



Ivory Legacy (The Dark Mafia Prince of New York #3)

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Category: Urban

Description: Dominance is my birthright, the city my kingdom, and yet, the woman I possess is the one element I cannot fully control.

Pregnant with my heir, she is both my greatest challenge and my ultimate prize.

In the glow of impending fatherhood, I am Dante Moretti: mafioso, protector, a man on the brink of irrevocable change.

She has tantalized me from the beginning. With our child on the horizon, my world expands, revealing vulnerabilities I never knew existed within my heart.

Jade Bentley could elevate or annihilate everything I have built. Her evasion is not just an act of defiance; it is a test of my will to conquer and keep what is mine. I almost gave up my life for her and I would do it again if it meant I get to keep her and my child by my side.

I need to make her see that her place is by my side, witness to the empire we will bestow upon our child—a legacy written in blood. A legacy that could cost me everything but would keep her next to me, where she belongs.

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Chapter One: Jade

I was trapped.

The chill of the interrogation room seeped into my bones, its sterile atmosphere wrapping around me like an unwanted ghost. The chair beneath me was unforgivingly rigid, yet the discomfort it brought paled in comparison to the pulsating dread nestled deep within my chest. Detective Rodriguez leaned in, his gaze as piercing as shards of glass, and I understood that this wasn't just a casual chat.

“Dr. Bentley,” he began, his voice gruff and unyielding. My last name rolling off his tongue felt more like an indictment than a simple address. “Here’s the deal: you cooperate or Dante’s future will be filled with more bars than those at his usual watering holes.”

The ultimatum was crystal clear: either I complied or Dante would lose his freedom. A spark of indignation ignited within me at being coerced so blatantly but it was quickly extinguished by the chilling acceptance of its validity.

“Why are we stuck in this godforsaken interrogation room?” I protested, attempting to mask my fear-induced quiver with annoyance. The walls seemed to inch closer with every passing second, each one echoing Dante’s name ominously.

“Because you agreed to assist us,” Rodriguez retorted flatly, though there was a distinct edge to his tone. “We can’t afford any risk of you getting cold feet and running off. We need you, Dr. Bentley, and if you want your lover boy to avoid donning prison garb, you need us too.”

I gritted my teeth under the weighty scrutiny of the detective's stare. His distrust for me was palpable and honestly, I couldn't fault him for it. But did I even have an alternative? With each heartbeat that echoed in my chest, I could feel Dante's existence intertwined with mine - a connection far deeper than what I had ever anticipated when our paths first crossed. His world was shrouded in darkness, teeming with secrets and perils - and now, so was mine.

"I never agreed to supervised confinement," I snapped, the injustice of the situation rankling. "I thought you were taking me to my house to change out of these blood-soaked clothes...not straight to lock-up." My stained black shirt was a grim reminder of the chaotic scene I'd left behind, a stark contrast to the pristine walls of this room.

Rodriguez's dark eyes softened for a split second before reverting back to their default frostiness. "Dr. Bentley," he began in a voice that tried and failed to be soothing, "Dante Moretti is in a medically-induced coma because of a gunshot wound. You can't help him right now."

My fists clenched reflexively at his words, each syllable hitting me harder than the last. The image of Dante, lying unconscious amidst tangled sheets and blaring monitors, was etched into the back of my eyelids. The desire to protect him - even from himself - was visceral.

He continued without waiting for my response, "But you know who can help? You can - by assisting us in taking down his family's criminal empire."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I should be there when he wakes up."

"Well, it does matter, because I need to make certain that we do have your help."

"Fine. But I need proof he's still alive," I demanded, my voice hitching with a mix of dread and defiance. What I really wanted to do was cry...but I wasn't going to give

this bastard the pleasure of seeing that. “C’mon. You have to give me that, at least.”

Detective Rodriguez regarded me for a moment, his expression unreadable.

“Alright,” he said, pulling out his phone. He tapped the screen a few times before showing me a photo of Dante lying in a hospital bed, an IV snaking into his arm, his face pale but peaceful in slumber. “Satisfied?”

I shook my head, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “That could be from hours ago. I need proof that he’s...you know, not okay. But alive. Right now. Breathing.”

Rodriguez hesitated, then sighed. “Hold on.” He dialed a number and spoke briefly into the phone. Moments later, the screen came to life with a video call from a nurse at the hospital. She panned the phone around the room, showing Dante surrounded by his family—Enzo, Dante’s mother clutching a rosary, and Marco, his brother, stone-faced and stoic.

“Okay. Edward? Do you want to talk to him?” The nurse’s voice was gentle. “Do you want to talk to the family?”

“No,” I cut in curtly, my heart twisting at the sight of Dante’s motionless form. I didn’t have the bandwidth to deal with his family. They had never even met me. I wasn’t going to go in there and announce myself, not even through a phone call.

I was pregnant, not crazy.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my gaze lingering on the screen until Rodriguez ended the call. With a deep breath, I fortified the walls around my heart, bracing myself for what was to come. Dante was under watchful eyes; now it was time to focus on my own survival.

“Okay. You got what you wanted,” Rodriguez said, stashing his phone back in his pocket. “Now you have to give me what I want.”

“I already told you I would cooperate,” I said. “You want me to become a mole? Fine. Whatever. I’ll do whatever it takes as long as Dante is...as long as he’s okay.”

“I need you to sign something for me.”

I looked at him for a few long seconds. Fuck that. I wasn’t going to sign anything.

“Sure. But, uh, can I use the restroom?” The words escaped my lips in a rush, my mind racing with the sudden clarity that had settled over me. Dante was alive and on his way to recovery; the leverage they held over me wasn’t as solid as they had led me to believe.

“Jade...”

“I’m pregnant! I have to pee all the time,” I said. “Do you want me to do it here?”

Rodriguez looked me up and down, his eyes cold and assessing. “Sure,” he finally grunted. “But you’re not going alone.” He motioned to a uniformed officer standing by the door. “Carter, take her.”

The officer nodded, his face an expressionless mask. He gestured for me to lead the way. We walked down the bleak, narrow hallway, my footsteps echoing on the linoleum floor, until we reached the ladies’ room. Carter held the door open, his presence at my back a silent pressure urging me forward.

Once inside the cramped space, I entered the nearest stall and locked it behind me. My hands trembled as I sat on the closed toilet seat, the sound of the flushing mechanism filling the silence as I used the noise to cover the sound of my heavy

breathing.

This was it—a brief moment of privacy, a chance to think. I berated myself for being so gullible, for letting fear cloud my judgment. They wouldn't have let Dante die; not when he was their best bargaining chip.

And...he was a person. The doctors weren't just going to let him die from a gunshot wound.

Fucking Rodriguez. I had been so worried about Dante I hadn't been thinking clearly.

But it was becoming clear now. I had been a fucking idiot.

"Everything alright in there?" Carter's voice cut through my thoughts, sharp and intrusive.

"Fine," I snapped, harsher than intended. "Just a minute."

I stood up, pacing the tiny space like a caged animal. I needed a plan, something foolproof. Rodriguez and the police were no amateurs. A scientist by trade, logic was my weapon, and I would wield it with precision. It was time to outsmart them, to find my way back to Dante and to safety.

If...if Dante was safety. For me. For my child. I couldn't think about that right now.

"Ma'am?" Carter called again, impatience seeping into his tone.

"Coming out now," I lied, buying myself a few more precious seconds. My mind raced through possibilities, discarding one after another, until a desperate, wild idea formed. It was risky, possibly foolish, but it was all I had.

“Let’s do this,” I murmured to myself, steeling my nerves. I unlocked the stall door, stepping out with feigned calmness as I breathed heavily. Carter studied me with hawk-like intensity as I washed my hands, avoiding his probing gaze in the mirror.

“Ready?” he asked, his hand hovering near his gun belt.

“Uh, sure,” I confirmed, my voice steady despite the turmoil within. Fuck. I really hoped this would work.

He waited for me to keep talking.

“Could we maybe... sit down for a second? There’s a bench in the hallway, right?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even. The fake concern in his eyes didn’t escape me.

“You can sit in the interrogation room.”

“Please,” I said. “You’ll be right there.”

“Sure,” Carter said as we walked out into the hallway. “But make it quick.”

I nodded and made my way to the bench slowly, deliberately. Each step was a calculated effort, each breath a silent plea for believability. Just as I reached the seat, I let the panic I’d been holding back surface, my hand flying to my stomach with practiced alarm.

“O-Oh God...” My words came out strangled, choked by an imaginary fear.

“Ma’am?” He was on his feet now, the facade of concern peeling away to reveal genuine surprise.

“Something’s wrong,” I gasped out, doubling over as if in agony. My hands clutched

at my belly, the black maternity top stretching tightly across my supposed bulge. “I didn’t want to say anything, but I was, uh...in the bathroom...you don’t want to know.”

“Ma’am?” he asked again, this time sounding more alarmed.

“The baby...I think—“

“Shit.” The officer was moving now, radio in hand. “Dispatch, we need medical assistance in the hallway, near the interrogation rooms. Now!”

“Please,” I whimpered, my face contorted into a mask of pain. “It hurts so much.”

Carter was cursing under his breath, his eyes darting around the room, suddenly unsure of what to do with his hands. His tough exterior faltered as he knelt beside me, his voice taking on a softer edge. “Hang in there, okay? Help is on the way,” he said. “Look, my wife was pregnant last year and...she had a couple of scares. But she was fine. Everything was fine. You’ll be okay.”

I felt so bad for lying to this man, but I had no other choice. As he reached out to comfort me with a gentle pat on my arm, I grimaced as if the pain was worsening.

“What did you have?” I said between gritted teeth.

“What?”

“Your wife,” I panted, gripping the arm of the chair until my knuckles turned white.

“Boy or girl?”

“Boy.” His voice wavered, caught between uncertainty and the instinctive need to reassure. “We had a boy.”

“I always wanted a boy,” I murmured, clutching my stomach tighter. “He wants a daughter, but...”

If I could keep him talking, if I could fool him here, in this cold, impersonal room, I might be able to fool anyone.

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I nodded, wincing dramatically as I held onto my stomach. “Boy would be nice,” I muttered through gritted teeth. “What’s he like?”

“Ma’am, I think you should—“

“Just keep talking. It helps.”

“His name is Charlie,” Carter said.

“Charlie,” I gasped out, giving him a weak smile. “That’s a strong name. What’s he like?”

“He’s a handful, but he’s great,” Carter admitted, his eyes softening as he spoke about his son. “He’s got this laugh—sounds exactly like a duck quacking. First time I heard it, I thought we had a bird in the house.”

A genuine chuckle escaped me despite the situation, and I covered it up with another grimace of pain. “I’m sure he’s wonderful. You seem like...like you’d be a good father.”

“Oh, I’m okay. My wife is the real hero. She makes it look easy.”

“Tell me about her,” I asked, keeping my voice steady despite the anxiety gnawing at my insides. Why was the medical team taking so damn long?

And then, as the clamor of approaching footsteps echoed through the hallway, I knew it was game time. I couldn’t afford a single misstep—not now, not when freedom was within reach.

A swarm of medical personnel rushed into the room, their faces masks of solemn concentration under the harsh fluorescent lighting. One of them, a young nurse with a freckle-splattered face, took my pulse while another, significantly older and gruffer-looking, grabbed a blood pressure monitor from his bag.

The tightness of the cuff around my arm was uncomfortable, but I welcomed the physical sensation. It was grounding amidst the whirlwind of uncertainty. The gruff man watched the device intently before writing something on his clipboard.

“Blood pressure’s slightly elevated, but that could be due to stress,” he commented dryly, his voice carrying a hint of an Irish accent. “We need to get you to the clinic though—to check you over properly.”

“I don’t know if I’m allowed to leave...”

“You’re not being detained,” Carter said quickly. “You can leave now if you want to.”

Fuck, this poor, kind man. I really did feel bad for exploiting him.

“Don’t you have to go report this to the Detective?”

“Sure,” he said. “It can wait until you’re okay.”

“That’s not necessary,” I managed to say, my voice strained and faux-weak. “I can’t keep you from your work.”

“But it can wait—“

“No,” I insisted, putting as much urgency into the word as I could. “Go. I’ll be okay.”

After a moment of hesitation, Carter finally nodded, shooting me one last worried glance before stepping out and closing the door behind him.

The medical team packed up their equipment, prepared to transport me to the hospital. As they moved around me in a flurry of professional efficiency, my mind was racing on overdrive. The plan was working, but I couldn’t afford to get complacent.

The ambulance ride was uneventful but nerve-wracking. I kept up my act, gasping and grimacing when somebody looked my way. It wasn’t until we were safely inside the hospital that I allowed myself to relax slightly.

It was going to take me some time to figure out an escape plan...but at least I hadn’t signed any damn documents from Rodriguez.

And that, at least, was something.

Now if only I found a way to get away from the police...

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Chapter Two: Jade

Ellie nudged the door to room 307 open, the harsh scent of hospital-grade disinfectant assaulting my senses. I was a stark contrast against the crisp white sheets, my dark hair spread out like an ink spill on white parchment. I could feel each shallow breath, slow but steady—I was still alive.

Everything was okay.

My hand was on my belly and the ruse had worked, but I didn't know how long I had away from Rodriguez, away from the police.

I hadn't signed anything, but I didn't know if they could detain me. And I needed to find out more about Dante. I needed to make sure he was okay.

"Hey," Ellie's voice floated to me, softer than her usual tone. "How are you holding up?"

My eyes fluttered open at her question, feeling surprisingly sharp despite the painkillers that must have been flooding my system. "Ellie...how's Dante?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She hesitated before answering, uncertainty clouding her features. "I think he's okay, Jade." Her words brought some relief, though it was fleeting; I hadn't seen him since before everything spiraled out of control.

I wouldn't see him if it was up to Detective Rodriguez.

I was fine, but the performance had taken it out of me. Being frazzled while pregnant was surprisingly difficult, and I didn't know how long I could keep this ruse up. A monitor was attached to my stomach; the doctors wanted to monitor the baby and make sure everything was okay. The constant beeping was a reminder of the fragile life inside of me.

"I need to get out of here," I said. What I mostly meant was that I needed to get out of here before the police tracked me down again.

"Whoa, slow down," Ellie cautioned, pressing a gentle hand onto my shoulder in an attempt to keep me grounded. "The doctors need to make sure you and the baby are both okay."

I felt bad lying to her too. We were fine.

"I don't care what they said," I interrupted sharply. The defiance in my voice felt foreign yet necessary. "I can't stay here, El."

Her surprise mirrored mine as she stammered back at me. "Jade, that's crazy talk." She looked scared and confused by my sudden declaration but she didn't understand - if the mafia wanted to find me, if the cops wanted to find me, no amount of sterile corridors or humming medical machines would be enough to keep them away.

"Take a breath, Jade," Ellie's voice was calm, her eyes steady. I did as she said, my chest rising and falling with a deep inhale followed by an exhale.

"Why didn't you tell me about the pregnancy before?" Her question was direct, but not unkind.

I fidgeted with the hem of the hospital gown, looking for the right words. "Ellie, I was still trying to wrap my mind around it all." My hands moved to my belly

protectively. “But...I’m excited. Really excited to be pregnant.”

She gave me a small smile, intently listening with that calm demeanor of hers that always seemed to make things better. I felt a pang of guilt for keeping it from her, even if it was only for a short while.

“Can we go back to your house?” I asked suddenly, feeling the walls of the hospital closing in on me.

“Of course,” Ellie replied without hesitation. “After the doctors make sure everything is okay.”

I leaned close to her. “Everything is fine,” I said in a whisper. “I just needed to get away from the police, okay?”

Her eyes widened. “You mean from Rodriguez?”

“Dante is the father of my child, El. I can’t just turn against him.”

A heavy silence fell between us, and I thought I saw a spark of something in Ellie’s eyes—fear perhaps, or anger? But it passed quickly, replaced with the familiar warmth I knew so well.

“Okay,” she said, her voice shaky but resolute. “Trust me, Jade, we’ll figure this out.”

“Okay, but can we figure it out at your place?” The urgency must have been clear in my voice because she didn’t ask any questions, just nodded and helped me up.

“Yes.”

Despite the doctor’s advice to stay overnight, I checked myself out against medical

advice. But medical advice was pointless because I didn't need medical help.

I just needed to get away from the police.

And I needed to make sure I wasn't vulnerable to Dante's enemies.

