly he shattered it. I cannot afford to repeat the same mistake I made with Robert.

As I leave early for the day, my mind is a whirl of thoughts about the employees and the idea of promoting Oliver. Robert's betrayal creeps back into my mind, frustrating me, but the smooth jazz on the radio and the thought of seeing Nicole and Jaime help calm my nerves. I imagine Nicole by the pool, her bikini-clad figure more stunning than I've ever allowed myself to imagine. With each day, my excitement grows to see both of them. It's a feeling I've never experienced before—a taste of what it's like to have a family, something I've been missing for far too long. It's what Claire and I were deprived of during our childhood. I always wondered what motivated others to desire a family, but now I'm finally starting to understand.

I cruise down I-85 under a misty gray sky, eager to get home. The rain beats against my windshield, a steady backdrop to the soothing jazz flowing from the speakers. As I turn off the highway onto the forest-lined road leading to the estate, I get a call. A familiar name flashes on the car's console screen: Balina Porter.

I hesitate for a moment, then hit the green button.

"Hello," I say.

"Is that Mr. Unobtainable himself?" Balina's voice is light, teasing.

"I guess you read the article?" I respond calmly.

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"Oh, everyone's read it by now—at least the small section of the world that knows who we are," she quips with that familiar wit.

"More your followers than mine, I'm sure," I counter.

"Don't be so sure, Shane Matthews—you've got more fans than you think. How've you been?" Her tone shifts to something more sincere.

"I've been good, actually. A lot better, all things considered."

"That's good. I know I haven't called since just after the funeral, and I feel—"

"Balina, I know you keep me in your thoughts, and you'd be there if I really needed you. Thanks for that."

"As long as you know you can call me whenever you need to, Shane," she assures me.

"I know, Balina. How've you been? Where are you now?"

"Well, technically I'm not allowed to say. The studio is so secretive about these damned superhero movies. All I can tell you is it's really cold."

"Another one of those, huh? Who are you fighting this time—aliens? Robots?"

"This one's actually a team-up," she says, her voice growing excited. "Me and a few of the other heroes form a team to—oh, you know, I've already said too much."

"Sounds fun."

"It is," she assures me. "The cast is great, and I'm so lucky... but that article really got me thinking about some of the fun we had."

"We did have some good times, Balina."

"I was thinking... we're taking a week off starting Friday. I'll be back in the city. Maybe we could... you know, hang out?"

I'd be lying if I said hearing from her didn't feel good. Balina, the lead actress in two of the highest grossing movies last year, had graced the covers of dozens of magazines and won Sexiest Woman of the Year twice. And yet, here she was, asking me out—not her handsome costars, not some athlete or model, but nerdy Shane Matthews. But my heart isn't in it.

"What do you think?" Balina asks.

"I've got Jaime now—not much time to go out. Plus... there's someone else. Nothing official yet, but... you know."

"Ah, I see. Well, good luck. I'm really happy for you, Shane. I hope it works out."

"Yeah, me too."

"So, I guess I'll see you around, and maybe, hopefully, you'll have someone cute on your arm?"

I laugh. "Yeah, thanks. See you around, Balina. Get back to saving the world."

"On the job. Bye, Shane," Balina says before the line goes blank.

The swift strikes of thunder light up the cloudy gray sky as I make the final turn onto the private road leading up to the house. Usually, I'd text Nicole to let her know I'm on my way, but not today. I'm eager to surprise her and Jaime with my early return.

When I walk in from the rain, I find Jaime snuggled under a blanket on the couch, completely engrossed in the singing cartoons on TV. He's so absorbed that he doesn't notice me walking in behind him. I slip off my jacket and unbutton the top few buttons of my suede blue shirt, letting the cool air from the house replace the dampness clinging to my skin. I decide not to disturb Jaime, and instead follow the sound of running water coming from the kitchen.

Nicole stands over the sink, her hands and forearms wet with soap and water. As soon as she hears me come in, she turns, and the smile she gives me is one of the greatest I've ever seen.

"Shane," she says, and just hearing my name on her lips makes me forget all the problems of the day.

All I can think as I look into her green eyes and bright smile is, Why can't we be together?

"You're back early today," she adds.

"Yeah, I thought I'd leave a bit early. Things were slow today."

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"Everything okay?" Nicole asks, her voice laced with genuine concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I reply, realizing that I really am—and it's all because of her.

"Jaime's been asking about you," she says, drying her hands with a towel. "He wanted to wait until you got home so we could all read a story together."

I can't think of anything else I'd rather do.

We get Jaime into bed just as the rain begins to pour harder, the thunder cracking loudly with each stroke, echoing through the house. The sound of the storm outside only makes the warmth inside feel more comforting.

I read the first half of the story, right up until the boy in the tale finally discovers the secret map to the magic island. Then Nicole takes over, her voice carrying the story forward. She gets about halfway through her part when Jaime begins to doze off, his eyelids fluttering as sleep overtakes him. She's two pages from the end when his eyes finally shut tight, and his breathing becomes deep and steady. Nicole looks at him adoringly as she stops reading and closes the book. She gently pulls the blanket up over him, but she jumps slightly as a strike of lightning sounds in the distance. Jaime stirs, his eyes fluttering open for a brief moment, and he murmurs a soft word before drifting back into a deep sleep.

"What did he say?" I whisper, curious.

Nicole turns to me, her expression tender. "Paulie," she says. "It's his bulldog plushie. We couldn't find it earlier. But I'd better find it now; he might get a little shaken if he

wakes up in this storm without it."

"Want some help?" I offer.

She smiles that warm, heart-melting smile of hers and nods. "How about we search over a cup of coffee?" Nicole suggests.

"Sounds good."

We head to the living room, where we begin our search for Paulie. I check under the tables, behind the couch cushions, and even inside the toy chest. We comb through the room with growing determination, until Nicole lets out a triumphant "Ah-ha!" I see her fishing something from beneath the foot recliner on the sofa.

"It's stuck in the gears," she says, frowning slightly.

I move closer to help, and together, we work to free Paulie from the clutches of the recliner, being careful not to damage him. As we work, I realize how close we are—closer than we've ever been. I catch the scent of her vanilla bean shampoo and the faint hint of lavender oil on her skin. A sudden pang of self-consciousness hits me, wondering how I must smell—wet and in desperate need of a shower. But I push the thought aside as we focus on the task at hand.

With a final tug, Paulie comes free, and I hold him up between us, victorious. Nicole strokes the plushie's head, her fingers brushing against mine.

"We make an awesome team," she says playfully, her eyes sparkling.

"Agreed," I reply, my voice a little softer than I intended.

The tension between us is undeniable now, thick in the air. My heart pounds in my

chest as we both realize how close we are, our eyes locked in an unbroken gaze. It feels like there's a magnetic pull between us, drawing us closer, inch by inch. Our faces are just a breath apart, and without thinking, I close my eyes and press my lips to hers.

I expect it to be brief, but the kiss lingers, warm and soft, as if neither of us wants it to end. When we finally pull back, Nicole's green eyes meet mine, filled with something I can't quite name but makes my heart swell. She exhales deeply, our hands still entwined, her touch sending a shiver down my spine.

"We should get this to Jaime," Nicole says, her voice barely above a whisper as she places her hands on my shoulders and gently pushes herself up. She holds onto her smile, giving me a hand and helping me to my feet. We stand there for a moment, lost in each other's eyes, before turning to head back to Jaime's room.

After placing Paulie in Jaime's arms and watching him snuggle up to the plushie, we both whisper goodnight. There's no second kiss, no words exchanged about what just happened. Instead, we silently savor the feeling as we part ways, each retreating to our rooms, both knowing that something between us has changed.

Chapter 12

Nicole

It's been two days since the kiss. Shane has been busy at work, and we've only seen each other briefly in passing. I'm up early, sipping coffee while Jaime watches his cartoons on the couch. The moments I'm not tending to him, my mind drifts. I daydream about the three of us together, even picturing Giovanni joining us—our potential future and the possibilities it holds. But the sweet thoughts only last a moment. Each time, my past creeps back into mind; memories of Raffaele, the Serpenti, and my parents. If I'm really going to move forward, I need to free myself

from the sins of my past and those of my parents.

Shane walks into the living room, his black suit sharp and pressed, his blue and white tie perfectly knotted. I imagine wrapping the tie around my hand and reeling him in for a kiss. We haven't spoken much since that night—he's tried, but I've been slightly avoidant. I feel stuck in my head, afraid to ruin the vibe by saying the wrong thing.

"Good morning, guys," Shane says, gracing the room with a warm smile, one he flashes at Jaime and then at me. Our eyes meet and hold for a moment before I quickly look back down at my phone, my heart jumping just a tiny bit.

"Good morning, Uncle Shane," Jaime replies, not taking his eyes off the TV as he shovels another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

"Nicole, could I talk to you for a minute?" Shane asks.

A wave of nerves hits me. "Sure," I say, standing up to follow him through the swing door into the kitchen.

He stops near the counter and turns to face me. I come up close, just within arm's length—close enough to smell his cologne, to see the spark in his eyes.

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"I've got a charity event in a few days. It's a last-minute thing, and I could use some help," Shane begins.

"Sure, do you need me to watch Jaime?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"No, I'll arrange for someone else to watch him that day. I was thinking you could help me with the event?" he says.

I laugh softly, trying to contain the excitement rising within me. He wants my help. "What could I help you with?" I ask, curious.

"I need someone to organize the gift bags for our guests. It's something I'd usually ask Kristen to handle, but she's swamped at work and headed out for vacation soon. Plus, it's a paid job, and I thought you might appreciate the extra money. You'll have a budget, and all the decisions—from the contents of the bags to the setup at the event—will be yours."

"I... I've never really done anything like that before. Are you sure you trust me with this?" I ask, uncertainty lingering in my voice.

"Of course I do," Shane assures me. "Kristen is expecting your call if you accept and need any help. Besides that, you could always do some research, and if you still need advice, I'm here."

"Wow, Shane, that's great. Thank you," I say.

"Wonderful," he says, taking my hand and locking eyes with me. "Thanks to you,

Nicole," he adds, his voice sincere.

For a brief moment, it looks like he wants to kiss me, but he doesn't. Instead, he turns to leave but stops at the door. I wait, half-expecting him to walk up to me and press his lips to mine. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a large rectangular card with elegant writing on the front.

"Your ticket," he says, handing it to me.

"Wow, you want me to attend too? I don't think I've ever been to a fundraiser," I say, admiring the beautifully crafted invitation. "What do I even wear?"

"Something elegant, formal," Shane replies.

"Shane, I don't have anything like that..." I start to say.

"There's a budget for your wardrobe as well. We need our organizers looking their best," he says with a wink. "Kristen will send you an email with more details later. Enjoy your day, Nicole, and thanks again."

He flashes one last smile before walking out, leaving me standing there, invitation in hand, heart racing.

I spend the next few days diving into the event's details—the guest list, the types of people attending, the charity the event is meant to support, and the best techniques for becoming an event organizer practically overnight. After a lot of research and a few sleepless nights, I settle on the perfect selection of items for the gift bags: luxurious bath products, artisan chocolates, elegant stationery, and a few high-end skincare samples. The display I decide on is simple yet sophisticated: a long table covered in a crisp white cloth, with bags marked with the Vesitech logo and the charity's name in elegant script. The words "Thanks for Your Support" are written in fine lettering

beneath the logo.

Arranging the bags turns out to be surprisingly easy—even enjoyable. However, it's my dress that causes me the most stress. The budget Shane gave me is overly generous, and the fact that I get to keep the dress adds even more pressure. This won't just be an expensive dress—it'll be my expensive dress, and possibly the only one I'll ever own.

I spend an entire day scouring 13 stores before I finally find it—something stunning. It's an elegant black dress with a classic, form-fitting silhouette. The dress is short-cut, stopping just above the knee, with a subtle slit on one side and delicate lace detailing along the neckline and sleeves. It's sophisticated yet understated, a dress that whispers rather than shouts elegance. Instantly, I fall in love with it.

Each day leading up to the event, I try the dress on, admiring the way it hugs my curves and makes me feel like I belong in the world I'm about to step into.

On the night of the event, Shane sends a car to pick me up. The babysitter, a lovely older woman who works for a reputable nanny service, arrives on time. I give her the list of numbers and Jaime's usual nightly schedule, making sure everything is in order before I leave.

As the car pulls up to the venue around 6 p.m., I can hardly contain my excitement. I step out, feeling like a different person, someone confident and ready to take on the world. I'm not just attending a celebrity event—I'm an organizer. And I'm wearing the kind of dress that one of them would wear.

I make my way to my seat in the rear of the auditorium with 15 minutes or so before the show is set to begin. The stage is bright with colorful decorations, and a live band plays a lively tune. Shane stands at the front, surrounded by staff and spectators, too busy to notice me in the crowd. As I settle into my seat, I spot Balina Porter making

her entrance. Even I have to admit she's stunning. Graceful, with a look that exudes confidence and mystery. Her smile suggests she knows more than anyone else in the room, and her hazel eyes are captivating. She gives me a quick smile as she passes.

For a moment, I imagine what it must be like to be her, noticing the way people look at her with admiration and envy as she glides down the aisle. She walks up to Shane, who's greeting guests near the stage. I watch their interaction closely. They seem happy to see each other, but not in a way that worries me. A quick exchange of smiles, a kiss on the cheek, and she moves on to her seat in the front row.

The auditorium fills up quickly, and soon everyone is in their seats. Shane takes the stage. The band plays an opening number, and his smile sends my heart fluttering. As he begins his welcome speech, I'm still buzzing with excitement, barely able to believe I'm here among such well-known people. It's overwhelming in the best way.

Halfway through his speech, my phone buzzes with a call from an unknown number. I decide to ignore it, but moments later, a text arrives. I glance at the screen, and a wave of fear washes over me.

You're being noticed by more pairs of eyes than one. Back to the shadows, little Nicola.

My heart drops. I quickly scan the room, searching for anyone who might be watching me, but the crowd is too dense. Every shifting shadow seems ominous, and my anxiety starts to build, my heart pounding in my chest. Feeling scared and alone, I slip out of the auditorium and find refuge in a nearby restroom. I make sure no one sees me enter, then lock myself in a stall, pulling the small canister of mace from my bag. I sit there, trembling, for what feels like hours. It's probably just two, but it feels like an eternity.

Finally, I muster the courage to leave. The final act is on stage—a children's group

singing the farewell song, accompanied by the band. Instead of returning to my seat, I find a corner where I can stand with my back against the wall, and no one can sneak up on me.

When the show ends and the lights come up, the crowd begins to disperse. Some people gather in groups, chatting animatedly, while others head for the exits. I spot Shane making his rounds and speaking with the big names in attendance. I watch as he moves from one person to the next, working his way up the aisle until he reaches my empty seat. He scans the crowd, looking for me, and I decide it's time to stop hiding.

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I approach him, trying to steady my nerves.

"Hey, I was looking for you," he says.

"Yeah, I just went to use the restroom," I reply, forcing a smile.

"Did you enjoy the event?" Shane asks, smiling in return.

"It was wonderful, Shane," I say, though my voice wavers as I try to conceal the fear still gripping my chest.

"Well, from what I've been hearing, people really loved your gift bags. The show only just ended, and I've already seen three posts about them on Insta... Are you sure you're alright?" he asks, studying me closely.

"I'm fine, Shane. Really," I say, my tone colder than I intended.

He takes my hand gently. "I've got the sitter for another two hours. I was thinking maybe I could say a few more goodbyes, and then we could—"

Before he can finish, Balina Porter calls out to him from across the room. She's standing with a group of actors, a few of whom I recognize. She waves him over with a smile.

"I'm sorry, Shane, I really just need something to drink," I say quickly, cutting him off. "Why don't you go talk to your famous friends, and I'll catch up with you in a bit, okay?" I give him a quick pat on the shoulder and turn to walk away.

I can see his frustration as I say it, and I feel his eyes on me as I walk off. Space is what I need—from him, the event, and the fear that still grips me. I head to the bar and order a drink, hoping it will calm my nerves.

I can't let them control me like this. One text, and I'm hiding in a restroom for hours.

After two drinks, I start to feel better and more in control. I'm ready to head back in, take Shane's arm, and walk out with him, smiling confidently at Balina Porter as we pass. But just as I reach the doors to the auditorium, my phone buzzes again. I hesitate, not wanting to look. What if it's Jaime? Or maybe even Gio? My heart races as I check the message.

Be cautious who you trust. We think your brother may have flipped and given you up.

"No!" I gasp, the word escaping my lips before I can stop it. A woman nearby glances at me, curious. "Sorry," I mutter, staring at the screen in disbelief.

Lies. Gio would never betray me—he'd die first, just as I would for him.

It all suddenly becomes too much—the event, the expensive dresses, the kiss... Who do I think I am? My job is to protect Jaime, not to play the role of an event organizer with a billionaire boyfriend.

I scoff at myself and turn to head outside, deciding to catch a car home. I'll tell Shane I'm leaving once I'm already gone. For now, I'll let him enjoy his night.

Chapter 13

Shane

It's Saturday, just two days after the charity event, and the house is unusually quiet. Jaime is out for the weekend and won't be back until tomorrow evening. I've planned an entire getaway for him and his friend Alex—a trip that includes a chauffeur, a car, and accommodations at a resort on the city's outskirts. Annette has gone along as their escort, along with our backup nanny, to give Annette some much-needed relaxation, or as she calls it, "cocktail and spa time." I'd offered Nicole the choice to either join them or take the day off, and she'd opted for the latter. Deep down I hoped, like me, she was looking forward to some quiet alone time together. But after the charity event, I'm not so sure anymore.

It's around noon when I finally get out of bed, the quietness of the house allowing me some much-needed sleep. I head downstairs to the kitchen and find a pot of coffee, still hot. Pouring myself a cup, I wander over to the window.

Nicole is on the rear deck, comfortably dressed in her loungewear, enjoying the tranquility by the pool. A slice of pecan pie sits on her plate as she sips on her coffee, her focus on the book in her hands.

I step outside, walking over to her. "Good afternoon," I say, breaking the silence between us for the first time today.

"Hey, Shane," she replies, giving me a brief smile before quickly returning to her book. I'm about to say more when she continues. "Look, I'm sorry for bailing on you at the event. I just... had a lot on my mind."

"Is that it? Just a lot on your mind?" I ask, trying to keep my tone even.

"Yeah, I'm just putting myself through a lot, and I'm confused about things right now."

"You know you can talk to me if you need anything," I offer, my voice softer.

"Yeah, I know, Shane," she responds, her tone suddenly cold.

I start to turn away, ready to give her the space she clearly wants, but something inside me tells me to push a little further. "I just have to know... the kiss... did it mean anything to you?" The words come out bolder than I expected, my heart pounding as I wait for her response.

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"Of course it did, Shane," she says, sincerity in her voice.

"Then what is it? Are you trying to remain professional? Do you want me to leave you alone? Because I can. Just tell me, and we'll go back to being friends and raising Jaime. That's what's important..."

"Shane," she interrupts, a hint of frustration in her voice. "It's not you. You're just jumping to conclusions. I... I don't know what I want right now. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. It would be best if you had time to figure things out. I'll give you your space," I say, trying to sound respectful, but I know my frustration is showing. I turn to leave, needing to put some distance between us.

"Shane," she calls out, her voice softer now. Moments later, she's up and behind me, grabbing my hand to stop me. I turn to face her, the tension between us growing with each passing second. The urge to pull her close, to feel her lips against mine again, is almost overwhelming.

"Since that night, all I've thought about is you. Being with you, kissing you, holding you. It haunts me every day. I want to reach out each time you pass, I want to try—to make an effort with you. But I think about Jaime and wonder if it's right for him, if it'll be a distraction from finding my brother. And... if your heart is really in it."

"Nicole, everything you've said is exactly how I feel," I say, stepping closer to her. "And if that's the case, the only thing stopping us from trying is ourselves." I lean in, kiss her softly, then pull back slightly to look into her eyes. "I just can't stop thinking about you in that bikini, watching me from the window."

She looks away shyly, but can't hide the smile that tugs at her lips. "You know, what I'm wearing now, under this, is much more appealing than that." It's her leaning in this time and pressing her lips against mine.

"Something I haven't seen? Now I'm intrigued," I whisper, letting my lips brush against her ear before trailing down to kiss her neck.

"Well, I've never seen your bedroom. Maybe we can do some show and tell," she teases, tilting her head to the side, her eyes fluttering shut as her body responds to my touch.

I kiss her once more, deeply this time, then look into her eyes as I take her hand. "Let me give you a tour, then."

Without another word, I lead her into the house, our footsteps quiet on the floor as we head toward my bedroom, the anticipation between us building with every step.

I walk in first with her hand grasped in mine. She doesn't bother to look around the room. Instead, she closes the door and then turns to me, placing both palms on either side of my chest. She smiles, and in the depths of her green eyes, I can see she's wanted this as much as I have. We kiss again, long and deeply, my hands resting on the small of her back, just above her buttocks. I pull her close, feeling her soft hands slide under my shirt and up to my chest. She stops me and pulls it up over my head. Then she slowly unzips her sky blue hoodie, revealing a lace bra that's nearly see-through in the front, her breasts fully exposed beneath the delicate fabric. She takes it off, then guides me by the hand to my king-size bed. She leaves me beside it, crawling onto the silk sheets covering the mattress, kicking off her house shoes and showing me her bare feet as she moves toward the pillows. She slides off her top, and then her sweatpants, revealing matching panties. Her tanned skin looks soft and inviting, her eyes alluring. She pulls out the band of her ponytail, letting her long brown hair flow free, then flips it over her shoulders. I feel myself becoming aroused

as I watch, but still, I wait. She looks me in the eyes, then sticks the tip of her index finger into her mouth. She licks and sucks for just a moment before sliding it down her body and into the front of her panties.

"Shane," she says softly. "I think I need your help with this."

I strip down to my boxers, then crawl across the bed to her. I caress her face and kiss her, then reach behind her back to unclasp her bra. It's a fumble for a second, my lips rubbing gently against hers. Then I kiss her ear.

"Take this off," I whisper, removing my hands from the clasp and sliding them down to her waist. I kiss her neck until the bra is off and her breasts are revealed. I rub my lips lightly across one nipple, lick it, then give it a light bite before moving on to the other, all the while rubbing my hands up and down her body, trying to touch every inch. She moans, her hands roaming my chest, and then I feel her hand slide down beneath my waistband. She grasps my member and strokes it lightly, touching herself at the same time. I slide her panties down her thighs, over her knees, and off her cream-colored toenails. She smiles at me, her green eyes seeming to glow in the rays of sunlight shining through the cracks in the curtains. She lifts her bare feet to my waistline, then grasps my waistband with her toes and slides my underwear down just enough to release my hardness. I lie on her, kissing her neck, my bare crotch pressed against hers.

"I want it, Shane. Now," she says.

I don't speak. I shift my hips, maneuver my hardness and, with a bit of pressure, oblige her. It slides in slowly, her body quivering with every inch, her wetness audible. I push in deep on the first stroke and hold it there, looking her in the eyes and waiting for her reaction. Her mouth gaped open, her eyes half-closed in pleasure, I begin to push in and out of her as she grasps my shoulders tightly and calls my name.

The sex doesn't have the usual awkwardness of a first time; in fact, it's natural and synched. Watching her ride me, her hair in her face, her pointed breasts bouncing above me, only turns me on more. She finishes three times before I do once. I lie on my back, Nicole's head resting on my shoulder, her right hand atop my abs, and I feel at home, loved, in love—like nothing I've ever felt before. I wonder if she feels the same.

We're both silent for a moment, still feeling the sensations, taking in what just happened and catching our breaths.

"So what now?" Nicole asks, her tone soft, her voice sweet.

"I was thinking we could go downstairs to the cinema, watch a movie, maybe order a pizza, and do it a few more times."

She laughs. "I mean with this. Do we see where it goes?"

"That's what I'd like," I say.

"Me too, but let's keep it between us for now. Nothing handsy or revealing in front of Jaime."

"Agreed. I think it's better just between us for now."

"Next question, and this is a serious one."

"I'm listening," I respond.

"What kind of pizza do you like? Jaime has been ordering it with pineapples, and I hate it," she jokes.

"Yeah, he gets that from his mom. I'm more of a meat-lovers guy."

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"Me too," she says, her hand sliding back into my shorts.

We make love again, and afterward, we get up to take a shower. An hour later, we're sitting in the cinema room, watching an action movie with pizza and a bottle of Chardonnay. As we talk and watch the movie, she asks me about my likes and dislikes in movies and food. She asks about Claire and how much Jaime reminds me of her, and I gladly share.

"And how about Giovanni? How's he been?" I ask.

"Uhh... he's good, I guess." The question shifts her mood.

"You don't have to answer, Nicole," I assure her. "I'm only curious to learn as much about you as I can. But you don't have to feel pressured to tell me anything. I only hope one day you'll want to," I say with a smile.

"Shane..." She seems to grow more agitated and uncomfortable with my reassurance. "I..."

"You need to learn how to pick wine better," I joke, picking up the bottle. "You never pair Chardonnay with pizza. For that, you'd want a Chianti or a Barbera. Those wines have a nice acidity that cuts through the richness of the pizza, balancing the flavors." I see her smile and tilt her head up to kiss me.

We finish the movie and two more after that, and that night, for the first time, she sleeps in my bed.

Chapter 14

Nicole

The past few days have felt like a sanctuary in the eye of the storm that is my life. Whatever Shane and I are building together, it's given me a rare sense of joyful retreat from the constant worrying. It's only been a few days since this all started, and we're already becoming skilled at keeping things hidden. Last night, he slipped into my room after Jaime was asleep. This morning, he woke up early to sneak back to his own room just before Jaime got up.

I stand by the coffee maker in the kitchen while Jaime munches on his cereal, eyes glued to his cartoons before school. My coffee is already brewed, steam curling up from the cup in front of me. I know Shane is up and headed downstairs for a quick hello before work. And I know this is where he'll come first.

He comes down just after 7:30, almost on cue. My heart jumps when I hear the door open behind me, but I don't turn around. I pick up the spoon and casually stir my already-stirred coffee, expecting to feel his hands on my hips, his lips pressing a soft kiss on the back of my neck. But that doesn't happen. Instead, Shane grabs my hand and spins me around to face him. He looks me deep in the eyes, then kisses me. I taste the fresh mint of his toothpaste and the rich, deep scent of his cologne. I grab him, holding on tight, and when he pulls back, he looks at me again.

"You're gorgeous. Just what I need to see in the morning," Shane says softly.

"I look like the same sleepy hag I always do in the mornings," I say with a smile.

"Yes, a gorgeous sleepy hag with frizzled hair," he jokes back.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask.

"Next to you, I sleep like a baby," he says.

"Yeah, but you definitely snore like a man," I remark.

"Well, you do, too," he teases, laughing. Then his face grows more serious. "I was thinking. I'll finish a bit early tonight, so how about we have a real date? Just dinner, nothing fancy. Somewhere private, where no media would see us together."

It's not quite the media I'm worried about.

I hesitate for a moment. I'm far from having my life figured out, and danger seems to lurk closer every day. Still, looking at Shane, his smile, and the excitement in his eyes, I can't say no.

"Private sounds nice. I like private," I say. "I'd love to."

"Great. I've already checked with the nanny. I'll call her from work to confirm and send a car for you after she arrives. How does seven sound?"

"Seven sounds alright, but what do I tell Jaime?"

"Tell him you're having dinner with a friend, and so am I. It's not technically a lie. And he'll be in bed by the time we get back."

"Okay." I smile at him. "Jaime's been asking for you, by the way. He might be a little jealous of us going out without him."

"Ah, yeah. He wanted to see the tickets for the show. As if he doesn't believe I have them. Don't think he'll be too jealous when he does," Shane smiles.