The air felt crisp as we made our way through the early evening streets, a hint of fall's chill brushing against my skin. By the time we reached Ellie's apartment, my nerves had twisted into a tight knot in my stomach. The door closed behind us with a click that sounded too much like the finality of a cell door.

"I don't want to testify against Dante," I blurted out as soon as we were inside. My voice echoed slightly in the spacious living room, betraying the tremor I tried so hard to hide.

Ellie's apartment was warm and inviting, a stark contrast to the sterile walls of the hospital. Soft earth tones and gentle lighting made the space feel cozy, while framed photos on wooden tables told stories of happier times. Books were stacked haphazardly on shelves that lined one entire wall, each one a testament to Ellie's insatiable appetite for knowledge. A plush sofa took center stage in the living room, large windows behind it drawing in the fading sunlight.

"Jade, we can talk about this tomorrow," Ellie said, concern etching lines into her face. But I was past the point of waiting—I needed to set things straight.

"I can't sleep. You can sleep if you want to."

Ellie moved into the kitchen, her movements brisk, her back to me as she responded. "No, let's—you know what, let's talk." She filled the kettle and set it on the stove before turning to face me with a look of determination. "Tea?"

“Sure,” I said, trying to inject some normalcy into my voice. I followed her into the kitchen, taking a seat at the island as she busied herself with mugs and tea bags.

My gaze wandered over the sleek furniture and high-end appliances, and I couldn’t help but wonder how Ellie could afford all this on our salaries. A jittery sensation rippled through me, a combination of fear and cold, and I wrapped my arms around myself for warmth.

“Here you go,” Ellie said, sliding a steaming mug of tea across the counter towards me. I clasped the mug with both hands, the heat seeping into my palms, grounding me.

“Nice place,” I commented casually, buying time as I sipped the herbal brew, each gulp helping steady my frayed nerves.

She didn’t say anything.

“Thanks,” I murmured and took a tentative sip. The warmth of the tea seemed to thaw some of the ice that had settled in my chest. My eyes drifted around the room once more, noting the opulent items that didn’t quite fit with the Ellie I knew—the expensive-looking art on the walls, the high-tech gadgets that seemed barely used.

“I thought her vacation was only two weeks long.”

She raised her brows. “Yeah, dude, so did I. It’s so weird,” she said. “Who just picks up and leaves, and doesn’t come back?”

“Who knows,” I shrugged, setting the mug down.

“Speaking of strange, let’s talk about Dante.”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Ellie’s expression shifted, her playful demeanor giving way to something more serious. “Babe. I’m your best friend. You can tell me everything. Anything. I’m not going to judge you, I’m just here to listen.”

I took another sip of the tea, looking up at her. I was free of him. He couldn’t overhear me. And yet my stomach twisted with the idea that he wasn’t around, that he wouldn’t be okay.

That he had been shot because of me. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“I think you can start from the beginning.”

“He gave me a promotion, or so he says.” I paused, recalling his words, his penetrating gaze that seemed to promise so much yet reveal so little. “I think he is paying me more now that he’s taken over some of the lab.”

“That part sounds good,” Ellie said with a nod, but I could tell she was holding back.

“Except, it’s not all perks and pay raises.” My fingers traced the rim of my mug as I gathered my thoughts. “After he found out I was pregnant, he set up a workstation in his penthouse. He wouldn’t let me leave. Says it’s for my protection, but it feels more like I’m a bird in a gilded cage.”

Ellie’s eyes darkened, a spark of anger flaring up in them. “That’s why Detective Rodriguez and I have been working on getting you out. You’re too good for Dante’s games, Jade. I mean, if he kidnapped you...”

“No. I could’ve left,” I said, except I couldn’t have, not really.

But I didn't want to get into that right then.

My heart skipped at the mention of a plan. To be free of Dante's smothering 'protection', to return to a life where my work was just work, devoid of mafia entanglements—it was a lifeline I hadn't allowed myself to hope for.

But...there was another part of me that hated the idea. That I would be away from him.

That he would have taken a bullet for me only for me to slip out of his grasp.

"Really?" The word came out as a whisper, laden with a mix of relief and disbelief. "How?"

She hesitated for a second. "I don't think you're going to like it when I say this."

"Say it anyway."

"Testifying," Ellie replied with a firm nod. "It's the cleanest way to do it. You get immunity, witness protection if you need it, and Dante can't touch you."

I recoiled as if she'd slapped me. Testify? Against Dante—the father of my child? The thought alone made my stomach turn. I shook my head vehemently, the shadows of the early evening room seeming to close in around me. "I can't. I won't turn against him, El. There has to be another way."

Ellie's gaze softened but her voice remained steady, almost steel-like in its resolve. "Jade, you're not seeing this clearly because of—"

"Because of what?" I cut her off, fire rising in my chest. "Because I have feelings for a man who lives in shades of gray? Because he's the father of my baby?"

Because I love him?

I barely managed to hold myself back from saying that...but I still fucking didn't, even though it felt like it rippled through me like electricity.

I shook it off. I had to shake it off.

“Okay, okay,” Ellie interceded, holding up her hands in a calming gesture. “There might be another option. But it’s risky, and it involves contacting a friend from the inside.”

“You have friends from the inside?”

“Not...exactly. A few years ago, my cousin got married to the best looking guy I’ve ever seen. Nathan Zhou.”

“Okay...”

“My cousin, Abby, is an FBI agent. Well, she was,” she said. “But things totally changed for her when Nathan came into her life. He’s part of this whole thing. But he’s not a bad guy. Just caught up in it all, like Dante. I think if I reach out to Abby, she might be able to get him to help us.”

I swallowed down the last sip of my tea. “Well, hopefully, I won’t need his help.”

“It’s either the police or the mafia, babe,” she said softly. “But at this point, you should know you can’t do any of this by yourself.”

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry despite the hot liquid.

She was right, and I hated it.

But all my choices seemed bad...and I had no idea what the fuck I was supposed to do with that.

All I knew was that I had to make sure my baby was safe.

That I had to make sure Dante was safe.

And after that, everything would fall into place.

...It had to.

Because if it didn't, I was going to lose my goddamn mind.

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Chapter Three: Dante

Eyes snapped open—a ceiling, white and unyielding, loomed above. My head pounded like the drumbeat of a funeral march.

The sterile scent of antiseptic invaded my senses. Hospital. Right. The realization struck like a gut punch, memories of gunfire and chaos flooding back. I shifted in the bed, pain lacing through me, an unwelcome reminder of my vulnerability.

My side hurt so fucking much.

And it was too bright in this room to make sense of anything.

But there was one thing I was absolutely certain of: she wasn't here.

"Jade," her name burst from my lips, a lifeline to sanity. "Where's Jade?"

The nurse at my bedside, clipboard in hand, peered down at me with a furrowed brow. "Who?" she asked, her voice flat, detached.

"Jade Bentley," I pushed through gritted teeth, anger rising fast, hot, and uncontrolled—she was the mother of my child, damn it. "You have to know where she is!"

"Sir, I have no idea who that is," she replied, unmoved by my distress, scribbling something on her clipboard that I couldn't give a damn about.

My pulse hammered against the confines of my veins, each throb resonating with a mixture of fury and dread. “You gotta tell me where she is,” I demanded, fingers gripping the edge of the hospital bed until my knuckles turned white.

“Is that your girlfriend?”

“I...yes,” I said. “Look, I just need to see her, alright?”

“She might be waiting for you. I can go and get her if you’d like,” she said.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to thank her, but talking hurt. God, I was so thirsty.

“But Mr. Moretti,” the nurse said, her voice a calm counterpoint to the storm raging inside me, “you need to rest. You’ve been through a significant ordeal.”

I opened my eyes. “What happened?”

“Well, you were shot,” she said. “Got you right here.”

She pointed at a patch on my left side, bandages peeking out from under the flimsy fabric of the hospital gown. I grimaced, remembering the white-hot flare of pain that had dropped me to my knees.

My vision swam with the memory - Luca’s betrayal, the searing pain of bullets cutting through flesh, my desperate thoughts of Jade as darkness closed in. A cold knot twisted in my gut. Luca had been family, a trusted capo. And he had tried to murder me.

But where was Jade?

“The surgeon will explain it all to you in detail,” she said.

“Forget the surgeon. I need to know where Jade is.”

“Well, okay, but first, you need to rest.”

“Rest?” The word came out as a harsh laugh. “You think I can rest not knowing if she’s safe?”

I realized the drugs were going straight to my head. There was no way this woman knew anything about Jade...I didn’t think.

But maybe, on the off chance. I had to make sure.

The nurse placed a gentle hand on my arm, the touch meant to be soothing, but it only served to heighten my agitation. “I understand you’re worried, but—“

“Understand?” I cut her off, my tone edged like a blade. “You don’t understand anything.”

The door swung open with a quiet creak, and Marco stumbled in, his presence immediately drawing my gaze. He looked like hell — eyes rimmed red and skin pale, a stark difference from his usual lively demeanor. A bruise was blossoming across his cheekbone, and he moved with the careful precision of someone trying hard not to show how much pain they were in.

“Marco,” I said, my voice dropping from its earlier ire to something laced with concern. “What the hell happened to you?”

He waved off my question, a flicker of his usual bravado breaking through despite the clear signs he’d seen better days. “Later, Dante. We got bigger problems.”

“Jade,” I said, the single word holding all the weight of my fears. “Is she—“

“Let’s talk,” Marco interrupted, glancing at the nurse with a look that said this wasn’t a conversation for outsiders.

The nurse caught the exchange, her expression softening with understanding or maybe just resignation. “I’ll give you two a moment,” she said before slipping out, leaving us alone in the sterile room that suddenly felt far too small.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” he said. “I was worried about you.”

“You were worried about me? You look worse than I feel.”

“Nothing a drink won’t fix,” he tried to joke, but his voice lacked its usual punch.

“Cut the bull, Marco. You’re hurt.” My grip tightened, concern etched into every line of my face as I scanned him for injuries. “Who did this to you?”

“Later,” he insisted, brushing off my hands with an irritated flick. “We have to focus on your girlfriend.”

“Jade.” Her name sliced through the fog of drugs still clouding my mind, sharpening my senses with alarming clarity. “Where is she, Marco? Tell me she’s safe.”

He shifted on his feet, avoiding my gaze. It was unlike him; Marco always met challenges head-on. “I’m working on it, Dante. I swear.”

“Working on it isn’t good enough!” The words burst from me, a raw edge to my voice betraying the cold dread that settled in my stomach. “She’s out there with my kid, Marco. Our kid.”

His eyes finally met mine, and something unspoken passed between us—fear, urgency, the unyielding weight of family ties strained to their limit. “I know,” he said

softly, the fight draining from him. “I know.”

I shot up in bed, the beeping monitors an unwelcome symphony to my pounding head. “And you have no idea where she is?”

He hesitated, and that sliver of silence was a blade to my gut. “I don’t know, Dante. After Luca... after what happened,” he said, avoiding my eyes, “she vanished.”

“Vanished?” I echoed, blood roaring in my ears. “What does that mean, vanished? People don’t just disappear!”

“Hey, keep it down,” Marco snapped back, a bite in his tone as he glanced nervously at the hospital door. “We’ve got ears everywhere.”

“Then use them to find her!” I demanded, the sense of urgency clawing at me. The mere thought of Jade out there, alone and possibly in danger—no, I couldn’t stomach it.

“Look, I’m trying, alright?” His gaze flickered to mine, a storm brewing in those familiar eyes. “But with Luca turning on us, I can’t really use our resources, okay? If Caruso is turning our men against you of all people, well, then everyone might be compromised.”

“What about Enzo? Call Dad,” I said. “Does he know about this?”

Marco’s face hardened and he averted his gaze from mine. “Dad knows. He’s working on it.”

“Is he out looking for her? Is he—“

“He’s doing everything he can, Dante,” Marco cut in, the edge in his voice making it

clear that this was not open for debate.

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“Dad’s pissed because you kept him out of your route idea and tried to get one of Caruso’s men to turn against him, which, incidentally, made me get shot. Remember that?”

“Yes, I remember that,” I said. “But he’s not visiting his oldest son in the hospital after he’s been shot?”

“He’s trying to protect you,” Marco replied. “Look, I know Dad’s an asshole, but everything is turned up to eleven and he doesn’t want to lose you right now. Caruso and his men are watching him—they’re watching you, they’re watching Mom, they’re watching me. If someone tracks him here—which, by the way, super weird they brought you to this hospital—then how do you think this is going to end for you? If Jade visits you, how do you think it’s going to end for her?”

His words, as harsh as they were, rang true. The weight of them settled onto my chest like a leaden blanket, crushing the air from my lungs.

“I can’t lose her, Marco.” My voice was barely a whisper, heavy with desperation. “She’s... She’s everything.”

“And you think yelling about her in a hospital full of potential enemies is going to help her? Is going to keep her safe?” Marco’s voice was equally low, his brow furrowed in a scowl. “You need to think, Dante. You’re good at thinking almost all the time, except when it comes to her. So think.”

I fell silent at his reprimand—harsh, yes, but not undeserved. Since Jade had...well, since she had come into my life, I’d been reacting out of fear. Out of desperation. But

I wasn't doing anyone—especially not Jade—any favors by panicking.

“You're right,” I conceded after a long moment of silence. My gaze was focused somewhere on the sterile tiles of the hospital floor as I took in my brother's words. “But her life is in danger. We've got to find her. Every second we waste—“

“Keep your voice down, Dante,” Marco hissed, glancing nervously at the door. “You want the whole damn hospital in here?”

“Let 'em come,” I growled, the muscles in my jaw clenching tight. Jade's face, usually so composed and astute, haunted me. If she were here, she'd have a plan, a way to cut through the fog of treachery that clouded my mind.

“Listen, man, I'm on it, okay?” Marco's eyes were bloodshot, the dark circles beneath them telling of sleepless nights. “But you can't just storm out of here and go after Luca. Not in your condition.”

“Fuck my condition,” I pushed myself up, the room wavering for a moment before settling into focus. “I've been shot before. It never stopped me.”

“Easy, easy,” Marco urged, placing a firm hand on my shoulder and pushing me back down. “You think I don't want to rip Luca apart myself? But we're playing a game with no rules now, and running headfirst into danger is exactly what he'd expect.”

“Then we'll be unpredictable,” I countered, but doubt gnawed at me. Was I really thinking straight? Could I trust my own judgment when every cell in my body screamed for vengeance and reunion with Jade?

“Unpredictable,” Marco mused, his brow furrowing. “Yeah, maybe that's our angle. But we need more intel, something solid. Right now, we're grasping at shadows.”

“Get me something I can use.” I was pleading now, desperation edging into my voice. “Anything to lead me to Jade.”

Marco nodded, his resolve hardening. “I will. Just...give me some time.”

“Time is a luxury I don’t have,” I muttered, turning away from him. My heart pounded like a drumbeat, relentless.

“Jesus Christ, Dante,” he said. “Sit down and take a breath, okay? We’ll get her back. But we need you in one piece, alright?”

My gaze met his, the urgency in his eyes mirrored in my own. After a moment, I nodded tersely, relenting to his logic. He was right. As much as it pained me, he was right. I couldn’t help Jade if I was dead.

“I know,” I ground out through gritted teeth. “I just...she’s alone out there, Marco.”

“I know.” His voice was softer now, understanding. He knew what she meant to me, how my world had shifted when she came into it.

With a sigh, he pushed himself off the side of my bed and gave me a pat on the shoulder before heading for the door.

“I’ll get you something as soon as I can,” he promised, pausing at the threshold. “Just hang tight, okay? We won’t let Luca win this.”

But as the door shut behind him, leaving me alone in the sterile silence of the hospital room, I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that they had already won.

Chapter Four: Dante

Marco wasn't here anymore.

And the longer I waited, the longer she was out there.

Vulnerable. The Carusos could find her. They would kill her to get back at me, I knew that for sure.

I needed to find her first.

I swung my legs over the side of the hospital bed, the sterile white sheets crumpling beneath me. The IV stand beside me was an unwelcome anchor, its contents trickling into my veins with a persistence I had no patience for. "Doc," I grumbled, fixing the surgeon with a steely glare that ordinarily commanded respect and instigated action, "I'm signing myself out."

The surgeon, a middle-aged man with a face worn by years of saving lives and losing battles, didn't flinch. He adjusted his glasses, as though buying time to frame his response. "Mr. Moretti, I can't advise that. You were shot in the side. The bullet grazed vital organs. Walking out of here is not just against medical advice—it's against common sense."

"Well, it's not your decision," I scoffed, the sound rasping out from my throat. The discomfort of the wound was nothing compared to the itch under my skin, the need to move, to act. I couldn't afford to be laid up here while my world spun on without me. My family, my... responsibilities needed attention. Immediate attention.

“Your body needs to heal,” the surgeon insisted, his voice firm but not unkind. “You risk infection, hemorrhaging—“

“Risk comes with the territory,” I interrupted, the words slicing through his well-intentioned warnings. I stood, swaying slightly, a hand pressing against the fresh stitches as if it could hold the pain inside. “I’ve faced worse.”

“Honestly, Mr. Moretti, that’s very sad,” he said with a reluctant sigh, “but this is one battle you don’t have to fight alone. Let us help you.”

In my line of work, help usually came with strings attached, favors to be repaid in blood or cash. But I saw the earnestness in his eyes, the genuine concern that I knew wasn’t feigned or bought. It was his job to care, and he did it well.

“Appreciate the sentiment, Doc,” I said, easing my tone to something less confrontational. “But the only way I heal is by getting back to business. By making sure my family’s safe.”

“Mr. Moretti,” he began again, but I cut him off with a raised hand, my decision etched in stone.

“Sign the papers. I’m leaving.”

He was about to say something else when the door swung open abruptly, and in strode Detective Rodriguez—his entrance slicing through the tension like a blade. He was an imposing silhouette against the afternoon light that fought its way through the blinds, his dark hair peppered with authority and experience.

“Doctor,” his voice boomed, leaving no room for negotiation, “I need to speak with Mr. Moretti alone.”

Rodriguez flashed the surgeon his badge briefly, just long enough for the doctor to register what the detective was asking him to do.

The surgeon hesitated, casting me a look that married concern with apology before nodding curtly and exiting the room. I watched him go, the fabric of his coat whispering farewell. Alone now with the detective, I felt the tightness in my chest ease into something resembling amusement.

“Rodriguez,” I greeted him, ignoring the dull throb at my side as I shifted in the bed to face him fully. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Think about your next words very carefully, Moretti,” he said. “Because you’re in a hospital bed and I’m not.”

He was right. And just like that, the room fell silent.

The silence thickened as Rodriguez pulled out a notepad, his movements meticulous and practiced. I watched him with a mix of annoyance and curiosity, my mind racing to anticipate his next move.

Rodriguez didn’t miss a beat, his expression unreadable as he met my gaze. “I’m here to ask you about the shooting, Dante. Who was it this time? Another family dispute or something more personal?”

“I’m not speaking to you without my attorney present.”

“The choice is yours, Moretti,” Rodriguez responded with a shrug, nonchalantly flipping through his notepad. “But let me remind you, an innocent man wouldn’t need a lawyer to tell the truth.”

“I know people on the force. I can stop you.”

“Please, try,” Rodriguez retorted, his voice echoing throughout the room with a vehemence that caught me slightly off-guard. “You’re a mob boss in New York City. I know some of my coworkers can be corrupt, but we’re all itching to take you down.”

His words hung heavy in the air, the underlying truth stark and binding. I was no innocent man. My hands had been stained long before I found myself at the wrong end of a gun barrel.

“And you’re a dog chasing its tail,” I shot back, my voice low and controlled. “How long has the NYPD been trying to pin something on my family, Detective? Years?”

“That’s right,” Rodriguez replied quickly, his eyes flashing with uncharacteristic fervor. “And I won’t stop until your empire is dismantled.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“Every bullet fired in this city has consequences. And sooner or later, they’ll lead back to your doorstep.”

“Is that a threat, Detective?” I challenged, but Rodriguez just shook his head, the corner of his mouth twitching in what could have been a smirk or a sneer—I couldn’t tell which.

“No threats, just facts. You know how the game is played, Dante. And this time, you’re going to tell me who’s dealing the cards.”

I pushed the wad of hospital sheets off my legs with an irritated grunt, the starched fabric grating against my skin. The room was too bright, the hum of machines too loud, and Detective Rodriguez stood there like a damn statue, his cool demeanor only fueling the fire in my chest.

“Listen, you’ve got your badge and your gun, so why don’t you just cuff me and get it over with?” I barked, the sharp pain in my side punctuating each word.

Rodriguez’s lips barely twitched, but his eyes, those damn piercing orbs, drilled into mine. “Arresting you now would be too easy,” he said, voice steady as if we were discussing the weather instead of my freedom.

“Too easy?” I scoffed, shifting to sit up, ignoring the sear of protest from my wound. “Since when do cops care about taking the hard road?”

“Since it involved the Moretti family,” he shot back with a calm that scraped at my resolve.

“Ah, right. The grand quest to take us down.” My laugh came out as a harsh exhale. “Well, detective, while you’re on your noble crusade, people like me have real concerns—like family.”

He barked out a laugh. “Are you talking about your girlfriend? The one who couldn’t wait to get away from you? The one who literally escaped from an interrogation room so she wouldn’t have to see you again? Is that what you mean by family?”

“You’re way off base, Rodriguez.” I snapped, my voice dangerously low. “You don’t know a thing about Jade or what she means to me.”

Rodriguez’s smirk faded, replaced by a hard glare. “Oh, I think I understand perfectly. You’re just upset that your little science project didn’t work out the way you wanted.”

I was on my feet before I even realized it, standing tall despite the protest of my battered body. Rodriguez didn’t even flinch, just watched me with those icy eyes of his.

“Careful, Detective,” I warned, my voice barely more than a growl. “Don’t underestimate how quickly this conversation can turn.”

“As long as we’re trading threats,” he shot back, his tone frosty as he finally placed his notepad back in his pocket. “Just remember this; you’re not invincible, Moretti. And your reign over this city won’t last forever.”

“You think I’m scared of whatever you’ve got planned for me? I’ve stared down worse fates than a jail cell.”

“Is that so?” He stepped closer, invading my already limited space, his height casting a shadow across the bed. “Then you won’t mind sticking around the city for a while?”

“Try and stop me,” I challenged, meeting his gaze head-on, daring him to blink first.

A thread of relief wound through the tightness in my chest, but the knot didn’t fully unravel. I narrowed my eyes at Rodriguez, the familiar burn of frustration flaring up again as he stood there, a statue of authority.

“Fine,” he finally said, his voice carrying the weight of a gavel’s fall. “Stay in New York, Moretti. But keep one thing in mind—you step out of line, you so much as breathe suspiciously, and I’ll have you back here with cuffs tighter than those bandages.”

I wanted to lash out, to remind him that the world I lived in had no room for idle threats, but instead, I bit back the retort. My family—Jade, her condition, the life we could forge away from all this chaos—flickered in my vision like a distant lighthouse in stormy seas.

“Under investigation and surveillance, then? That’s your move?” I asked, the edge of defiance still sharp in my voice despite the underlying note of concession. The game

was changing, and though I wasn't about to fold, I recognized the need to play a smarter hand.

"Consider it a courtesy," Rodriguez replied, his blue eyes glinting with the reflection of the bedside lamp, giving nothing away. "And remember, every kingpin falls eventually."

"I'm grateful," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

He rolled his eyes. "I know you aren't," he said. "But you should be. Because you can't even begin to understand all the damage I can do."

And just like that, he was gone.

Chapter Five: Jade

My pulse hammered in my ears, a relentless drumbeat that matched the racing of my heart. Perched on the edge of Ellie's sofa bed, I could feel every worn spring beneath me, every threadbare patch of the throw that had become my temporary shroud in this refuge turned prison. The darkness of her living room seemed to hold its breath as much as I did, blanketed by the weight of the winter night pressing against the windows.

Memories flickered through my mind like the pages of a book caught in a tempest, each image crisp and searing despite the cold that crept into the apartment. I remembered the sterile gleam of BioHQ's labs, the heady mix of fear and thrill as I delved into genetic codes that held secrets darker than the Moretti family could fathom. And then there was Dante—his world had snared me in a web I couldn't have imagined, his presence both a danger and an inexplicable solace in the madness that had become my life.

I didn't know how he was. I couldn't find out how he was—if I even so much as called the hospital, Rodriguez would find me. And giving the slip to the police wouldn't look good if I did have to testify, which I had only just realized on Ellie's sofa.

So things weren't looking great for me.

But it was the tiny flutter, the subtle shift within me that anchored me to the present moment. My hand instinctively went to my belly, cradling the promise of new life that bloomed amidst the chaos. This child, innocent and yet unborn, had become my compass, my reason for every hard decision, every step cloaked in shadow. For them,

I would brave the treacherous path ahead, forsake the comfort of old alliances, even if it meant walking headlong into the unknown.

Protecting my baby wasn't just an option; it was the imperative that propelled me forward, past the fear that clawed at my resolve. Even now, with Ellie sleeping mere feet away, her steady breathing a counterpoint to my own erratic one, I knew I couldn't stay. She'd understand, eventually.

With a silent apology to my friend, I steeled myself for what had to come next. There was no turning back now—not when every heartbeat was a countdown to a future I had to grasp with both hands, no matter how they trembled.

The plush carpet muffled my steps as I tiptoed toward the coat closet where my bag waited—a lifeline in nylon and zippers.

My hands shook as I reached for it, the tremble betraying the icy knot of dread lodged deep in my stomach. I unzipped the main compartment, the faint whisper of fabric against teeth sounding thunderous in the hushed room. I paused, glancing back at Ellie's sleeping form, praying she'd remain oblivious to my covert departure.

With a shuddering breath that I willed to be silent, I snatched my phone and wallet. They were the sum of my possessions now; everything else was a ghost of a life rapidly receding behind me. I slipped them into my bag, each item a weighty anchor, tethering me to a reality I could no longer afford to ignore. My fingers fumbled over the phone's cold surface, and my heart pounded a staccato rhythm that echoed the urgency pulsating through my veins.

"Sorry, El," I murmured under my breath, the words dissolving into the darkness. There was no space for hesitation, no room for second-guessing. The necessity of my actions crystallized with every shaky beat of my heart. For my child, my future—I would do whatever it took.

The stillness of Ellie's apartment was a deceptive shroud, the quiet only amplifying the hammering of my heart against my ribs. I stood motionless, the bag clutched in my hand like a lifeline, straining my ears for any hint of movement, any sign that my plan was unraveling before it could truly begin.

My breath hitched as the faintest creak sounded from somewhere within the darkened maze of rooms, a mundane noise transformed into a sinister omen by the charged atmosphere of my escape. I waited, every nerve ending alight with a primal alertness that bordered on paranoia. But no footsteps followed, no voices shattered the fragile silence that enshrouded us.

I exhaled slowly, steadying the rapid rise and fall of my chest.

Enough stalling, Jade. It's now or never.

With practiced precision, I zipped up my bag, each click of the teeth a tiny chime in the cavernous night. I slung it over my shoulder, the strap pressing into my flesh—a grounding pressure amidst the chaos of my racing thoughts.

I inched the door open, my breath coming in shallow gulps that I feared were too loud in the silence of Ellie's apartment. The cool metal of the doorknob against my palm was grounding, a reminder of the physical world when every cell in my body seemed to be screaming with anticipation and dread.

The hallway lay bathed in shadows, the feeble light from a distant street lamp filtering in through a grime-smeared window at the far end. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me to confirm the coast was clear. No lurking shapes, no whisper of movement.

I let out a soft sigh as relief flushed through me, quick and heady. My legs, previously tense as coiled springs, carried me forward now with newfound purpose.

There was no turning back. I had made my choice, and with each step toward the stairway, I sealed my fate.

With a final glance over my shoulder at the closed apartment door, I stepped out into the cool night air. The chill was immediate, biting at my exposed skin, but it couldn't rival the ice in my veins. I nudged the door closed with the heel of my boot, holding my breath as the latch clicked softly into place. The sound seemed to echo in the stillness, and for a moment, I stood frozen, waiting for any sign that I'd been heard.

None came.

My heart hammered a rapid beat, urging me on, and I listened. The apartment building was silent save for the distant hum of the city that never truly sleeps. My steps quickened along the hallway, the dim emergency lights casting long shadows that flickered as I passed. I kept my eyes sharp, darting from one murky corner to the next. The Morettis had eyes everywhere, and I couldn't risk being spotted now—not when I was so close to freedom.

I could almost feel the weight of surveillance cameras that might not even be there, but paranoia had become a second skin. There was no room for error. Every step felt like a negotiation between the need for haste and the caution that my predicament demanded. With each stride, I committed myself further to this path—each soft footfall on the carpet a silent vow to protect the life that thrived inside me despite the odds.

This was it. The beginning of a treacherous journey, walked under the cover of night's anonymity. A single thought propelled me forward: for the child whose heartbeat was the most vital rhythm I knew, I would brave the darkness and all its lurking dangers.

As I reached the end of the hallway, I didn't look back. There was nothing left for me

in that direction. Ahead lay the unknown, a path fraught with risks and lined with shadows that could hide friend or foe. Yet, despite the uncertainty that awaited me beyond the apartment building's confines, one thing was crystal clear—I would do whatever it took to give my child a chance at a life unmarred by the sins of their parents. With every step that carried me closer to the street, my resolve hardened into an armor of maternal instinct and sheer willpower.

My mind raced, plotting routes and contingencies, while my heart hammered a staccato rhythm against my ribs. There was no room for error, no second chances. This was it—the moment where I reclaimed our lives or lost everything.

I stepped out of the building, the darkness swallowing me whole. Each step away from the place I'd called a temporary haven was a step toward an uncertain future. But as I vanished into the night, I clung to a single truth: I was Jade Bentley, and I would carve a new path for us—one where my child could thrive, free from the sins of our past.

At the same time, though, I knew there was only one place for me to go.

Home.

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Chapter Six: Jade

Snowflakes swirled around the lonely bus bay at Central Station, where I stood, my breath fogging in the frigid air. The harsh winter night seemed to press against the glass walls of the station, seeking entrance but kept at bay by the warmth within. Here I was, Jade Bentley, a woman whose life had become as unpredictable as the swirling patterns of ice outside.

I pulled out my phone with hands that betrayed a slight tremor, not from the cold, but from the anxiety that gnawed at my insides. My thumb hovered over the contact list, and with a hesitant tap, I dialed the one number that linked me back to a life before chaos took the reins—Mom.

“Hey, Mom,” I started, my voice a hushed whisper amongst the symphony of idling engines and the occasional scuff of heavy boots on salted concrete. “Yeah, it’s me. No, no, everything’s... Look, I need to leave the city. Now.” My words tumbled out, brisk and fragmented like the brittle winter branches against the station windows.

The noise of a distant siren sliced through the stillness of the night, a stark reminder of the city that never sleeps—even when it becomes your own personal nightmare. My heart raced, yet I held onto the semblance of composure I was known for. There was no room for panic—not when every decision mattered.

“Thanks, Mom. Yeah, I’ll... I’ll keep you posted.” I ended the call, my fingers tightening around the cold metal of my phone as if it were a lifeline. A deep breath did little to steady the tremble that had taken residence in my bones, but it was time to move, time to think about what’s next.

My thoughts were already consumed by the road ahead. The road out of Dante Moretti's New York City—and hopefully, toward something that resembled peace.

But first, I needed to get prepared.

The ATM's screen flickered in the dimly lit corner of the bus terminal, a beacon of false security as I keyed in my PIN. It was a risk every time I used my card; Dante had resources, and it wouldn't take much for him to track my transactions. He'd likely already flagged my accounts, watching for any movement.

"Come on," I muttered under my breath as the machine whirred, dispensing cash that felt like both freedom and a tightrope walking over an abyss. It spat out a couple of crisp bills before flashing an infuriating message: "Daily withdrawal limit reached." It wasn't nearly enough; it was never enough when you were trying to outrun a past that clung to you like a second skin.

"Damn it," I hissed, snatching the money from the slot. Every cell in my body urged me to flee, to disappear into the night with no trail to follow. But the raw reality of my situation settled in—cash was king now, and I was practically a pauper.

My phone buzzed, slicing through the silence of the terminal and my spiraling thoughts. Mom. The display showed her name, and I pressed the device to my ear, fighting to keep my voice level.

"Hey, Mom."

"Jade, darling, did I wake you?" Her voice was laced with concern, the maternal instinct kicking in even across the miles and late-night static. "Had you gone to sleep already?"

"No, we... we just spoke," I told her.