"Tickets to wha—" is all I can get out before he leans in and kisses me again, and I

forget what I was saying.

"Uncle Shane!" Jaime shouts as he walks into the kitchen. Shane quickly pulls back almost instinctively, just before Jaime catches us.

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"Hey, bud. Happy Friday!"

I give Shane a stern look. "That was too close," I whisper, just as Jaime gets closer.

"Can I see them?" Jaime asks.

"Sure, I was just giving them to Nicole," Shane says.

I watch curiously, still unsure what they're so excited about. Shane pulls the tickets from his pocket and lets Jaime examine them before handing them to me. I glance at them.

The tickets are for a monster truck show at the stadium tomorrow afternoon.

"You don't remember, do you?" Shane asks, noticing the confusion on my face.

I force a smile. "No," I admit nervously.

"It's going to be the best, Nicole! You sure you can't come, Uncle Shane?" Jaime asks.

"Nah, bud, got another late one tomorrow. But you and Nicole can take some good videos for me, right?" Shane replies.

It must have slipped my mind. With everything happening—the charity event, the threatening text, this new relationship with Shane—the show got lost somewhere in the mix.

"I've got to go, guys. See you tonight," Shane says with a wink. He turns to Jaime. "Get ready for monster trucks," he says in a deep, playful voice, ruffling Jaime's hair. Shane leaves the kitchen and heads out the door, and I take Jaime upstairs to get him dressed for school.

The restaurant is Japanese—exclusive and members-only, Shane assured me in his text earlier. I'm to meet him directly at our private booth.

"No chance of anyone seeing us arrive together," his text had promised. I can't help but smile at the careful planning he's put into this.

When I enter the restaurant's lounge, the ambiance immediately strikes me—dim lighting with elegant lanterns hanging overhead and soft traditional music playing in the background. There's a single hostess behind a sleek black podium. She looks up as I approach, her face professional but warm.

"Good evening. May I have your reservation number?" she asks.

I give it to her, and she types it into her computer. After a moment, she looks up with a slight nod. "Right this way," she says, her voice soft and polite.

She leads me through a discreet door into a narrow hallway lined with other doors, each marked with a number. It feels more like an upscale speakeasy than a restaurant. I hear the muffled sounds of laughter, clinking glasses, and soft conversations coming from behind the closed doors, creating a sense of hidden revelry. The ambiance is intimate, secretive, almost sensual.

We stop at door number seven, and she knocks lightly before opening it. Inside, Shane stands waiting with a wide smile that instantly puts me at ease.

"Hey," he says, his voice warm and welcoming. The room is spacious but intimate, a

private booth with a curved leather seat that wraps around the walls and a polished wooden table in the center. Embedded in the middle of the table is a large grill where a soft fire flickers beneath a metal grate.

Once I'm inside, the hostess gives me a polite smile and quietly closes the door, leaving us alone in our secluded sanctuary. Shane steps forward, his eyes never leaving mine, and kisses me gently, his lips lingering just a moment longer than necessary. Then he takes my hand and guides me to the table, where we settle in side by side.

There's a sleek tablet on the table displaying the menu. He picks it up and hands it to me. "Order whatever you like."

I scroll through the selections—an array of alcoholic drinks, traditional Japanese appetizers, and plates of raw meats elegantly arranged like works of art.

"Is this one of those places where we cook it ourselves?" I ask, glancing up at him.

"Yeah, is that okay?" Shane replies. "I remember when we first... you know. You mentioned you'd never been, so I wanted to try it with you."

I can't help but smile, touched by his thoughtfulness. "You're so sweet," I say softly, leaning in to kiss him again.

The meal is an experience in itself. We drink sake and enjoy the fun of grilling our own meats over the open flame. The scent of searing beef and garlic fills the room, and the cozy atmosphere makes everything feel more intimate. By the end of the evening, I've fallen in love with the restaurant and, in a way, with Shane all over again. This private, hidden space makes me feel safe, wrapped up in the warmth of his presence, if only for a moment.

When the meal is done, we're granted special permission to leave through a back entrance of the restaurant. Our car awaits, but as we step outside, paranoia begins to creep back in. The dark alley behind the restaurant feels too quiet and too exposed. I subtly scan the area, my eyes darting from shadow to shadow.

During the ride home, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. I catch a glimpse of a black SUV in the side mirror, and my heart races. It seems to follow us from the restaurant, lingering behind. I try to focus on Shane, who is chatting casually about the evening, but my mind is racing. Am I just being paranoid? Maybe I've had too much to drink, and I'm imagining things.

By the time we reach home, the SUV is long gone—or maybe it was never there. I exhale, feeling my anxiety melt away as we step inside. The safety of the house, the warmth of Shane's hand in mine, is enough to push the fear to the back of my mind, at least for now.

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It's Monster Truck Day, and Jaime has been talking about it nonstop since lunch. I was apprehensive about the whole thing at first—the involvement of wrecked cars in any event, considering what's happened to him, seems like a bad idea. Though with his excitement and everyone else's support of it, maybe I'm the only one who's made that connection. And perhaps that's for the best.

It's just after lunch, and Jaime is playing in his room, giving me some much-needed peace before the chaos of monster trucks this afternoon. I stand at the sink, finishing the last of the dishes, then dry my hands and settle back into my chair with my book. The quiet is soothing, and I try to let the story take me away, but my mind keeps wandering back to that black SUV I thought was following us after dinner with Shane.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes, jolting me out of my thoughts. I glance at it, my heart sinking as I see a text from an unknown number.

The message reads:

You still haven't learned, apparently. Perhaps you won't until you get burned. Lay low.

Panic floods through me. How can they tell? Who is this? A million questions surge through my mind at once. I think back to the SUV after dinner—were we really being followed? Is this connected? My heart pounds in my chest, the walls seem to close in around me, and I feel that all-too-familiar anxiety creeping in. I need to make sure Jaime is safe.

I rush to check on him, and each step I take toward his room feels like I'm reliving a nightmare. It's like that time I walked out of my parents' room to check on Gio. The fear, the uncertainty—it's all there.

When I open Jaime's door, I see him bent over his desk, drawing. He turns around, sensing my presence, his eyes curious. "What is it?" he asks, noticing the blank expression on my face.

"Nothing," I manage to say, forcing a smile. "You okay, bud?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

He nods, a little confused. "Is it time to get ready for monster trucks yet?" he asks, his excitement clear.

I hesitate, my mind still swirling with fear. "No, buddy. Actually, I'm not feeling so well..." The words catch in my throat, because I know what they'll mean to him. "I'm thinking I might have to cancel the monster trucks."

"What?" he shouts, his face falling. "No, Nicole, please! Can't you just take some medicine?"

"No, buddy, I think it's pretty serious. Maybe we can reschedule..." I offer weakly, knowing how much this will disappoint him.

"We can't, Nicole. Can't you just call—"

"Tell you what," I say, trying to calm him, "just relax. Wait here, and I'll see what I can do."

He huffs, his frustration clear. "Okay," he snaps, his voice sharper than I've ever heard. I close the door gently, leaving him alone. My phone is still in my hand; I

think about calling Annette to cancel, but something stops me. I remember Gio crying when we couldn't go to the city fair. I remember him asking to see his old friends after we went into hiding, and all those weekends spent locked in the house, too afraid to step outside. They're doing it to me again, and worse, they don't even have to show their faces. All they need is a phone to throw my life—and everyone else's—into a closet.

I take a deep breath, put the phone away, and head back to Jaime's room. I open the door, and he looks up at me with concern.

"Are you feeling better?" he asks cautiously.

"Yeah, bud. Much better. Put on the clothes I set out for you, and let's get ready for the monster trucks," I say, trying to mimic the funny voice Shane uses, but it comes out awkward.

Jaime's face lights up instantly. He jumps up, his earlier frustration forgotten. His joy makes everything worth it.

When we get home from the show, Jaime is so exhausted that he falls asleep almost immediately. I retreat to my room, craving the comfort of a quiet evening and a good book. Around 9:30, just as I'm finally getting lost in the pages, there's a knock at my door.

"Come in," I say, already knowing it's Shane.

He steps in, dressed in his dark blue suit and the tie I love the most on him. He looks tired, but concerned. "Are you feeling better?" Shane asks.

I'm a bit taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Jaime was awake when I went to see him. He told me you were feeling sick and canceled going to the show, but that you left and came back feeling better right away. So I was wondering if you were okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, trying to hide my discomfort, but I can feel the weight of his gaze. I'm so tired of lying to everyone. Still, I think he senses something is off.

"You're sure? You don't need anything?" he asks.

"No, I'm fine, really," I reply, my voice a bit sharper than I intended. I set my book down and walk over to him, pulling him into a kiss to change the subject. "How was your day?" I ask, hoping to steer the conversation away.

"It was fine," he says. "We had to make some changes in the departments with Oliver moving up, but things ran pretty smoothly."

"Great," I say, trying to sound upbeat. "Are—"

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"You sure everything is okay?" Shane interrupts, his tone more serious now. He's not buying it.

"Yeah..." I say, but it comes out more uncertain than I mean it to.

"Listen," he says, his voice firm. "If you don't want to tell me what's happening, I understand. But... you know, with the charity event, you looked all nervous after dinner, now this is affecting Jaime—and I'm sorry to say, your job too. Just tell me what's going on, and if you can't, at least try to get it under control."

He looks me in the eyes, then turns and leaves, closing the door softly behind him. I stand there, feeling my heart shatter into a hundred pieces.

Chapter 15

Shane

It's around midnight when I hear a tap at my bedroom door. I open it to find Nicole standing there, the curves of her body highlighted by the dim light from the hallway. There's a vulnerability in how she looks at me, her eyes silently asking for forgiveness.

"I can't sleep," she says, her voice barely above a whisper, carrying the weight of whatever secrets she's holding. I can sense she doesn't want to talk about it, and I've learned not to push by now.

"Not really in a talking mood myself," I respond, my voice still heavy with sleep.

She steps forward and kisses me deeply, her urgency clear. She pulls back and opens her robe, revealing the silver-laced lingerie beneath. She's not here to apologize—not with words, at least. Her deep green eyes pierce right into my soul as always, melting my heart with just a look. I step back, making room for her to come in.

She takes my hand, leading me to the bed. With a sense of urgency, we undress each other as if it's our only way to communicate right now. Her gentle yet determined touch conveys all the emotions she's holding back.

Nicole falls asleep in my arms, her breathing steady and soft. Her face looks peaceful in the dim light, but my mind is restless. Curiosity consumes me, and I don't sleep much that night. My mind races with wonder about her secrets. What shadows from her past still linger, just beyond my grasp?

I lie there, staring into the darkness. Nicole murmurs something in her sleep. She says Giovanni's name, followed by another word that I can barely make out. It sounds like "Sepenti" or something similar. She whispers it in Italian, her accent thick with sleep. It feels vaguely familiar, like something I've heard before but can't quite place.

I can't help but wonder if she's involved in something dangerous. The signs are there. She's agitated, fearful, and constantly looking over her shoulder. I want to believe that she's been through a lot, maybe coerced into something she couldn't escape from. But another part of me, the part haunted by memories of Robert, worries that there's more to it. Something illegal. Something that could put us all at risk.

She doesn't seem like the type to get involved in things like that. It's confusing. Robert was a seasoned criminal, but Nicole shows no signs of that. It could be about money, or it could be something else entirely. I should encourage her to open up and tell me the truth. However, I have to be careful not to push too hard, or else she might distance herself from me.

This whole time, I've pushed the thoughts aside, focusing instead on how to make her happy. I think she deserves a life free of whatever haunts her, and I can give her that—whatever it takes. Still, I'm a man of logic, and with that comes the realization that I could be being played again, just like with Robert.

No, I can't start thinking like that, I tell myself.

The following morning, I prepare for work while thinking about the previous night's events. Throughout the day, I have a series of increasingly demanding meetings. In light of our substantial losses, our company has taken a more proactive stance in our interactions with investors. The pressure is intense, as I find myself overwhelmed with numbers, projections, and endless discussions on how to improve the situation. Nevertheless, amidst it all, I am reminded every day of how good a decision it was to move Oliver up. It makes me realize that I need to trust people more, and maybe even consider giving Nicole a similar opportunity.

It's around lunchtime when I run into Balina Porter at the office. She's a sight for sore eyes, dressed impeccably as always, her presence commanding attention. She greets me with that familiar, playful smile.

"Hi, Shane," she says.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"I'm having lunch with Kristen. We ran into each other at the charity event and haven't really caught up since... you know, since us," she says lightly. "She mentioned her niece, Sarah, is in town and interested in acting. We thought it'd be nice to get together."

"Well, that's kind of you," I say, feeling slightly proud. "You all have a good time."

But Balina interrupts with a smile. "Actually, I was just coming to invite you."

"I'm sure Kristen and her niece would much rather have you to themselves."

"No, it was their idea. Sarah's also interested in starting her own business—proactive kids these days. Kristen thought it'd be nice if you joined us."

I hesitate for a moment, my mind still half on the work piling up on my desk. But I decide it might be good to get out of my own head for a bit. "Sure, why not?"

Lunch is relaxed, with Kristen and her niece leaving early to head to an audition, leaving Balina and me alone to chat. The conversation flows easily, moving from work to life in general. Balina has this charm that makes you want to spill everything to her—just the type of mind I need to pick in this instance.

"I need some advice," I say bluntly, just as the server comes to collect our dessert plates.

"Don't tell me you want to be an actor too?" Balina jokes.

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"No," I laugh. "Not at the moment."

"Shoot," she says plainly.

"How do you deal with secretive people, or trying to get them not to be so secretive? How do you make them trust you enough?"

She looks at me, her gaze thoughtful. She ponders it for a moment.

"Secrets can be tricky. And everyone is different. But they usually mean there's pain or fear involved. My advice? Be patient, but persistent. Don't push too hard, but don't let up, either. Eventually, if they trust you enough, they'll open up. You have to make yourself a safe place, somewhere where they feel free of judgment. Be relatable. Be understanding."

I nod, absorbing her words. She doesn't know it's about Nicole, but her advice hits home. "Thanks, Balina. That's... helpful."

She gives me a warm smile. "I'm happy for you, Shane. Whoever she is, she's lucky to have you."

Just then, my phone buzzes with a message from the office. As I glance at it, I notice the time and realize I'm late.

"Balina, I have to take off," I say, standing up quickly.

"Yeah, I guess I'll see you soon," she says with a smile.

"Can't wait," I say. I give her a hug and head for my car, trying to make it home as quickly as possible.

Chapter 16

Nicole

"Can't we just have a bit of space to walk?" I plead quietly, turning to Raffaele, who walks just a few steps behind us. His presence is a constant reminder of the life we've been thrust into.

Raffaele's eyes narrow slightly, his expression stern but not unkind. "You can walk a few feet ahead, but don't go too fast, and don't stare at anyone for too long. Understand?"

"Okay," I respond softly, trying to keep my voice steady. I don't want Gio to hear the desperation in my tone; he's scared enough as is. I squeeze his hand gently and take a few steps forward, separating us from Raffaele.

"Isn't that better, buddy? Just the two of us," I say, smiling as I look down at Gio.

He nods, a small smile spreading across his face. "Yeah, I like it better," he says, his voice still hinting at the childlike innocence I'm so desperate to protect.

It's been two weeks since our parents died, and in that time, Gio has barely spoken a word on his own. I know he misses them—our home, his school, his friends. But what we both miss most is our freedom. Raffaele and his men monitor every step we take and scrutinize every move. I can't help but wonder how much of this is truly for our safety and how much is about keeping me under control.

Today is a rare break from our enforced solitude. We've ventured outside the

compound to a nearby town. The sun is shining, and the people around us seem friendly and uninterested in who we are or why we're here. Gio is smiling for the first time in what feels like forever. It should be a moment of relief, but the weight of Raffaele's gaze from behind keeps me anchored to reality. One of his men trails just a few feet behind him, while another waits in the driver's seat of an SUV parked nearby, ready to whisk us away at a moment's notice.

The city is small and picturesque, with the market square at its heart, bustling with vendors selling fruits, dresses, and trinkets. Locals walk together, chatting and laughing, eating cannoli, and enjoying the summer weather. It's the kind of place people come to for a vacation, to escape the worries of their everyday lives.

The market square is alive with the scents of ripe fruit, warm bread, and the salty sea. Walking with Giovanni, I bask in the gentle warmth of the sun as we navigate the cobblestone streets. We pass by a grape vendor with a wrinkled face and a friendly smile who hands us two large purple grapes.

"Thank you," I say, returning his smile, trying to seem as natural as possible. I hand one to Gio and watch as he pops it into his mouth. "What do you think?" I ask him.

"It's so fresh and sweet," he replies, and I see his eyes light up. These are the moments I work so hard to make for him. I only hope they bring him some joy to the darkness our family has left us in.

The surrounding crowds are dense, the chatter providing a comforting background noise, helping to distract me from the anxiety gnawing at my insides. I scan the faces in the crowd, searching for anyone who might be looking at us too intently, anyone who could pose a threat. I make sure Raffaele is still visible, trailing behind us like a shadow.

I make an effort to appear like an ordinary sister taking my little brother to the market

on a sunny Sunday afternoon. However, I can't shake the feeling of unease, and my heart races whenever someone approaches us or stares for too long.

We make our way through the market square, the cobblestones worn smooth. The backdrop is a row of two-story villa houses, their faded pastel facades bathed in sunlight. Farther down the hill, the road curves gently toward the sea, where more houses are nestled along the coastline. The clear blue shimmering water of the beach is visible in the distance, beckoning to us like a far-off dream.

"Do you think we could go to the beach later?" Gio asks, his voice filled with hopefulness.

"I don't know, G. I'll ask Raffaele, but don't get your hopes up, okay?" I keep my tone gentle, not wanting to dampen his spirits.

We cross a road to another line of vendors when I suddenly feel a hand grip my arm. Instinctively, I push Gio away, my heart pounding. But when I look, I see Raffaele; his expression is tense and severe.

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"We need to go. Now," he says, his voice low and full of urgency. He starts walking faster, pulling me along with him, and I drag Gio with us, quickening my pace.

I glance over my shoulder and spot an older man with a beard, dressed in all black, hurrying toward us. Gio squeezes my arm tighter.

"Don't look back," Raffaele orders, his voice steely. He lightly shoves us off the main street and into a narrow alley, his pace increasing to a light jog. The footsteps behind us grow louder, and I know the man is still in pursuit. Raffaele pulls out his pistol and cocks it, his movements swift and practiced.

We reach a corner, and Raffaele pushes us to the side, out of view. He turns and fires a shot down the alley. I hear othergunshots echoing farther back, and I wonder if they're from our pursuer or one of Raffaele's men who might have gotten the drop on him.

We wait in tense silence until the SUV comes speeding around the corner. It screeches to a halt in front of us, and Raffaele shoves us into the backseat, climbing in behind us. As we pull away, I catch a glimpse of the alley, where the man who was following us now lies still and lifeless between the narrow walls.

The drive back is silent, the weight of what just happened pressing down on all of us. Raffaele doesn't even bother to look at us. After what he's just done or seen, his cold, emotionless expression is truly the scariest thing I've ever seen. Gio clings to my side, his earlier smile completely gone, replaced by the hollow look he's worn since our parents died. I wrap my arms around him, trying to offer comfort, but I'm just as shaken.

The brief taste of freedom we had in the market square is gone, replaced once again by the cold reality of our situation. And as much as I want to protect Gio and give him some semblance of a normal life, I know that as long as Raffaele is in control, normalcy is a luxury we can't afford.

All these years later, the memory is still as vivid as ever—the smell of the ocean air, the terror on Giovanni's face, the echo of bullets ringing through the alleyway. It still gets my heart racing and my hands trembling. I can only imagine what Giovanni has endured all these years without me. What have they done to him? Is he still the sweet, innocent boy I left behind with promises of a home far away from all of it? Does he resent me for not coming back sooner? Would I even recognize him now?

I can't reach my contacts anymore. If I offer them cash, they might answer the phone. It's driven me to Shane's office. I stand outside his door, hesitant. I can hear his voice as he makes his usual morning calls. He's busy, working even on his day off, and here I am, about to interrupt him. My hand hovers over the doorknob, ready to turn and walk away. But then Gio's face flashes in my mind—the man with the beard lying dead in the alley.

No, I tell myself firmly. He needs me.

I turn back and knock on the door three times.

"Come in," Shane calls out. He gives me a warm smile as I enter, then holds up a single index finger, mouthing the words, "One sec."

I nod and stand, waiting.

"I'll call you back. Thanks again, Oliver." He hangs up the phone and turns his attention to me, a welcoming grin on his face. "Hey," he says. "What's up?"

"I..." I hesitate, but before I can continue, he speaks.

"You look gorgeous, by the way," he adds, his voice softening.

I blush and smile. "Thank you, Shane. I hate to ask, but I really need another advance. I know it's only been a few weeks since the last one..."

"Done. Just tell me how much you need, Nicole. It's done."

"Really? Thank you, Shane. Two months should do. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. You're more than I could ever ask for," I say, my voice thick with genuine gratitude.

"You're more than Jaime and I could ever ask for. You're a part of this household now, a part of our lives. Don't hesitate to tell us if you need anything or have any problems. I want you to feel safe and confident in that," Shane says, his words sincere.

I can sense his desire for me to trust him and to open up about everything. He's too intelligent not to be curious, and I know he's holding back from asking why I need the money. But I can't tell him—not yet. I need to keep them safe.

"Is there anything else?" Shane asks.

"No," I shake my head. "I need to make Jaime's lunch. Sorry to disturb you. Thank you again, Shane." I walk over and kiss him on the cheek, then turn to leave.

"Nicole," he calls out as I grasp the doorknob.

My heart skips a beat. I knew it was too easy. He wants to know why, and if I'm going to get the money, I'll need to give him some explanation.

"Yes?" I say, turning around, already searching for a plausible excuse.

"I think I'll join you for lunch. Is that okay?" he asks, his voice light with no trace of suspicion.

"Of course, Shane. You're always more than welcome," I reply, relieved.

"Great," he says, standing up and walking toward the door with me. I open it, and he follows me downstairs to the kitchen.

Jaime is right where I left him, playing with his iPad at the dining table.

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"Uncle Shane's joining us for lunch, bud," I say excitedly.

"Yay!" Jaime exclaims, his face lighting up as he looks up from his game just long enough to smile at us. Then he's back to the screen, his fingers moving deftly over the device.

As I start pulling out ingredients for lunch, Shane leans against the counter, his eyes still on Jaime. "How do you think I'm doing? You know, as a parent? As his guardian?" Shane asks, his voice holding a hint of uncertainty.

"Aww, Shane. Are you concerned you're not doing well?" I reply, surprised by the vulnerability in his tone.

"Sometimes, yeah. It's just... a lot different than I thought it would be. I wonder if I'm doing enough... or too much."

I glance over at him, taken aback by his openness. Shane isn't the type to doubt himself often, especially when it comes to Jaime. But there's a sincerity in his voice that makes me pause.

"Shane," I say, choosing my words carefully, "you've done an amazing job with him. He's a happy, well-adjusted kid, and that's a reflection of you. You're not just his uncle; you're his rock. And... well, any future girlfriend of yours will feel like a queen with how much care you put into everything you do."

Shane looks at me, a flicker of something I can't quite place passing over his face. "Future girlfriend?" he repeats, as if testing the words on his tongue.

"Yeah..." I reply, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

He hesitates, then asks, "Well, what about you? What do you think you are to me?"

I feel a lump in my throat. "I don't know... I've never thought about it."

"Wait, so where did this 'future girlfriend' thing come from?" he asks, a teasing smile tugging at his lips.

"I don't know. I guess I'm just giving you a woman's perspective, as someone who is... intimate with you," I stammer, cringing inwardly at my awkwardness.

"So, would you consider yourself my girlfriend? Or maybe my potential future girlfriend?" he presses, his tone more serious now.

I freeze, the knife in my hand hovering over a tomato. The question hangs in the air between us, heavy with unspoken feelings. My heart skips a beat as I meet his gaze, searching for the right words, the right way to navigate this delicate moment.

"I..." I start, but my voice falters. How do I answer that? Our relationship has been such a whirlwind—a mix of emotions, secrets, and stolen moments. I know what I feel for Shane, but putting a label on it feels... complicated. "Shane, I don't think we need to put labels on this. Not right now, at least. What we have... it's special. And I think that's enough for me."

He nods slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. There's a brief flicker of disappointment in his gaze, but it's quickly replaced by understanding. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I guess you're right."

A heavy silence lingers between us for a moment, but then Shane reaches for a slice of tomato I've just cut, popping it into his mouth with a grin. "I guess that means I get

to help with lunch," he says, trying to lighten the mood.

I chuckle, handing him the knife. "Only if you promise not to cut yourself."

Chapter 17

Shane

The early morning sun filters through the blinds in my home office, casting soft patterns across the room. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air as I take a sip, flipping through contracts and investment reports. My usual morning routine these days. Working from home has become more frequent, thanks in no small part to Oliver's initiatives.

"All these years, I've just been too... stubbornly foolish to try anything new, and then you come in and change my mind in a month," I tell Oliver, speaking over the speakerphone on my desk. His new policy to offer optional work-from-home days for employees has shown phenomenal results.

Oliver's laugh comes through the line, light and easy. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Shane. It's a pretty new concept. A lot of people were hesitant to adopt it, and for good reason."

"Yeah, you're too nice. Truth is, I'm just another stubborn CEO, stuck in the past and afraid to try anything new. But you proved me wrong."

"I'm just glad to see it's working out well for the company's interests," Oliver replies, his tone modest yet pleased.

"Production is actually up, and so is morale," I say, pausing to reflect on the progress we've made. "A month ago, there was no way you could have convinced me that

offering employees the option to work from home wouldn't lead to a drop in productivity. I thought people would slack off without the structure of an office environment. But the numbers don't lie. I never would've come up with something like this."

"I just followed the data," Oliver says. "Other companies have reported twenty percent increases in productivity among their remote employees, some even producing forty-three percent more business than their in-office counterparts. Figured it was worth a shot."

"The feedback from our people has been overwhelmingly positive," I add. "People are happier, more engaged. I'm sure they can't wait to see you push me out of the way," I joke.

"I'm less popular than you might think. I mean, you're Shane Matthews. Many employees are motivated to work here because they want to work with you. I'm one of them."

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"Aww, come on. You're turning out to be a superstar. The best decision I made in a while was moving you up."

A knock comes at the door, interrupting our conversation.

"Give me a second," I say to Oliver. "Come in," I call out, knowing it's Nicole.

She enters, looking slightly out of breath, a hint of exhaustion in her eyes.

"I'll call you back later, Oliver."

"Sure thing, Shane. Later," Oliver responds, the line going blank.

I turn my attention to Nicole. "What's going on?" I ask with concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she smiles a bit. "I was just chasing your nephew down, trying to get him to finish his vegetables."

I let out a hearty laugh. "Did you catch him?"

"Yeah, he's taking his nap now," she replies, but there's a nervousness behind her smile, something she's not saying.

"What is it?" I question, sensing something more.

"I hate to bother you, but I could really use that advance soon, if you could..."

"Of course. Sorry, I put in a transfer yesterday, so it should pop up on Monday after the weekend. But if you need money now, I could..."

"No, Shane, Monday is fine. I really hate to rush you on it, but I have a few loans I need to pay off."

"Sure, no problem. Are you sure you're okay? You don't need anything else?"

She walks up and kisses me on the forehead. "I'm fine," she assures me. "Sorry to bother you. I think I'll take a nap, too." She gives me a final smile before turning and leaving the office.

As the house grows quiet with Nicole and Jaime napping, I slip out by the pool for a quiet lunch and a quick phone call.

"So, how's it going with your little secret keeper?" Balina asks, her voice playful. I can hear the background noise of a busy film set, with someone shouting, "Clear the set!" in the distance.