“I know, I know. But I could sense that you were upset and...I don’t know,” she chuckled softly, but there was something more—a knowing undertone that suggested intuition rather than forgetfulness. “I just had this feeling you needed me.”

I fought back a surge of emotion, a mix of frustration and gratitude. “Mom, I’m okay.”

“Jade, you’ve never been a good liar, not even as a little girl,” she chided gently. “Now tell me what’s wrong. And don’t say ‘nothing’, because we both know it’s not true.”

I took a breath, the cold air of the station doing nothing to soothe the tightness in my chest. The truth was a luxury I couldn’t afford, not even with her. “It’s just... money stuff. I’m fine, really.”

There was a pause, and I could practically hear her mind turning over, piecing together the unsaid words that lingered between us.

“Sweetheart, if money is the issue, let me help. I can wire you some cash first thing tomorrow—no questions asked. You know I’ll always take care of you.”

Her offer was an unexpected lifeline, a moment of reprieve in the relentless tide that was threatening to pull me under. “Mom, I can’t ask you to do that...”

“Jade Bentley, you didn’t ask—I offered. And I insist. Whether you’re twenty-five or fifty, you’ll always be my little girl. Let me do this for you.”

“Okay,” I conceded, the word feeling like a surrender and a salvation all at once. “Thank you, Mom. Really, thank you.”

I ended the call with a soft click, a faint smile touching my lips – it didn’t reach my

eyes, but it was there nonetheless. A glimmer of hope kindled within me, flickering weakly against the darkness of my thoughts. I could almost feel the weight of the smartphone in my hand, its sleek surface now slick with the sweat from my trembling fingers.

I clutched the phone tightly, knuckles whitening, as if by sheer grip alone I could hold onto the sense of safety my mom's promise provided. The relief was tangible, a fleeting respite from the fear that Dante Moretti's reach could extend even to the shadows where I sought refuge.

With a shaky exhale that turned to mist in the wintry air of Grand Central Station, I shoved the phone into the depths of my bag. It was done. Help was on the way. Now, I just had to survive long enough for it to reach me.

I sucked in a lungful of the station's charged air, the tang of metal and exhaust battling the underlying scent of stale coffee from the all-night kiosk. My chest expanded against the constraints of my coat, and for a moment, I pretended that with this breath, I could inhale courage and exhale fear.

"Time to move, Bentley," I muttered to myself, the words barely audible above the dull roar of the cavernous terminal.

My hands moved with purpose, rifling through my bag. I pulled out the essentials—my wallet, a small notebook crammed with research notes, and the burner phone I'd bought on impulse. Each item was a piece of the puzzle that was my escape, a symbol of the life I was desperate to protect.

At the till, I shoved the items into a nondescript backpack that screamed 'tourist' rather than 'fleeing for her life'. My fingers were nimble, betraying none of the chaos that churned inside me. They flipped through the wad of cash, counting silently before sliding it over the counter for yet another ticket to Nowhere Fast.

“Keep it together,” I whispered to the reflection in the glass pane separating me from the clerk—a reflection that seemed so far removed from the Jade Bentley who once peered into microscopes, searching for answers to questions most people hadn’t thought to ask.

“Next, please!” the clerk called out, snapping me back from my reverie. I shouldered the backpack, feeling the comforting weight against my back, and stepped away from the till, blending into the sparse crowd of night owls and early risers.

I darted toward the ticket counter, my heart drumming a rapid beat in my chest. “One ticket to Harbor’s End,” I demanded, breathless, my voice a notch too loud in the quiet of the night.

The clerk raised an eyebrow but typed away, unfazed by the urgency lacing my tone. “That’ll be fifty dollars,” he said flatly.

“Here.” I shoved a crumpled bill across the counter, not bothering with pleasantries. The transaction was swift, and soon enough, a flimsy piece of hope lay in my palm—a one-way ticket out of this city that had become a lavish prison.

Clutching the ticket like a talisman against the chaos Dante Moretti’s world had thrust upon me, I spun on my heel and strode towards the elevator. The polished metal doors slid open silently, swallowing me whole as I descended into the bowels of Grand Central Station, where the buses promised anonymity and distance.

My mind reeled with calculations and contingencies, each step a deliberate march away from a life intertwined with a criminal empire that knew no boundaries. The pulsating fear of being followed, of being dragged back to a love poisoned by danger, receded with every determined footfall.

“Harbor’s End?” the bus agent asked, peering at me through sleepy eyes.

“Yep, that’s me,” I replied, feeling the ghost of a smile tugging at my lips. I handed over the ticket, and he nodded, tearing off a portion and handing it back without another word.

“Bus leaves in ten minutes, Gate 24B,” he muttered, already losing interest as he looked past me to the next customer in line.

“Thanks.” I pocketed the precious stub of paper and turned away, my resolve hardening. There was no room for hesitation, only the unyielding will to disappear into the night, to a place where the reach of the Moretti family might falter, where the whispers of my past wouldn’t haunt me.

As I walked towards the gate, the weight of my backpack felt grounding, a reminder of the tangible, of the reality that I was moving forward, one step at a time. Harbor’s End was just the beginning, a mere stopover in my flight towards freedom—or whatever semblance of it I could grasp with trembling hands.

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Chapter Seven: Dante

“Jade!”

My voice, raw with panic, bounced off the high ceilings of the penthouse as I flipped the couch with a single-handed heave. Cushions tumbled to the floor like fallen soldiers in my fruitless search for her. The room bore the chaos of my despair—drawers yanked from dressers, picture frames askew, the contents of her bedside table scattered across the carpet.

“Damn it, Jade, where are you?” I muttered to no one, my hands clenching into fists. She was gone. I knew that. The silence of the apartment screamed it louder than the storm brewing within me.

I stormed over to the shattered remains of my phone on the marble floor. Dropping to my knees, I pieced together enough of the device to track hers. A glow flickered to life, and the screen confirmed what I dreaded: Grand Central Station.

How the hell had my phone ended up here? How had it ended up shattered?

Fuck it. It didn't matter.

I needed to find her...I could worry about my phone later.

Dropping to my knees, I pieced together enough of the device to track hers. A glow flickered to life, and the screen confirmed what I dreaded: Grand Central Station.

“Of course, she’d go there,” I snarled under my breath. It was public, swarming with people—an ideal place to get lost, or worse, found by someone else.

Ignoring the pulse of pain from the wound in my side, I slipped into a jacket and palmed a fresh phone from the drawer. It would be a cold day in hell before I let her slip through my fingers. I locked up the penthouse, each click of the locks a countdown to finding her.

The streets of New York were just shaking off the remnants of sleep, but I moved like a man possessed, driven by a cocktail of rage and concern. Each step shot fire through my side where a bullet had grazed me days earlier—a parting gift from a rival too foolish to aim properly. But I welcomed the pain; it kept me sharp, fueled my need to find her before anyone else did.

Slowing down wasn’t an option. Not when every second could mean the difference between having her in my arms or losing her to the city’s gaping maw. With the Moretti name comes enemies hidden in shadows, waiting for a moment of vulnerability. And Jade, with her intelligent eyes and stubborn will, was now my greatest vulnerability.

“Grand Central, don’t fail me now,” I grunted, pushing open the doors to the terminal. The morning light filtered through the expansive windows, casting the grandeur of the station in soft relief. But the beauty of the place was lost on me. All I saw were potential hiding spots, escape routes, dangers.

“Find her,” I commanded myself, jaw set, as I began the hunt through the heart of the bustling crowd.

The chaos of Grand Central was a stark contrast to the stillness of my penthouse, now void of Jade’s presence. But here in the thronging heart of New York City, I stalked through the crowd with singular focus. I scanned every face, every hurried step,

searching for any trace of her.

My senses were sharp despite the searing pain from my wound, and I absorbed every detail—the scent of coffee that did nothing to mask the underlying smell of city grime, the clamor of voices announcing departures, the clack of heels on marble floors. There was no sign of Jade’s soft waves of dark hair or the purposeful stride she used when deep in thought.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath. I pulled out the tracking app on my phone, the blip representing Jade’s location mocking me with its stagnant position. The station was a maze of possibilities, each one disappearing as quickly as I latched onto it.

With methodical precision, I moved towards the main information booth, the epicenter of movement where paths diverged and converged in a constant stream of humanity. It had been the last place her phone pinged before going silent. A clever move—a drop in an ocean of people, all moving to their own rhythms.

I pressed the heel of my hand against my temple, trying to channel Jade’s logical mind, her knack for seeing patterns in chaos. If she were here, she’d have analyzed the situation with scientific detachment, calculating odds and dismissing unlikely scenarios without sentimentality.

If she wasn’t afraid of me. And...she was. She was probably afraid of the police too and there was a part of me that thought I should probably be...grateful. But I wasn’t grateful. I wanted her.

I needed her.

She couldn’t just leave me. Not when she was pregnant with my child.

I stopped short, my breath hitching—not from the wound this time but from realization. Her phone lay discarded by a pillar, screen cracked, a deliberate breadcrumb meant to be found. My chest tightened with a mixture of fury and respect. She'd played me at my own game, leaving a false trail to follow while she vanished into the early morning haze of the city.

“Smart girl,” I growled, the words tasting like bile. Betrayal stung sharper than any blade, and my fists clenched until my knuckles whitened. I kicked the phone away, hearing it skitter across the floor, lost now in the shuffle of feet.

I turned back to the crowd, eyes narrowed, ready to pick up the chase. Every tick of the clock, every heartbeat, was a reminder that time was slipping through my fingers like sand.

“Where are you, Jade Bentley?” I vowed silently, “I will find you, no matter what it takes.”

But I wasn't going to find an answer here. I needed to go speak to someone who would know where she was, and the only person that I could think about was Ellie.

Yeah, Dr. Ellie Harper would know exactly where Jade had gone, exactly what she was doing. I just needed to go to her apartment and interrogate her. Once I did that, everything would become clear to me and I would just go and retrieve her.

It would be easy.

It would be simple. And it would be the solution to all my problems.

I turned around, wincing at the pain.

And I was about to make my way to her place when I heard her voice.

“Moretti!” A familiar voice cut through the hum of morning chatter, and I spun on my heel to see Ellie Harper approaching, her brown eyes wide with what I assumed was concern—or maybe fear. It was hard to tell with Ellie. She always had that look about her, like she knew more than she let on.

“Where is she?” I demanded without preamble, closing the gap between us in two long strides. My voice came out harsher than I intended, every word laced with a threat. The station’s grandeur faded into the background, the towering windows and marble floors nothing but a blur as my focus narrowed to Ellie and her potential answers.

Ellie held her ground, her professional facade firmly in place. “Dante, you need to calm down. Making a scene here won’t help anyone.”

“Cut the crap, Ellie!” I snapped, my patience fraying like a worn rope. “I know you’re in contact with her. Tell me where Jade is.”

“Even if I knew, do you think I’d just hand her over to you?” Ellie’s response was steady, but I caught the slightest tremor in her voice. She was good, but not good enough to hide the truth from me.

“Damn it, Ellie! This isn’t a game,” I roared, grabbing her by the shoulders. “If she’s not here...she’s in danger, okay? As long as she’s not with me, she’s in danger.”

“Dante,” she said, looking into my eyes. “She’s in danger when she’s with you.”

“Damn it, Ellie! This isn’t a game,” I roared, grabbing her by the shoulders.

“Let go of me, Dante,” Ellie said, her tone firm despite the flicker of alarm in her eyes. She tried to shake off my grip, but I wasn’t having any of it.

“Jade’s in danger because of my world. You know that.” My words were punctuated by an involuntary wince as my wound protested the movement. “If anything happens to her...”

“Nothing will happen to Jade,” Ellie interjected quickly, perhaps too quickly. Her reassurance sounded hollow, practiced. “She can take care of herself.”

“Can she?” I challenged, releasing her with a shove that had her stumbling back a step. My chest heaved, anger and worry churning inside me like a violent storm. The air felt thick, charged with electricity as the morning light streamed in, casting long shadows across the concourse.

“I’m going to find her,” I muttered, turning away from Ellie. I couldn’t stand to look at her anymore, at her too-calm demeanor when everything inside me was chaos.

“Watch your back, Moretti,” Ellie called after me, her warning clear even amidst the noise. “Not everyone wants to see you reunited with Jade.”

The morning chill bit at my skin as I stormed out of Grand Central, every muscle in my body tight with urgency. My steps were sharp, purposeful echoes on the pavement, the city’s pulse quickening alongside mine. A thin trail of blood seeped through the hastily wrapped bandage on my side—a constant, dull reminder that time was a luxury I couldn’t squander.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:18 pm

Chapter Eight: Jade

I pushed the door open, the jingle of the bell announcing my arrival more confidently than I felt. The Harbor Cove Diner embraced me with the aroma of coffee and sizzling bacon, an olfactory nudge that did little to settle my nerves. Weeks had slipped by since I'd landed in this picturesque town, a fugitive from a life too dangerous to cling to. Dante hadn't found me yet, hadn't turned my new haven into a hunting ground, and for that, I was silently thankful.

But I was also a little mad. I missed him. I had left everything so I wouldn't have to turn on him.

And he wasn't even looking for me.

But it wasn't like I could call and ask what the hell was going on, so...I told myself to get a grip and start my work day.

"Ah, you must be Jade!" The voice shattered my momentary relief, pulling me back to the task at hand. "My wife said you came in looking for work."

I had. Part of me was hoping I wasn't going to get any, but the kind owner decided to give me a chance right then and there, and I needed a distraction.

I turned to see Mr. Thompson approaching, his gait steady and sure despite his age, a warm grin creasing his weathered face. Beside him stood Mrs. Thompson, her eyes crinkling in a welcoming smile. They were as much fixtures of this place as the checkered tablecloths and worn counter stools.

“Welcome to our little family,” Mrs. Thompson said, her voice as inviting as the diner itself. “We’re so glad to have you on board.”

“Thank you,” I managed, my voice steadier than I felt. My hands twisted together, betraying my composure.

“Let’s introduce you to everyone.” Mr. Thompson gestured toward the kitchen, beckoning me to follow.

As we made the rounds, each staff member greeted me with nods and smiles, their faces blurring into a montage of Harbor Cove’s hospitality. Every introduction was a thread weaving me tighter into the fabric of this community, a tapestry far removed from sterile labs and the shadow of the Moretti empire.

“Everyone’s real friendly here,” Mr. Thompson assured me, clapping a reassuring hand on my shoulder before he shuffled off to tend to a sputtering coffee machine.

“Everyone” included a cook with a laugh as hearty as his burgers and a waitress whose quick wit rivaled any repartee I’d encountered in academic circles. It was clear that survival here depended not on evading danger but on mastering the art of diner small talk and perfecting the delicate dance of balancing trays.

“Alright, Jade, think you can handle it?” Mrs. Thompson asked, her gaze appraising yet kind.

“Absolutely,” I replied, though really, I was fucking scared. Being a waitress seemed way harder than anything I’d ever done.

“Great! Let’s get you started,” she said, motioning to an apron that hung like a rite of passage on a nearby hook.

Slipping into the apron, I felt the weight of a new identity settling around me—not just Jade Bentley, scientist, but Jade, the waitress who’d find sanctuary among the ebb and flow of coffee refills and lunch rushes. With a deep breath, I stepped behind the counter and into my new life.

I shadowed a woman whose name I couldn’t remember and she slowly got me up to speed. I was right; it was hard and I wasn’t good at it, but it provided the perfect distraction. I didn’t want to think about Dante. I didn’t want to think about being pregnant.

I just wanted to think about the next order.

And days passed like that, and then they turned into weeks. Mrs. Thompson had probably only given me a chance because I had started to show and she thought I was a poor single woman about to have a baby who had left her deadbeat baby daddy.

Which, really, I sort of had.

But I didn’t want to think about it like that.

The chime of the door announced another customer, and with an affable smile, I approached the booth. “Good afternoon, what can I get for you today?” The words tumbled out, surprisingly natural against the hum of the diner.

“Whatcha recommend, darlin’?” the man asked, tipping his hat back with a weathered hand.

“Today’s special is the meatloaf,” I suggested. “It’s like comfort on a plate.”

“Sold,” he said, with a grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

As I scribbled down the order, my mind couldn't help but drift to the lab at BioHQ, where precision ruled and the stakes were high. There was something oddly comforting about the routine here, yet I ached for the thrill of discovery, the eureka moments that had defined my career as a scientist. In stolen moments, I sketched protein structures on napkins and jotted down ideas for experiments, though they felt like messages in bottles tossed into an ocean of what-ifs.