"She's coming along, I guess."

"Give her some time, Shane. She'll get there."

"Yeah, I think so."

"So, what is it you need advice on now?"

"Well, I'm not great at this whole... courting thing. The last serious relationship I was in was with you, and, well..."

"I did all the courting," she laughs. "Wow, this one must be really special. I can't wait

to meet her, though I'm not sure how she'd feel about you calling me for dating advice."

"Well, I guess she has her secrets, and I have mine."

"Yeah, you two are really starting off on the right track," Balina teases.

"So, what do I do to slowly show her I want her to be more? How do I start it off?"

"You start by casually inviting her to things. Include her in your plans, but don't expect her to always be present. More like... always considering her, you know? Always have a seat for her right next to you. And don't go overboard buying her a bunch of things that could scare her off, or worse, make her think you think she can be bought, or set her up to expect things from you. Treat her like a best friend forty percent of the time and a girlfriend the other sixty percent. Then slowly shift it to where she doesn't even notice."

"So no gifts?"

"Simple things, nothing too expensive, and make sure the gift means something and has some purpose behind it. No Cartier bracelets just because it's Tuesday. Focus on her interests and buy things that represent them. Think about the happiest couple you know. Use them as a model."

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"Ms. Porter, we need you on set," a voice calls in the background.

"Shane, they're calling me back. I've got to go."

"Balina, you are incredible. Thank you."

"Good luck, Shane. Talk soon," she says before hanging up the phone.

I hang up the phone, Balina's words lingering in my mind.

The happiest couple I know... I only think briefly before Claire and Mark pop into my thoughts. I remember how anxious Claire was for me to meet him, how she fidgeted and stumbled over her words, trying to get everything just right. To this day, I wish I'd taken the time to know him better—to understand what kind of father he was to Jaime, what kind of husband he was to Claire. I wonder how it would've felt to have those family dinners, the kind where we'd all sit around the table, sharing stories and laughter.

But I was too caught up in work, too absorbed in cleaning up the mess left behind by Robert's deception.

That night, the idea hits me as I flip through an old photo album I found tucked away in the house. There's a picture of Jaime, Claire, and Mark standing around a grill with plates of burgers in their hands, their faces lit up with the biggest, most genuine smiles I've ever seen. The memory feels warm and inviting, like something I want to recreate.

I decide to fire up the grill for a poolside dinner. We start just as the sun dips below the horizon, casting the backyard in a soft, golden glow. Nicole insists on cooking the steaks, and honestly, I'm relieved. Cooking isn't exactly one of my talents. While she hovers over the grill, expertly flipping the meat, I set the table, the rhythmic sounds of R&B music playing softly in the background.

The smell of charred steaks fills the air, blending with the scent of chlorine from the pool. Jaime is nearby, his small hands busy with crayons, sketching away in his notebook. I walk over to Nicole, who's swaying to the music, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"That smells way better than anything I could've cooked," I say, stepping closer to her.

She laughs, a light sound that dances with the music. Then she turns to face me, her eyes sparkling in the golden light. "I could kiss you right now," she whispers, her voice playful. She glances over at Jaime, who's engrossed in his drawing, then looks back at me with a mischievous grin. "But I guess I'll wait till later."

"I'm looking forward to it," I reply with a grin, feeling the warmth spread through me.

Nicole turns her attention back to the grill, her movements fluid and confident. "This is great. Jaime seems really happy."

"Yeah," I nod, watching as Jaime hums along to the music, his pencil moving rhythmically across the page. "Claire and Mark used to have BBQs with him. I'm just happy it didn't trigger anything."

"Yeah, he's strong," she agrees, flipping a steak. "Did your parents do this kind of thing with you and Claire?"

"Nah," I say, shaking my head. "They had BBQs to entertain their friends, but just for us? Never. I guess I never told you, but we weren't ever really close. In fact, when I left home, we hardly talked after. They didn't really care to reach out or keep in touch, and I guess neither did I."

Nicole pauses, her eyes softening as she looks at me. "What about now? I mean, are they still... around?"

"Yeah, they're still around. I think about talking to them, but then I remember how they treated us as kids, and..."

"When's the last time you saw them?" she asks gently, her voice laced with genuine curiosity.

"Claire's funeral," I say quietly. "But I don't think we talked for more than a few minutes. Maybe it's better that way. What about you? Any especially good memories with your parents?"

Nicole's face goes blank for a moment, and then she smiles, though there's a touch of sadness in her eyes. "Tons, actually. My parents had their faults, but when it came to me and Giovanni, they tried to give us the world." She pauses, her eyes distant as if the memories are washing over her. I take a seat nearby and look up, giving her my full attention.

"I remember family time being the highlight of all our lives," she continues, her voice soft with nostalgia. "They lived and breathed for us, wanted us to have every experience in the world and be there to see us do them."

"It sounds wonderful," I say, and I mean it. I can't help but feel a pang of envy.

She looks down at me, her eyes searching mine with a hint of sadness. "I'm sorry, I

just—"

"No, don't be sorry," I cut in gently. "It's the first time I've ever heard you talk about them. I'm enjoying it."

Nicole comes over and squats down beside me, taking my hand in hers. Her grip is warm and reassuring as she looks me in the eyes. "Shane, you should really consider making peace with them, or at least trying. Even if you think it's pointless or that they won't care, just try before it's too late."

I nod, the sincerity in her voice striking a chord. "I promise you I'll think about it," I say, genuinely meaning it.

She smiles, seemingly accepting it as good enough. "Now," she says, standing back up, "I think it's just about steak time." She turns back to the grill, the firelight dancing on her face.

The steaks are some of the most delicious I've ever had, and Jaime can't put his fork down, his little face full of pure joy as he devours his meal.

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"Uncle Shane," he says between bites, "did you think about it yet?"

"What's that, bud?" I respond, wiping my mouth with a napkin.

"The puppy," he reminds me, his eyes wide with anticipation.

I look over at Nicole, who gives me a small shrug, a playful smile tugging at her lips.

"I did, buddy. I think it's okay, as long as you can promise to eat your vegetables... without Nicole having to chase you down," I say, grinning.

"Okay," he says eagerly, nodding his head with enthusiasm. "I'll eat any vegetable you give me."

"I guess you just have to check with Nicole," I add, turning my attention to her.

Nicole raises an eyebrow, feigning surprise as she meets our expectant gazes. "Just one thing... We all get to pick the name together," she says.

The next morning, we head into town for brunch, and afterward, we stop by a few local pet stores.

It's at the third one where we find him—a small, brown-and-white puppy with a wagging tail and bright eyes. He's a rambunctious little thing, full of energy, and Jaime falls in love instantly. The dog seems just as smitten, sticking close to Jaime as if they've known each other forever.

We sit in the pet store, watching Jaime play with the puppy while the owner looks on, a smile of disbelief on her face.

"He's usually terrified of everyone," she says, shaking her head. "But I guess some people just have that touch."

"So, is this the one, buddy?" I ask, leaning down to ruffle the puppy's fur.

"Yeah, I love him," Jaime says, his eyes bright with excitement.

"And what are we going to call this little guy?" Nicole asks, crouching down next to Jaime.

"I want to call him Buddy," Jaime says with a grin. "So we'll have the same nickname."

We take Buddy home that day and introduce him to his very own room in the estate. That night, Jaime plays with Buddy until they both fall asleep, side by side, the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Chapter 18

Nicole

Jaime continues to impress me. We sit on the floor of his room, side by side, as he reads aloud from his favorite book. According to his teacher, he's reading at a second-grade level, which is impressive for a six-year-old.

"And the mom and dad, brother and sister all put on their shiny gold hats and stepped into the magic doorway," Jaime reads, his little voice full of excitement. "The end."

"Wow, Jaime, you didn't miss a single word," I say, smiling with pride.

"Thanks, Nicole," Jaime grins, clearly pleased with himself.

"What did you think of the story?" I ask, curious to hear his thoughts.

"It's so cool! I love that the family worked together to get home."

"Yeah, having family and friends is the best, right?"

"Yep," Jaime agrees, nodding eagerly. "Hey, Nicole, I want to draw you a picture of my family."

"Sure, buddy," I say, my heart swelling a little. "Why don't you run over to your desk and get started?"

Jaime jumps up from the floor, hurrying over to his desk. He pulls out a sheet of paper and his box of colored pencils, his little hands moving quickly as he starts to draw.

I watch him for a moment, lost in thought. It's been so long since I last drew a picture of my parents. Gio used to draw one every few weeks after they were taken from us, almost like it kept them alive in his heart. I remember reading somewhere that it's part of the healing process, and it's good to see Jaime naturally embracing that. Our shared tragedy is a bond between Jaime, Shane, and me—a sad bond, but also a reminder of how much we have to rely on each other.

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I sit quietly, scrolling through my phone, until Jaime lets out a triumphant, "Done!" He turns from his desk, clutching the paper behind his back, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Close your eyes," Jaime says, his voice full of anticipation.

I smile and close my eyes tightly, playing along. I hear the paper rustling as he brings it closer.

"Open!" he announces.

I open my eyes to see a simple but heartfelt drawing on the white paper. Two larger stick figures, clearly adults, stand on either side of a smaller one in the middle—Jaime, with Buddy at his side. I look closer, noticing the names written beneath each figure in his adorable six-year-old handwriting. To my surprise, the woman isn't Claire, but me. "Nicole" is scrawled under the figure with green eyes, a detail that makes my heart flutter.

I glance at the man in the picture and see Shane's name written beneath his stick figure. The sight of it makes me pause. I want to ask Jaime why he didn't draw his parents, but something tells me to let it be.

"It's wonderful, Jaime," I say softly, my voice thick with emotion. "I love how beautifully you've drawn me."

As I hold the picture, a rush of unexpected emotion floods over me. This simple drawing feels like a confirmation of something I've been struggling to define. We are

a family; not in the traditional sense, but in our own unique and special way. The thought of having a real relationship with Shane has been on my mind daily, tangled up with doubts and fears. But Jaime's picture brings clarity—it is possible, and each of us feels it.

Later, Shane and I walk down the docks, arm in arm, dressed casually for our second yacht date. I'm wearing a light sundress, perfect for the warm evening breeze, while Shane is in a comfortable yet stylish outfit, a step down from the formal attire we wore the first time. Shane's midsize yacht awaits us at the end of the dock, where his small crew of two stands ready.

Captain Clifton steps off the boat, greeting us with a warm smile. "Mr. Matthews, Ms. Nicole," he begins formally, then catches himself. "Oh, right. Nicole," he corrects, earning a grin from both of us.

"We have an amazing evening planned for you," Clifton continues. "First, we'll start with drinks and hors d'oeuvres as we cruise out a few miles to a spot where you'll have a perfect view of the full moon and stars. Then, we'll serve dinner—an exquisite Surf and Turf featuring Maine lobster, Argentinian prawns, and grass-fed filet mignon aged to perfection. We'll pair that with truffle mashed potatoes, roasted asparagus, and a bottle of Château Margaux."

Shane and I exchange a glance, both of us already anticipating the night ahead.

"Next, we'll stop near the northern docks in Trenton Bay, where a small surprise has been set up for you," Clifton hints, a twinkle in his eye. "I hope you've brought your dancing shoes. Finally, we'll cruise back out to the bay for some late-night dessert, and our final surprise."

I squeeze Shane's arm, excitement bubbling up inside me. "This sounds perfect," I say, my voice almost a whisper.

Shane looks down at me, his eyes reflecting the soft glow of the setting sun. "I'm glad you think so," he murmurs. "I wanted tonight to be special."

And as we step aboard, the yacht gently swaying beneath our feet, I can't help but feel that tonight will be exactly that—special in every way that matters.

On board, I immediately notice the changes to the yacht's interior.

"Anything different?" Shane asks, a sly smile playing on his lips.

"Wow, Shane, you've really gone all out," I say, admiring the space. The plain white walls and boring tan leather seats are gone. Now, the walls are painted in soothing shades of light and deep green, perfectly complementing the sea aesthetic. Beautiful pieces of art, which look fairly expensive, adorn the walls.

"I love the artwork," I say, running my fingers along the edge of a frame. "They really bring this place to life."

"I picked them up from a gallery," Shane says, leaning in closer. "Mostly local artists, some of them still students."

"This is really a step up from last time," I note, genuinely impressed.

"Well, I took some notes from you," he admits, his eyes twinkling.

"Wait, did you do all this to impress me?" I tease.

"I'm always trying to impress you," he replies with a wink.

Dinner is delicious, and I barely manage to finish my meal. Afterward, we pull up next to a dock for our first surprise—a live band consisting of a violinist, a cellist, a

pianist, and a flutist. Their music is played through the yacht's surround sound system. Shane and I stand near the railing on the bow, watching as the musicians perform their symphony. Shane takes my hand and pulls me close, the lights on the deck dimming as we dance under the light of the full moon. It feels like heaven.

Our next surprise is a fireworks display out on the bay, but by then, we can barely keep our eyes or hands off each other. We leave just a few minutes into the show. Shane leads me down to his private cabin below deck. The bursts of fireworks are still audible in the background as Shane kisses my neck from behind. He unzips the back of my dress, sliding the sleeves off my shoulders until the fabric falls to the floor. His mouth moves from my neck to my upper back, his hands gliding across my skin to my bra strap. He gently undoes it, sliding the laces over my shoulders and down my arms.

He caresses my breasts, and though I yearn to kiss him, I stand still, letting him take the lead. It feels incredible to be wanted, to be guided by his touch. All that's left are my panties. His lips trail down my now-bare back while his hands trace the curves of my sides, stopping just at the panty line. I feel him grasp the fabric on either side and slide it down my thighs until it pools at my feet. I shiver as his lips kiss their way down to my buttocks.

"Bend over," he instructs, his voice low and commanding. "Put your palms on the bed."

I'm surprised by his boldness and a bit embarrassed, but I'm turned on more than anything. I do as he asks, feeling his lips touch my lower ones. A wave of heat rushes through me as his tongue and lips move, teasing me until I'm on the edge. I moan in pleasure, gripping the sheets, my head resting on the bed. Suddenly, he stops. I hear the rustle of fabric as he removes his pants.

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"Yes," I whisper, my voice trembling with anticipation.

He comes closer, his hands caressing my lower back and buttocks as he enters me. We make love for hours, exploring every position we can think of. It's the most passionate experience I've ever had. With Shane, it's like tasting life for the first time.

Afterward, we lie in his bed, the boat gently rocking with the breeze. We talk playfully, and I feel truly safe for the first time in my life. Safer than I've ever felt before. I can tell him anything, and am ready to tell him everything. I make a promise to myself—no more secrets. If we're to be together, I want him to know everything. But that can wait until tomorrow.

We dock at dawn the next day. After brunch by the dock, we're home by 8 a.m. Shane spends the day working in his office while I tend to Jaime. The whole day, I'm contemplating how to tell Shane everything, wondering when the best time would be.

After putting Jaime to bed that night, I retreat to my room and find myself writing in my journal. My phone buzzes with a text message. The message states, "I've found something you're looking for," and includes a number.

I get up and make sure my door is completely closed, locking it just in case. I head to my walk-in closet and close that door as well before dialing the number.

"Hello," says a young man's voice on the other end.

"Hello," I respond, keeping my voice steady. "Someone texted me."

"You're looking for information on Giovanni," the voice continues matter-of-factly.

"What do you know?" I ask, my heart already racing.

"Giovanni has fallen in with some of the local gangs," he says, his tone emotionless.

"What?" My heart drops. "Are you sure?"

There's no response. Instead, my phone chimes with another message. I quickly open it.

"There's your proof," the message reads, accompanied by a picture. It shows Giovanni standing with a group of men, their faces hard and cold. I can tell just by looking at them—they're mafia. Which one, I'm not sure.

"When was this taken?" I demand.

"A week ago," the voice replies.

"Where is he now?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"He was last seen just before an incident in a city near your hometown. A man was killed during the incident, but the details are still unclear," the voice says.

"But Gio is okay, right? What city was it?" I press, desperate for more information.

"This is all the information we have right now. If you want more, it will cost. You know who to talk to."

The phone clicks, and the line goes dead.

My heart pounds uncontrollably as I walk out of the closet. My worst fear has come true only a day after one of the happiest days of my life. Gone are my happy thoughts and dreams of building a future. Once again, the mafia has crushed my happiness and taken something I love from me. Panic spreads through my body, my nerves on edge. I sit on the edge of my bed and cry uncontrollably. My mind races with thoughts of what to do and who to talk to.

"They can't keep doing this," I tell myself, my voice shaking with resolve. "I won't let them."

Chapter 19

Shane

"She's gone cold again," I say to Balina, frustration lacing my voice. "Just when we were getting closer, she's opening up, and we have this amazing night of passion on the yacht, she starts looking off into the distance again like she's a million miles away."

"Small steps are still steps, Shane," Balina responds. Her tone is gentle but firm. "You have to be patient until she's ready to tell you what's wrong."

"I just want her to tell me what's wrong so I can help her and we can move past this," I say, rubbing my temples. The uncertainty gnaws at me.

"I know, but you have to give her space to work through her own things," Balina advises.

"Why can't I just tell her how I feel? That I know she's got her personal life, and I want what's best?" I ask.

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Balina interrupts, saying, "You don't know what's best for her yet. And maybe she doesn't, either. People like figuring things out independently, especially when they're involved with someone perceived as successful and powerful like you, Shane. You might not realize it, but you can be intimidating. Your image is that of success, wealth, and fame. Even if it's not entirely true, that's how people see you. Trust me, being with someone always in the spotlight makes people worry about not fitting in or belonging with us. They feel like they have to be someone they're not just to keep up, when the truth is it's usually us who are the ones that need to adjust."

I sigh, letting her words sink in. Balina's right. Nicole's been through a lot, and she probably feels she has to handle it alone.

Balina pauses, her voice softening. "Look at me, going on a rant."

"Yeah, save some for your legion of followers, will you?" I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

Balina laughs heartily. "Twelve million strong," she says proudly. "How's your three doing?"

"It's 3.3 million now, Balina," I reply with mock pride.

Balina claps her hands on the other end of the line, and I can't help but chuckle.

"So, do we have anything special planned? Any surprises?" Balina asks.

"Well, Antonio Conti's coming over tonight and making dinner for all of us," I reply.

"Antonio Conti, he's busy," she says. "How did you manage to set that up?"

"He's just an old family friend. I guess it's one of the perks of being a rich and famous person," I say jokingly.

A buzz on my phone interrupts my thoughts. "Hold on a second, Balina," I say, checking the message. It's Kristen.

"Shane, there's a Dr. Wilks on the phone. From East Bay Dental."

I quickly switch the line back to Balina. "Hey, I've got to run. Talk soon?"

"Of course, Shane. Take care," she replies.

I click over to Kristen. "Put him through, Kristen," I say, bracing myself for the conversation.

"Mr. Matthews," an older man's voice greets me. "This is Dr. Wilks. I was calling because your nephew Jaime missed his appointment today."

I groan inwardly, remembering something about Jaime's dental appointment but forgetting the exact day. "I apologize, Doctor. The nanny usually handles these things. I'll give her a call and see about rescheduling. Will that work?"

"Yes, Mr. Matthews. We look forward to hearing from you soon."

After hanging up, I dial Nicole.

"Hey, Shane," she answers, her voice calm but tinged with something I can't quite place.

"Hey, I got a call from Jaime's dentist. He had an appointment today, and they want to reschedule."

Nicole sighs heavily. "I completely forgot, Shane. I'm so sorry. I've just... I've had a lot going on."

"It's fine, Nicole. We can reschedule. Is everything alright? I just want to make sure you're okay."

"Yeah, I'm just figuring some things out. I promise this won't happen again."

Her voice carries a weight of distress that I can't ignore. "Look, I was thinking we could go camping with Jaime this weekend. I know a place—"

"Sorry, Shane. I'm not really up to it. I just want to ground myself around here before I go off getting lost in the woods."

I can tell she's struggling with the excuse, her voice betraying her uncertainty. "Umm... sure, Nicole. You do that. If you want a day off or some alone time, just me and you, just say the word."

"I know, Shane, and I do. I just need a bit of space right now. I haven't been well. And I need you to know it's nothing to do with you. You guys are everything to me," she emphasizes, her sincerity piercing through the phone.

"Just don't hesitate to reach out if things get hard. I'll see you later?"

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"Yeah, Shane," she says softly. "See you later."

At lunch, I'm at my desk, Oliver across from me, ready with his computer open. I try to push thoughts of Nicole aside, focusing on the meeting with one of our longest-standing clients. I need to be 100% focused, but Nicole's distant voice keeps echoing in my head.

I lean back in my office chair, take a deep breath, and dial Natalie Gates's number. The phone rings twice before she picks up, her voice sharp and to the point.

"Good morning, Shane," she greets, skipping the pleasantries. "I appreciate you calling. I wanted to discuss some concerns I have about the recent changes in your supply chain."

"Good morning, Natalie," I reply, keeping my tone as calm as possible. "I'm here with Oliver, and we wanted to personally address any concerns you might have. You're one of our long-standing clients, and your satisfaction is extremely important to us."

"Well, let me get straight to it, then," she says. "I understand you've cut ties with a trusted supplier due to some legal issues they're currently facing. I'm aware of the accusations against them, but isn't it a bit premature to sever a reliable partnership based on what could be just rumors?"

I anticipated this. "I understand your concern, Natalie, but the decision wasn't made lightly. The accusations against them are serious—neglect of oversight in their management, and there are credible reports linking their supply lines to unethical

practices, including child labor. I can't risk Vesitech being associated with that."

Natalie's silence on the other end of the line makes the air in my office feel heavier. "That's a serious claim, Shane," she finally says. "But I have to wonder if it's wise to distance your company from a long-standing partner over unconfirmed allegations. You know as well as I do that rumors can be damaging, often more than the truth itself."

I know exactly the history she's referring to. Robert. The unspoken rumor that still haunts Vesitech. I've worked tirelessly to distance the company from that and rebuild trust and integrity, but this is the first time anyone has directly brought it up to me, especially in a context like this.

"I'm fully aware of how damaging rumors can be, Natalie," I say, choosing my words carefully. "But this isn't just about rumors. It's about the lack of oversight and the potential damage that the association could bring to Vesitech's reputation. We've vetted our new supplier thoroughly, and I'm confident they can meet our needs without compromising our values."

I signal Oliver, and he jumps in. "Ms. Gates, our new supplier has been recognized for their ethical practices. They've maintained a stellar reputation, and are known for their efficiency and reliability. We believe this transition will be not only smooth, but beneficial for all parties involved."

Natalie listens, but cuts him off. "Shane, I'd expect you to understand better than anyone the compromising situations companies can find themselves in because of rumors. I'll have to think this over carefully."

Her tone tells me she's unconvinced, and I can feel the tension tightening in my chest. Nicole's distant voice from earlier creeps back into my thoughts, and I wonder if I should have pushed harder and asked her more. But I know it's not the right time. I

don't want to lose her, but I'm unsure how to keep her close.

"I understand, Natalie. I'm always here if you have more questions or need further reassurance. Your trust in us is something we don't take for granted."

"Thank you, Shane," she says, her voice measured. "I'll be in touch."

The call ends, and I set the phone down, running a hand through my hair. My thoughts are in disarray. Nicole's pulling away, and I'm helpless to stop it. I'm going to save this relationship, no matter what it takes—and hopefully keep Vesitech intact while I'm at it.

The scent of fresh-baked pizza greets me as I approach the front door of the estate. Inside, I hear Antonio's familiar voice, slightly muffled, delivering one of his passionate rants in the kitchen.

Walking in, I find him near the stove, his bright white chef's coat pristine under the overhead lights. He's in his element, commanding the room as always.

"There are two vital components to a perfect sauce," Antonio says, his intense gaze focused on Jaime. "You know what they are?"

Jaime, perched on a stool at the counter next to Nicole, thinks momentarily. "Hmmm... tomatoes and garlic?"

"Nope," Antonio responds with a knowing smile. "It's a gentle hand and a love for cooking."

As I enter, all eyes turn to me.

"Mr. Shane, welcome home," Antonio greets me warmly.

"Hey, Antonio," I reply, matching his enthusiasm. "Thanks for coming by."

"The pleasure is all mine, sir. I've been training my junior chef here on how to make real Italian food," he says, nodding toward Jaime.

"You think he's ready to work?" I joke.

"Sicuramente," Antonio replies in Italian, pride in his voice. "Such a fast learner. Just wait till you try his dessert."

"Yeah, Uncle Shane. Antonio showed me how to make cannoli," Jaime adds, his excitement palpable.

"Hey, I helped too," Nicole chimes in, her smile genuine and refreshing—a sight I've missed more than I realized.

"I can't wait," I say, sitting next to Jaime at the counter, feeling a warmth beyond the kitchen's heat.

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As expected, Antonio continues to be the life of the conversation at dinner, sharing stories from his time in Italy and his culinary adventures. Jaime listens with wide-eyed fascination, hanging on to every word. Nicole, though smiling and engaged, remains mostly quiet.

Antonio notices and tries to draw her out. "Nicole," he says with a twinkle in his eye, "you must miss the food back home. There's nothing quite like real Italian cuisine, right?"

Nicole nods, her smile polite. "Yes, I do miss it. But your cooking tonight was a wonderful reminder."

"Grazie," Antonio replies, switching to Italian for a moment. "Mi fa piacere sentirlo. E la tua città? È un bel posto?"

Nicole's eyes flicker with something—perhaps nostalgia or something deeper—but she keeps her answer brief. "Sì, era bello," she says softly, her voice almost lost in the clatter of dishes.

Antonio studies her for a moment but doesn't press further, turning his attention back to Jaime, who is eagerly finishing his plate.

As dinner winds down, Antonio stands to leave. "Well, my friends, it's been a pleasure. But I must return to my kitchen before they start to wonder if I've retired."

Jaime jumps up, his face lighting up with excitement. "When will you come back, Antonio? I want to learn more recipes!"

Antonio chuckles, patting Jaime on the head. "We'll see, little chef. I'll talk to your Uncle Shane, but if you really want to see me, maybe you can convince them to bring you by the restaurant sometime, eh?"

Jaime's eyes sparkle at the idea, and he turns to me with a pleading look. "Can we, Uncle Shane?"

"We'll see, buddy," I say, smiling at his enthusiasm.

Nicole takes Jaime's hand, gently leading him away to get ready for bed. "Come on, little chef. It's time for bed. We'll dream about all the desserts you'll make next time."

As they disappear down the hallway, I grab the remaining cooking supplies and follow Antonio out to his car. As I help Antonio load the last of the supplies into his trunk, the cool night air does little to calm the unease gnawing at me.

"Antonio," I start, closing the trunk, "what did you think of Nicole?"

He looks at me with a knowing smile. "She's lovely, Shane. Fun, kind, and she clearly cares a lot about you and Jaime."

I nod, but the unease doesn't dissipate. "Did you notice she was... I don't know, a bit reserved? I thought she might open up more with you, especially when you spoke to her in Italian."

Antonio leans against the car, folding his arms, his expression turning serious. "Shane, friend to friend, it doesn't seem like she wants to open up. And that's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's something to be aware of."

"Do you think it's because of where she's from?" I ask, trying to piece together the puzzle.

Antonio sighs, his eyes reflecting a depth of understanding. "She's from a tough place in Italy. People from those areas often carry things with them—memories, experiences—they'd rather leave behind. It's not uncommon for them to be apprehensive about talking about their past."

His words hit close to home, aligning with the worries simmering in the back of my mind. What if Nicole's past involves more than just painful memories? I can't shake the thought of what she might have gone through to get here, the kind of deals she might have made. I've heard stories of immigrants bartering for visas, getting tangled up with the wrong people, the kind that come knocking when it's time to collect. Could Nicole be in danger? And if she is, does that mean Jaime could be at risk, too?

I push the thought away, feeling a twinge of guilt. It feels wrong even to think about it and question how someone got here. Immigrants have it hard enough without being judged for the lengths they might go to for a better life. But the fear lingers, gnawing at the edges of my mind. I don't want to believe Nicole is involved in anything illegal, but the uncertainty is there, and it's eating at me.

Antonio, sensing my inner turmoil, claps me on the shoulder, his smile returning. "Focus on building new experiences with her. Better experiences. She's sweet, she's here, and she's with you. That's what matters."

I nod, shaking his hand. "Thanks, Antonio. I appreciate the advice."

"Any time, Shane. Take care of yourself, and them." He gets into his car, giving me a final wave before driving off into the night.

As I watch him disappear down the driveway, my phone buzzes with an email from our doubtful investor, Natalie. I glance at it, my heart sinking as I scan the words. The phrase "no longer in good faith to continue our investment" jumps out at me.

I don't even bother reading the rest. The frustration I've been trying to suppress all day boils over, and I know I won't be able to sleep like this. I need to clear my head. Without another thought, I head for my car, hoping that a long night drive will help me sort through everything—how to save my relationship with Nicole and how to keep the business afloat.

Both feel like they're slipping through my fingers, and I'm not sure which one scares me more.

Chapter 20

Nicole

The sound of my cell phone buzzing at 3 a.m. jolts me from my restless thoughts. I'm already awake, staring at the blank ceiling, caught in that uneasy space between sleep and wakefulness. My heart pounds as I reach for the phone. This is the call I've been waiting for—the one I've spent so much time arranging.

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"Hello," I whisper, slipping out of bed and moving to the closet, where the darkness feels safer.

"I have something for you," a voice says. It takes a moment, but I recognize it—Francesca, disguising herself with an accent. Clever girl. We skip the pleasantries, following the protocol we've established over weeks of covert messages.

"Lonzo," she says, and then gives me a number. My fingers tremble as I punch it into my phone. "Listen," she continues, her tone steady, "he can be intimidating, and he should be—he's well-connected. But don't give too much away. Stay calm, and don't let him sense any fear. Call now; he's waiting."

The line goes dead, leaving me in the oppressive silence of the closet. My chest tightens, and I take a slow, deliberate breath. "You can do this, Nicole," I murmur to myself, my voice barely a whisper. Giovanni's image flashes in my mind—vulnerable, lost—and with a surge of resolve, I press the call button.

The phone rings, the sound unnervingly loud in the stillness, until a raspy voice answers. "Nicola," he says, the familiarity in his tone sending a wave of unease through me.

"I was told you have information for me," I say, striving to keep my voice level, hiding the anxiety that's gnawing at me.

"Perhaps," he replies, his tone as cold as ice. "But first, let's talk money. You'll need to pay before I answer any questions."

"How much to ask you a question?" I ask, trying to steady my shaking hands.

"Five grand of your USD," he states, the confidence in his voice making it clear this isn't up for negotiation.

"I'll give you two, and another two if what you say is useful," I counter, hoping to strike a deal.

"No, no, little Nicola. You pay me five large up front, and I answer one question. If you want more, you pay as we go."

I hesitate, feeling a knot of apprehension forming in my stomach. "I don't even know you..."

"Oh, but you do, Nicola. You've at least heard of me, haven't you?"

"Yes, rumors," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Rumors can be misleading," he says, the smirk almost audible in his voice. "When you ask the kind of questions you've been asking, you attract attention. Trust me, most of the money you've spent looking for little Gio has found its way to me. And most of the information you've received... well, you're welcome. It was only a matter of time before we had this conversation."

His words send a wave of dread through me. I feel cornered, but I can't afford to show it. "Five thousand is steep," I say, my voice wavering slightly. "I'm not wealthy, and I don't even know if what you have is worth it."

"You wouldn't be talking to me if it wasn't worth it," he replies smoothly. "And I wouldn't be talking to you if I wasn't sure you could afford it."

His confidence is unnerving, and I can't help but feel like a pawn in a game I don't fully understand. "Fine," I relent, knowing I have no choice. "How do I send it?"

"You have someone in Italy who you've been sending money to, someone who gave you my name. Get it to them, say nothing, and they'll know what it's for. Then you call me back and ask your question."

"I'll call you back," I say, feeling the last bit of control slipping away.

"I'll be waiting," he replies before the line clicks off.

Back in bed, I feel a growing sense of despair. "I just need to end this," I tell myself, staring at the ceiling, knowing that sleep will not come again tonight.

The next morning, I lie in bed, scrolling through my phone. Shane has taken charge of Jaime's morning routine, allowing me to rest, though my mind is anything but at ease. Despite everything, I can't help but feel grateful for Shane's presence in my life.

Around 8 a.m., Shane taps at my door, but doesn't enter. He tells me he's taking Jaime to school, and they both say goodbye. I get up, offer them a tired smile, and then return to bed. An hour later, the confirmation comes—the money has been sent.

I call Lonzo back immediately.

"Good girl," he answers, his voice laced with something that feels like condescension. "That boss of yours must really like you to toss that kind of money around. Keep him close; you might need more soon."

"You've got your money," I say, cutting through his smug tone. "Tell me what you know about Giovanni."

"Your brother has been running with the Serpenti," Lonzo says bluntly, the words hitting me like a physical blow. The name alone makes my skin crawl. No, not them, I think, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead.

"It doesn't seem voluntary, but he's learning quickly to get his hands dirty. You have heard there was a body left at his last known location. The man was someone your brother and his crew were sent to intimidate."

My heart sinks as I listen, the truth of his words cutting through my hope. I don't want to believe him, but the tone of his voice and his reputation make it hard to doubt. "I need to talk to Gio. How can I reach him?" I ask, desperation creeping into my voice.

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"That's an expensive request, girl. More so than your first question."

"I don't have that kind of money to throw around. I don't know what you've heard, but I—"

"Listen, Nicola," Lonzo interrupts, his tone firm. "If you want to find Giovanni, you already have an avenue—the same one you've always had."

"I don't know what you mean," I lie, though I know exactly what he's suggesting.

"Raffaele knows more than anyone about Giovanni," Lonzo says, his voice dark and knowing. "That's all I'll tell you for now. Call back when you're ready to pay for more."

The line goes dead, and a heavy sense of dread settles over me. If I want to help Gio, I need to speak with him directly. Maybe hearing my voice will give him the strength to fight back, to know he's not alone.

But the thought of calling Raffaele fills me with dread. Memories of his cruelty, his violence, and his threats flood my mind. I've spent years trying to escape his grip, and the idea of confronting him again makes my stomach churn.

That afternoon, Jaime is eager to practice checkers. He's been learning the game over the past few days, and he's determined to get his first win. We sit at the kitchen table, the board between us, but my mind drifts elsewhere.

"Nicole, is this a good move?" Jaime asks, pointing to a piece.

I glance at the board, barely registering the question. "Um, yeah, that's a good move," I say absentmindedly.

Jaime frowns, sensing my distraction. "Are you okay, Nicole?"

His question pulls me back to the present, and I force a smile. "I'm sorry, buddy. I just have a bit of a headache. How about we pick this up later and watch a movie instead?"

"Okay," Jaime agrees, though he makes me promise not to move the pieces while we take a break.

As we settle on the couch, the weight of everything presses down on me. The more I try to grasp at solutions, the more it feels like my world is unraveling. My carefully laid plans are slipping through my fingers. I can't tell Shane the truth—it would endanger him and everyone around us. Lonzo's ominous remark about Shane keeps replaying in my mind. If someone like Lonzo can figure out that I'm with someone wealthy, then others can too. It's not just my safety on the line anymore; it's Shane's and Jaime's as well. The realization leaves a cold pit of dread in my stomach.

That night, Shane is working late. I tuck Jaime into bed, his innocent face a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me. I try to smile as I kiss his forehead, but my mind is elsewhere. I retreat to my room before Shane gets home, needing to avoid any questions I'm not prepared to answer. I send him a quick text, explaining that I'm dealing with "womanly issues" and feeling a bit grumpy, so it's best if we give each other some space tonight. I make sure to assure him that it's nothing to do with him and that I can't wait to see him in the morning. It's a flimsy excuse, but one I hope will keep him from prying.

Lying in bed, my thoughts race. Every scenario I run through leads me back to the same, inescapable conclusion. I've done everything I can to avoid this

moment—spent nearly all my savings, called in favors, tried to dig up information through other channels. But it's no use. Raffaele is an inevitability, a shadow that's loomed over me since the day I left Italy. The more I tried to evade him, the tighter his grip has become. I should have known it would come to this; he likely planned it this way all along.

My hands tremble as I dial his number. The phone barely rings before he answers, as if he's been waiting for this exact moment.

"Hello," he says, his voice sickeningly sweet, a tone I know all too well.

"Hi, it's Nicola," I reply, my voice unsteady despite my efforts to sound composed.

"I know," he responds, his tone almost dripping with satisfaction. "I'd never forget your voice."

"Where's Gio, Raffaele? What has he gotten himself involved in?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady, though the fear is gnawing at me.

"Gio is not a child anymore, Nicola. Your innocent little brother is making a name for himself, and not in the way you might have hoped," he says, his words laced with a twisted kind of amusement. "Much like you with your fancy restaurants and yacht parties. I'm a little offended, actually—you never sent me an invitation."

His words strike like a knife, confirming my worst fears. The paranoia I've been feeling, the unease that's been following me—it's all justified. He knows far more than I'd like to admit.

"I need your help," I say, swallowing my pride. "Please don't make me beg for it. I've done everything you've asked, made every payment since I left. The least you could do is let me talk to my brother."

There's a pause on the line, and I can almost hear the satisfaction in his silence. When he speaks again, his voice is dripping with triumph. "I knew you'd come back to me, Nicola. You always do."

His control over the situation is evident, and he's not shy about flaunting it. I feel a shiver run through me, not from fear but from the realization that he has been watching my every move, waiting for the right moment to tighten his grip.

"I can help you," he continues, "but first, let's take some time to catch up. How about you start by sending me a nice picture of yourself? I've only seen you from a distance recently."

"If I send you a picture of my face, you'll put me in contact with Gio?" I ask, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

"I think it's much more likely that I will," he says, his voice smooth and confident. "But we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. And make sure you smile big and brightly in the picture. You've looked so sad the past few days."

His words send a wave of revulsion through me, but I know I have no choice. The thought of sending him a photo, knowing he'll get some sick pleasure from it, makes my skin crawl. But if it brings me closer to Gio, it's a price I'll have to pay.

Chapter 21

Shane

With my coffee mug in hand, I grab Jaime's backpack from the table and hand it to him as he finishes his breakfast. He takes it eagerly, sliding his arms into the straps, his face bright with morning excitement.

"Ready for school, buddy?" I ask, ruffling his hair.

"Super ready!" Jaime replies, his voice full of energy.

"Great," I say, smiling as I walk him to the front door. Mr. Jacob, one of my most trusted drivers, is waiting by the car in the driveway.

"Good morning, Mr. Matthews," Jacob says with a nod as we approach.

"Morning, Jacob," I reply, holding the door open for Jaime. He climbs into the back seat, his small feet barely touching the floor of the car.

"Have a good day at school, bud," I tell Jaime as he settles in.

"I will, Uncle Shane!" he says, his excitement palpable.

"And drive safe," I add to Jacob, who gives me a reassuring smile before closing the door behind Jaime.

As I turn to head back into the house, I hear Jaime's voice calling out, "Uncle Shane!" I turn around to see him leaning out of the car window.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Don't forget about my field trip on Thursday! I need the things on the list the teacher gave me."

I pause, realizing this is the first I've heard of a field trip.

"Just ask Nicole," Jaime adds, sensing my confusion.

Nicole. Of course. She always has things under control. I smile at Jaime, giving him a thumbs up before Jacob pulls away from the curb. As soon as they're gone, my thoughts turn back to Nicole. I haven't seen much of her lately, and when I have, she's seemed distant—like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. I head upstairs to her room to ask about Jaime's field trip, and maybe, just maybe, get a glimpse into what's been troubling her.

As I reach her room, I hesitate before knocking. I know she might still be asleep, and I don't want to disturb her, but the thought of hearing her voice, even for a moment, pulls me forward. I knock gently.

"Come in," she says, her voice soft but clear.

I open the door to find Nicole standing near her bathroom, wearing just a bathrobe. The sight of her catches me off guard. She's looking at herself in the mirror, adjusting the robe as if contemplating something deeper than her appearance.

"Hey, sorry to bother you," I start, trying to keep my voice light. "Jaime mentioned something about a field trip this week..."

She turns to face me, a small smile playing on her lips. "Yeah, I've already taken care of it. Everything on the list is packed in a camping backpack I bought for him. It's in the closet downstairs."

"Ah, great," I say, relieved. "Where are they going camping? I don't remember hearing about it..."

"Shane," she interrupts gently, her eyes locking onto mine. "Why don't we talk about that later?"

There's something in her gaze that holds me captive, something that feels both familiar and entirely new. She reaches for the belt on her robe, untying it slowly, letting it hang open just enough to reveal a narrow strip of her naked body. I stop mid-sentence, my breath catching in my throat as I watch her.

She pulls the robe down around her shoulders, holding it there for a moment before letting it slide off completely, pooling at her feet. The air between us crackles with tension as she walks toward me, her movements slow and deliberate, pushing me back onto the bed.

Laid back on the bed, I watch as she climbs on top of me, her bare legs straddling my hips. The warmth of her body seeps into me, her skin soft and moist from her recent shower. Her breath carries the fresh scent of mint as she presses her lips to mine, her breasts brushing against my chest. The familiar sweet and citrus smell of her perfume, laced with a hint of something spicy, both calms and arouses me.

She begins to undo my pants, her hands moving with a mix of urgency and finesse. "Take off your shirt," she says bluntly as she unlatches my belt. There's a command in her voice that I haven't heard before, one that stirs something deep within me. I quickly unbutton my silk blue designer shirt, our eyes never leaving each other's gaze.

I briefly feel the cool air of the room against my skin as my pants come off, but Nicole is on me in an instant. She slides down on top of me, her wetness enveloping me as her eyes fill with anticipation. I run my hands up her thighs, grasping her buttocks as she begins to move, shifting back and forth, her bodyfitting perfectly with mine. Her eyes close, her head tilting back as she begins to moan, her hands roaming her neck and breasts.

"Shane," she murmurs, her voice thick with desire, her eyes shut as if lost in a trance. Her fully erect nipples call to me, and I can't resist. I pull her down and lightly caress them with my lips and tongue. She pushes me back roughly, then leans over me, her hips still grinding, sliding me in and out of her slowly. She looks me in the eyes again and kisses me, her tongue caressing mine as she bites my lip just hard enough to inflict a bit of pain, sending a thrill through my entire body.

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She moves her mouth to my ear. "I want you to take me as hard as you can," she whispers, her breath warm against my skin. Then she runs her tongue lightly up my ear, the sensation sending shivers down my spine.

She climbs off me and lies on her back, inviting me with her eyes. I position myself above her and thrust into her, her body arching to meet mine as she gasps, her hands grasping at my arms and back. I respond to her every request, her moans driving me further, faster until we're both lost in the rhythm of our bodies.

When we're done, we lie next to each other, quietly catching our breaths as we stare at the ceiling.

"Shane," she says suddenly, breaking the silence. "I just want to say I'm happy working here and being a part of your and Jaime's lives. I don't think I've ever told you how much I appreciate you and all you do for everyone."

"You're the gift, Nicole," I say, turning over on my side to look at her. "One neither of us could have expected or even knew we needed. We appreciate you just as much."

She looks back at me, a soft smile on her lips. She reaches out and pinches my cheek lightly with her fingers. "You're sweet," she says, her voice tender.

Now is my chance, I think. The words are right there, on the tip of my tongue, but something stops me. It's been so long since I've seen her smile when we've made love like this. I don't want to ruin the moment. I stroke her cheek gently. "I've got to get ready for work," I say, feeling the moment slipping away.

"Go on," she replies, her smile still in place as she leans in to kiss me. It's a soft, lingering kiss, one that feels both like a promise and a goodbye.

"Let me know about the field trip, when and where."

"Yeah, I guess it slipped my mind. I'll forward you the letter from the school."

"Thanks," I say, gathering my clothes and giving her one last smile before heading back to my room, still naked and smelling of her.

That night, I get home late. The house is dark and quiet as I walk into the kitchen. A note on the fridge reads, "Lasagna's in the oven," with a time and temperature to heat it up. I'm still stuffed from the late-night subs with the staff, so I skip it and pour myself a glass of scotch instead. As I pass by Jaime's room, I peek in to see him sleeping soundly, his little face peaceful in the dim light. I notice Nicole's light is still on, but I don't bother to disturb her. I've been surrounded by people all day, and I need a moment to myself.

I head out to the second-floor terrace that overlooks the pool. From here, I can see Nicole's balcony just across the way. Her curtains are drawn, but a sliver of light escapes around their edges. I'm lost in thought, the cool night air wrapping around me like a blanket, when I hear footsteps behind me.

Nicole slides up next to me, resting her arms on the railing just as I am. We both look out into the night, the silence between us comfortable yet heavy with unspoken words.

"You know, I realized at work that you'd already texted me about the field trip," I confess, trying to break the tension.

"Yeah," she says simply, her voice carrying a strange finality.

"I'm so lucky to have you," I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

"For as long as I'm around, Shane, I'm happy to help out."

"For as long as you're around?" I question, the ominous tone of her words making my stomach twist.

She hesitates before answering. "I just mean... life is unpredictable."

"That's why it's good having you around to remind me," I say, trying to sound reassuring, but her words have planted a seed of worry in my mind.

"Yeah, but anything could happen, Shane—to you, to me. One of the most important things I've learned from Jaime and you is that changes happen, sometimes tragically, and you have to adapt. You have to be flexible if you don't want it to break you."

I look at her, my eyes searching her face for some sign of what's really going on. But she keeps her gaze fixed on the horizon, her expression unreadable. The way she's talking, it's as if she's preparing herself—or maybe even me—for something. The thought sends a cold shiver down my spine, a feeling of dread creeping in that I can't quite shake.

"So... I wanted to know how you felt about us going out for two days near the end of this month," I say, trying to steer the conversation back to something lighter, something that could bring her back to me. "No Jaime, just us on the yacht. There's a great little island a few miles off the coast that's having a festival. I thought it might be a nice getaway."

Nicole turns to look at me, her eyes soft but distant. "Sure, Shane. That sounds really fun," she says, but there's a lack of enthusiasm in her voice that makes my heart sink. "But let's talk about it later," she adds, her gaze slipping away from mine once more.

Frustration starts to bubble up inside me. I've been patient, I've given her space, but this... this distance between us is growing, and I feel powerless to stop it. "Why'd you even come out here with me if you didn't want to talk?" I ask, my voice harsher than I intended.

Nicole goes quiet, surprised by the sharpness in my tone. She doesn't answer right away, and when she does, her voice is small, almost fragile. "Because I didn't want to be alone," she says, and there's a vulnerability in her words that catches me off guard.

I take a deep breath, trying to push aside my frustration. "Nicole, I need you to tell me what's going on with you," I say, my voice softer now, pleading. I turn toward her, taking her hands in mine. "Please. I can't help you unless you do."

She remains silent, her eyes downcast. I can feel the weight of whatever she's carrying, and it's crushing her—crushing us.

"Whatever you need to fix it, if I have the means, it's yours. But please tell me what I need to do. If it's money, I'll pay you more. We can work this out," I offer, my desperation creeping into my words.

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Nicole looks up at me then, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She reaches up and touches my face, her fingers trembling. "Shane, it really means so much to me... you mean somuch to me," she says, her voice thick with emotion. "But I just need to take care of this myself for now."

She leans in and kisses me—a slow, tender kiss that feels like both a goodbye and an apology. When she pulls back, she looks me in the eyes and says, "I'm sorry."

And with that, she turns and walks away, leaving me standing alone on the terrace, the cool night air swirling around me. I watch her go, a sinking feeling in my chest. As I take another sip of my drink, I realize just how impossible holding us together might be.

I stand there for a long time, staring out at the dark, still water of the pool below, the reflection of the moon rippling across its surface. The weight of what just happened presses down on me, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm losing her—that I've already lost her. The life I've been trying so hard to build with Nicole and Jaime feels like it's slipping through my fingers, and I don't know how to hold on.

When I finally pull myself away from the terrace, I walk back through the silent house, every step feeling heavier than the last. I pass by Jaime's room again, pausing for a moment to listen to the sound of his gentle breathing. It's a small comfort, but it does little to ease the turmoil in my mind.

I head to my room, but sleep eludes me. The bed feels too big, too empty without Nicole beside me. I toss and turn, replaying the conversation on the terrace over and over in my mind, trying to make sense of it, trying to find some way to fix

whatever's broken between us. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this isn't something I can fix with words or money. Whatever's going on with Nicole is deeper than that—something that she feels she has to face alone. And that thought terrifies me.

I close my eyes, willing myself to sleep, but all I can see is the look in Nicole's eyes as she walks away from me—the look that says she is already gone.

Chapter 22

Nicole

"I've waited a week, Raffaele, and I've done everything you asked," I whisper, my voice filled with frustration. Showing annoyance only fuels him, but I can't help it anymore.

"Relax, Nicola. Your brother isn't going anywhere." There's a smugness in his voice that's sickening. He loves hearing me this way. "Let us catch up a bit before you start expecting favors from me."

"Just tell me what you need. If it's money, I can get you more. Just let me talk to Gio." My patience is running out, and every second with this man on the phone tightens the knot in my stomach.

He lets out a slow, condescending laugh. "You throw money around so freely these days. How much extra does your billionaire boss pay you to sleep in his bed?"

My teeth clench tightly, and I fight the urge to scream. Don't let him get to you, I remind myself. He wants to provoke you. He feeds off your reactions.

"Tell me what I need to do to talk to Gio, Raffaele," I demand, voice sharp, no longer

hiding my impatience. "Enough games. I won't let you keep doing this."

"Do you think of me when you're lying with your boss?" His voice turns sinister, dripping with jealousy and bitterness. "Do you remember all the nights we spent at the compound? Me protecting you, taking care of you? I guess you've found yourself a new man now, someone to fix all your problems."

"You locked us away. You used me, beat me—don't you dare twist this," I snap, my voice shaking with anger.

"I loved you," he counters, as though his version of love could ever excuse what he did to me.

"You loved control, Raffaele. Playing with people like they were pieces on a chessboard, just to satisfy your sick mind." My voice grows bolder with each word, the years of pent-up resentment bubbling to the surface. "All because you never got the respect you craved. You didn't have what it took to climb the ranks of Avvoltoi. And now look at you. Still the same petty thug, angry at the world because of your own failures. You've become a twisted, manipulative—"

"Watch how you speak to me!" Raffaele roars through the receiver, his tone dripping with venom. The sudden outburst catches me off guard, and I instantly regret pushing him too far. Angering him isn't the plan—it could put all of us at risk. But deep down, there's a small, twisted satisfaction in knowing I've hit a nerve.

There's a pause, and I can hear his breathing, heavy and uneven. "I still hold all the cards, Nicola. I have the means to reach out and touch Gio. And you, your billionaire boyfriend... and that cute little—what was his name? Ah, yes. Jaime."

A cold wave of terror washes over me, tightening around my chest like a vice. Jaime. He knows about Jaime. My hands tremble as I grip the phone tighter, trying to keep

my composure. My heart pounds in my ears, drowning out everything else.

"Your boyfriend has caused me trouble before," Raffaele continues, his tone casual, almost bored. "I'd be more than happy to leave him in a ditch somewhere. Or maybe I'll just come visit you in the middle of the night while you sleep. Remember that feeling? Waking up to find everyone you love dead beside you?"

"Stop!" My voice is louder than I intend, almost a shout. "This is between us, Raffaele. I just want to speak with Gio. There's no need to drag anyone else into this."

"Fine," he says coolly. "If you really want to help your brother, come back to me. Leave behind this little fantasy life you're living—this new family of yours. They're only in danger because you're around. Come back, and nobody gets hurt. Together, we'll get Gio out of the mess you left him in."

"I'm not doing that," I say through gritted teeth, refusing to let him manipulate me again. "You don't control me anymore, Raffaele."

"No," he says, his voice lowering to a dangerous whisper, "but I can make your life hell."

"I have protection. My deal with the Avvoltoi is still valid." The words come out rushed, desperate. My hands are shaking now, and I can feel the walls closing in around me.

Raffaele's laughter echoes through the line, sending another cold rush of dread down my spine. "As far as you're concerned, Nicola, I am the Avvoltoi. And I don't remember making any deals with Shane or Jaime. Wouldn't want them to just... disappear, would you?"

"You think there would be no consequences for that? A missing billionaire and his

child?" I work up the nerve to say. "I doubt your bosses would authorize something that brings that much attention. You're just trying to scare me."

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"Maybe you're right. Maybe I just expose that he's sleeping with his nanny, who's funneling money to the mafia. That he's been involved with us before. What will happen to his company and his reputation?"

"What are you talking about?" I question. "What do you know about Shane?"

"I know that you're not the only one keeping secrets," he says, ending with a laugh.

I go quiet, my breath hitching in my throat. This call was a mistake. I thought I could reason with him, but it's worse than I imagined. He's threatening everyone I care about, and I walked right into his trap.

"I'll give you time to think it over," Raffaele says, his voice softening with a false gentleness that sends chills through me. "Call me back when you're ready to make a real deal, Nicola. Goodbye."

The line goes dead. The silence that follows is suffocating. I sit there, frozen, unable to move. How did I let this happen? How did I let him back into my life, back into control?

A cold sweat clings to my skin, and my breath comes in shallow gasps. He knows everything. He's watching me. Watchingus.

I crawl out of the closet and back into bed after the phone call, my body heavy with the weight of Raffaele's words. The night stretches endlessly before me as I stare at the ceiling, running over the possible outcomes in my mind. Leaving Shane, leavingJaime—it feels like the only way to protect them, but it tears me apart. Every

scenario I come up with ends in disaster.

Raffaele's threats will hang over me if I stay like a dark cloud. If I leave, I lose everything. There's no way to win here. Money no longer satisfies him, and striking back only risks Gio's life. I could try to reach someone higher in the Avvoltoi, but it's been years since I had contact with any of them. Even if I did reach them, would they care enough to stop Raffaele? The Avvoltoi aren't saints. They'd need a good reason to protect some billionaire and his nephew—assuming they'd even get involved.

I'm lost in these thoughts when a soft tap comes at my door.

"You awake?" Shane's voice is gentle, barely above a whisper. It's early, the sun not yet risen, and I freeze, not wanting to face him. I'm afraid he'll see through me—sense that something is terribly wrong. So I remain silent.

A few moments later, my phone buzzes with a text from him:

Leaving early. Sorry if I came off dismissive last night. I want to see you, but we don't need to talk until you're ready. Take care.

The message is kind, but it cuts through me all the same. He's giving me space, being patient, but I don't deserve his understanding. I'm dragging him into a world that could ruin him, and the guilt gnaws at me.

Sleep continues to evade me, so I give up and get out of bed, slipping into the kitchen an hour before anyone else is awake. I move through the motions of preparing Jaime's breakfast, but my mind is distant. I feel restless, my hands shaking slightly as I crack eggs into a bowl. I tell myself I need to make this morning special. I need to see Jaime's smile today—it's the only thing that might make me feel less like I'm drowning.

I prepare his favorite: French toast with whipped cream, blueberries, and crispy bacon. It's a treat I usually reserve for weekends, but today... today, I need it. I need to know I can do something right. The kitchen smells sweet and warm as the toast sizzles on the pan, and I try to focus on the small joy of cooking for him.