"Jade, table four needs a top-up on their coffee," Mrs. Thompson called out, snapping me back to reality.

"Got it," I replied, pouring the dark liquid into waiting cups, exchanging pleasantries with patrons whose faces were becoming familiar.

When my break finally arrived, I sank into a booth with a sigh, the scent of freshly baked pie mingling with the robust aroma of coffee. Mrs. Thompson slid into the seat opposite me, her presence as comforting as the homemade quilts that adorned the diner's walls.

"Bet this is a bit different from your old job, huh?" she asked, her voice carrying the wisdom of years spent within these walls.

"More than you know," I admitted, giving her a wry smile. I stopped myself from telling her what it was—all I had told her was that I used to work in a lab, and I'd let her believe I was working in the cafeteria.

"Life has a funny way of taking us places we never imagined," Mrs. Thompson mused, her eyes reflecting memories of days gone by. "This place started as nothing more than a dream and two pairs of hands willing to work 'til they were raw."

"Seems like you built something wonderful," I observed, glancing around at the cozy ambiance that spoke of love and dedication poured into every detail.

“Yeah,” she said. “The restaurant is good. The community is even better. You’ll start feeling it, you know, the longer you’re here for.”

Her words settled over me, a gentle reminder that even without lab coats and beakers, life was still a series of experiments—some yielding success, others lessons to be learned.

But I didn’t give myself a lot of time to think about it.

Every day was the same. I took as many shifts as I could, tried to keep myself occupied, and was exhausted by the end of the day.

The sizzle of the grill was my new morning alarm, each pop and crackle a reminder that life at the Cove Inn Diner unfolded with an energy all its own. While I expertly balanced plates along my forearm, navigating between tables with a grace I didn’t know I possessed, the undercurrent of nausea reminded me that something more than just the aroma of frying bacon lingered in the air.

“Morning, Jade,” called out Lou, one of our regulars, as he settled into his usual booth. “The usual, please, and make the coffee extra strong today.”

“Coming right up,” I replied with a practiced smile, scribbling down his order. My mind was busy cataloguing the breakfast preferences of Harbor Cove’s early risers.

“Hey, you okay?” asked Rosie, the diner’s veteran waitress, her eyes narrowing with concern as she caught me pressing a hand to my stomach.

“Just the little one saying ‘hello,’” I quipped, trying to brush off the wave of dizziness. She offered me a knowing smirk before heading back to the kitchen.

“Here’s your breakfast, Lou,” I said minutes later, setting down his plate with a

flourish. “Eggs over easy, wheat toast, no butter, and hash browns extra crispy. And your coffee—dark as midnight and twice as potent.”

“You’re the best, Jade. This place hasn’t felt this alive in years,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee and winking appreciatively.

“Thanks, Lou.” I smiled genuinely, warmed by his compliment. The diner’s clatter and hum were a stark departure from the sterile silence of BioHQ’s labs, but here, amidst the banter and the daily grind, I was carving out a space for myself, even if it was worlds away from where I’d begun.

And the day passed like that.

The clatter of dishes and the soft hum of the refrigerator were the only sounds in the Cove Inn diner as I wiped down the last table, my movements slow and deliberate. Mrs. Thompson, her silver hair catching the glow of the overhead lights, stacked chairs with a care that spoke of years tending to this place.

“Need a hand with those?” I offered, tossing the rag over my shoulder.

“Thank you, dear,” she replied, her voice a soothing timbre after the day’s bustle. “But let’s sit a moment, hm? My old bones could use the break.”

We settled into a booth by the window, the one with a view of the harbor where shadows played on the water’s surface. The silence was comfortable, a companionable stillness stretching between us.

“Jade,” she began, her gaze softening, “I’ve watched you these past weeks, how you carry yourself. You’ve got strength in you, more than you might realize.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Thompson,” I said, feeling the weight of her words settle over me like

a blanket. I was aware she was saying it because she was feeling sorry for me, but I appreciated it nevertheless. “This place feels like a strange kind of home now.”

“Good,” she said. “It suits you. I know you’re here alone, and you’ll need to make plans for when the baby is born, so start thinking about it. Alright?”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I whispered, my throat tight with emotion. “For the job, for...for this.” I gestured around the empty diner, at the life I never planned but somehow needed.

“Thank you for bringing your light into our little corner of the world,” Mrs. Thompson replied, giving my hand one final squeeze before standing. “Now, let’s get those chairs down. We open early tomorrow, and the world doesn’t stop turning for late-night heart-to-hearts.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I said with a soft laugh, rising to join her in the closing routine. As I moved through the motions, the comforting rhythm of the diner wrapped around me, and for the first time in a long while, I felt a sense of belonging that reached deep into my bones. Here, in Harbor Cove, perhaps I could truly start anew.

The chill of the late afternoon air nipped at my cheeks as I stepped out of the Cove Inn diner, pulling my coat tighter around me. Harbor Cove was quiet, the usual hustle of tourists and locals thinned by the winter season. My breath formed small clouds of mist as I wandered down the cobblestone streets, the rhythmic sound of my boots against the stone a solitary echo in the calm.

I turned a corner, and there it was – the harbor. Sailboats swayed gently in their berths, their masts clicking softly like a subtle, natural percussion. The sea was a sheet of pewter under the overcast sky, and I paused to watch the waves roll in, steady and soothing. It was moments like these that made the past weeks feel like a distant nightmare.

“New in town?” A voice rang out from behind me, causing me to jump slightly. I turned to see an old man leaning against the frame of his shop door, a pipe perched between his lips.

“Is it that obvious?” I replied with a half-smile.

“Harbor Cove has a memory like an elephant,” he chuckled. “Enjoying the view?”

“Very much so,” I said, before continuing down the street, leaving the man to his quiet contemplation.

Further along, nestled between a florist bursting with hues of winter blooms and a bakery sending out tempting aromas of fresh bread, was a small bookstore that seemed to beckon me closer. Its windows were adorned with displays of classic literature and promising new releases, both begging for attention.

I pushed open the door, a bell chiming above me, and stepped into a world lined with shelves upon shelves of books. The scent of aged paper and ink filled the air, a stark difference from the sterile environment of the lab I was used to. I ran my fingers along the spines, each title a whisper of another life, another world to get lost in.

Hours slipped by unnoticed as I delved deeper into the stacks, picking up novels and thumbing through pages, allowing myself to be immersed in the poetry of words and the escapism they offered. I found solace in the silence and the stories, a respite from the relentless pursuit of answers that had once consumed my every waking moment.

“Find anything good?” the clerk asked as she passed by, her eyes bright with the shared secret of book lovers everywhere.

“Too many to choose from,” I admitted, holding up a particularly worn copy of a science fiction classic.

“Ah, a fellow traveler of imaginary realms,” she smiled. “Take your time, Harbor Cove isn’t going anywhere.”

“Thanks,” I responded, my heart a little lighter. I placed the book back on the shelf, making a mental note to return for it later. As I left the cozy confines of the store, the crisp air greeted me again, but this time, it didn’t feel quite so cold. Harbor Cove, with its quiet charm and unexpected sanctuaries, was slowly but surely wrapping itself around my weary heart.

Chopping onions wasn’t exactly rocket science, but as my knife rhythmically diced them into uniform cubes, I found the activity soothing. The sizzle that greeted them as they hit the hot pan was my new favorite sound, a far cry from the sterile silence of BioHQ’s labs. My apartment in Harbor Cove was small, yet it offered enough space for culinary experiments. With each stir and taste, I was crafting more than just a meal; I was creating a life that was entirely mine, untethered from the shadows that had chased me here.

I glanced around the kitchenette, where pots bubbled with promise. My hands, once steady holding pipettes and petri dishes, now maneuvered spatulas and spoons with growing confidence. On tonight’s menu: a hearty vegetable stew, its recipe a page torn from a cookbook discovered during my bookstore sanctuary visit. As aromas filled the space, there was a certain irony in finding such joy in the alchemy of flavors, when my life’s work had been rooted in an entirely different kind of chemistry.

After dinner, I turned to the blank canvas propped up in the corner of the room, my makeshift studio bathed in the golden hue of the setting sun. A set of acrylics lay scattered on the floor, vibrant colors beckoning. Painting was my silent rebellion against the precision of my past—a world where every detail was measured, every outcome hypothesized. Here, the only hypothesis was what would happen if I let my heart guide my hand.

The brush felt heavy at first, as if it knew the weight of the secrets I carried. But as strokes layered upon strokes, hues blending into something unexpected, the tension eased from my shoulders. This was no data to analyze, no conclusions to draw. Just the freedom of expression, my emotions spilling onto the canvas in a riot of color that didn't need to make sense to anyone else but me.

I stepped back, my gaze taking in the chaotic beauty of my creation. It was raw, it was real—it was me. Harbor Cove might have been a detour in my meticulously planned life journey, but as I looked around my rustic refuge, I couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, I was exactly where I needed to be.

And that was when the doorbell began to ring.

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Chapter Nine: Jade

The first flutter of nerves hit me as I slid into the maternity leggings, their soft stretch a reminder of the life growing inside me. I pulled on a white cut-off shirt that hugged my burgeoning belly, a stark white canvas for the future written in the curves of my body.

I couldn't escape from the fact that Dante had been the one to buy me these clothes...but damn, they were fancy and comfortable. The man might've been a little crazy, but he definitely had refined taste.

"Okay, Jade, this is it," I muttered to myself, checking my reflection in the mirror. My dark hair framed my face, the waves serving as a gentle armor for what lay ahead. My scientific mind knew all the statistics and probabilities, but the mother-to-be in me thrived on the unknown, the emotion that couldn't be quantified.

The clinic in Harbor Cove wouldn't see me. They were booked up, and I wasn't a high risk patient. I didn't want to go back to the city...but St. Mary's Hospital in New York City beckoned me with its sterile halls and state-of-the-art facilities—a familiar place from my past life, one that had nothing to do with Dante or the perilous love that bound us.

It was a risk, returning to the city that never sleeps, where every shadow could be an enemy in disguise. But risks were part of the equation now, and I was determined to ensure the best for my child—even if it meant facing my own fears head-on.

I just had to keep my head down. That was all I had to do.

I opted to rent a car—it had been a long time since I had to drive every day, but I enjoyed it, and it would be easier to get away if I needed to.

And so, with the decision made, I set out from Harbor Cove, where the harmonious cries of seagulls and the soothing rhythm of the ocean were about to be replaced by the relentless heartbeat of NYC.

“Please, let this go smoothly,” I whispered, not to any god in particular, but to the universe that held my fragile world in its hands.

The rental car’s engine hummed—a subtle, yet steady reminder that I was in motion, leaving behind the serene embrace of Harbor Cove. My fingers curled tighter around the steering wheel as I navigated the transitions from quaint coastal roads to the more assertive lanes of traffic drawing me back into the city’s clutches.

In an attempt to blend in with the throngs of vehicles on the interstate, I kept the car at a precise speed, neither too fast to become a beacon for highway patrol nor too slow to attract curious glances. The familiar skyline rose in the distance, tall buildings piercing the sky like needles, and my heart hammered against my chest with a cadence that mirrored the increasing pace of the city life I was approaching.

I found solace in the anonymity provided by the sunglasses perched on my nose and the baseball cap pulled low over my eyes. Each glance in the rearview mirror showed a sea of strangers—people blissfully unaware of the cargo I carried within me. The drive demanded a level of alertness that was almost exhausting, each passing mile a potential threat that I had to anticipate and outmaneuver.

As I edged closer to New York City, the soundscape evolved from the melodic whispers of the ocean to the cacophony of honking horns and the rhythmic thumping of construction. With every stoplight and intersection, I felt the tightening grip of the city—an intricate tango between freedom and entrapment where every step mattered.

“Keep it together, Jade,” I murmured to myself, using my reflection in the window as an anchor to the present moment. The city was a chessboard once, but now, I was playing a different game—one where the stakes were no longer just my own life but the fragile beginnings of another.

When the hospital’s imposing structure finally came into view, nestled among the concrete giants, I let myself feel some relief. But that relief was fleeting; the real challenge awaited inside. But for now, I parked the car in the shadow of St. Mary’s, and told myself everything was going to be just fine.

The door swung open with a click that echoed down the sterile corridor, less welcoming than necessary. I stepped across the threshold of St. Mary’s Hospital, shrouded in anonymity beneath my hat and sunglasses—a flimsy disguise against a world I once navigated with confidence. The obstetrics department was located on the third floor, according to the receptionist who barely glanced up from her novel as I inquired.

“Third floor, take a left off the elevator,” she had said without looking up. “Can’t miss it.”

I followed her directions, the tap of my boots against the polished floor counting out a steady rhythm that matched my racing heart. Anticipation twisted into a nervous coil in my stomach in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. This was a different kind of fear—a mother’s concern, protective and primal.

I reached the waiting area, a room buzzing with the low drone of shared expectancy. My gaze swept over the space, drinking in the sight of round bellies and glowing faces. Some women sat alone, engrossed in magazines or their phones, while others chatted animatedly with partners or family members. Laughter punctuated the air like soft notes in a tender melody, while children’s squeals underscored the domestic symphony.

The soundscape was a comforting cacophony: the rustle of pages turning, the murmur of conversations swirling with hope and anxiety, and the occasional name called by a nurse, each summons cutting through the gentle hum. It was an orchestra of life, each participant unknowingly playing their part in the universal score of creation.

I found an empty seat by the window, tucking myself away from the center of activity—close enough to observe but far enough to remain a spectator. Sunlight streamed through the glass, casting geometric patterns on the floor and warming my face. I watched a couple holding hands, their fingers intertwined.

Maybe, in another universe, that could've been Dante and I.

I hated that I missed him. I hated how much I missed him.

“Jade Bentley?” A voice eventually called out, slicing through my reverie.

I rose, feeling every eye in the room briefly flicker towards me before returning to their own stories. The walk to the examination room felt like crossing a bridge between two worlds: one filled with unknowns, and the other brimming with the promise of life yet to unfold.

I stepped through the threshold of the examination room, a sterile sanctuary where life's earliest whispers were first acknowledged. There was no time for hesitation; my heart throbbed with purpose for the tiny life within me.

“Jade Bentley?” Dr. Pineda, greeted me with a warm yet competent smile that belied the countless hours she'd dedicated to the welfare of mothers-to-be. Her eyes, sharp and knowing behind wire-framed glasses, scanned me quickly, assessing without judgment.

“Dr. Pineda,” I replied, extending a hand that she enveloped in her own—reassuring

and steady. Her grip was firm.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” she suggested, gesturing toward the examination table draped with crisp paper that crinkled under my weight as I sat down. Dr. Pineda moved with quiet efficiency, gathering her tools of trade: the blood pressure cuff, a tape measure, and the Doppler for the baby’s heartbeat.

“Bit of a tight squeeze in these leggings,” I joked, trying to ease the tension knotting my stomach.

“Comfort is key,” she returned, chuckling lightly as she wrapped the cuff around my arm. “Blood pressure first.” The machine emitted a low whirr, squeezing rhythmically.

“Looks good,” she confirmed and jotted down the reading on my chart. She then applied a dollop of cold gel to my abdomen, making me flinch. “Sorry, it’s always a bit chilly.”

“No problem,” I murmured, my focus narrowing to the handset she moved in small circles over my skin. We both held our breaths, waiting.

Then, there it was—the galloping rhythm of a tiny heart that thundered like a hopeful drumbeat within the room. My own heart echoed the sound, a syncopated beat of life and love twining together.

The wand glided over my abdomen, and each pass amplified the surreal symphony inside me—a steady beat that surged through the air with a life force all its own. The digital heart monitor punctuated the silence of the room, an audible affirmation of the new life I was responsible for. Excitement bubbled up in me, mingling with a sudden twinge of anxiety as I pondered the weight of motherhood.

“Everything okay?” she asked, catching the flicker of concern in my eyes.

“More than okay,” I said, forcing a smile. “It’s just... this is all becoming so real.”

“Understandable,” she replied, her demeanor reassuring. “You’re about to embark on one of the most challenging, yet rewarding journeys of your life.”

“Rewards mixed with sleepless nights and endless worries, I presume?” I quipped, trying to mask the gravity of my thoughts with humor.