Jaime bounds downstairs, his face lighting up when he sees the spread on the table. "What's special about today?" he asks, grinning from ear to ear.

I force a smile. "Just wanted to do something nice for you," I say softly, brushing his hair back as he takes his seat.

"Thanks, Nicole!" He digs into his plate, clearly delighted by the surprise.

I watch him as he eats, my heart aching with every bite he takes. He looks so much like Gio when he was young—so full of life, so innocent. I failed Gio, and the weight of that failure sits like a stone in my chest. I won't fail Jaime. He's already lost so much, and I refuse to let him lose more because of me.

As he finishes, I kiss him on the forehead before he heads out the door, running excitedly down the walkway to the waiting car. I watch him climb in, his face pressed against the window as he waves to me. I wave back, forcing a smile until the car disappears down the street.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind me, the weight of everything crashes down. I lean back against the door, my body sliding down until I sit on the floor, knees pulled to my chest. Tears blur my vision, and I can't hold them back any longer.

The sobs come, quiet but relentless, as I bury my face in my hands. Raffaele's threats, the danger to Gio, the risk to Shane and Jaime—it's all too much. I've dragged them into a nightmare they don't even know exists, and now it's only a matter of time before the darkness catches up to them. To us.

"I can't lose them too," I whisper to myself, the tears continuing to fall.

As I sit there against the door, the sobs quiet to soft, shaky breaths, but the weight of everything still presses down, suffocating me. I can't stay here anymore. Raffaele's threats are real, and the longer I stay, the greater the danger I bring to Shane and Jaime. They don't deserve this—none of it.

Wiping my eyes, I push myself up from the floor. Every step feels heavy as I make my way to the bedroom. I open the closet, staring blankly at the clothes hanging there, the life I've built around me. It all feels like a facade now. I had let myself believe I could leave my past behind, but I was wrong. The mafia's reach is far, and the past... it never lets go.

With trembling hands, I pull a suitcase from the top shelf, drag it down, and open it on the bed. I start throwing clothes in, not paying attention to what I pack—just grabbing things quickly. Tears blur my vision again as I stuff the suitcase, but I keep going, trying to ignore the lump growing in my throat.

My mother's voice echoes in my mind, something she had said when I was young, just before everything fell apart. She warned about trusting people outside the family. Never get too close to anyone who isn't one of us. I had been so naive back then, thinking I could break free, that I could love someone from outside the life we knew. A lesson I learned when I told her about how little Fredo asked me to be his girlfriend. "His parents are good people, and they'll ask questions about who their son is dating," she'd warned me.

I should have listened, I say to myself.

I choke on a sob as I throw the last piece of clothing into the suitcase. I should have known better than to get close to Shane and Jaime.

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Now, the only way to protect them is to leave.

I sit down at the small desk by the window, pulling out a piece of paper. My hand trembles as I pick up a pen. How do I even begin to say goodbye? What do you tell a six-year-old who has come to trust you, to care for you, when you're about to abandon him?

Tears spill onto the paper as I write:

Dear Jaime,

I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I have to go, but I love you so much. I hope you'll remember me always. You're such a special boy, and I will never forget you. Please be strong, and know that this isn't your fault. None of this is your fault.

Love, Nicole.

I can't write more.

I fold the note and leave it on his pillow.

Shane comes to my mind. It's too much—too final. I wouldn't know what to say anyway. How do I tell him that I love him, but I'm leaving to keep him safe? That I've brought him and Jaime this close to danger?

I zip up the suitcase and take one last look around the room. It feels empty now, like a part of me is being left behind here. I can't let myself think about it too long, or I'll

break completely.

I grab my suitcase and slip quietly down the stairs, making sure I don't wake anyone. The house is eerily silent, the only sound my footsteps echoing softly as I head for the front door.

I pause briefly as my hand grasps the doorknob, hesitation holding me back. It's wrong to leave like this, I know it. But I also know I don't have a choice—maybe I never did. My only priority is to protect them. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and finally pull the door open. Stepping out into the cool air, I hear the door click shut behind me, sealing the irreversible decision I've made. From this moment on, there's no turning back.

Chapter 23

Shane

I'm determined to get a smile out of Nicole today. It's the first thought that crosses my mind as sunlight spills through the window, warming the bedspread beneath me. There's an essence of laziness in the air that feels perfectly like a Saturday. I decide to make the most of it, get up early, and creep downstairs.

I fumble through the kitchen, stacks of pots and colanders clattering as I search. "The pans," I mutter, juggling my phone between my shoulder and ear.

On the other end of the line, Gladys, our part-time nanny, sighs. She's only slightly irritated, likely because I'm bothering her during her favorite game show. "They're in the cabinet under the stove, Mr. Matthews. The nonstick pans are on the right, and the cast-iron ones are above the stove."

I stop in my tracks. "What's the difference?" I ask, even more lost.

"What are you trying to cook, Mr. Matthews? And why are you calling me for this? Don't tell me you've already scared off that pretty young girl."

I chuckle, shaking my head. "No, no, she's sleeping in, so I thought I'd cook breakfast today." Then I add quickly, "And, Gladys, please call me Shane."

"Well, that's nice. You and her, you're such a cute couple." Her tone is warm, amused.

"Gladys," I laugh nervously, "we're not a couple."

"Oh, come on now. I'm sixty-three years old, Shane. I've seen that look, and I'm happy for you."

I feel an unexpected sense of warmth spreading through me. "Thank you," I say sincerely. "I'm cooking eggs and bacon, by the way."

"Well, use the nonstick pan with the blue handle," she instructs. "It's the best one."

With a sigh of relief, I pull out the right pan. "You're a lifesaver, Gladys. I'll cook these eggs in your honor."

She laughs on the other end. "Just don't burn them. So, breakfast and then what? You got a whole day planned?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I admit, grabbing eggs from the fridge. "I figured we could see where the day takes us—maybe go for a drive."

Gladys sighs. "Come on now, take some initiative. You're already cooking breakfast; take it a step further. Any ideas on what she might want to do?"

I pause, then it hits me. "The ferry," I say, grabbing some bacon from the fridge. "She hasn't ridden the ferry into town yet. We could catch an early one, explore the city, and maybe walk around Market Street. Have lunch by the pier."

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"Now that's a plan," Gladys says. "A nice walk, some shopping, lunch by the water—it sounds like the perfect day." I nod, feeling more confident.

"Yeah, I think she'd enjoy that," I say, relieved. "Gladys, you go enjoy your shows, and let me get breakfast going."

"Let me know how things go. Bye, Shane."

"Bye, Gladys."

I survey the counter loaded with ingredients, utensils, and the pan with the blue handle. "Where do I even start?" I mutter to myself, feeling a little overwhelmed. I set my tablet on the counter, shamelessly pulling up a recipe for scrambled eggs.

I want this breakfast to lift Nicole's spirits, but deep down, I know my cooking might not be enough to pull her out of the dark place she's been in lately. A small part of me worries it could even backfire—what if she's not in the mood? What if this feels forced? I push those thoughts aside, hoping, at the very least, she'll get a laugh out of my effort. But I hesitate before starting. Maybe it's better to have a watchful eye. I decide to wait until Nicole is awake before firing up the stove.

I sit at the kitchen counter with my tablet and watch sports highlights, glancing at the clock. Nicole usually wakes up around 8 on Saturdays, and I figure I can use the next hour as some rare "me" time. Jaime's upstairs, occupied with cartoons, and the house feels calm, just the quiet hum of the day beginning.

It's 8:30 when I realize Nicole's alarm hasn't gone off yet. Usually, by now, she's

downstairs making coffee or reading in the nook by the window. Just as that thought crosses my mind, I hear Jaime coming downstairs and into the kitchen, Buddy trotting at his side.

"Good morning, Jaime," I say, pushing away my worry.

"Good morning, Uncle Shane," he replies, his eyes lighting up as he notices the food laid out. "Are you going to cook?" He sounds surprised, almost like he doesn't believe it.

"Yeah," I say with a grin. "I'm going to give it a shot. How hard can it be? You want to help, little chef?"

Jaime looks at me, then at the ingredients, and his small face scrunches with doubt. "I think we should wait for Nicole," he suggests.

I laugh. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'm gonna take Buddy out," he says, already heading for the door, the leash in his hand.

With Jaime preoccupied, I decide to check on Nicole. I don't want to wake her, especially knowing how restless she's been lately, but something feels off. I knock on her bedroom door softly, calling her name once. Twice. No response.

As I push the door open, a wave of unease rolls through me. The sight that greets me hits me like a punch in the gut. Once filled with life and vibrancy, her room now appears empty and lifeless. It looks exactly as it did the day I showed it to her. The perfumes and lotions that used to clutter the dresser, the jackets that hung from the coat rack, her shoes, her clothes—everything is gone. It's as if she never existed.

My heart drops into my stomach. I start scanning the room, trying to understand what I'm seeing. It's all stripped clean of presence but for one thing—a white envelope placed neatly on her pillow, standing out like a ghost in the room. I ignore it at first, checking the closet and the bathroom. I'm hoping to find one sign of her, something she may have left, some sign she's coming back. But it's all gone; she's gone.

"There's nothing," I whisper, a numbness creeping over me as the realization hits. My hands shake as I finally walk over to the bed and pick up the letter, a sense of dread building in my chest. The envelope is addressed to Jaime, written in her familiar handwriting.

"Nicole?" Jaime's voice drifts up from downstairs. "Uncle Shane? I'm super duper hungry now!" he calls out, his tone light and joking, oblivious to the situation.

"Just a minute, bud," I call back, my voice tight. "Watch some cartoons on the couch, okay?"

There's a long, exaggerated sigh from Jaime. "Okay," he says, the sound of the TV clicking on faint in the background.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, my heart pounding in my chest as I tear open the envelope. Inside, there's a note. Her handwriting is shaky but legible, and as I read it, the room seems to spin around me. I read it once. Twice. Enough times to remember it by heart and for my body to go cold. The letter is simple, apologetic, but final.

I feel my emotions threatening to break through the surface for the first time in years. I can't believe this. After everything... she's gone. But before I can let the tears come, Jaime calls from downstairs again, pulling me back to reality. The note crumples slightly in my trembling hand as I sit there, frozen.

I head downstairs, feeling the weight of Nicole's absence in every nerve in my body. I

feel heavy and lightheaded all at once. My mind is racing, trying to grasp the reality of her departure, but I push those thoughts away for Jaime's sake. He doesn't need to see me unraveling. Not now. I gather the ingredients for breakfast, but my hands feel clumsy.

"Finally," Jaime says with a sigh of relief as he plops down at the kitchen table. "Where's Nicole, Uncle Shane?"

The question stops me in my tracks. I feel a wave of emotion rise, but I still hold back. I clear my throat, forcing myself to speak calmly. "She had to go take care of some paperwork early this morning," I say, trying to sound casual as I keep my back turned to him. The lie tastes bitter as it comes out, but it's better than the truth. Better than telling him I don't know where she's gone or why she left us.

I move about the kitchen, making preparations. But I can't stop checking my phone, praying for a message from Nicole, and calling her nonstop. My desperation grows with every unanswered ring. As I crack an egg into the bowl, a sense of overwhelming difficulty washes over me. Cooking was already challenging, but now, with the weight of everything on my shoulders, it feels impossible. I turn to Jaime, mustering a forced smile.

"Hey, buddy, how about we grab breakfast from Frankie's and eat it on the ferry instead?"

Excitement radiates from Jaime as his eyes light up. "Yeah! That sounds awesome!" he says, practically bouncing in his seat. But then his face falls a little. "But what about Nicole?"

I hesitate. The emotions I've been pushing down threaten to spill out, but I hold them back. "Maybe she'll catch up with us later, bud. I can't promise, but... let's go have some fun in the meantime, okay?"

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He nods, eager for the adventure. "Okay! I'll get dressed!" Jaime bolts upstairs. His excitement and energy move me, providing a brief respite from the turmoil in my head.

As I grab my phone again, I see nothing but unanswered calls. No texts. No signs of life from Nicole. I sigh, running my hand through my hair, and try to focus on Jaime. The least I can do is make this day good for him.

We leave Frankie's around 10, breakfast sandwiches in hand. I try to enjoy the simplicity of it—just me and Jaime, walking to the ferry, watching boats glide across the water. But my mind is elsewhere, always coming back to Nicole.

As we step onto the ferry, my phone buzzes. A text from Nicole. My heart skips as I open it, but her words crush me instantly:

I'm sorry, Shane. Take care of Jaime. You two are all that matter now.

I stare at the message, the world blurring around me. "What the hell are you doing, Nicole?" I whisper to myself.

Jaime looks up at me as we sit down on the ferry, unwrapping his sandwich. "Is Nicole coming?"

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. "She... she had to go take care of her family, bud. She might be gone for a while."

"How long?" Jaime asks, his brow furrowed.

"I don't know, buddy. Could be short, could be long," I say honestly. "But... she left you a letter." I pull the envelope from my pocket and hand it to him.

Jaime's eyes widen as he takes the letter, opening it carefully. He reads it in silence, then folds it neatly before slipping it into his pocket.

"Why didn't she just say goodbye?" he asks.

It's a question I anticipated. "She was in a hurry, bud."

"Oh," he says, half-heartedly.

"Check out the jet skis," I say quickly, trying to change the subject as I point out to them.

"Cool," Jaime says.

He doesn't ask any more questions, and I'm grateful for it.

We walk the market street in the city, stopping at little shops and stands. I calm down a bit, watching Jaime distract himself with the sights and sounds. I keep trying to convince myself that she left for the money, that she never really cared. And given her situation, I can't blame her. Maybe she saw Shane Matthews as an easy target—a man with a billion-dollar empire and a weakness for her. But even as I think it, I know it's not true. It's just anger talking, the thought that she's given up on us simmering beneath the surface.

We have lunch at an Italian restaurant on the pier, but I can barely taste the food. Jaime chatters about the boats, the market, and school—doing a good job filling the silence between us. I nod along, giving him half-hearted responses.

By the time we get home, I'm emotionally and physically exhausted. Jaime runs to the living room to play video games while I head to the bathroom. As soon as I close the door behind me, the weight of everything hits me like a wave. The anger, the sadness, the sense of betrayal. It all crashes down, and for the first time in years, I break. Tears spill down my face as I sink to the floor, my hands gripping the sides of the sink. I haven't cried like this since Claire's death. I thought I'd gotten past this—this feeling of loss, of abandonment. But Nicole broke something in me I didn't even know was fragile.

I don't know how long I sit there, letting the tears fall, letting the anger and sadness burn through me. It feels like a release, like I'm purging something. When it's over, when the tears dry up and the sobs die down, all that's left is a hollow ache, a cold, empty feeling of loss.

And then, something shifts. A revelation, sharp and clear, settles in my mind: No more. I can't do this again. I'm not built for it. Letting anyone get this close to me again was a mistake—only Jaime deserves that space. My focus needs to be on him, on what truly matters. He's the only one who deserves my attention now, the only one I can't afford to lose. Nicole? She was just like everyone else—someone I couldn't trust. The thoughts spill over me like affirmations, familiar and comforting, like the colder, more focused version of myself I'd left behind is rising to the surface again—the one who kept his walls high, who didn't let anyone in.

But even as I tell myself these things, I know deep down it's just my fury talking. A part of me clings to the warmth Nicole brought into my life, the healing and positivity she managed to stir in me. That part isn't gone—at least, not yet. I know Nicole is in trouble somewhere in the corners of my mind. I know she probably needs my help. But there's nothing more I can do. I've pleaded. I've begged for her to let me in, to let me help her, for months. This was her decision, and no matter how much I want to chase after her, I have to accept it.

I tell myself I need that bit of coldness now. I need to protect myself, to shield Jaime from the chaos that keeps creeping into our lives. It's time to let the walls come back up.

Days pass, and the impact of Nicole's disappearance fills our daily lives. Jaime keeps asking me to call her, but I'm forced to make excuses each time, like she's busy or has found a new job and is working nights. But I know he's not buying it anymore.

A few nights after, during dinner, Jaime fusses over his vegetables, refusing to eat them. His attitude has taken a turn since she's left, and though I've tried to maintain it, so has mine.

"Uncle Shane, I ate vegetables at lunch today. Why do I have to eat them again? Why don't you just give me all the vegetables for one day at one time?"

My patience snaps. "Just eat your damn vegetables, Jaime!" I yell, louder than I intended. His eyes fill with tears, and my heart sinks instantly.

"I miss Nicole!" Jaime cries, pushing his plate away. "She never yelled at me like this."

His words cut deep, and I realize I have to do something—for Jaime, if not for myself.

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As I watch Jaime's tear-streaked face, a new revelation pops into my mind. I need to make a plan. I have to find her.

Chapter 24

Nicole

Raffaele grips the steering wheel in one hand. The other is glued to his phone, his eyes flicking between the screen, the road, and me, always scheming, always watching.

"That fucking scumbag," he blurts out in Italian, his voice sharp with frustration. I don't flinch, keeping my gaze on the world passing outside the passenger window, ignoring him as I have for days now.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, his tone softer now, almost coaxing.

I don't answer.

He glances at me, irritation flashing in his eyes. "You could at least try to make an effort, Nicole," he snaps. "I know you're adjusting, but I haven't asked anything from you except to smile and eat the nice dinners I buy. Spend the money I make. That's not hard, is it?"

I finally turn to him, my voice flat. "Keep it all. I just want to talk to Gio."

He sneers, clearly annoyed. "I'm working on that around the clock, but you need to

hold up your end. If we're going to work, you need to start putting in some effort to be happy."

A bitter chuckle spews out as I shake my head. "I never agreed to come back and be with you, Raffaele. I agreed to come back and put up with you because you threatened everyone I care about. God knows why I'm still here." I chuckle again, this time more sarcastically. "We're off to a perfect start, aren't we? If that's what you want." I let out a dry laugh. "God, you really are delusional, aren't you?"

His jaw tightens. He grips the wheel harder, knuckles whitening. "You think this is a joke?" His voice is low and dangerous now. "You laugh because you don't understand how important I am yet. You're still thinking about your billionaire."

I stare out the window, clenching my fists. "I know how important you think you are," I reply, my tone icy. "Flashing stacks of money like it's supposed to impress me. Driving me around in your expensive car, taking me to fancy dinners—all paid for in blood money. And it all comes from you, the kind of cold bastard who threatens a child." I glance at him, my disgust on full display.

He pulls the car to the side of the road abruptly, the tires screeching against the asphalt. In one swift motion, he reaches over and grabs my face roughly, his fingers digging into my chin, forcing me to face him. His eyes are wild with anger, his breath hot on my skin. For a moment, I can see him struggling, words caught in his throat, though I know what he really wants to do. His rage simmers just beneath the surface, ready to explode.

That old feeling crashes over me. It all flashes back: the sound of his voice when he screamed at me, the terror I felt knowing when the first blow was coming. I remember the shame of lying on the floor, looking up at him, praying he wouldn't hit me again.

But not anymore.

I hold his gaze, defiance burning in my chest. "What? If you're going to hit me, do it. Then go find my brother." My voice is steady, though my heart is pounding.

I glance down, noticing his free hand drifting toward the pistol at his side. My pulse quickens, but I don't look away. He sees that I've noticed, and for a moment, time seems to stretch between us. Then, just as quickly, he lets go of my face, his hand falling away from the gun. He puts both hands back on the steering wheel, breathing hard.

"Do not press me, Nicole," he says, his voice low and dangerous. "It is in your best interest, and everyone else's, that you follow my every word. My men are looking for your brother, but it wouldn't take much for them to make sure the day they find him is his last."

The weight of his threat hangs in the air like a thick cloud, suffocating. My throat tightens, but I refuse to let the tears fall. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"You don't want to eat?" he snaps, starting the car again and pulling back into traffic. "Fine. We go home, and you can starve." His voice is colder now, but I can hear the satisfaction in it. He thrives on control, on knowing he's broken me down just a little more, the helplessness, the fear, the constant stress of being near him. Raffaele, who pretends he's changed, who showers me with gifts I don't want, who takes me to dinners I can't stomach, is still the same monster he's always been. His compliments on my body, the way he touches me without permission—it all makes me sick. It's as if I'm trapped in a continuous loop of fear and disgust. His rage is still there, lurking, waiting to lash out.

I stare out the window, fighting the lump in my throat, every part of me aching. I won't cry. I can't. Not in front of him.

Shane and Jaime occupy my every thought, every moment of every day. When I'm alone, without the constant distraction of my hate for Raffaele and his men, the ache of missing them is unbearable. I wonder what they're doing right now. Is Shane still making his coffee in that slow way that always annoyed me? Has Jaime found something new to focus his endless energy on, something to fill the space I left behind? Part of me hopes, for their sake, that they've moved on, that they're happy.

But another part of me, one that I can't help, selfishly wishes they haven't forgotten me. I want them to remember. I want them to wonder where I've gone, what's happened to me. I want them to miss me, to want me back. It's a cruel thought, but it's all I have left now—just the memory of what we had.

Before I came to meet Raffaele, I took steps to protect myself. I stored all my things away and locked my credit cards and valuables where he couldn't reach them. I was terrified he'd take them, use them to manipulate me in ways I couldn't escape. But a part of me also hopes, just in case... if I disappear for good, someone—maybe Shane, maybe someone else—will find it all. They'll see the pieces of my life that I left behind, and I hope they'll get some closure.

If nothing else, I want them to know it wasn't their fault. Whatever happens now, it's because of choices I made, and not because they didn't care enough.

The tension between Raffaele and his men is growing. I can feel it in the air, as if the entire house is straining under his frustration. Whatever leads he once had on Giovanni have either dried up or were never real in the first place. Each time he gives me some empty tip—Giovanni was seen here, someone spotted him there—it feels like a breadcrumb tossed carelessly in my direction, not enough to satisfy, just enough to keep me on the hook. Before, he'd at least try to tempt me back with photographs or proof, but now that he has me, there's no need. His leash is short, and I'm starting to suffocate under its grip.

I no longer trust that he even knows where my brother is. He must know something—he let me talk to Giovanni once before I was dragged back into this—but whatever it is, he's hiding it, or worse, using it as leverage. I grow tired of his games.

That night, I make my decision.

After midnight, the house settles into a deep silence, the kind of stillness that promises no interruptions. No one comes to check on me after that hour; they all assume I'm too cowed to do anything but sit and wait. I head to the bathroom, retrieving the hairdryer I stashed there earlier. I crack open the casing, and inside, nestled among the wires, is the tiny black burner phone I planted. It's my lifeline, my only connection to the outside world.

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I snap the hairdryer shut, slide the phone into my pocket, and move quickly. My plan has been weeks in the making. I've tested the sounds and memorized the movements—out the second-floor window, up the slanted roof to a small, flat surface near an attic window. It's a precarious climb, but I've done it before. No one will hear me up there.

I climb, careful not to make a sound, the cold night air biting at my skin as I reach the roof. This is my one shot to make contact. I call Francesca first, but the line rings out. No answer. I expected that. My fingers tremble as I dial Lonzo next, my heart pounding in the quiet. The phone remains silent for several long minutes, and I'm just about to give up when it lights up in my hand.

But the voice on the other end isn't Lonzo. It's an older woman.

"You have to stop calling," she says flatly, her tone sharp and final. There's no pretense of politeness, just an edge of warning.

I swallow hard, my voice barely a whisper. "Who do you work for?"

"It doesn't matter," she snaps. "You're with him now. You're dead to the world."

"I'm not with him," I protest, desperation slipping into my voice. "I just need to—" The line goes dead before I can finish.

I just sit there for a moment, staring at the darkened screen. My heart races in confusion. Since when does anyone fear Raffaele? He's always been a low-level thug, barking louder than he bites. But this... either he's grown far more dangerous than I

ever realized, or he's done something so terrible that people have cut ties with him completely.

Neither option bodes well for me.

I climb back down to my room, my mind racing, every ounce of hope I'd been clinging to slipping away like sand through my fingers. I need to find Giovanni. I need to leave this place before it consumes me. Raffaele is more dangerous than I thought, and I can't afford to underestimate him anymore.

Over the course of a few days, I have yet to hear anything concrete about Giovanni; no real leads, no sightings. The snippets I catch are always vague—a rumor here, a possible sighting there. Giovanni feels more like a ghost than a real person, at this point. But what I do find out terrifies me. Raffaele is planning to overthrow Pietro, the head of the Avvoltoi. If he makes that move, it'll put targets on all of us—me included. My protection would be gone, and Raffaele would completely control me. It's becoming clear why he brought me back. He doesn't care about helping me find Giovanni; he wants power, and I'm just another pawn in his game.

This was a mistake. He'll never help me willingly. I need to start planning my escape.

"Nicole." His voice pulls me from sleep, deep and slurred, the smell of alcohol heavy in the air. I blink into the darkness, my heart pounding as I see Raffaele standing over me, a shadow darker than the room itself.

"What?" I say, my voice sharp. "What do you think you're doing, Raffaele?"

He sways slightly, his breath reeking of whiskey. "Whatyoumade me," he slurs. "I tried to be nice. I tried to bring you to my side. Let you witness my rise as my woman, something you should be proud of." He pauses. His words are heavy and full of self-pity. "But even now, your mind is still with him. With these Americans. Not

even our blood." His words churn something dark inside me, but I keep my face impassive.

"You embarrass me in front of my men," he growls, his voice low and dangerous. "They think I'm weak because of you. That I won't do what needs to be done."

Fear prickles at my skin, but I refuse to let him see it. I clench my fists under the sheets, my eyes darting toward the lamp on the bedside table. It's close. Not much of a weapon, but it'll have to do.

"What is it, Raffaele? What needs to be done?" I ask, forcing the words out in an even tone, though my body tenses, ready to act.

"Your billionaire. We need him," he spits.

My heart skips a beat, my mind racing. "What have you done?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Nothing... yet," he says, the venom in his tone unmistakable.

"What do you need Shane for?" My stomach twists, dread filling every inch of me.

"My time to rise has come, and Shane will be my tool. I want him in—his company, his resources. I need him to cooperate."

It clicks in my head, the pieces coming together. "You want to use him to overtake Le Ombre," I say, the realization making me sick.

He narrows his eyes. "What do you know about Obsidian?"

"I know enough," I say with a sigh. "Your men haven't exactly been discreet."

Obsidian holds power in America, and you think partnering with Shane will give you leverage with them. You think bringing in American money will help you seize control of the Avvoltoi."

Raffaele glares at me, his eyes wild with confusion and anger. "How do you know..."

"Because you're not good at this, Raffaele," I snap. "Neither are your men. And if you think I'm going to help you drag Shane into this, you're delusional."

Raffaele's expression darkens, but his voice stays cold. "This I expected," he says with unnerving calm. He whistles sharply, and two of his men burst into the room.

I grab the lamp, smashing it over one of their heads as he lunges toward me. The glass shatters, sending shards flying across the bed and floor. He stumbles back, clutching his bleeding forehead, but the second man grabs me by the neck, yanking me from the bed. I kick and thrash, landing a sharp punch across Raffaele's face, but it's no use. They overpower me, dragging me toward the door.

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I make them fight for every step, knocking over anything I can reach, screaming insults, kicking at their legs. My body slams into the walls as they haul me down a narrow staircase, my heart racing with panic. They drag me toward an open door—beyond it, a set of stairs that leads down into a dark cellar.

I scratch one of them across the face, drawing blood. He snarls and punches me hard in the ribs, and everything goes black.

When I wake, the world is cold and silent. I'm alone, chained to a pole in an empty, dimly lit room.

Chapter 25

Shane

"This isn't a library, Shane, and her records—if any exist—aren't a book," Mike explains over the phone, his tone half-serious. "You didn't talk to anyone at the precinct about this, did you?"

"No, I just talked to you," I say, pacing back and forth.

"Well, that's good. The last thing you need is people thinking you're some kind of stalker," Mike jokes, but his voice carries an edge of concern.