“Exactly,” Dr. Pineda chuckled, removing her gloves. “But remember, it’s okay to feel overwhelmed at times. What matters is that you’re not alone in this. Do you have any questions or concerns? Anything you want to discuss?”

I hesitated, the list of uncertainties running through my mind like a ticker tape. “How do I prepare for something like this? Being a parent—especially under... unconventional circumstances.”

“Focus on what you can control,” she advised, sitting down beside me. “Start with the basics. Nutrition, rest, avoiding stress—which I know may be easier said than done for you.”

“Stress seems to have taken a liking to me,” I admitted with a wry grin.

“Let’s tackle it together then,” she offered, her voice firm but kind. “We’ll monitor you closely, make sure you’re both healthy. And if anything concerns you, no matter how small it may seem, I’m here.”

“Thank you, Dr. Pineda,” I said, truly grateful for her support. “That means more to me than you might realize.”

She nodded. “It’s surprisingly common, y’know. Women breaking up with their partners after they finally manage to get pregnant. Makes it more challenging, but...it’s not impossible. Millions of women do it every single day. You can do this. And we’re here for you. You should remember that.”

I had no idea how she realized that was sort of what I was struggling with, but I supposed it really must have been very common.

“Actually, there is one thing you could help me with” I said, my curiosity wrestling with the trepidation that had taken root in the pit of my stomach. “The genetic testing... I haven’t checked the results. I’ve been worried about...I didn’t want to go online because I don’t want my ex to see that I checked the results.”

Dr. Pineda raised an eyebrow, her expression a blend of concern and professionalism. “I can assure you our patient confidentiality is stringent. But I understand your apprehension given your situation. There’s some literature I can give you which you might find valuable. There’s also a domestic violence hotline—”

That practically made me wince. I had no idea how I could begin to explain to her that this wasn’t domestic violence. All I could do was nod, feeling numb.

“Can we go over them now?” My voice was steadier than I felt, a testament to years of training myself to maintain composure under scrutiny.

“Of course.” She pulled up my file on her tablet, swiping through screens with deft fingers. “Everything looks normal. No indicators for common genetic conditions. Would you like to know the sex?”

My heart skipped, but I managed a nod. This information was a tangible link to the life growing inside me—a life entwined with Dante’s whether I liked it or not.

“It’s a boy,” she said softly, watching my face closely for a reaction.

A boy. A tiny surge of wonder eclipsed my fears. Images of a small version of Dante, with his dark hair and maybe even his guarded eyes, flickered across my mind. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

“Jade?” her voice brought me back.

“Sorry, I just...” I trailed off, unsure how to express the storm of emotions swirling within me.

“Take all the time you need,” she reassured me, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” I whispered, touching my belly as if to connect with the little boy whose heartbeat had become the most significant sound in my world.

Dr. Pineda left, and I lingered in the quiet of the exam room, fingers tracing a path over my belly, where the thrum of a tiny heartbeat resonated like a secret promise. A boy. Dante’s son. My son. The reality of it hung heavy in the air, thick as the winter clouds outside the hospital window.

I had no idea whether I should tell Dante. I had no idea how I would even tell him.

But for the time being, this knowledge was mine. Only mine.

And, right then, that felt good enough that I didn’t want to change it. Even if I wasn’t sure whether it was the right thing to do.

Chapter Ten: Dante

I paced my office like a caged animal, the silk of my pajamas rustling with each turn. Jade's face haunted me, her absence a constant ache in my chest. Three weeks. No word. No sign. And she was pregnant with my child.

"Where the fuck are you?" I muttered, running a hand through my disheveled hair.

My mind raced with possibilities, each worse than the last. Had she been taken? Was she hurt? Or had she simply decided to vanish, to keep our baby away from the dangerous world I lived in?

The thought made my stomach churn. I couldn't blame her if she had, but the idea of never seeing her again, never meeting our child...it was unbearable.

A sharp knock interrupted my spiral. "Come in," I barked, collapsing into the chair behind my desk.

Sal entered. His face was grim. "Boss, we've got a problem."

I leaned forward, forcing myself to focus. "What is it?"

"The feds are closing in. They've doubled surveillance on all our operations. We lost two shipments this week alone."

"Tell me you mean the NYPD," I said.

“Looks like they’re working together,” Sal said, rubbing his hand on his face.

Fuck. This was really bad. I still needed to hear him confirm it. “So...how bad is this?”

Sal’s eyes darted nervously. “Bad, boss. If we don’t find a way to throw them off soon, we’re looking at serious jail time. All of us.”

The weight of responsibility settled heavy on my shoulders. I had an empire to protect, men who depended on me. But all I could think about was Jade.

“We need to lay low for a while,” I said, rubbing my temples. “Tell the boys to halt all major operations. Stick to the legal businesses for now.”

Sal nodded, but hesitated. “Boss, there’s something else. The Carusos are making moves. They smell blood in the water.”

I cursed under my breath. Just what I needed - vultures circling while I was distracted.

“Keep an eye on them,” I ordered. “If they try anything, we hit back hard. Make an example.”

“Got it, boss.” Sal paused, eyeing my rumpled pajamas. “You okay? You look like shit.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I’m fine. Just...personal stuff.”

Sal’s expression softened. “Still no word from her?”

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak.

“We’ll find her, boss,” Sal said firmly. “Whatever it takes.”

As he left, I slumped back in my chair. The walls of my penthouse felt like they were closing in. I needed to do something, anything, to find Jade. But where the hell did I even start?

I turned back to my computer, fingers flying over the keyboard. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter - I scoured every social media site I could think of. Jade’s name and face burned in my mind as I searched, hoping for even the smallest trace of her.

Nothing. Not a single post, comment, or photo. It was like she’d vanished into thin air.

“Fuck!” I slammed my fist on the desk, frustration boiling over. My heart raced, anxiety clawing at my chest. Where was she? Was she safe? The image of her, pregnant and alone, haunted me.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to think. There had to be something I was missing. Someone who could help.

Marco. My brother was a pain in the ass, but he had connections I didn’t. And when it came to family, he always came through.

I grabbed my phone, hitting his number on the speed dial. It rang twice before he picked up.

“Dante? It’s early, man. What’s wrong?”

“I need your help,” I said, my voice tight. “It’s about Jade.”

There was a pause. “Still no word?”

“Nothing. I’m going crazy here, Marco. I need to find her.”

“Alright, alright. I’m on it. What do you need?”

“Use your contacts. Check hospitals, airports, anywhere she might have gone. And keep it quiet. I don’t want the wrong people getting wind of this.”

“You got it, brother. I’ll start making calls right away.”

“Thanks, Marco. I owe you one.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll cash in when I need to,” Marco said, a smile in his voice. I already felt a little better, but I knew I wouldn’t feel good until I found Jade.

As I hung up, a flicker of hope sparked in my chest. With Marco’s help, maybe we had a chance. I stood up, suddenly aware of how ridiculous I looked in my pajamas. Time to get my shit together. I had a woman to find.

The restaurant buzzed with lunchtime chatter, but I barely noticed. My eyes were glued to my phone, waiting for Marco’s call. The waiter refilled my coffee for the third time. I nodded absently, not even tasting it.

Finally, my phone vibrated. Marco’s name flashed on the screen.

“Talk to me,” I said, voice low.

“I’ve got something, but it’s not much,” Marco replied. “A nurse at St. Mary’s remembers seeing someone matching Jade’s description about a week ago. She came in for a prenatal checkup.”

My heart raced. “And?”

“She used a fake name. Left before they could run any tests. The nurse said she seemed scared, Dante.”

I clenched my fist. “Shit. Any idea where she went after?”

“Nothing solid. But I’ve got feelers out. Someone will talk eventually.”

“We need to move fast,” I said, glancing around the restaurant. “The longer she’s out there...”

“I know, I know. We’ll find her, bro. Just sit tight for now, okay? Don’t do anything stupid.”

I grunted, ending the call. Sitting tight wasn’t my strong suit.

I signaled for the check, tossing some bills on the table. As I stood, a prickle ran down my spine. Something felt off.

Outside, I scanned the street. Nothing looked out of place, but years in this business had honed my instincts. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

A black SUV idled across the street. Tinted windows. I casually adjusted my jacket, feeling the reassuring weight of my gun.

Was it the Carusos? Those bastards had been pushing into our territory lately. If they caught wind of Jade...

I quickened my pace, ducking into an alley. My mind raced. I needed to get somewhere safe, regroup. Figure out my next move.

One thing was certain – I wasn’t about to let anyone or anything stop me from finding

Jade. Not the Carusos, not the cops, not even my own family. She was out there, carrying my child. And I'd burn this whole city down if that's what it took to bring her home.

My phone buzzed. Marco again.

"What?" I snapped, pacing the alley.

"Calm down, man. Remember what the detective said – stay put."

I kicked a trash can. "Fuck that. I can't just sit around while Jade's out there."

"I get it, but we gotta play this smart. You go off half-cocked, you could blow the whole operation."

I leaned against the brick wall, scrubbing a hand over my face. "I know, I know. It's just...she's pregnant, Marco. My kid's out there."

"I know, but...well, do you want me to call Dad?"

"Fuck no. Leave Dad out of this. I can handle myself."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" I replied.

"Okay. In that case, you have to calm down. Take a deep breath. I need you to trust me, alright?"

I took a deep breath. "Yeah. Okay."

“Good. Now go home, get some rest. I’ll call if anything comes up.”

I hung up, my jaw clenched. Every instinct screamed at me to act, to do something. But Marco was right. I had to play this smart.

Back at my penthouse, I paced the office like a caged animal. Jade’s face haunted me – her smile, her eyes. The way she’d looked at me the last time I saw her.

“Fuck!” I slammed my fist into the wall.

I couldn’t sit still. Couldn’t think straight. My mind kept spinning through worst-case scenarios. What if the Carusos had her? What if she was hurt? What if–

No. I couldn’t go down that road. I had to stay focused, stay sharp. For Jade. For our baby.

I collapsed into my chair, head in my hands. How the hell had I let this happen?

I was Dante fucking Moretti.

I ran this city.

And I couldn’t even protect the woman I loved.

Chapter Eleven: Jade

No one had spotted me at St. Mary's.

I'd gone back for another check-up and no one had spotted me then. I almost liked going into the city now, though of course I had to hope I wouldn't run into Ellie, who I'd essentially ghosted, or Detective Rodriguez, who would probably be furious with what I had done.

But my life was now in Harbor Cove and while it had begun to feel a bit more like home, it turned out I didn't necessarily...like it.

In my little studio apartment, the mirror didn't care about the chaos of my life; it just reflected back the truth I was still grappling with. Four months along, and there was no denying the swell of my belly, a prominent testament to the tangle of love and danger I'd found myself in. I ran a hand over the curve, feeling the kickback of emotions—fear, wonder, and an odd sense of pride.

Dragging myself away from my reflection, I shuffled over to my desk cluttered with the remnants of a life that seemed like someone else's now. Papers scrawled with genetic sequences and scribbled hypotheses lay abandoned, like dreams I couldn't chase anymore. I sat down, the chair creaking under the shift in weight, and let out a sigh heavy enough to fog the glass of the cold winter window.

My fingers, once so steady in the lab, now trembled as they brushed over the unfinished journals—my research at BioHQ that had promised so much. I missed the sterile scent of the lab, the hum of machinery, the thrill of discovery. I massaged my

temples, trying to ease the exhaustion that made my head feel like it was stuffed with cotton.

“Come on, Jade,” I muttered to myself, “You’ve cracked tougher codes than this.” But as I glanced around the silent apartment, with its shadows lurking in the corners untouched by the weak morning light, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this code might just be unbreakable.

I powered up my laptop, its low hum a stark reminder that the only company I kept these days were gadgets and ghosts of my former life. The screen blinked to life, scattering pale light across the papers littering my desk, illuminating the stark reality of my isolation in Harbor Cove’s frosty embrace.

“Okay, let’s find you something worthy of your brain,” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else, as I navigated to job boards tailored for the scientific community. My fingers danced over the keys, a ballet of desperation seeking opportunity.

The listings read like a who’s who of biotech’s finest institutions, but the subtext screamed no vacancy for expectant mothers. “Immediate start,” one demanded. “Must be willing to relocate immediately,” another insisted. With each scroll, my heart sank further into the pit of impracticality.

“Come on, Jade, think,” I urged myself, but the reflection in the mirror earlier wasn’t lying; my body was changing, and with it, my availability to the cutthroat world of research and discovery.

“Maybe there’s a remote position,” I mused half-heartedly, knowing full well the hands-on nature of my expertise didn’t lend itself to telecommuting. Only someone with Dante’s resources would have...no. Fuck it. I wasn’t going to think about Dante.

I was going to force myself not to think about Dante.

I couldn't afford the luxury of surrender—not with a child on the way.

My inbox became a gallery of cover letters and resumes, each sent out like a paper boat on an uncertain sea. I typed furiously, my mind racing through potential interview questions, envisioning lab coats instead of maternity wear.

“Experience in genetic engineering,” I typed out, the words feeling hollow against the backdrop of my current predicament. “Expertise in bioinformatics,” I continued, my resolve waning with every character.

“Who am I kidding?” I said under my breath, the weight of reality pressing down on me. This exercise felt akin to sending signals into space, hoping for alien life to respond when all I needed was an earthly lifeline.

With a deep, steadying breath that did nothing to quell the storm inside, I stood up abruptly, pushing back from the desk. The chair rolled away, and I faced the room—my small, silent corner of the world where ambition met the unmovable force of circumstance.

The morning light spilled into my living room, a cruel reminder of the passage of time. I was anchored to the couch, its cushions holding the imprint of my restless nights and anxious days. The days I had shifts at the restaurant weren't as bad, but these were brutal.

It felt like all I did was wait and think about Dante.

So instead, I focus on my job search.

Which was, of course, going absolutely nowhere.

My laptop screen glared back at me with the stark emptiness of an abandoned city—no new emails, no job offers, nothing but the quiet echo of hope fading away.

“Nothing,” I muttered, hitting refresh for what felt like the thousandth time that week. Each silent chime of failure chipped away at my resolve, leaving me to question the sanity of expecting different results from the same futile gesture.

“Look, kid,” I said suddenly, looking down at my swelling belly, “I don’t resent you, not one bit. But this...” My voice trailed off as I swept a hand across the expanse of my former life sprawled on the coffee table—scientific journals, BioHQ security passes, all relics of a time when my future seemed as boundless as the stars themselves. “...this just sucks.”

The apartment, once a sanctuary of solitude and scholarship, now felt like a cell. The walls seemed to inch closer each day, trapping me in a world where ambition collided with the hard truth of my circumstances. No amount of willpower or intellect could negotiate with biology; my body had become both a creator of life and an obstacle to living it.

“Your mom’s a fighter, though,” I continued, my tone softening, as if trying to impart some strength through the layers that separated us. “We’ll figure this out.” The conviction in my words was as thin as the winter sunlight filtering through the blinds, but it was all I had left to offer.

There was one option.

One option I hadn’t wanted to use, but they were the only people I hadn’t ghosted. And they had nothing to do with the Morettis or NYC or anything like that. I would just go back home, and figure things out from there.

I had tried to make a go of it on my own and it was brutal.

But I had a family. Sure, they would probably be a little judgy—my dad more than my mom—but ultimately, they were a safe place to land. I knew that.

I gripped the phone like a lifeline, my thumb hovering over the final digit of my parents' number. They'd take me back, no questions asked; they'd love that, actually. But it felt like surrender, a white flag raised against the relentless siege of independence I'd fought so hard to maintain.

"Dammit," I muttered, the tremor in my hand betraying the turmoil inside. The cold device seemed to grow heavier with each second of hesitation. Going home meant admitting defeat, letting go of the life I'd built brick by painstaking brick.

Just as resolve began to crystallize, the shrill ring of the doorbell sliced through the silence, startling me into stillness. My heart jackhammered against my ribcage as I set the phone down, unfinished call hanging like an omen.

"Who on earth...?" I mumbled under my breath, padding across the hardwood floor to the door.

None of my coworkers came here. Not a single soul from my old life knew I was here.

No one should have been knocking on my door.

Peeking through the peephole, my breath hitched. Dante.

Just standing there, as if materialized from the foggy cloak of a dream—or a nightmare.

And before I could think it through, I was opening the door.

Chapter Twelve: Jade

I yanked the door open, mustering my most unwelcoming frown. “Dante, what the—“ But before I could lob another word his way, there he stood, all imposing height and broad shoulders, eclipsing the weak winter sun that tried to sneak past him into the apartment.