"Mike, this is serious," I plead. "I think she's in real danger."

"Shane, come on." Mike's tone softens slightly, and I can sense the skepticism. "She

packed her things, she left a note, she even sent you a goodbye text. She's got secrets, yeah, but who doesn't? Doesn't mean she's in danger. You know how these go, though. Most times, there's another guy involved. I hate to be the one to say it, but I've been a cop a long time, and I've seen it before. This has all the makings of someone trying to move on. And you are a stalker in the making," he jokes.

"I'm not stalking her," I say sharply, my nerves on edge. I pause, trying to steady my breath. "Look, Mike. Something's not right. I just... I can't shake this feeling."

"Shane." Mike's voice takes on a more sincere tone. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be making light of this. I've been heartbroken too, and I get it. I know you've got trust issues after everything with Robert." He sighs deeply, and I can practically hear him rubbing his temples. "I mean, being stabbed in the back by a lifelong friend? That kind of thing doesn't heal easy. It leaves a scar that makes you question everyone's motives."

"This isn't about Robert," I interrupt, my frustration bubbling up. "I just want Nicole to be safe. That's all I care about. I don't need the details, Mike. I just need to know she's okay. If you can check around for me, please do. I won't bother you again if you don't find anything, just... make sure she's alright."

Mike sighs again, this time deeper, almost resigned. "Alright. I'll see what I can do, but don't expect a call back, okay? And if anyone asks, I told you to leave it alone and that it's best you move on with your life, which I actually think you should."

A wave of relief washes over me, though it's fleeting. "I knew I could count on you. Thanks, Mike."

"Yeah, yeah. Take care of yourself, Shane," he says before hanging up.

"I need to get out of here," I mutter to myself, the silence closing in. I grab my keys from the desk and head out the front door, hoping the open air will somehow make

the emptiness less unbearable.

I try to focus on other things—to take in the city streets, the passing scenery, anything to distract myself—but it's useless. My eyes keep darting to the people walking by, scanning faces I don't recognize, searching for something familiar. I look for her—her green eyes, that leather jacket, those blue sneakers. But, of course, none of them are her.

I sink further into my seat, feeling the weight of my thoughts pulling me down. What if she really has moved on? The question gnaws at me, and I hate myself for even thinking it. I need to know the truth. And then, like a bad *déjà vu*, the sinking realization hits—someone I trusted, gone without a word, leaving me with nothing but questions and silence.

It's Robert all over again.

I pull into a diner parking lot, deciding I need to eat something, if only to shake this feeling. But as I sit there, engine idling, the memories come rushing back, uninvited. Robert's betrayal—sitting here, waiting for a phone call from a detective, I feel like I've been thrown back into that same dark place.

It's too familiar. The lies. The secrets. The feeling of being kept in the dark, blindsided by someone I thought I knew.

I turn off the car and lean back in the seat, the weight of it all pressing down on my chest. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and try to push the memories away. But the flashback hits me like a wave, transporting me back to the shared office I used to have with Robert. The memory is sharp, vivid—the day everything started to crumble.

I had just hung up the phone with another investor, their words echoing in my

ears. We wish you luck in the future. Another client lost. Another nail in the coffin.

Our company wasn't doing well, and every call felt like a countdown to failure. The door swung open, and in strolled Robert, all confidence and swagger. That smile of his—the kind that made you believe everything was fine, even when the ship was sinking. It made me uneasy.

"Philly?" Robert asked, his tone almost too casual for the situation.

I nodded, still processing the call. "Philly," I confirmed. "We lost them."

Robert exhaled, a long, dramatic sigh. "That was a big one."

"Yeah," I said, feeling the weight of it.

But Robert didn't linger on the loss. He walked over and gave me a big smile as he dropped a file on the desk in front of me. "I've got something bigger," he said.

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I raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"This," he tapped the folder, "is going to get us out of this hole." He placed a bag of takeout on the desk. "I thought we could eat in, discuss it over lunch."

"Must be big, if you want me to read it so fast."

"It's a rat race, man. And we're already losing." He took a seat, pulling out the food—sandwiches from our favorite deli.

I shook my head and flipped open the folder while unwrapping my sandwich. I skimmed the pages throughout lunch while Robert rambled on about the Knicks. It looked legit at first glance. A new investment group, offering us a way out. But there was something off.

"Who are these guys, Robert?" I asked, glancing up from the file. "This seems too good to be true."

"They're aggressive. But they're legit. It's a new group, a little under the radar. They're looking for opportunities like ours—companies that need a second wind."

"This clause here—" I pointed to a section detailing an unusually fast return on investment, with almost no oversight. "This doesn't make sense. No group is going to put in this much capital without demanding more control. It feels... off."

Robert waved his hand dismissively, taking a bite of his sandwich. "That's just how they operate. They want fast returns so they don't get bogged down with

micromanaging. They want to see results. Think of it like venture capital, but more streamlined."

I wasn't convinced. "We should check this out thoroughly. Get a few things cleared before we even think of setting up a meeting."

Robert's face lit up, clearly expecting this. "Yeah, sure. But if it checks out, can I take the lead on it?"

I hesitated. Something still didn't sit right. But if it was as clean as he made it sound, it could be the solution we desperately needed. "If everything works out," I nodded slowly, "you can take the lead."

Robert's grin widened. He looked like a man who had just won the lottery.

I wish I had seen the truth behind that smile back then.

I let Robert run the negotiations over the next few days. He seemed confident, more so than usual, and I allowed myself to believe, just for a moment, that maybe he had found the answer to all of our problems. But as the days passed, he told me very little—just vague updates about how "things were looking good."

Still, my gut told me something wasn't right.

Suspicious, I started digging. I spent hours poring over the contract again, searching for anything I'd missed, but I couldn't find anything concrete. Frustrated, I reached out to Jake Miller, a friend who had been in the industry long enough to know the ins and outs of every major deal.

When Jake took a look at the file, the shift in his expression told me everything I needed to know. His face went pale, and he looked up at me with a seriousness I

hadn't seen before. He slid the papers back toward me.

"Listen, Shane," he said, lowering his voice. "I'm going to give you the name of a detective. Call him. Don't mention me. And don't tell anyone I helped you with this."

That made my stomach drop. I'd never heard Jake talk like that.

"Jake, what's going on? Who are these people?"

"I can't say. But if you want to stay clear of serious trouble, you need to call this guy. I'm not joking, Shane—promise me you won't mention my name."

I nodded, the weight of his words sinking in. "I promise."

The next day, I waited until Robert was out of the office before I picked up the phone and called the detective.

Detective Henson's voice was calm but firm when he picked up, like a man who had seen his fair share of bad situations. I explained the details, trying to keep it vague enough not to incriminate anyone, but specific enough to let him know I was in deep.

"I'm glad you called me first," he said after a moment of silence. "If you hadn't, and you'd gone through with this deal, we'd be having a very different conversation right now."

A chill ran down my spine. "What do you mean?"

"The group you're dealing with—they're not investors, Shane. They're an organized crime syndicate. They use companies like yours to launder money, funnel cash through seemingly legitimate deals. Once you're in, you're in for good. You don't get out clean."

I sat there, stunned, the gravity of what Robert had nearly pulled us into hitting me all at once. I couldn't believe it.

"I'm calling off the deal," I said firmly, my mind already made up.

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"Good," the detective replied. "That's the smartest move you could make. If you need help untangling yourself from this mess, give me a call. But make no mistake—these people don't play around. You did the right thing by reaching out."

When I hung up, I could barely think straight. How had Robert not seen this coming? Or had he known all along?

Later that day, I confronted him. When I told him I was pulling the plug, he didn't fight me like I expected. Instead, he just... went quiet.

"Why?" Robert asked, his voice subdued.

I told him what I had discovered; about the syndicate, about the police. The mention of law enforcement made him stiffen, and for the first time since I'd known him, I saw real fear in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, running a hand through his hair. "I'll make it up to you someday."

He never called or showed up at the office again. Just like that, Robert vanished from my life.

And to this day, I've always wondered what happened to him. Whether the mafia caught up with him... or if he found another way out. Either way, I never heard from him again. And a part of me feared that one day, it would happen to me too.

The threats started small—a voicemail, a note on my car. Each one referenced the

deal Robert nearly pulled us into, demanding I make good on a promise I never made. I tried to ignore it, but it kept escalating. I had no idea what Robert had promised, and with him gone, I was left holding the bag.

That's when I called the detective again, and I was introduced to Mike. He showed me the truth about Robert—a career criminal who had lied to me from the beginning. The realization hit hard, but Mike took control of the situation. With one conversation, the threats disappeared, and I could breathe again.

Robert never resurfaced. No apology, no explanation, nothing. It left a scar, one that still aches every time I think about it. Now, with Nicole gone, the same sense of betrayal lingers, and I can't shake the feeling that history might be repeating itself.

I push thoughts of Robert to the back of my mind again. Just as I reach for the handle to get out of the car, my phone rings. It's Mike's number. I answer immediately.

"Hello?" I say, feeling my pulse quicken.

"Shane, you sitting down, buddy?" Mike's voice has that tone—the one that tells me I'm not going to like what's coming next.

I lean back in the driver's seat. "Yeah, lay it on me."

"I did some digging, and Nicole... she's part of an active investigation. Now, she's not a suspect in any crime, but we think she's mixed up with some pretty serious people. You need to stay away from her."

"What is she involved with?" My throat tightens, dread settling in.

"Between us—this is confidential—it could be anything, possibly trafficking, drugs... we're not sure. But here's where you come in: Some of these organizations are the

same ones that came up with Robert. Now, we don't know her exact connection, or yours, but—"

"Wait, my connections? Are you trying to say I'm a suspect?" I cut him off, my voice sharper than intended.

"No, Shane, we're not saying that. What's more likely is that you're a target again. But we can't overlook this as a coincidence right now. For now, you're involved, and I'm suggesting you keep your distance. Let me know if she contacts you."

"Yeah, sure," I reply.

"Shane..." Mike starts, but I hang up before he can finish.

Serpenti. The word she muttered in her sleep flashes back to me. It was all connected somehow. I need more answers, and I know there's one place I haven't searched yet. I reach into the backseat and pull out something personal, something I've avoided touching until now: the small blue diary Nicole had left under her pillow. Why would she leave something so intimate behind? Was it on purpose? None of that matters now. I have to read it. Maybe this will finally give me the answers everyone else is refusing to.

I head into the diner, slide into a booth, and open the diary. Flipping through the pages, I take pictures with my phone, then use a translation app to make sense of the Italian entries. By the time I'm halfway through, my eyes are blurry with tears, not from any revelations, but from her words about me and Jaime. Every entry is filled with memories of how beautiful her time with us was. How much it meant to her.

Chapter 26

Nicole

I don't know how long I've been down here. The bright lights are always on, messing with my sense of time. No windows, no way to see if it's day or night. I sleep when my body forces me to, and I eat when they remember to feed me, though it feels like it's been hours since the last meal—a cold cheeseburger and some soggy fries tossed in a plastic bowl like I'm some stray dog. They leave me with a bottle of water, a thin sleeping bag, and a bucket for everything else. The toilet paper? One roll, used sparingly.

I'm alone most of the time, the silence heavy in this bare room. But the walls are thin, and voices drift through from upstairs. His men argue constantly, their doubt in Raffaele growing louder. I can hear the cracks forming in his plan, and despite my own situation, it brings a slight sense of satisfaction. But with it comes the worry—Raffaele's losing control, and when people like him lose power, they get desperate. He's already mentioned trouble with Obsidian's higher-ups, and from what I've overheard, he's planning something reckless—an assassination.

The door creaks open upstairs. I hear Raffaele's boots descending the steps, their weight unmistakable. I tense, knowing he's here for me.

"Nicola," he calls out, his voice laced with forced calm. "This could all be over if you just cooperate. You could be upstairs, enjoying a proper meal. Fredo made Bolognese tonight. It's a shame you can't have any."

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I stay silent, my back against the cold wall, arms wrapped around my knees.

He steps closer, his boots stopping just outside my little cell. "Stop this, Nicola. Agree to what we ask, and come upstairs. We can be a family again."

A bitter laugh bubbles up from my throat before I can stop it. Family. What a joke. I spit in his direction, though it barely reaches his boots.

"Nicola," he sighs, frustration seeping into his voice. "Shane doesn't have to get hurt. Neither does Jaime. You can go back to them. Just give us what we need."

I clench my jaw, trying to suppress the rage rising inside me. "I've told you a hundred times—I don't know anything. And even if I did, I'd rather rot down here than help you."

He pulls out his phone, the glow of the screen lighting up his face. I don't even bother looking up until I hear a familiar voice on the other end of the call.

"Hello?" Giovanni's voice echoes from the speaker.

My heart lurches in my chest. I whip around to face Raffaele, full of panic and hope as I shout, "Gio! It's Nicola! Are you alright? Where are you?"

He doesn't respond, just repeats, "Hello?"

Raffaele smirks. "It's muted, Nicola."

I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes. The call ends with a quiet click, leaving the room colder than before. At least I know he's alive.

Raffaele tucks his phone back into his pocket. "See? Gio's working to pay off what your parents left behind, just like you should be. But he's actually doing the work. No billionaire to help him out."

I turn away, staring at the bare wall, my back to him. His words grate on me, but I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me break.

"I'll come back when you're ready to cooperate," Raffaele says, his voice low and threatening. "We're tired of these pointless visits. If you don't start talking soon, maybe we'll just leave you down here for a few days. Let you sit in your filth, hungry and thirsty. Maybe then you'll be ready to be reasonable."

He turns and heads back up the stairs, his boots thudding with each step, the sound fading as the door closes behind him.

I curl up tighter, pulling the sleeping bag around me, my body shivering from more than just the cold. I know what's coming. Raffaele's not patient, and he's running out of time. Soon, he'll stop asking and start taking.

Hours later, I hear footsteps descending the stairs—lighter this time, definitely not Raffaele's. The smell of herbs and tomato sauce fills the stale, musky air, making my stomach growl involuntarily. I turn my head to look, and Fredo is at the foot of the steps. He stands awkwardly, holding a wrapped plate of what I can only assume is the Bolognese Raffaele mentioned earlier. Beside him, a bucket of water with a small white cloth draped over the edge.

He doesn't say anything at first, just looks at me with that familiar mix of pity and discomfort. Fredo's never been like the others. He follows Raffaele's orders, sure, but

there's always been a hesitation in his movements—a reluctance that sets him apart. From what I hear through the thin walls, he doesn't agree with this new direction. He questions things, always second-guessing. I see my chance.

"You want to wash up before you eat?" he asks nervously, his voice wavering slightly.

I don't reply. I just stare at him, curiosity piqued. His eyes dart from me to the bucket, uncertainty written all over his face.

"The water's clean," he adds quickly, almost apologetic. "I can turn my back, give you some time." He nudges the bucket forward, sliding it just within my reach.

I look down at the bucket, hesitating for a moment. The idea of fresh water, of feeling clean again, is tempting, but I can't afford to trust him fully. Still, the grime on my skin feels unbearable.

"Go on," he says, his voice steady but distant. He turns his back to me, folding his arms. I wait for a moment, watching him. When I'm sure he's not looking, I shuffle over and pull the bucket closer. Quickly and efficiently, I splash the water on my skin, wiping away days' worth of dirt and sweat, hitting the essential areas first. It's cold, but it feels incredible.

"Slide it back when you're done," Fredo says, his tone softer, less harsh than usual. I finish up quickly, pushing the bucket back toward him with a nod. Only then does he turn around.

He starts to hand me the plate of food, but pauses, eyeing me with a strange mix of caution and something like... sympathy? "If anyone asks, you had a tuna sandwich," he mutters, the corner of his mouth twitching.

I nod in agreement, eager to take the food. He hands me the plate, and I dig in immediately. The warmth of the pasta and sauce is a shock to my system—it's hot, fresh, and, at that moment, the best thing I've ever tasted. I eat quickly, savoring each bite, knowing it might be a long time before I have something like this again.

Fredo watches me in silence, his eyes studying me but never quite meeting mine. When I finish, I slide the plate back toward him. He dips a small cloth into the water bucket and hands it to me, gesturing at his own mouth. I realize there's sauce on my face, and I quickly wipe it away, handing the cloth back to him.

He turns to leave, but I can't let this opportunity pass. "Raffaele," I say, my voice breaking the heavy quiet. "He's reckless. He's going to get us all killed."

Fredo stops mid-step, one foot on the bottom stair, his shoulders tense. "Perhaps," he replies, his voice flat. "But that's the life we live in, huh?" Fredo's voice is almost resigned, as if he's accepted the inevitability of his world.

"It doesn't have to be," I press, my heart pounding, knowing I'm treading dangerous ground. "I didn't choose this life. My parents did, and I've been paying for it ever since they died. You know I don't deserve this. Help me, please," I whisper, my voice cracking with desperation.

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Fredo hesitates, but only for a moment. "I've helped as much as I can," he says quietly, and with that, he turns and continues up the stairs, leaving me alone in the suffocating silence.

Hours later, I'm still lying on the cold, hard floor when I hear the creaking of the old stairs again. I know immediately that it's Raffaele. I don't bother getting up. I stay on the floor, my back to him, pretending to sleep, but my pulse quickens.

"It's hard to find good, trustworthy people, you know?" Raffaele's voice is slurred, thick with alcohol. "You take them off the street, protect them, and they throw it in your face." He's drunk again, but his tone is eerily calm, laced with malice.

I don't respond. I stay still, my breathing steady, hoping he'll leave.

"I help you. I give you food and shelter, and all you do is betray me. You'd rather help some billionaire you just met. I tell my men, 'don't give her the good stuff; let her suffer,' and they give you pasta. How was it, by the way?" His voice is filled with bitter amusement.

"What do you want, Raffaele?" I ask, my voice flat, tired of his games.

"You know I heard that whole thing, right?" He lets out a dark chuckle, his boots scraping against the concrete floor as he moves closer. "These walls are thin. I just noticed." His laughter dies quickly. "But that means you know some things too, huh? It doesn't matter," he says, his voice dropping. "You're worthless. I keep fighting the urge to kill you because something inside me says not to give up on you. That you'll come to your senses. But I don't think so anymore. You're as stubborn as you were

when I had you before. You won't change... unless you're forced."

"What are you going to do, Raffaele?" I ask, sitting up now, meeting his gaze with defiance. "Throw me in a deeper cell? Starve me? Beat me? You've done all that already."

"It's not your pain that'll scare you," he says, his voice cold. "Maybe next time, I'll bring you a finger, and you can guess whose it is. Might be small enough that you'll be convinced it's someone you care about."

The blood drains from my face as the weight of his words sinks in. He starts walking up the stairs, leaving me paralyzed with fear. And then, in the silence, I hear her voice—my mother's. You can't always do what's right, Nicola. Sometimes, we do things we aren't comfortable with to protect the ones we love. Her words echo in my mind, just as they always do when my survival instincts are pushed to the limit.

"Raffaele," I call out, my voice trembling but firm. He stops, turning slowly, curiosity flickering in his eyes.

"I need to know exactly what it is you want me to do," I say, forcing my voice to steady. "And I need guarantees before I agree to anything."

A slow, satisfied smile spreads across his face as he descends the stairs again. "I just need you to do what you're good at, Nicola. Making men fall for you, making them trust you. You're going to go back to your billionaire, tell him you left to check on Giovanni, and that you love him. Get close. Tell him you want to be more involved in business. Get access to his office, his computers, his safe, and get me the information I need, or at least something useful: dirt, debts, the kind of things I can use for leverage. You do that, and no one gets hurt."

"And if I don't?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"If you don't," Raffaele says, his voice dripping with malice, "you stay here. And each week, I'll bring you a body part. You can decide whether it belongs to Jaime or Giovanni. Maybe I'll visit your lawyer friend—Annette, wasn't it?—and her son. Who knows?"

"Okay," I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them. "I'll do it."

Raffaele's eyes gleam with triumph. "I'm so proud of you, Nicola. But I need to think this over. If I feel I can trust you, I'll come back, and we'll talk. Until then... get some sleep."

He walks back up the stairs, leaving me alone again.

Chapter 27

Shane

I arrive at the precinct and spot Mike in the lobby, deep in conversation with a uniformed officer. The moment he sees me, he waves me over.

"Alright, first things first," Mike says, his tone brisk and businesslike. "We need to ensure your nephew is safe while we proceed with the investigation. Follow me, and we'll get some details from you."

"Of course," I reply, my voice tight with concern.

They lead me to a small interrogation room, the sterile atmosphere making the situation feel all the more real. Mike pulls out a pen and notepad, ready to take down information.

"Alright," he begins, looking me square in the eye. "Where is Jaime now, and who's

he with?"

"He's at the Fullmont Resort with his nanny, Gladys Moore. Room 803."

Mike nods, jotting it down. "Good. Hotels like the Fullmont have solid security, especially ones that are as upscale as that. Can you call them now?"

"Yeah, but I don't want Jaime to know anything about this. He can't find out he's in any danger."

Mike gives a reassuring nod. "Don't worry. We'll make sure Gladys knows what's going on, but we'll do our best to keep Jaime in the dark. He doesn't need to know any more than he has to."

I pull out my phone, hands a little shaky. I dial Gladys and try to remember how Mike suggested I explain the situation. As the phone rings, I glance at Mike for reassurance.

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"Gladys," I say, keeping my voice steady. "There've been some threats made against me... serious threats, but the police are involved, and I'm with them now."

There's a sharp gasp on the other end. "Shane, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, we're fine," I say quickly. "They just want to take precautions, so you need to stay at the resort. They'll send an officer to keep an eye on you, but everything should be alright. Just... let's not worry Jaime, okay?"

"Of course," she replies, surprisingly calm for someone who just learned of the threats. "You're sure you're okay?"

Just then, I hear Jaime's voice in the background. "Is that Uncle Shane? Can I talk to him?"

I smile despite everything. "Sure, put him on."

"Uncle Shane!" Jaime's excitement crackles through the phone. "We're having so much fun! Gladys said I can swim in the pool all day."

I can hear the splashing of water and children playing. It's surreal how his world is still so carefree while mine is anything but.

"That's great, buddy. Have fun," I say, trying to keep my voice light.

"Did you find Nicole yet?" Jaime asks, his innocent curiosity hitting me harder than I expected.

"We're working on it, bud. Just enjoy the pool, okay? Listen to Gladys."

"Okay! Love you, Uncle Shane! Bye!"

The phone clicks, and Gladys is back on the line. "He's gone back to the pool."

"Alright, Gladys. It's really important that you don't leave the resort." Mike steps in, his voice firm. "I'm putting you on with an officer now who'll ask you some questions and stay on the line until our guy arrives."

"Yes, officer," she replies, her tone steady but concerned.

"I'll call you soon," I add, feeling the weight of it all.

"Take care, Shane," Gladys says softly.

I hand the phone to the officer, who nods and promises to return it once he's done talking to Gladys. Mike motions for me to follow him.

"Let's go to my office," he says, leading me out of the interrogation room.

Mike's office hasn't changed since the last time I was here. The same tattered chairs and dusty shelves still smell like a brand-new car after someone has just smoked a carton of cigarettes in it.

"This guy is really something," Mike says, sliding a file across the desk toward me.

I pick it up, reading aloud. "Raffaele."

"Yeah. This guy's neck-deep in all kinds of shit. Flipping on his bosses back home, planning hits here. A classic Tony Montana wannabe."

"Scarface?"

"Yeah," Mike snorts. "That movie is like the fucking American Dream to guys like him. But, just like in the movie, they always bite off more than they can chew. Same ending, too. Maybe not as dramatic, but they all go down."

Mike leans back in his chair, tapping the desk as he talks. "He's tied up with a new group over here—Le Ombre, or Obsidian, as they like to call themselves. He's making some serious moves. Big targets on his back."

"This is the guy Nicole's with?" I ask, my voice tightening.

Mike nods. "Looks like it. And apparently, she's known him for a while—way before she ever came to America."

"You think she's working with him?" The question comes out before I can stop it, my stomach twisting with the thought.

Mike shakes his head. "Nah, not unless you're working with him, too," he says with a smirk. "We don't have her tied to anything criminal. She's clean, from what we can see."

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"So arrest him," I demand, my frustration bubbling to the surface.

Mike sighs, rubbing his temples. "It's not that easy, Shane. If I tell you we've been after him for years, just assume we've tried everything. Nothing sticks. The guy's got a silver tongue and a Rolodex full of lawyers. Half the time, we don't even know where he's gonna pop up next."

"So you know he's committed all these crimes," I say, pointing to the file in front of me, "and you can't do anything?"

"Yeah, that's how it works," Mike says, leaning forward. "We need something solid—something that sticks. If we grab him now on suspicion or whatever, he'll see it coming. He'll adapt, go underground, learn our patterns. The last thing we wanna do is make him an even better criminal. We need something undeniable, something he can't talk his way out of. Once we have that, maybe his connections will turn their backs on him, too."

I look over the file, feeling its weight sinking into my chest. He doesn't look like Nicole's type. At least, not from what I know of her. But then again, I'm starting to realize just how little I've ever really known her at all.

Mike's description of Raffaele sends my mind spinning. This isn't just some thug trying to make a quick buck. This guy is dangerous and deeply connected. I can't help but think about what it must've been like for Nicole to be involved with him. The fear, the control. How long has she lived in his shadow, constantly watching her back? Maybe that's why she couldn't let her guard down around me, why she seemed distant, never willing to get too close. She must have been terrified, traumatized,

even. And here I was, thinking it was something I did wrong.

As if reading my mind, Mike clears his throat. "You know, Shane... it's possible Raffaele's got a personal vendetta against you."

"What do you mean?"

Mike taps the file again. "You remember that deal you busted up ten years ago? The one with Robert?"

I nod, the memory flooding back like a bad dream.

"Well, Raffaele was tied up in that, too. We didn't know it at the time, but his fingerprints were all over it. He lost big when you pulled out of that deal. It's not impossible he's been waiting to make his move ever since."

I stare at Mike, the pieces slowly clicking into place. "You think he's using Nicole to get to me?"

Mike leans back in his chair, arms crossed. "It's a possibility. He knows your connection to her, knows she's been close to you and Jaime. That's a lot of leverage. And if he's as desperate as it seems... yeah, I'd say you're a target."

A cold chill runs through me. Jaime. My heartbeat races as I think about my nephew and how vulnerable he is. "What about Jaime? What if Raffaele comes after him?"

Mike's face softens. "Don't worry, Shane. We'll make sure Jaime's protected. He'll be under our watch. But you—" Mike pauses, choosing his words carefully. "You need to be smart about this. We'll handle Raffaele, but Nicole... we might not be able to do anything about her."

Anger flares inside me, a heat I can't suppress. "That's not good enough, Mike. I can't just sit here and let you handle it. I'm not leaving Nicole to fend for herself."

Mike raises his hands in a calming gesture. "Shane, I get it. But you need to think this through. If you go after Raffaele yourself, you're walking into a war zone. I'm telling you, we're working on it. But we need time."

"I don't have time!" I snap, slamming my fist onto the desk. "I'm not going to sit around while Raffaele threatens my family. I'll handle it myself if you won't do anything."

Mike gives me a long, hard look, his face unreadable. "You're making a mistake," he says quietly. "Don't do anything rash. I'll have eyes on Jaime, but you... you're on your own if you go down this road."

"I've been on my own before," I reply coldly. "I'll figure it out." Without waiting for Mike's response, I grab my coat and storm out of the office.

As I step out into the street, the reality of the situation hits me hard. Nicole is out there somewhere, trapped in Raffaele's world. Jaime's safety depends on me making the right decisions. But I can't sit back and do nothing.