“How did you find me?”

“Is that really what we need to talk about right now?”

“Yes!” I said, trying to stop the tears welling up in my eyes. I didn’t know how I felt about him being here. There was a part of me that was incredibly relieved; of course, I knew he’d woken up after the gunshot he’d taken for me, but I didn’t know if he was okay.

And there he stood: every inch Dante Moretti, his shoulders set back, that expression on his face that made it seem like he knew he could stop traffic.

But then he crumbled.

Just for a second.

And I really thought about letting him in. Until I realized he was the reason I was in this position in the first place and I started to get angry again.

“You tell me or I close this door and call the police.”

“Jade, I saw you leaving St. Mary’s.” His voice bulldozed over my simmering annoyance. “We need to talk. It’s urgent.”

My skepticism clung to me like the coat I hadn’t bothered to remove yet, heavy and uncomfortable. “Urgent?” I echoed, arms crossed as if they could shield me from whatever mess Dante was dragging up the stairs of my Harbor Cove refuge. “You can’t just follow me around—“

“Please.” The single plea held more weight than I expected, and for a second, it seemed to cost him, etching a grimace across his face that hinted at pain he wouldn’t dare show in full.

The grimace that contorted Dante’s handsome face sent a jolt through me, erasing the remnants of my indignation. It was a silent echo of the past, a reminder of blood-stained shirts and whispered promises in the dark. “I can explain,” he said, his voice a low rumble of urgency. “Just let me in.”

There it was again—that look which always seemed to precede chaos. His presence at my doorstep was like a crack in my carefully constructed world, threatening to let the darkness seep through. I hesitated, my mind’s eye flashing to the last time I’d seen him, pale and close to death. That memory had haunted me, lurking in the shadows of my meticulous life.

“Jade.” His use of my name felt like both a plea and a command, resonating with a vulnerability I knew he despised showing. Dante Moretti wasn’t a man who pleaded.

“Fine,” I finally said, stepping aside with a reluctant sigh, allowing him entry into my Harbor Cove sanctuary. The winter light that struggled through the clouds seemed to hesitate too, as if unsure about this breach of my solitude.

As Dante crossed the threshold, I couldn’t help but notice how he filled the

space—like an indomitable force, yet somehow fragile in his determination. It was in these moments, these cracks in his armor, that I glimpsed the man behind the mafia prince facade, and my heart clenched at the sight.

He strode into my living room, a winter gust sneaking in behind him before the door closed with a soft click. His coat dripped snow onto the hardwood floor, a stark reminder of the frigid world outside my Harbor Cove apartment. I crossed my arms over my chest, the action more protective than I intended.

“Look, Dante, I don’t have time for—“ My protest was cut short by his raised hand.

“I know you’re busy, Jade. Just give me five minutes.” The deep timbre of his voice wrapped around the plea, grounding it with sincerity.

“Five minutes,” I echoed, not missing the irony that time with Dante always seemed to bend and stretch far beyond what was promised.

“Thank you.” The corners of his mouth twitched upwards in a shadow of a smile, but it didn’t reach those intense eyes that had seen too much. They darted around the room, taking in every detail as if memorizing my sanctuary for reasons I didn’t want to contemplate.

Then, without warning, he stepped forward, closing the gap between us. His arms enveloped me in an embrace that caught me off guard, warm despite the chill clinging to his clothes. A thousand sensations rocketed through me, none of which I could afford to examine too closely.

“Damn it, Dante...” I muttered against his shoulder, my words muffled by the fabric of his coat. My hands found their way to his back, pressing against muscle and bone. There was a comfort there, a familiarity that I couldn’t deny, no matter how fiercely my mind screamed at the recklessness of it all.

“Sorry,” he breathed out, his breath sending shivers across my skin—not from cold, but from something else entirely. “I just needed...”

“Three minutes left,” I reminded him, though neither of us made a move to break away.

My fingers clutched at the fabric of his shirt, a sharp inhale caught in my throat. Dante’s presence was an immovable force, yet now he trembled, an earthquake vibrating through his solid frame. His face buried in my hair, breaths uneven and ragged against my neck.

“Jade.” It was more of a sigh than a word, soaked in desperation.

“Hey,” I said, my voice quiet, trying to steady him with my touch. “What’s going on?”

His body shuddered once more, and then I felt it—the dampness seeping into my hair, the unmistakable warmth of tears. Dante Moretti, the man who commanded armies with a look, who hid his heart behind walls of iron and ice, was crying. And not just a single tear, but a silent storm that he couldn’t contain any longer.

My heart twisted at the sight, a man on his knees in more ways than one. Dante, the epitome of controlled strength, the model of stoic demeanor, was now unraveling before me.

“Dante,” I whispered, my hands cupping his face. His eyes were shadowed with pain and something infinitely sorrowful. “Talk to me.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured between sniffs. His voice was an unfamiliar rasp, each syllable laced with regret—the likes of which I had never heard from him before.

“For what?” My brows knitted together as I tried to read him. What could possibly have brought him to this state?

“For everything,” he said, shaking his head as if the weight of all he’d done was too much to bear. “For pulling you into my world... for putting you in danger... for not being able to give you what you deserve...”

His words hung in the air, heavy and raw. I didn’t know how to console him, didn’t even know if he wanted to be consoled. But what I did know was that the man before me was not the same Dante Moretti that walked into my apartment moments ago. This man was unmasked, stripped of his powerful exterior and bared to his very core.

“But you’re here,” I found myself saying, my voice soft yet unexpectedly steady. “Why did you come, Dante?”

Dante rubbed his temple. “I needed to talk to you,” he said.

I swallowed. “Okay,” I said. “You’re here. Talk.”

Chapter Thirteen: Dante

Jade's fingers were warm against my skin, the last traces of our shared tears still cooling on my cheeks. I'd stormed through Harbor Cove like a tempest, half-mad with worry, searching for her. Now, standing in the soft glow of her apartment, I was struck by how much I'd feared losing her.

I had thought I was so angry that she'd gotten away from me. But now that I saw her face, I realized that wasn't what had been driving this search.

It was the fear that someone had shot her, too. It was the fear that I had lost her and our baby for good.

"Jade," I began, my voice gravelly with emotion, "I've been looking everywhere for you. The Carusos—they're not just going to sit back after what happened. They could come after you. They turned one of my men against me and I don't know if they're still searching or...I don't know. I don't want anything to happen to you. To either of you."

Her eyes, a bastion of scientific curiosity turned to me, filled with a calm that belied the storm I knew raged inside her. She had always been the eye of my hurricane, the one certainty in a life built on shifting sands.

I stood there, the last vestiges of sunlight from the waning afternoon casting a soft light across Jade's face. My chest heaved with a mix of fear and relief; she was safe, at least for now.

"Let me get you some water," Jade said gently, her eyes never leaving mine as if she could peer right into the turmoil that twisted my guts.

"Thanks," I muttered, watching her navigate to the kitchen with an ease that made it clear this was her sanctuary, not a hideout.

That made me feel like shit.

She returned, two glasses in hand, and handed one to me before sinking into the couch, its fabric whispering under her weight. I followed suit, feeling the cushions embrace us both, a small island of normalcy.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were?" I asked, my words rough around the edges.

"I mean. That's obvious."

"Humor me. I need to hear it from you."

She took a sip, her throat moving delicately as she swallowed. "I was trying to..." Her voice faltered, and she set down the glass before meeting my gaze. "Look, you kept me captive for months. I didn't know what was happening. And then I thought I was going to lose you, and the police came after you, and it was all such a mess. I realize the fact that I'm pregnant is more than just a complication, but Dante, the police really wanted me to testify. It's a miracle I managed to escape from them. You're not the only reason I'm here."

"Wait," I replied, trying to process that. "You wanted to protect me?"

"Yes, I wanted to protect you, Dante. If I testified against you, it would destroy everything you've built."

"Protect me?" I echoed, the irony bitter on my tongue. "From what, Jade? You think I can't handle it?"

"No." She shook her head, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. "It's not that. It's just...there's a part of me that definitely needed to get away from you. From all of this."

"Damn it, Jade," I cursed under my breath, recognizing the truth in her words. "I was a fool for ever trying to imprison you in my apartment."

The admission stung, a raw acknowledgement of my own failings.

Her eyes glistened, moisture pooling until tears brimmed along her lower lashes. "Dante, I—"

"Shh," I cut in softly, my heart wrenching at the sight. "I guess I was so desperate to protect you I didn't stop to think about what you might want. I should've always thought about what you want."

You make it sound almost romantic."

"Because it is, Jade. This whole damn thing between us—it's the most honest thing I've ever felt." I took her hands in mine, their coolness a stark contrast to the heat of my palms.

"Even if it terrifies me." Her voice was barely above a whisper, each word laden with the weight of our shared past and uncertain future.

"Especially then," I confirmed, my thumbs tracing circles over the backs of her hands, committing the feel of her skin to memory. "Because it means it's real."

She closed her eyes, the tears spilling down her cheeks. "I don't know how I feel about all this, Dante," she said. "I'm furious because how dare you keep me captive in your apartment and I'm a bit annoyed you came to see me when I obviously made the trek in part to get away from you. But I'm...glad to see you. Excited, even. And I wish I wasn't, because it would be easy if I wasn't. It would be easy if I could just tell you to get away from me and never come back, but I can't do that, can I?"

"No, you can't," my voice was a low growl, a combination of exasperation and desire. Desire because every word she spoke, every tear she shed, drew me in closer. Exasperation because I wanted her to understand. I wanted her to see the impossibility of our situation as clearly as I did, to see that there were no easy answers, only hard choices. And every choice came with its own set of repercussions.

I grabbed her hand, the coolness of her skin grounding me. "Thank you," I said, my voice rough with gratitude. "For being honest, for understanding—even when it's the last thing you owe me."

Jade looked up, her eyes a clear window to her soul. "We're past owing each other things, Dante. This is about what we choose now."

"Right." I paused, the weight of unshared truths heavy on my chest. "There's more I need to tell you. Things about my... our world that could change everything." I glanced away, wrestling with the urge to protect her from the family's darkness.

"Tell me," she urged, squeezing my hand.

"Jade, the Moretti problems—they're not yours to shoulder. It's better if you stay out of it. It's better if you stay here."

Her gaze never wavered "You think me being here will make this easier?"

"Maybe it won't," I conceded, the thought of separation clawing at my insides, "but I can't let you get tangled up in my mess any further. You deserve better. And it'll keep you safe. You and the baby."

She was quiet for a moment, her silence speaking louder than words ever could. Then, with deliberate tenderness, she leaned into me, an anchor in the tempest of our lives.

"Jade?" I prompted, watching the gears turn in her head.

She scooted back, releasing my hand, and folded her arms across her chest—a shield against the whirlwind threatening to engulf her. "If you go," she started, her voice steady as always, "what then? You return to your life, and I just... what? Wait for a news report that you've been arrested, or worse?"

"Is that what you think will happen?" My question hung in the air, mingling with the fading warmth of the afternoon sun filtering through the window.

"Isn't it likely?" She stood up and paced to the window, gazing out over Harbor Cove, where the water mirrored the sky's descent into dusk. She was beginning to show and she looked fucking beautiful. "Your family, Dante, they're not known for letting go easily."

"True."

"Being apart won't change the danger," she said, more to herself than to me. Her analytical mind dissected each scenario, seeking a solution as if it were a complex equation rather than the mess of our intertwined fates.

"Jade," I tried again, taking a cautious step toward her. "I'm not worth the risk—"

"Stop." She turned suddenly, her eyes blazing with a determination that rivaled any I'd seen in the boardrooms of BioHQ. "Don't make decisions for me, Dante Moretti. Don't ever do that again or I'll disappear from your life quicker than you know. I've spent my life calculating risks. If there's one thing I know, it's that some variables can't be quantified—they're felt."

Her words punched through the fog of my uncertainty. She crossed the room, closing the gap between us with purposeful strides. Standing before me, she lifted her chin, and I saw the fire that burned within her—the same fire that had drawn me to her from the moment we met.

"I want you to stay." The declaration was simple yet carried the weight of all our unspoken promises and fears.

"Jade—" I began, but she cut me off.

"Because despite everything, my life is better with you in it. And I'm choosing to face whatever comes, together." Her voice wasn't just clear; it was resolute.

I should have told her I couldn't stay. I should've said that I was pretty sure the FBI was building a RICO case, that the Carusos were waiting to pounce on us, that they had probably followed me to Harbor Cove.

That just being here was enough to put her and our unborn child in danger.

I didn't.

Instead, I caught her face in my hands, the warmth of her breath on my skin grounding me in the reality of her words.

"Okay," I murmured, hardly daring to believe that she would tether her fate to mine.

And then I lied to her. "I'll stay."

Chapter Fourteen: Dante

I wanted her so much. I had desperately wanted her since the last time I had seen her.

I pressed my lips against hers, softly at first, then with a desperation born from the knowledge that every moment was precious, and every choice came with a cost. Her lips moved against mine, hesitant at first but growing bolder with each caress, her hands clutching the lapels of my coat as if anchoring herself in the turbulent sea that was our situation.

My mouth away from hers, and I slowly slid my mouth down her chin, nestling into the sweet spot where her pulse throbbed against her neck. Her scent, the familiar melody of oranges and cinnamon, stirred up a maelstrom within me. As my lips traced the curve of her throat, soft sighs escaped her lips, her fingers threading through my hair.

“Dante,” she breathed, her voice a soft plea tangled with desire and uncertainty.

My hands slipped down to the small of her back, pulling her tighter against me, the swell of her stomach pressing against mine. The reality of our unborn child caught between us.

Gently, I pulled back, my gaze dropping to her rounded stomach. My hand moved naturally there, as if it was drawn to the tiny life that grew inside her. Jade watched me silently, her eyes shining with tears, and the faintest hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

“You’re starting to show,” I said.

“Maybe I’ve just been eating my feelings.”

I chuckled at her dry humor, a sound that felt unfamiliar to my own ears. “You’re beautiful,” I told her, my hand still resting on her belly, the warmth seeping through the fabric of her clothes.

“Thanks. It’s hard to feel it right now.”

I shook my head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “My beautiful Jade,” I said. “Let me remind you.”

Before she could protest, I swept her into my arms, her soft gasp echoing in the stillness of the room. I moved slowly, taking in every inch of her flushed face, every flicker of anticipation that danced in her eyes. I peppered kisses onto her neck, drawing a shaky breath from her lips.

“Dante,” she whispered, her voice trembled, a mix of surprise and pleasure.

She clung to me as I carried her across the living room and into the bedroom. The room was softly lit by the dying sun filtering through the opened blinds; casting long shadows on the carpeted floor and creating a halo around Jade’s dark hair as I laid her delicately on the bed.

“Have you been touching yourself thinking about me?” I asked.

She groaned. “I left in a rush, which means I didn’t get my vibrator.”

“So you’ve just been using your fingers? Retro.”

“I was getting by,” she retorted, though there was a hint of a blush creeping up her neck.

I chuckled softly at her indignance, leaving a trail of kisses down the length of her exposed throat. “I’ll have to make it up to you then.”

She gasped as my mouth found the softness of her shoulder, her fingers tangling in my hair. The rest of the world seemed to fade away, all that mattered was us, wrapped in this moment.

And then I kissed her again. Deep, my tongue in her mouth, fingers threaded into her dark, wild hair and pulling her tighter against me. Her breath hitched, hands traveling the length of my back, nails pressing through the fabric of my shirt.

My response was lost in the sudden rush of yearning that consumed me. Her words were forgotten as I pressed my mouth to hers, drowning in the taste and feel of Jade Bentley — the woman who had irrevocably changed my life. The mother of our unborn child.

“Dante,” she breathed into my ear. Her voice hitched as I began to unbutton her blouse, my fingers slow and deliberate. “Don’t tease.”

“I’m not,” I murmured, pressing my lips to the column of her throat. “I’m savoring.”

A soft groan escaped from her lips as I continued my maddeningly slow pace, each button revealing more of her skin to me. Every inch was a revelation, a testament to our shared desire.

“Patience is a virtue,” I teased, my lips working on the exposed swell of her chest.

“My virtue went out the window when we started this little dance,” she quipped back

with a chuckle that turned into a gasp as I traced the edge of her bra with my fingers.

My response was lost in the sudden rush of yearning that consumed me. Her words were forgotten as I pressed my mouth to hers, drowning in the taste and feel of Jade Bentley — the woman who had irrevocably changed my life. The mother of our unborn child.