Chapter 28

Nicole

Raffaele comes downstairs and orders one of his men to unchain me. Fear tightens my chest as I remember what he said about me being useless now. I haven't given him anything, I think to myself, my mind racing. There are the people who escape or are saved, and then there are the ones who don't. The thought chills me, but I refuse to let it consume me. I won't go out like that, I tell myself, forcing calm over the panic

threatening to rise.

"I've done what I can," I murmur under my breath, a wave of quiet dignity washing over me as I steel myself for whatever comes next. As we reach the top of the stairs, I brace for the worst. But instead of whatever dark scenario I'd imagined, they lead me to my room. Raffaele and his goon stay outside, watching as I step in.

"Shower. Get dressed. Come out when you're done," Raffaele says, shutting the door firmly behind me.

My room is trashed, just as I expected. My bags are overturned, and my clothes and belongings are scattered everywhere. They've gone through everything. Of course they have. I take a deep breath and head straight to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. The sight of the shower makes me pause; the thought of hot water hitting my skin feels almost foreign. Has it been a week? It must've been at least that long since I felt something warm and cleansing. I strip off my dirty clothes and step in, letting the water run over me, feeling the grime and stress melt away for a moment.

Afterward, I dress quickly, not wanting to give them any reason to think I'm stalling. The guy waiting outside the door is new—I've never seen him before. He leads me downstairs without a word. When we reach the dining room, I see Raffaele seated at the head of the table, a spread of food laid out before him: crepes, Italian sausage, fresh baguettes, eggs, and a few other dishes I can't even identify right away.

I sit. Another man is working in the kitchen, also unfamiliar.

I can't help but notice Fredo's absence. The temptation to ask where he is gnaws at me, but I stop myself. You can't save everyone, I remind myself. Gio, Jaime, Shane—focus.

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"New crew?" I ask, settling into my seat, my eyes scanning the room.

"Something like that," Raffaele says, smirking. "But that's not your concern. Just know that all these men are loyal to me. They recognize me as the future of Avvoltoi. You could learn something from them."

I glance at the table, at the feast laid out before us. "You celebrating?" I ask, unable to hide the bitterness in my tone.

"Power and respect have their rewards," he replies smugly, cutting into a sausage. "Me and those around me? We always eat well."

Each word from his mouth turns my stomach. Raffaele has always been arrogant, a man who believes he is bigger than the world around him. But now, it's more than arrogance—it's delusion. He doesn't speak anymore; he preaches, like some twisted prophet of his own making.

"Please," he says, his voice eerily sincere. "Eat. You must be hungry."

The false kindness in his tone is chilling, considering everything he's done to me. I sit there, staring at the food, unwilling to move.

"Okay," Raffaele says, almost as if he's surrendering. He begins to help himself, grabbing sausages and baguettes.

"French omelet with Gruyère and fresh herbs, or a sausage omelet with caramelized onions, roasted red peppers, and cheddar?" Raffaele says, pointing to the two omelets

on the table. When I don't respond, he shrugs and takes the sausage omelet for himself. He pours some orange juice from a jug and starts eating.

I sit in silence, wrestling with whether to eat or not. But my body chooses for me. My hunger is overwhelming, and my hands instinctively reach for the nearest stack of bacon. I stuff a piece into my mouth, the taste hitting me like a jolt. Before I know it, my plate is full, and I'm stuffing food down like it's my last meal.

"So, you want to convince me you're still useful?" Raffaele says, his voice casual but laced with challenge. "Convince me."

"I'll do it. Whatever you need from Shane—I'll find it, bug his office, whatever you want. But you leave me and Gio out of this after it's done. You don't touch Jaime."

"And Shane?" Raffaele's voice drops to a low tone.

"I'm here, aren't I? I left Shane once; I'll do what you need and leave him again. He can take care of himself." The words come out cold, detached—nothing like how I feel.

Raffaele chuckles. "I send you back to Shane, and you'll do everything you can to take me down. No, Nicola, we're beyond that now, and we both know it. You need assurances, and so do I."

"What do you want me to do?" I stop eating, my appetite completely gone. "You've already got Gio. You've threatened everyone I know. I'm locked in your prison." My voice rises louder now, frustration cracking through. "What else can you take from me? What else do I have to lose, to offer?"

"Your loyalty." His eyes narrow. "I want you to prove your loyalty to me, the one who's protected you. Gio's done his part; it's time for you to prove yourself. The way

I see it, you owe me two debts. One for you, one for Gio. First, you prove your loyalty to me. You do that, and Gio goes free. And once I have what I need from your billionaire... we'll be clear."

I stare at him, rage simmering under the surface. In his twisted mind, he's justified every ounce of torture, every threat, every vile thing he's done. And now he says I owe him. I glance at the knife on the table before me—gleaming silver, practically calling my name. A single moment, a quick lunge across the table, and this nightmare could be over. But then, so would I. So would Gio. I force myself to relax, noting what the torture has done to me. My survival instincts are at their peak. He's not wrong to be suspicious; I can't wait to see him hurt.

"Nicola." Raffaele's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "Are you listening?"

I nod and play along. "How do I prove my loyalty to you... as the new head of the Avvoltoi?" The words make me want to vomit, but Raffaele's smile widens, feeding off the praise. His ego is monstrous, even more grotesque than I ever realized.

He whistles sharply, and his men file out of the room without a word. "Not for their ears," he says, locking eyes with me.

I take a sip of the coffee, trying to steady myself. "What do you need?"

"Le Ombre owns an establishment in town—The Velvet Mirage. You know it?"

I freeze. My heart sinks as realization dawns. "You want me to help you kill someone?"

Raffaele grins. "You want to prove your loyalty? What better way to bind us together?"

"I'm not a killer, Raffaele. I'm not doing it." My voice is firm, but inside, I'm unraveling.

He leans back, his smirk fading. "You won't kill anyone. We just need you to help get close to him."

The air between us thickens. I know what he's doing—he's trapping me. He knows I'll be entirely bound to him once I help him with this. Spying on Shane is one thing; this is something else entirely. He's tying me into his web, ensuring I can never leave without consequence. Le Ombre, the police, Avvoltoi—someone would catch up with me eventually, and all he'd have to do is make a phone call.

"So... The Velvet Mirage. You know it?" His tone is serious.

"Yeah," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

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"Good." Raffaele's eyes gleam with pride as he lays out the plan. It's sloppy, full of holes, just like I expected. He's getting desperate. But I don't question anything. I let him think he's in control.

As he speaks, I drift, lost in my thoughts. How did I get here? Caught up in something so dark, so twisted? I think of my mother's words, her lifeless body flashing before my eyes. Her voice echoes in my mind, warning me about this life. I see myself dead-eyed and broken, lying across a bed just like her.

I can't do this, and I can't let him do it either. My mind races with its own plan, one I have to execute before it's too late.

Raffaele's voice pulls me back. "It should take no more than—"

There's a knock at the door, and one of his men steps in. "Raffaele, we need you now."

Raffaele sighs, annoyed. He looks back at me. "Enjoy your breakfast. Think about what I've said." He stands up, wiping his hands on a napkin. "And remember this—you will be assisting me in a murder, one way or another. Either this Le Ombre pig... or Giovanni. This time, I mean it. Once I take control, your protection is gone. Better you prove your worth now."

He leaves, shutting the door behind him and leaving me alone at the table. I stare at the half-eaten plate of food, nausea rising in my throat. Slowly, I pick at the bacon, knowing I need my strength for whatever comes next.

Raffaele thinks he's cornered me, but he doesn't know everything. If I call the police, Raffaele could know it was me. He'd take his vengeance out on Gio, Shane, and eventually me. He needs to be rooted out. Le Ombre may be the key to turning this all around, and I have one in mind. Finding him may take some time, but being the daughter of informants, if there's one thing I've learned from my parents... it's how to play the patience game.

Chapter 29

Shane

"The Velvet Mirage," I say aloud, the name lingering in my thoughts. I'd heard of it—a notorious gangster joint on the lower side of town. But thinking back, I can't recall Nicole ever mentioning it. "Naw, doesn't ring a bell."

"You're sure?" Mike asks, the hinges of his desk chair creaking as he leans back, studying my reaction.

"Yeah," I respond, my voice tense with frustration. "I'm sure she's never talked about it. What's this about?"

"Just a lead we're following up on. Nothing for you to worry about," Mike says, his tone dismissive, but I can tell there's more to it.

"So what is it? Is that where he's keeping Nicole?"

"No, Shane. And even if it was, I couldn't tell you. You don't need me to remind you how an active investigation works, do you?"

I sigh heavily, the exhaustion of weeks of dead ends wearing me down. "Please don't."

"Just be patient. We're getting close," Mike says, but it feels hollow, like every other vague assurance I've heard.

My eyes narrow. "That's it? You drag me down here, ask me about some random nightclub, and give me nothing?"

Mike crosses his arms, unfazed. "You know we can't talk about this over the phone. Not with what's at stake. And there's nothing to give, Shane."

I stand up, frustration surging through me. "Fine. If you can't tell me anything, I'll figure it out myself." I head toward the door, the thought of doing nothing gnawing at me. "Maybe I'll stop by this Velvet Mirage myself and ask a few questions."

"Shane!" Mike's voice snaps with authority. "Sit down."

I ignore him, my hand already on the doorknob. I'm ready to act, to do something—anything.

"Shane, I will have you arrested before you leave this building," he says, his tone deadly serious.

I spin around, glaring at him. "On what charge?"

"Interfering with an active investigation," he states firmly, the threat hanging between us. I can see it in his eyes—he means it. There's something about that place. Something he's not telling me.

I drop my hand from the knob and sit back down. "What do you expect me to do? You tell me you can't help Nicole because she might be involved in something, but then you bring me here and leave me in the dark. I seem to be the only one who actually gives a damn about her. What do you expect from me, Mike? You want to

arrest me? Fine. But you know I've got some of the best lawyers in the city. How long do you really think you can keep me here?"

Mike leans forward, eyes narrowing, his voice low. "Just long enough to make an arrest." I make a mental note of that; whatever is happening is going down soon.

I scoff. "You don't even know where she is. Hell, you're the one asking me for information. You're fumbling in the dark, and maybe Nicole's just not a priority for you. You want your big bust, your crime lords, whatever. But I want Nicole safe, and if you don't help me, I've got a fortune in the bank that will. If these guys want money, fine. I just want Nicole back."

Mike's jaw clenches, and for a moment, the room is thick with tension. Neither of us speaks, but I see him weighing his options, torn between his duty and our friendship.

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"Listen, Shane," he says, his voice hard but steady. "These guys don't mess around. If you go waving your money in their faces, they'll bleed you dry or put you in a box."

He takes a deep breath, and I try to do the same. Both of us recognize the stubbornness in the other, but neither of us is willing to back down.

"We're friends," Mike continues, his tone calmer now, trying to reach me. "So I'm telling you this because I hope you'll use that smart brain of yours and see reason. This shit that Nicole's wrapped up in, it's major. You don't want to get yourself any deeper than you already are."

"Then tell me what's really going on," I press, leaning forward, desperate for answers.

"This is confidential," he says, his voice lowering. "We think Raffaele is planning to make a move on the leader of the local syndicate."

"Le Ombre?" I ask, the name sending a chill through me.

"Yeah," Mike confirms. "We're still trying to locate where the hit might go down, and the Velvet Mirage is one of the places our leads keep pointing to."

"What does Nicole have to do with all this?" I ask, the question gnawing at me.

"We don't know yet," he admits. "But it's suspicious as hell that, given her connections, she ups and disappears right when all of this is about to go down."

"So, what, you think she's involved?" My voice rises with frustration.

"We don't know," Mike says carefully. "But whether she's a distraction or something more, until she proves otherwise, she's on their side in our eyes. We have plans to make a clean arrest and minimize casualties, but your involvement and raising suspicion could jeopardize everything."

"I want to be there when you make the arrest," I insist, my voice tight with determination. "If she sees me, maybe she'll know she's safe, that we're there to help—"

"Absolutely not," Mike cuts me off sharply. "If she contacts you at any point before we move in, you call me immediately. Don't do anything stupid, Shane."

"Okay," I submit. "I'll stay out of the way."

I can tell from the look on his face that he doesn't believe I'll keep my word. He's a good detective, after all.

"Jaime's still under our protection, if you want it, until this blows over," Mike adds. "And so are you. My suggestion? Go be with your family. I'll call you the minute we have something concrete."

"Thanks, Mike," I mutter, standing up to leave. But my mind is spinning as I walk out of his office, the weight of everything settling on my shoulders like a lead blanket. Assassinations. Nicole mixed up with these monsters. It feels like my entire life has spiraled into chaos.

I let out a deep breath once I'm back in my car, pulling out my phone to text Marie:

On my way.

My father's stepmother has always been different from the rest of the family she

married into. Marie had been one of the few reliable figures for me and Claire growing up—a kind soul, a grounding presence. The last time I saw her was at Claire's funeral, where she'd expressed doubt about me raising Jaime. She'd admitted, though, that her constant traveling wouldn't be the best for a child Jaime's age. She returned from Montenegro about a week ago, wanting to spend time with him. I agreed. Getting Jaime out of town for a while seemed like the safest option, especially given the circumstances, and I trust her completely. Our new nanny, Allison, went with them. Gladys, understandably, needed some distance from the chaos.

The hotel I booked for them is a few hours outside the city—Mike's suggestion. High tourism, low crime. Knowing I can afford to keep them safe and comfortable gives me peace of mind. Still, as I drive the three hours to the hotel, I can't shake the haunting thoughts about all the people who can't escape danger, who don't have the means to protect their loved ones.

When I finally pull up to the grand hotel, its elegance washes over me. The place looks like something out of a dream, with its fine furniture, soft lighting, and a live pianist playing in the lobby. The air smells of expensive perfume and polished wood, a far cry from the tension choking me back in the city. I take a deep breath and head up to the 12th floor.

As I enter the room, I find Jaime and Marie sitting on the couch, watching cartoons. Both their heads turn as I walk in, and Jaime immediately leaps up and rushes over to hug me.

"Hey, buddy! I missed you," I say, scooping him up. "You being good for Grandma Marie and Allison?"

Marie smiles warmly, watching us. "Hi, grandson," she says.

"Hey, Marie," I reply, setting Jaime down. "Where's Allison?"

"She's getting Jaime's bath ready," Marie responds with a nod toward the bathroom.

Jaime tugs at my sleeve, motioning me to lean closer. "I gotta tell you a secret," he whispers. I lean down, and he cups his hands around my ear. "I don't like Allison. I want Nicole back."

My heart clenches at his words, but I manage a soft smile. "I'm sure she misses you too, buddy."

Allison's voice floats in from the bathroom. "Jaime, it's bath time!"

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I glance toward the bathroom. "Hey, Allison!" I call out.

She steps briefly into view, giving me a cheerful smile. "Oh, hi, Mr. Matthews! How's everything?"

"Great, Allison, thanks for being here," I reply, keeping my tone light.

"No problem! This place is wonderful, and I've been having the best time with Jaime and Marie. By the way, is there a little boy out here who needs a bath?" she teases, raising an eyebrow.

I give Jaime a playful look. "Yeah, he's going," I say.

Jaime huffs dramatically, rolling his eyes. "Okay, okay," he grumbles, clearly not thrilled, but he gets up and trudges toward the bathroom.

"Thanks," Allison says, retreating back into the bathroom as Jaime drags his feet toward her, looking like he's heading to his doom.

I chuckle softly. "Go on," I say gently.

Jaime sighs one last time before disappearing into the bathroom, leaving me and Marie alone.

Marie pats the spot on the couch beside her. "Come sit with me."

I do as she asks, sinking into the plush cushions beside her. She studies me for a

moment, her gaze filled with the kind of wisdom that only comes with age. "How are you really?" she asks.

I hesitate; my first instinct is to deflect. "Uhh... I'm fine."

"No, you're not," she says softly but firmly. The silence between us stretches for a moment as I try to figure out how much to say. I can't tell her the truth—she'd worry too much. But I can't lie, either.

"Is it about Nicole? Jaime keeps talking about her."

I pause, feeling the weight of her question. "Yeah... she left. It's been rough on both of us."

Marie nods sympathetically. "That's too bad. The way Jaime talks about her, she seems like she made a good impression on you two."

"She did," I admit, memories of Nicole flashing through my mind—the way she smiled, the way she cared for Jaime, the way she made everything feel just a little bit better.

Marie watches me carefully. "Too bad. You know better than anyone we could use some positive additions to the family." She pauses, then asks gently, "Is she gone for good?"

"I don't know," I say honestly, my voice low. "There's a small chance she might come back, but it's complicated. She's gotten herself into a bit of a mess."

Marie raises an eyebrow, her eyes sharp with concern. "Well, you did everything you could, right? I mean, you wouldn't be sitting here, wasting time talking to me, if the love of your life was out there and you knew you could get her back, would you?"

I don't say anything, but her words hit me hard. She's right. I sit there for a moment, her genuine smile comforting, yet pushing me to face the truth.

"Okay," I mutter to myself and to her, nodding as if to reaffirm the decision already forming in my mind. "Yeah. I'll bring her back."

Chapter 30

Nicole

I listen to Raffaele go over his plan again, searching for any gaps, any opportunity to turn the tables. I've played along, nodding and pretending to understand. I've promised him I'll do whatever it takes to free Gio, and I will—even if it means killing Raffaele myself.

Tommaso, one of Raffaele's most loyal men, enters the room. "He's here," Tom says, his voice clipped.

Raffaele straightens, a smirk playing on his lips. "Alright." He turns to me. "Come on, Nicola. There's someone you need to meet."

"What's going on?" I ask, keeping my voice even.

"Dino. My connection in Le Ombre. He wants a sit-down," Raffaele explains, eyeing me carefully.

"Why does he need to meet me?"

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Raffaele exhales, clearly annoyed by the question. “He’s betraying his own people to put me on top. Dino’s got a lot on the line, and he wants to be sure about who he’s working with.” His tone suggests I shouldn’t even be asking.

Traitors working together to climb to the top—how fitting, I think. Raffaele and Dino are cut from the same cloth, both men willing to betray anyone to serve their own ambitions.

“Come on,” Raffaele demands.

I take a deep breath and follow him into the front sitting room. It’s a small, worn space, with furniture facing a large window overlooking the front yard. Three men in suits stand inside. One is near the door, arms crossed, while the other two are searching the room, checking under cushions and rifling through drawers.

“What’s this, Dino?” Raffaele asks, irritation clear in his voice.

Dino, the man near the door, doesn’t even glance over. “Just a precaution.”

“No trust?” Raffaele asks.

Dino finally turns, locking eyes with Raffaele. “I’m putting my ass on the line here, Raf. Trust comes with precautions. You understand that.” He gestures to his men as they continue their search. “We aren’t exactly swapping cookie recipes, are we?”

I can feel the tension in Raffaele. Being forced to wait in his own home while Dino’s men search is clearly getting under his skin. Dino holds the power here, and it shows.

After a few more moments, one of Dino's men nods. "It's clean."

Dino pulls out his phone and starts playing soft music. Raffaele gives him a confused look.

"It's just a precaution," Dino explains casually. "Don't want any ears outside this room hearing what we're talking about."

The music is subtle, just loud enough to muffle our voices but dull enough that we can talk over it comfortably. Clearly, Dino's no amateur.

Raffaele nods, though it's clear he doesn't like it.

"Let's sit," Dino says, gesturing to the couch.

Raffaele and I sit side by side, while Dino takes the armchair across from us. His body language is relaxed, but his eyes are sharp, taking in every detail. Tom stands off to the side, while Dino's man posts up near the door, arms crossed, watching us closely.

"So it's the three of you?" Dino asks, leaning back in his chair.

"Yeah. This is Nicola," Raffaele says, nodding toward me. "And that's Tom."

Dino's gaze narrows as it lands on me. "They know the plan?"

"They know what they need to know," Raffaele replies, his voice tight.

"Alright," Dino says, his attention still fixed on me. "I want to hear it from them."

Raffaele shoots me a sharp look. "Nicola, tell him the plan."

My throat tightens, and panic rises. I wasn't expecting this. My mind races as I try to piece together everything Raffaele has told me.

"Nicola," Raffaele growls, frustration seeping through.

I take a breath, my hands gripping the edge of the couch. "We'll go—"

Dino raises a hand, cutting me off. He turns to Raffaele. "You're scaring her. Give us the room."

Raffaele blinks, caught off guard. "What?"

"I need the room," Dino repeats firmly. "I want to go over the plan with her and make sure she knows it."

Raffaele's jaw tightens. "This is my house."

"And this is my plan," Dino snaps, his voice cold. "My ass is on the line if things go wrong. I need to be sure she knows what she's doing, and I don't need her freezing up because you're breathing down her neck. We do this my way, or we end it here."

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Raffaele clenches his fists, but doesn't argue. "Fine," he mutters.

"Johnny, go with them," Dino orders.

Johnny silently follows Raffaele and Tom into the kitchen. The door clicks shut behind them, leaving Dino and me alone.

Dino studies me for a moment, saying nothing. His eyes are sharp, his expression unreadable.

"Do you want to go over the plan?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

He ignores my question. "Are you loyal to Raffaele?" he asks instead, his voice calm but cutting.

I freeze, unsure of how to respond. Dino's stare is unnerving, like he's done this a thousand times and knows every lie before it's spoken. The lie I'm about to tell gets caught in my throat. I know he'll see right through it.

"Yeah," I say finally, though my voice wavers.

"Why?" he presses.

Another question I wasn't prepared for. I hesitate again, and the look on Dino's face tells me he notices. His eyes narrow, and I can feel my heart start to race. I'm not good at this.

“He can’t hear you,” Dino assures me. His tone is casual, almost comforting, but it doesn’t calm the storm inside me.

I swallow hard. “Because... he’s helped me before,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “I owe him.”

Dino raises an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. “A lot of people helped Raffaele, and he ain’t exactly loyal to any of them,” he says, leaning in slightly. “But you... I hear good things about you.” His voice drops, and his gaze pierces mine. “You’ve got some friends, Nicole. More than you know.”

My curiosity spikes. “I do?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah,” Dino says, leaning back. “Pietro tells me you’re a good kid. Owed a bit of debt, but you’ve been paying it off.”

“Pietro?” I repeat, confused. The name is familiar, but hearing it come out of Dino’s mouth sends a shiver down my spine.

“Yeah,” he confirms. “Pietro. Head of the Avvoltoi. He says you’ve got his protection and that this clown Raffaele is just using you.”

I blink, trying to process what I’m hearing. Raffaele always spoke as if he was now on top, but here’s Dino calmly explaining that the real power still lies with Pietro.

“Look,” Dino continues, his voice steady, “I’m still loyal to Pietro. No way in hell am I letting Raffaele take him down. And if this idiot thinks I’m gonna betray my own people for him, he’s more delusional than I thought. We’ve got his little scheme all set up. When the time comes, Raffaele won’t be leaving that party at The Velvet Mirage.”

I stare at him, overwhelmed by this revelation. Everything I thought I knew about this situation shifts. Raffaele isn't in control—he's a pawn, just like me.

“So,” Dino says, fixing me with that same sharp gaze, “I’m gonna ask you again. Are you loyal to Raffaele?”

My heart pounds. This could be a trap. What if Raffaele put Dino up to this, just to test me? But the look in Dino’s eyes... I know he’s telling the truth. I’m tired of Raffaele’s games. Tired of being scared.

“No,” I say firmly, my voice steady this time. “And I’d rather die than spend another minute with him.”

Dino gives a satisfied nod. “Good,” he says. “Now listen, I can’t give you all the details, but I can tell you this: When things go down, it’s gonna get messy. There’ll be carnage. When that happens, you run. Get out of there, don’t look back. My people know your situation—they won’t target you.”

Relief washes over me, but I know better than to let my guard down completely. This isn’t over yet.

“And one more thing,” Dino adds. “I can’t confirm it, but I’ve heard the cops might be getting involved. And your billionaire—he’s been hanging around that club a lot lately.”

The mention of Shane sends a shock through my system. Shane... how did he get mixed up in this? It’s my fault. He’s in danger because of me.

“I don’t know how he got wind of this,” Dino continues. “Maybe he’s working with the cops, maybe he’s not. Either way, don’t freak out if you see him. We’re trying to keep him out of the club when things go down, but... it’s not a guarantee.”

I swallow hard. Shane, tangled up in this mess, risking his life because of me. I have to protect him, somehow. But how?

“Do you understand?” Dino asks, pulling me back to reality.

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“Yes,” I nod, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

“Good,” Dino says. “This stays between you and me. Got it?”

“Got it,” I reply, and for the first time since this nightmare began, I feel a flicker of hope. For all his rough edges, Dino seems like someone I can trust.

“So you’ve seen Shane?” I ask cautiously, my heart picking up speed at the thought of him.

Dino nods, leaning back in his chair with a slight smirk. “Yeah, guy’s a mess. Mopes around the club all day by himself, watching the faces of every woman who walks by.” He glances at me, his eyes locking onto mine. “Guess he hasn’t seen the one he’s looking for yet. Bit of a downer, really, but he spends a lot of money and tips nice, so the bosses keep him around.” He lets out a low chuckle. “Rents the SKY VIP lounge every day so he can look over the club for you. Even on days when he’s the only one up there. Boss fucking loves that shit.”

A wave of guilt hits me hard, twisting in my gut. Shane’s out there, looking for me, putting himself at risk, all because of the mess I dragged him into.

“Thanks,” I mutter, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Dino says, rising from his chair. “Now, let’s go over that plan.”

Shane

I park the blue Ranger a few blocks from the Velvet Mirage and walk the rest. It's my third rental this week—Mike's unmarked tails know the others by now, and I know all of his cars, too. Our friendship, if you can still call it that, has turned into a game of cat and mouse. He's warned me to stay away from the club and even threatened to arrest me a few times, but his threats are as empty as his promises to find Nicole. Business at the Velvet is booming, and I'm a tax-paying citizen. If Mike really wanted to, he could've hauled me in on some trumped-up charge by now, but he hasn't. Part of me thinks he's protecting himself—he's trusted me with the details of a planned high-profile assassination attempt on a local mob boss. If that got out, he'd be done. Another part of me thinks he's counting on me. If Nicole reaches out to anyone, it'll be me, and I'm his best chance of figuring out what Raffaele has planned.

As I approach the Velvet, the bass-heavy music pulsing through the club's walls thuds in my chest. The place is unmistakably mafia-run. You can tell by the men stationed around the entrance—rough-cut guys with straight faces, sacred and hardened. They wear dark clothing, their eyes scanning every passerby with casual menace. They linger in the shadows, close enough to be noticed but far enough to make you wonder what's going on behind the scenes. Inside, it's more of the same. Some of these guys are clearly muscle, tattoos creeping out from under their collars. They don't smile, barely talk, just stand there, watching.

I've grown out my beard and mustache over the past few weeks, trying to blend in and not be noticed. I keep my head down as I make my way through the entrance, the beat of the music practically rattling my teeth. The club's neon lights cast red and blue shadows across the room, adding to the illicit feel of the place. The air smells like expensive cologne, sweat, and alcohol—a mix that hits me when I walk in. No one pays me any attention; to them, I'm just another guy in a nice suit spending too much money. That's all anyone here cares about.

The VIP lounge at the Velvet has become my home away from home these past few weeks. Despite all the effort and all the money I've poured into occupying the space daily, Nicole was nowhere to be seen. I look down over the dance floor. The tinted windows of the sky lounge allow me to observe everything without being noticed. It's early—only 6 p.m.—so the crowd is still thin, but I know it'll pick up soon enough.

I glance at my phone at a picture Jaime sent me that morning. I'd booked him, Marie, and Allison a flight to Toronto, hoping to keep them safe. In the photo, Jaime's at an aquarium, walking through a tunnel-shaped glass hallway submerged in water, where sharks swim just inches away. The irony makes me laugh, but only for a moment. I feel like I'm in the tank now, swimming with predators.

A text comes in from Mike. He's called three times today, but I haven't answered. "Where are you?" the message reads. Before I can put the phone down, another one pings through. "Please tell me you're not at the club," it says.

I turn off the screen, shove the phone into my pocket, and take a long swig of Don Pérignon, courtesy of the skybox. The bubbles fizz on my tongue, but they do nothing to ease the tension in my chest. A knock at the door pulls me out of my thoughts.

I open it to see a massive security guard, his face expressionless. "Shane?" he growls.

My stomach tightens. "Yeah," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

He hands me a phone. "It's for you."

My heart skips a beat. Could it be her?

But when I press the phone to my ear, Mike's raspy voice greets me instead. "What the hell are you doing there, Shane?"

I sigh heavily. "Enjoying my night out, which I have every right to do."

"Listen to me, Shane," Mike says, his tone sharper than usual. "We think shit's about to go down. I need you to stay in that box no matter what. Do not move."

"Wait, is Nicole here?" I ask, my voice barely steady.

"No, and if she shows up, Shane, stay away. We've got plainclothes officers on the way. We don't need you getting in the mix if bullets start flying. Do you understand me?" Mike's voice is firm, almost pleading.

"Yeah," I submit, but the lie sits heavy on my tongue. I've been waiting for something like this for weeks. My heart pounds in my chest, and despite the adrenaline coursing through me, I force myself to stay calm. "I'll stay out of the way." I have no intention of doing so. The moment I see a chance to grab Nicole and get her out of this mess, I'll take it.

"Shane, buddy, promise me." Mike's voice is softer now, almost desperate.

I click off the phone and hand it back to the stone-faced security guard. He gives a curt nod and walks away, his footsteps swallowed by the pulsing bass of the club. I return to the window of the skybox, scanning the faces below, searching for her—or Raffaele. I've only seen his face once in a photo, but I don't think I'll ever forget it. Cold, calculating. A man who enjoys control.

The dance floor is packed now, flashing lights bouncing off a sea of bodies moving to the heavy rhythm of the music. Waiters glide through the crowd, balancing trays of drinks. Nothing changes over the next hour; people dance as if their world isn't about to fall apart. I start to wonder if this is all a false flag, something to throw us off.

And then I see her.

It's only a glimpse, but I know it's Nicole. Her dark hair, her walk—it's her. She's with two men, avoiding the center of the dance floor as they slip into a darkened corner just below the skybox, disappearing from view. My pulse races.

She's right below me, I think. If I move casually, I can get closer. Figure out a way to get her away from them without being seen. I leave the skybox, walking down the spiral stairs as calmly as I can. My heart pounds with every step. The bar below the skybox shelters a few booths tucked away, perfect for keeping out of sight.

As soon as I hit the bottom step, before I can even turn the corner where I'm sure Nicole is, a man grabs me from behind and slams me against the wall, pressing me into the shadows of the club.

"What are you doing, Shane?" His voice is a harsh whisper, his breath hot against my ear.

I turn, confused. "Who are you?"

The man quickly flashes a badge—just long enough for me to see, and then it's gone.

"Mike said you might try to do something stupid," the man says, his tone sharp. "Now listen, I'm only gonna say this once. We're trying to prevent any bullets from flying. You go around that corner and Raffaele recognizes you, that's exactly what's gonna happen. Now get your ass back to the skybox, and don't move until you're told."

Before I can respond, a shout rings out from around the corner, followed by a gunshot and a blood-curdling scream. The club erupts into chaos.

"Shit," the cop mutters. He pushes me down, forcing me to crouch against the wall. "Stay low!" he barks as people start rushing toward the exits, knocking into each other and pushing to escape. The beat of the music is still thumping, a disorienting soundtrack to the madness unfolding around us.

I spot a woman near the dance floor, falling to the ground, clutching her side. I can't tell if she's been shot or if she's just caught in the chaos. The cop rushes toward her, disappearing into the crowd, leaving me alone.

A small voice in the back of my mind tells me to leave. To run while I still can. But that's not happening. I've come too far. With the cop gone, I edge around the corner, pushing against the tide of people surging past me. Faces blur together—panicked, shouting, shoving. I search for Nicole in the chaos, but seeing through the mass of bodies is impossible.

"He shot him!" I hear a woman scream as she pushes through the crowd, her arm locked with another woman's, both of them frantic to get out.

Had Raffaele done it? Is this how it ends? I round the corner, and just as I'm about to lose hope, I crash into a tall figure dressed in black. Our eyes meet, locking for a split second. It's Raffaele.

And just behind him, her arm trapped in his grip, is Nicole.

"Shane," Raffaele spits, his face twisting in confusion and anger. "You did this?"

Before I can react, his hand reaches for the gun tucked under his jacket. I lunge forward, desperate to put myself between him and Nicole. I don't care about anything

else now. All I want is to get her out of his grasp. I shove her away and try to push him back, but Raffaele is fast. Too fast.

He swings his fist hard, a punch that lands squarely on my jaw. Pain explodes through my head, and I stagger backward, my vision blurring. I hit the floor hard, the cold concrete knocking the wind out of me. My ears ring, and I can't focus on anything but the throbbing pain in my skull.

I feel hands pulling at me, lifting me up. Nicole's voice breaks through the chaos, urgent and panicked.

"Get up, Shane!" she screams, her hands gripping my arms, trying to pull me to my feet.

I push myself up, groaning in pain, and as I regain my balance, I see Raffaele standing in front of me, his gun drawn. He raises it, pointing it straight at my head.

This is it.

Chapter 32

Nicole

The tension in the van is obvious as we ride to the Velvet Mirage. I sit beside Raffaele in the back, his leg bouncing anxiously beside mine. Tom's at the wheel, quiet as ever. The van's side panels are windowless, leaving only the rear door and front windshield to give any hint of where we're heading. I don't bother to look. It doesn't matter which road we take; the destination is fixed, but my fate—and that of everyone involved—feels like it's hanging by a thread.

Raffaele's nerves don't help. He's sweating, his hands twitching, and the jittery way

he keeps adjusting his collar makes it clear: he's on edge. And when he's like this, he's unpredictable. I've had enough bruises from testing that theory to know better than to push him when he's wound this tight.

"Remember, Nicola," he says, his voice strained. "All we have is each other in there. We're in this together. That means we leave together, because if they kill us, they leave no witnesses."

His attempt at reassurance feels hollow, his nervousness bleeding through every word. He's still suspicious of me. He knows I could betray him at any moment, and honestly, he's right to think so. Part of me almost admires his survival instincts. Dino's words echo in my head: He won't leave the Velvet. I wonder how much of what Dino said was true. Could he be setting me up as well? Or was Raffaele, for once, right about something—there won't be any witnesses left when this is over. Either way, if taking Raffaele down means everyone else, especially Shane and Jaime, will be safe, maybe that's a price I'm willing to pay. Even if it means going down with him.

"We're here," Tom announces as he pulls into the parking lot.

We jump out of the van quickly, our steps in sync as we approach the side entrance. Dino is already waiting by the door. He gives us a nod, opens it, and walks away without a word, disappearing down the alley between the Mirage and the building next door. We slip inside, Raffaele closing the door behind us.

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The hallway we enter feels like the backstage of a theater—narrow and industrial, with paths leading to the club's upper staffing areas, security rooms, and back entrances. The muffled thump of music leaks through the walls, growing louder as we head toward the main club near the bathrooms. Raffaele motions for us to stay close to the walls, avoiding attention as we pass the main dance floor and roped-off VIP sections. The place is already packed, the crowd thick with bodies, and the night is just beginning.

We reach the bar, tucked into an alcove with a darkened room above it, its windows blacked out. I glance up, heart racing as I spot the elevator-marked second-floor Skybox. Shane. He's right above me.

"Come on," Raffaele mutters, his shoulders relaxing slightly as he scans the crowd. He rounds the corner, and I follow, my stomach twisting in knots.

Dino is already seated at a booth, a bottle of champagne on ice and four glasses neatly set out. The moment I see him, some of the tension in my chest releases. For now, it's just another meeting. No bullets, no blood—yet.

We sit down, and Dino pours drinks for all of us. Raffaele and Tom remain vigilant, their eyes darting through the sea of faces in the club, always looking for something—or someone. I try to focus, but my gaze keeps drifting upward. Shane is so close, yet I can't do anything to warn him.

Dino hands me a glass, raising his own in a silent toast. I take it, my fingers trembling slightly around the stem. Whatever happens next, I have to keep it together. If I can play this right, we'll all make it out of here alive.

We sit for a while, Dino talking about the glories of America and how much Raffaele will like it once he's on top. But Raffaele seems distant and uninterested, his mind clearly elsewhere. His nerves are on edge, his eyes constantly scanning the club, looking for threats. He's jittery, and that makes me nervous.

"Hey, when does your boss get here?" Raffaele asks, his voice tense.

"He's on his way," Dino responds, taking a sip of his drink. "Relax, it's a process. Blend in—that's the only way you get close to him."

A waiter comes by and leaves another bottle of champagne and a bowl of popcorn. The normalcy of it feels jarring against the tension simmering beneath the surface.

Just then, Raffaele turns to me. "I don't like this. Something feels off. Do you feel it?" he asks, his eyes narrowing.

It all feels off to me, I think, but I keep my answer neutral. "I'm just along for the ride now, Raffaele," I tell him, trying to keep my voice steady.

Raffaele leans closer, his tone shifting to something almost sincere. "Nicola, listen... what I did to you, I want you to know..."

Before he can finish, something catches my eye. A shadow moving swiftly toward us—no, a man. My heart pounds in my chest. In an instant, he's standing to the side of the sofa, his eyes locking onto mine. Raffaele doesn't see him; the man is standing directly behind him. I see the gun rise, pointed at the back of Raffaele's temple, and I think, This is it. It's the end.

The gunshot breaks the slow rhythm of the club. My ears ring, and I close my eyes, bracing for the inevitable. But when I open them, Raffaele is still in front of me. Instead, I see Tom wrestling with the waiter on the floor, the gun going off again in

the chaos. I can't tell who's hit, but I know this wasn't part of the plan.

Raffaele turns to Dino, his face contorted with rage. "You set me up?"

Before Dino can respond, Raffaele pulls his gun and points it at him. Dino raises his hands, staying completely still, not even blinking. Raffaele grabs my arm, yanking me up from the booth, his gun still trained on Dino.

"We're leaving," he hisses, pulling me with him as he backs away from the booth. His eyes flicker toward Tom, who is still struggling on the floor. "Loyal to the end," Raffaele mutters before turning back to Dino, keeping his gun on him until we're out of the booth.

The club is descending into chaos now. People are running, shouting, trying to push their way to the exits. Raffaele tucks his gun into his jacket as he pulls me through the crowd, and for a moment, I think this is my chance. If I can just get him away from the Skybox—away from Shane. But I cooperate, letting him drag me along, waiting for the right moment.

As we near an exit, Raffaele suddenly stops. He's face to face with someone. Someone familiar.

"Shane," is all I hear, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Raffaele reaches for his gun, and Shane moves faster than I expect, pushing past Raffaele and heading straight for me. He grabs me, pushing me down as he struggles with Raffaele. I try to see what's happening, but the crowd is thick, and everything is a blur. I hear a scuffle, and then Shane falls backward, crashing hard onto the floor.

"Get up, Shane!" I shout, scrambling to help him. He's dazed, but I manage to pull him to his feet. My heart is racing, panic rising with every passing second.

Raffaele stands over us, a sick smile on his face. As Shane steadies himself, Raffaele slowly pulls out his pistol, his eyes never leaving mine as he points it at Shane's head.

Time seems to freeze. This is it. I brace myself for the worst, but just as Raffaele's finger begins to tighten on the trigger, someone slams into him from the side, knocking the gun from his hand and sending him crashing to the floor.

I don't even get a good look at the person who saved us. All I hear is a voice telling me, "Get him out of here," and I don't hesitate.

"Thank you," I manage to gasp, pushing Shane toward the exit as fast as I can. Shane turns back, his face dazed, but something in his expression changes.

"Robert?" Shane mumbles, still disoriented, but there's no time for questions. I push him forward, weaving through the crowd as the chaos unfolds around us.

By the time we burst outside, the cold night air hits us like a shock. We're free, but the parking lot is a mess—police cars are everywhere, officers rushing inside as others try to contain the fleeing crowd. Shane leans over, gasping for breath, but I can't stop. I grab his arm, pulling him along.

"We need to keep running," I plead, the fear still choking me. "He'll come after us. He won't stop, Shane."

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Shane cups my face in his hands, his voice soft but firm. "You're safe, Nicole. Look around—there are cops everywhere. They're here for him. He's not walking out of there without getting arrested."

His words are meant to comfort me, but I can't shake the feeling that Raffaele will find a way to slip through the cracks. He's always one step ahead. Always.

But then Shane points toward the front entrance. "Look," he says.

I turn and see Raffaele, handcuffed, being led into the back of a squad car. He looks defeated, but I know better than to relax just yet.

"You're safe," Shane says again, pulling me into his arms. I let myself melt into him, the weight of everything finally crashing down on me. "I love you so much," he whispers, his lips brushing my forehead. "More than you'll ever know. And from now on, you'll always be safe."

He kisses me, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I believe him.

The cold leather seat beneath me is a welcome change from the dungeon floor I'd grown accustomed to. I sit in the back of the squad car, my hands clasped tightly in my lap as I listen to Shane and Mike argue outside. Their voices are muffled, barely audible through the car's thick windows, but Shane's frustration is unmistakable. He's on edge, pacing back and forth as Mike leans against the hood of the car, arms crossed in defense. Despite the tension, I'm the calmest I've been in what feels like forever. For once, I know where I'm going and what's waiting for me when I get there. Even better, I know I won't be facing it alone.

Twenty hours later, after endless questioning, paperwork, and more waiting, we're finally released. Shane stays by my side the entire time, never once pressing me for answers or details. I'm grateful for his silence. He seems to understand that I'm not ready to talk, that I need time to process everything. He's careful with his words, offering little bits of normalcy to hold on to—he talks about Jaime and Marie, and the new nanny. But he never once asks me about what happened. Not yet.

As we drive back toward the estate, Shane glances over at me. "None of it matters right now," he says softly, his voice steady and reassuring. "Whatever you need, it's yours. If you want to get away, if you need space... anything."

I turn my head, watching him in the dim light of the car's dashboard. "I just need you," I say, feeling a faint smile tug at my lips for the first time in days. "Just promise to kiss me the moment we're out of this car, and I'll have everything I want."

Shane's eyes soften. He spots a gas station up the road and pulls in, parking the car in the first spot he finds. The engine cuts off, and without hesitation, he leans over the center console, his lips pressing gently against mine. The kiss is everything I've needed—soft, steady, a promise that whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

When we finally reach home, the house feels eerily quiet without Jaime's laughter filling the space. I take a long, hot shower, letting the water wash away the grime and the memories of everything that's happened. Shane orders my favorite takeout, determined to make me feel safe and comfortable again. But despite his best efforts, the house feels incomplete. I miss Jaime. I need to see him, to hug him, to remind myself that the nightmare is truly over.

After the shower, I dry off and sit on the edge of the bed, my mind still a wreck from everything. For the first time in weeks, I check my phone. Multiple missed calls. A number in Italy. My stomach tightens as I listen to the voicemail. I fall back on the bed, tears running down my face.

It's Giovanni, and he's okay.

Chapter 33

Shane

Two days have passed, and I finally get the go-ahead from Nicole to let Mike come by. We sit together on the couch in the lounge—Nicole, Mike, and I—settling into the moment as Nicole prepares to tell her story for the first time. I watch her carefully, my heart heavy with what I know is coming. She's calm now, composed, but I can feel the storm beneath her surface, threatening to break free.

As she begins to speak, laying out everything from her parents' ties to the mafia to her relationship with Raffaele, the debt, and the things she had to do to pay it off, my blood boils. Each detail she shares hits me harder than the last, especially when she gets to the part about her kidnapping—the fear, the manipulation, the isolation. My hands instinctively ball into fists, but Nicole sees it. She always does. She reaches over, her fingers gently brushing mine, a silent plea for calm.

I take a deep breath, willing myself to focus on her voice. She continues, steady but with a tremor beneath the surface, laying out the gut-wrenching truth in full.

At one point, Mike leans forward, his notebook in hand, but his tone soft. "I'm not here to pick apart your story, Nicole. Just to understand," he says gently. "This is your truth. No more of it needs to be plastered across a police report than what's necessary to keep you free."

Nicole nods, her gaze flicking to me briefly. She knows this isn't just about freedom. It's about closure—for her, for Giovanni, for both of us.

She explains Giovanni's part in all of this and how he confirmed he's worked things

out with Pietro. Raffaele had sold him out to the Serpenti, all behind Pietro's back, in some twisted plan to get even with Nicole and, by extension, me. The weight of it all settles in even deeper. This wasn't just about debts or family ties—it was personal, and Raffaele had been obsessed with revenge.

As Nicole finishes speaking, I feel a mix of admiration and anger. She's been through hell, and yet here she is, laying everything bare. But even as Mike closes his notebook, I know this isn't truly over.

A few more days pass, and slowly, life starts to return to something resembling normal. Nicole's healing—little by little. I notice the small things: the way she's starting to smile more freely, how she laughs with Jaime. It's like she's finally letting herself breathe. That same week, we talk to Giovanni and get him a ticket.

Jaime and I spend time together at the airport, reading comics and waiting to pick up Giovanni. We stand by the large windows, watching planes take off. The noise and rush of the terminal feel almost comforting after everything we've been through. Then I hear her voice.

"Jaime," Nicole calls softly, her nerves evident.

I turn to see her walking over with Giovanni. He's tall with a kind face, his single duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hey, you can call me Gio," he says, reaching out to shake Jaime's hand.

Jaime grins up at him. "Hi, Gio! We love Nicole so much. She's the best mom ever."

There's a pause. Jaime called her mom. The word hangs in the air between us, and I see Nicole's eyes well up with emotion. She glances at me, mouthing, I love you.

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I give Nicole and Giovanni some space to catch up once we're home. Jaime and I head into the kitchen to prepare dinner. He watches intently as I slide the pan of mac and cheese into the oven, closing the door with a soft click.

"What's next?" Jaime asks, looking around the kitchen.

I grin. "Next, we make the burger patties."

"Yep," Jaime echoes enthusiastically.

Just then, Nicole and Giovanni walk in, laughter trailing behind them.

"Hey Jaime, I heard you've got Ridge Road Racer 5," Giovanni says with a smile.

Jaime's eyes light up, and he's practically bouncing on his feet. "Yeah! I'm the best at Ridge Road Racer. Wanna play?"

Jaime looks at me for approval. I smile, waving them off. "Go on."

Jaime grabs Giovanni's hand and pulls him toward the living room, their voices fading as they disappear through the door.

Nicole stays behind, her eyes soft as she walks over and wraps her arms around me. She leans in, kissing me gently. "You need some help?"

I shake my head. "Nah, I've got it."

She sits down at the counter, watching me work. There's a quiet between us, the kind that feels peaceful after so much chaos.

"Oh, you wanted to talk to me about something?" Nicole says, noticing the envelope on the counter.

"Yeah, it's in there," I reply.

She picks it up, her eyes widening as she pulls out the paperwork inside. "Shane... is this...?"

I nod, smiling. "After you got cleared, the green card came through."

"Shane..." She's speechless for a moment, then rushes to kiss me. "Thank you," she whispers against my lips.

I kiss her back and return to cooking, my mind drifting. I think back to the Velvet Mirage, to that moment when everything could have gone wrong. Something's been eating at me since that night.

"Hey," Nicole says, noticing my distant expression. "What's up? You okay?"

I hesitate, stirring the pot absentmindedly. "Yeah, it's just... something I saw that's been bothering me."

She stands, walking over to me, her hand resting on my shoulder. "Shane, I'm here. We can talk about what happened. I'm safe now. Whatever it is, I'll be okay."

I exhale, grateful for her strength. "Do you remember when I bumped into you and..." I trail off, hesitant to say his name.

"Raffaele," she finishes for me. "Yeah, what about it?"

"The man who stopped him, the one who saved us... He looked familiar. Like... Robert."

Nicole's eyes widen slightly. "Robert? You said his name when you saw him."

I nod, feeling foolish even saying it. "I don't know, it just seems impossible. But I can't shake the feeling."

Nicole thinks for a moment. "You know, Dino told me I had friends I didn't even know about. Friends who knew a lot about you, too."

"That would mean Robert's been working for Le Ombre this whole time? Right here in the city?" I scoff, the idea almost too far-fetched to believe.

Nicole smiles, resting her forehead against mine. "Does it matter? Is he worth finding?"

I don't even hesitate. "No. He isn't. You and Jaime are my only priorities."

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She smiles softly, her hand trailing down to my chest as she kisses me again. "Good," she whispers.

Chapter 34

Nicole

Emotions hit me hard as we explore the botanical garden. Here, surrounded by the vibrant blooms and the gentle mist of sprinklers cooling the air around us, everything feels perfect. The soft drops on my skin are comforting, and the earthy scent mixed with flowers brings back childhood memories. I'm reminded of my mother's garden in Italy—the way she tended to her flowers with so much care. I run my fingertips along the petals of a rose, lost in the array of colors and smells.

"Is this place even open?" I joke, glancing around at the empty paths. "Where is everyone? How could anyone want to be anywhere else but here?"

Shane just smiles; his silence speaks volumes. I keep talking, rambling on about the flowers, but I can feel his gaze on me. It's different, more intense. I pause, turning toward him, and that's when I see it. His eyes are filled with emotion, so much that it stops me mid-sentence. The look in his eyes—it's overwhelming, like he's seeing me for the first time, or maybe for the thousandth, but each time with more love than before.

"I can't wait anymore," Shane says suddenly, his voice quiet but firm. I blink, confused, as he steps closer and then drops down onto one knee. My heart skips a beat.

"Nicole," he begins, looking up at me with a mixture of love and determination that leaves me breathless. "I love you more than anything. We've been through so much, and I want to spend the rest of my life facing everything with you, side by side." He pulls out a small velvet box, and the sunlight catches the diamond inside, making it sparkle. "Will you marry me?"

For a second, everything stops. The world fades, and all I can feel is an overwhelming rush of joy, disbelief, and love. Tears fill my eyes as I nod, my voice trembling. "Yes," I whisper, and then louder, "Yes! Of course I will."

As Shane slips the ring onto my finger, it fits perfectly, as if it was always meant to be there. Overwhelmed with joy, I throw my arms around him, pulling him close, and our lips meet in a passionate kiss. In that moment, nothing else in the world matters. Wrapped in each other's embrace, we stand there, completely caught up in the magic of the moment.

He takes my hand, leading me down a path to a quiet spot near a fountain. The sound of the water is soothing, the air scented with lilacs, and the breeze rustles the leaves of the weeping willows overhead. It's peaceful and serene—the perfect place for this moment. Shane pulls me close again, kissing me deeply, his hands sliding up my back, sending shivers down my spine.

"We're alone," he whispers against my ear, his voice low and filled with desire.

I can feel my worries melting away, my body responding to his touch. My hands find their way under his shirt, caressing the firm muscles he's built over the past few months. Shane has been working out more since everything happened, and it shows. His body is strong, capable, and safe.

I kiss him again, my fingers tracing the hard lines of his chest, eager to feel him even closer. I moan softly as he pulls my shirt up, his fingers teasing my skin, his lips

finding their way to my neck, then my chest. Every touch sends a wave of heat through me. I feel his hand slide down the front of my pants, his fingers moving expertly until they find my clit. He knows exactly how to touch me, how to make me weak with just a light graze. I feel myself getting wetter as his fingers slide inside me, his gaze never leaving mine as he works me toward the edge.

I want him. I need it.

I pull him down onto the soft grass, kissing him with a hunger I can't control. We undress quickly, our hands frantic as we touch every inch of each other. I straddle him, our bodies fitting together perfectly as I move, my hands resting on his chest. The sound of the fountain and the cool breeze only add to the intimacy of the moment, and as we reach our climax together, I feel like the luckiest person alive.

We return home, still wrapped in the glow of the proposal. As we approach the house, I notice a huge banner hanging across the doorway that reads, "Congratulations!"

I laugh, turning to Shane. "Is that for us?"

He grins, clearly proud of himself. "Yep."

I nudge him playfully. "How did you know I'd say yes?"

He shrugs, smirking. "I know everything."

Inside, the house is filled with familiar voices and music. Giovanni is the first to greet us, pulling us both into a hug. "Congratulations, you two!" he says, his smile wide and genuine.

Jaime runs over next, wrapping his arms around my leg. "Nicole, does this mean you'll be my mom now?" he asks, his eyes filled with hope.

I kneel down to meet his gaze, my heart swelling. "Jaime, I'll be whatever you need me to be," I say softly, pulling him into a hug. Shane kneels beside us, wrapping his arms around both of us.

In that moment, everything feels right. We're a family, complete and ready to face whatever comes next together.

Epilogue

Shane stands proudly at the altar, his heart pounding just about as fast as he thought it would, mesmerized as he watches Nicole gracefully make her way down the aisle to the theme of Here Comes the Bride.

Behind them, the beach stretches out, its golden sand reflecting the warm, soft glow of the setting sun. Nicole's dress is a delicate ivory lace. It hugs her figure and flares gently at the bottom, flowing elegantly with each step she takes. Her veil flutters behind her like a wave in the gentle breeze. To his left, Jaime stands next to Giovanni. Gio gives him a reassuring smile and nods. Jaime is grinning, his excitement barely contained as he watches Nicole approach.

Marie sits in the front row, and just behind her are Oliver and Kristen, who are seated next to Annette, with Alex bouncing happily in her lap. Love permeates the air as family and friends surround Shane, and gratitude washes over him. They are all here, united in this moment, to witness the beginning of something wonderful.

As Nicole reaches him, Shane takes her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin against his own. He catches her gaze, and the world fades away at that moment. It's just the two of them, bound together by everything they've been through, standing on the edge of a new chapter. The vows they exchange are full of promises, spoken with steady voices but brimming with emotion. Shane reflects on how much he's grown and the better man he's become because of her love, strength, and unwavering belief

in him.

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Nicole's smile is radiant, her eyes wet with tears, but her heart is lighter than ever. She's no longer burdened by her past, by the fear that once held her captive. She can live her life free and ready to embrace the future, and Shane's love is the foundation on which she's rebuilding her life.

As the ceremony concludes, Jaime rushes forward, waving a drawing he's worked on for days. "Look!" he exclaims, holding up the picture. The photo displays a colorful and lively scene featuring Shane, Nicole, and Jaime beneath the wedding arch with the ocean as a backdrop, surrounded by their loved ones.

Nicole kneels down, her laughter soft and full of love. "It's perfect, just like us," she says, her voice catching in her throat as she pulls Jaime close.

Shane crouches beside Nicole and Jaime, his arm wrapping around both of them. As his eyes drift to Oliver, Kristen, and Annette, who are sitting with Alex, a sense of warmth fills him. Oliver raises a glass with a proud smile while Kristen waves cheerfully. Little Alex giggles and toddles toward them, finding comfort in his mother's arms. Shane feels the warmth of their shared joy wash over him. They're all part of this—this perfect, messy, wonderful family.

"We really are the perfect family now," Nicole whispers, glancing at Shane as she wipes a tear from her cheek.

Shane smiles, his heart full. "Yeah, we are," he agrees, pulling them both into a tight hug.

Annette walks over with Alex in tow, and Oliver and Kristen join them too, their

faces glowing with happiness. Jaime takes Alex's hand, guiding him toward the waves as the rest of them watch. Laughter echoes along the shoreline as the sun dips below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the scene.

As they stand together, children's laughter fills the air, and a calmness settles within their hearts. The storm that had once raged in their lives has passed, and in its wake, they've built something unshakable, something that will last.