I slowly slid my mouth down the front of her body, until her chest was bare and I exhaled hard against her nipples before I took them in my mouth.

Jade gasped, her fingers gripping my hair in an instinctive response. Her breath hitched at the sensation, and she gave a soft moan, encouraging me further. My hand caressed her side, tracing the curve of her body and briefly resting on the swell of her stomach.

My mouth slid further down now as I slowly got on my knees in front of her, the sight of her before me invoking a primal need within me. Her blouse was discarded, bra straps hanging loosely from her shoulders, chest rising and falling with each breath she took, already marked by my kisses. I traced the edge of her slacks, my fingers dipping beneath the waistband to feel the soft curve of her hips.

“Fuck,” I said. “You smell so fucking good.”

With that, I began to work on her slacks, tugging them down her legs, revealing the rest of her in stages, like unwrapping a long-awaited gift. Her breath hitched as I paused to appreciate her exposed skin, the soft light casting an ethereal glow over her.

“I want you,” she whispered, reaching out a hand to cup my cheek. “I need you.”

And how could I deny her? When all I wanted was to lose myself in her, forget about the threats lurking outside, if only for a bit.

“Let me take care of you,” I murmured, tracing a path with my fingers up her bare thigh. She gasped in response, her fingers clutching the sheets beneath her.

My hands moved with slow deliberation, working their way back up her body until I reached the waistband of her underwear. I wanted to tear her underwear off and bury my cock in her so bad, but I was going to take my time.

I was going to relish this. I was going to relish her.

I traced the edges of her panties, teasing and provoking her. My fingers slipped under the elastic band, and she shivered at my touch. She was soaked, evidence of her anticipation pooling beneath my fingertips. Jade closed her eyes, her chest rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths as I started exploring her folds.

“Dante,” she gasped, her voice a mixture of plea and command, “I need...”

“I know what you need,” I interrupted, my voice husky as my fingers found her clit. I circled it slowly, the heat of her desire blazing against my skin. Her breath hitched in her throat as a jolt of pleasure shot through her.

“Fuck,” she whimpered, her hips lifting off the bed in an instinctive response. Her hands clutched at the fabric of the couch beneath her as wave after wave of pleasure rocked through her body.

I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. This was Jade — wild, beautiful, and beneath me. Her body writhed, consumed by a pleasure that I had the privilege of giving her.

“When’s the last time you squirted, love?” I asked, driving my fingers deeper, listening to the sharp intake of her breath as I grazed her g-spot.

“Dante,” she gasped, bucking into my touch. “I don’t know. With you. The last time

you made it happen, fuck!”

“That’s what I thought.” Satisfaction coursed through my veins knowing that only I was the one who could make her feel like this, only I could bring her to this edge.

“Dante,” she whined, her body trembling as my fingers continued their merciless assault on her sensitized flesh. Her hands yanked at my hair, pulling me closer as if begging for release. “Please.”

“Say it again.” It wasn’t just about the physical sensation anymore. It was about having Jade surrender to me wholly, comprehending the depths of our connection that extended beyond mere bodies.

“Dante,” she cries. “Please!”

Her plea was all the permission I needed. My thumb circled her clit with a steady rhythm as I plunged my fingers deeper, stroking that sensitive spot inside her which I knew would send her over the edge.

She screamed louder, her body convulsing in pleasure as she climaxed. Her walls clamped around my fingers, drenching them in warm, slick liquid as she rode through the waves of her orgasm.

As I slowly withdrew my fingers, Jade lay panting on the couch, her body spread out like a work of art beneath me. Her half-closed eyes and flushed cheeks were a testament to the pleasure she had just experienced. I lifted my hand to my mouth, tasting her on my fingertips. “Delicious.”

She watched me through heavy-lidded eyes, the sight of me tasting her causing her breath to hitch again. “Dante,” she whispered, reaching for me.

I gave her a slow, smug grin as I moved closer to her, pressing my body against hers. “What is it, Jade?” I murmured against the shell of her ear.

“I want you,” she whimpered, pulling me closer. Her hand slid down my chest and lower until it rested over the bulge in my pants. She gave a squeeze, causing me to hiss in pleasure.

“Patience, love,” I murmured, repeating my earlier advice. “I promised to take care of you.”

With a regretful groan, I pulled away from Jade and rose to my feet. She watched me with a dazed expression as I unbuckled my belt and unzipped my pants, freeing my aching cock.

Her eyes widened at the sight of me, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. A rush of desire surged through me at her reaction.

But I ignored it. This wasn’t about me. Not yet, anyway.

Returning to the couch, I parted her legs and settled myself between them once again. My hands traced the curves of her hips as I lined myself up with her entrance.

“Dante,” she breathed out, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Hush,” I told her gently. “I’ve got you.”

Slowly, deliberately, I began to push inside her. Jade’s breath hitched as she felt herself stretching around me.

“Dante,” she repeated. But this time there was no fear or hesitation in her voice. Only anticipation and desire.

I bit back a groan as she wrapped her legs around my waist and pulled me deeper inside. The walls of her pussy clamped around me like a vice, hot and wet and so damn

perfect. We both stilled as I came to a stop, buried to the hilt inside her. Jade's eyes fluttered shut, a satisfied sigh escaping from between her parted lips.

Holding her gaze, I started to move. Slow, gentle thrusts that had her whimpering in pleasure. Her hands found purchase on my shoulders, fingernails digging into the firm muscles beneath my shirt as I began to pick up the pace.

"Dante," Jade gasped, tilting her head back against the thick cushions of the couch.

I was torturously slow, savoring the feel of her around me.

"Fuck, Jade," I grunted, my voice rough with desire. "You're so damn tight."

Her body responded to my words, her inner walls tightening deliciously around me. She bit her lip, stifling a moan.

"Let me hear you," I growled into her ear. "I want to hear how good I make you feel."

She obeyed, whimpering and gasping beneath me. Each sound she made spurred me on, my hips thrusting into hers with newfound urgency. She was driving me crazy with her tightness, the wet heat of her surrounding me each time I buried myself deep inside her.

"Dante," she cried out suddenly, her body arching off the couch as an intense wave of pleasure washed over her.

“Fuck,” I choked out as her pussy clenched around my cock. Every part of me wanted to let go but I resisted the temptation; tonight was about Jade. For Jade.

I leaned down, capturing her lips with mine in a heated kiss while my fingers worked their way down to that sensitive bud nestled between her folds. With every thrust of my hips, I was met with the silky softness of her inner walls clamping down on me.

“Dante,” Jade gasped, her hands clawing at my back as another wave of pleasure washed over her.

“Again,” I commanded, my fingers circling her clit rhythmically as I continued to thrust into her.

With a cry, Jade arched her back, her body trembling as she climaxed for the second time. The tightening of her inner walls around my cock was too much. With a low growl, I let myself go, an intense orgasm ripping through me as I emptied myself inside her.

I collapsed on top of her, our heavy breathing filled the room, mingling with the faint scent of our lovemaking. For a moment, we stayed like that. Jade’s hand tenderly stroked my hair while I luxuriated in the warmth of her body beneath mine.

And for a second, I let myself believe everything was okay.

Chapter Fifteen: Dante

The soft lamplight from the corner of the room cast long, dancing shadows on the floor as I picked her up in my arms. Jade's head rest against my chest, her eyes half-closed, a satisfied smile playing on her face.

"My hero," she murmured, tracing a lazy finger along the curve of my collarbone. I chuckled softly at that, burying my face in her dark hair and breathing in the sweet scent of us.

In a few strides, we were in the bedroom. The bed was made with deep blue silk sheets that shimmered under the dim lighting. I set Jade down on the edge of the mattress, brushing a loose strand of hair out of her face before kissing her forehead tenderly.

"Sleep now," I told her, my rough voice just above a whisper. She shook her head with a weak protest, curling her fingers around my wrist to prevent me from pulling away completely.

"You too," she mumbled, her blue eyes blinking up at me sleepily. I didn't have the heart to refuse her.

Stripping off the rest of my clothes quickly, I slid under the covers beside Jade. She nestled into my side immediately, her warm body pressing closer as she draped an arm across my chest. Her breath was even and slow against my skin as her eyelids fluttered closed.

Watching her, I couldn't help but trace the curve of her cheek with my thumb. The slightest of smiles tugged at her lips as she stirred in her sleep, nuzzling closer to me. A surge of affection swept through me as I pulled her closer, careful not to wake her.

I'd never known a moment of peace quite like this. For once, the thought of the Moretti empire and all its darkness felt like a distant burden. Here, bathed in the soft glow of the lamp beside us, Jade in my arms...this was a different kind of world altogether.

A sigh escaped my lips as I leaned back against the pillows, my gaze tracing the ceiling above us. Jade's steady breathing was a reassuring lullaby in the otherwise silent room. It was enough to make me ignore the nagging feeling of unease that twisted my gut.

This wasn't our world to keep. We were borrowed pieces from different puzzles trying to fit together against all odds. How long before reality came crashing through?

I fell asleep thinking about it. When I woke up, it was still the middle of the night, and Jade was still naked next to me.

I'm just a man so...

...I gave into my urges again. My fingers traced over her soft skin, mapping the rise and fall of her body. The moonlight streaming through the window gave her an ethereal glow, turning her into a goddess under the sheets.

She stirred in her sleep, her back arching into my touch, a soft sigh slipping from her lips. I let my fingers explore her body, familiarizing myself with every curve and hollow, each touch more intimate than the last.

With every breath I took, I inhaled her scent – an intoxicating mix of our intertwined

bodies and blossoming love. It made my heart pound in my chest, the echoing rhythm a testament to how desperate I was for this woman beside me.

Jade's body responded to my touch even in slumber, a shiver running through her as my hand dipped lower. Still asleep, she shifted closer to me, her bare leg draping over mine. She was wrapped around me as though she belonged there – as though we belonged together.

My lips found their way to her neck, peppering kisses from her collarbone up to her earlobe. A low groan escaped from me as my hand teased the sensitive area between her thighs.

She was still soaked and ready for me.

“Dante,” she murmured in her sleep, and I felt the rush of heat in my veins. The desire was a roaring fire within me, burning me up from the inside. I had to have her, again and again, until we were both spent from the ecstasy.

My mind was filled with the image of Jade's bare body writhe underneath me, and I lost myself in her.

When I pushed into her, she gasped, eyes fluttering open to meet mine.

“Fuck,” she said, her eyes now open.

“Do you not want my cock inside you?”

“I—“ I stopped her from answering, burying myself to the hilt in her tight little pussy, making her moan instead.

“You can try to deny it all you want but I can feel how wet you are,” I said.

Her eyes widened at my crude language, but she didn't protest. Instead, she just clenched around me, making me groan with pleasure.

"See?" I taunted, thrusting into her once more. "You can't deny your desire for me."

Jade tried to turn away from me, a blush staining her cheeks, but I hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her back against my chest.

"Is this what you missed when you ran away from me? Is this what you touched yourself thinking about?"

"Dante!" Jade gasped, her body tensing as the color in her cheeks deepened. I could hear the mix of embarrassment and arousal in her voice, and I revelled in it.

"Yes, Jade?" I asked, a smirk playing on my lips as I continued my slow but deliberate thrusts.

She didn't answer at first, biting down on her lower lip as she tried to stifle a moan. But when I brushed my thumb over her swollen clit, all resistance fell away.

"Yes," she breathed out, pressing back against me as she writhed from the combined sensations. "I missed you."

"Did you think about my cock in all your holes?"

"Dante!" Jade protested again, but there was no true anger in her voice. Her body was trembling, her hips moving in time with mine. I didn't need an answer. Her actions spoke louder than words.

"Tell me, Jade," I urged her, my voice a low rumble in her ear. She let out a soft whimper, her head falling back against my shoulder as pleasure washed over her.

“I did...I did think about you,” she confessed in a whisper. Each word was punctuated by a moan as I continued to move within her.

“Oh, you wanted my fingers in your holes, too,” I said. “You want me to finger your ass while you come?”

“Dante!” Jade cried out, but this time it was a sigh of pleasure, not protest. I felt her walls clench around me tighter as I continued to stroke her, bringing her closer and closer to the edge.

“Well, then,” I murmured in her ear. “Let’s give you what you’ve been thinking about. Get your hands and knees.”

I pulled away from her, aligning her swiftly on all fours on the bed. The sight of her, bare and exposed, sent a fresh wave of desire coursing through my veins.

“Yes, like that,” I murmured, one hand coming to rest on the small of her back. I positioned myself behind her, my fingers gently tracing over the curve of her ass. She shivered beneath my touch and I chuckled lowly.

“I’m going to make you come apart, Jade,” I declared, my hands stroking over her thighs, working their way up to her heat. At the same time, I positioned my cock at her entrance again, pressing against her with a teasing slowness that made her whimper.

As I pushed into her once more, my hand moved lower to tease at her other hole. Her breath hitched in anticipation and I smirked at the reaction.

“Are you ready for this?”

I dipped one finger inside just as my cock plunged deeper into her pussy. The dual

sensation made Jade cry out, a mixture of surprise and pleasure echoing in the room.

“Just relax,” I said. “I need to work you up to my cock.”

“You’re so big, I don’t know how I can take all of you.”

Fuck, this woman was trying to make me come right then and there.

“But you want to. Isn’t that right, Jade?” I pressed, my voice low and husky, the words brushing against her earlobe as I leaned over her. A part of me anticipated denial or hesitation from her but instead, she moaned softly in response.

“Yes... yes, Dante,” Jade admitted in a whisper that sent a shiver through me. My smirk deepened as my free hand moved to stroke her clit again while my other continued to tease at her entrance and my cock thrust deeper into her. The bed creaked softly under our movements and the room filled with the sounds of our panting breaths and soft moans.

Her gasps grew louder when another finger joined the first, stretching her slowly but surely for what was to come. And with each thrust of my cock inside her cunt, Jade’s body writhed in response.

“That’s it, Jade... just like that,” I groaned out as I felt her body seizing around me. She was so close now; I could tell by how tightly she was clenching around me and the desperate pitch of her moans. All it would take is a few more strokes...

With my free hand, I stroked her clit once, twice, and then Jade lurched against me with a high, strangled cry. Her body spasmed as she came, her walls tightening around me in waves. It took all of my willpower not to come right then and there too.

“You think I can make you squirt while I fuck your ass?” I asked, not letting her

recover from her orgasm.

“Dante!” Jade’s voice wavered, caught between disbelief and a hint of excitement that sent a surge of energy through me.

“Answer me, Jade,” I demanded, my voice stern yet laced with raw desire. My fingers continued to stroke over her sensitized flesh, my cock still buried deep inside her.

She moaned softly, the sound hitching as I pressed my fingers ever so slightly deeper into her other hole. She was still trembling from her orgasm, and it was driving me insane.

“I...I don’t know...,” she stuttered, but the tiny shiver in her spine told me she was considering it.

“Let me show you,” I suggested, my voice dangerously low. I wasn’t asking for permission anymore. I was going to seduce her into this; to show her how good it could be. After all, I prided myself on knowing what she needed even before she did.

With that, I pulled out of her pussy slowly so that the sudden emptiness made her whimper in disappointment. I wasn’t going to keep her waiting for long though. Resting my cock against her slick folds for a second, I pushed inside once more, all while maintaining the gentle pressure on her other hole.

“You have such a gorgeous cunt. It’s such a shame to ever be away from it.”

“Dante,” Jade murmured, half-protest, half-plea. She was wet and trembling beneath me, her body reacting to my every touch.

“Relax, Jade,” I instructed gently, my fingers continuing to play over her tight

entrance. “I’ve got you.”

“Go slow,” she said in a hushed whisper. Her body keenly attuned to my every move.

“Of course,” I replied softly, then moved away from her for a second. With a slowness that took every ounce of my control, I began to press my cock gently into her ass. The sound that escaped from Jade’s lips was somewhere between a gasp and a moan—a sweet surrender to the pleasure that made my heart pound in my chest. “You’re good, beautiful. Relax.”

Her body tensed beneath the unfamiliar intrusion, a gasp slipping from her lips. I held still, swearing under my breath as the tight warm enclosure threatened to undo me.

“Breathe, Jade,” I murmured, stroking her back in soothing circles. “Relax...it’s just me.” My voice was barely above a whisper. Despite the intensity of my desire, my first priority was her comfort.

She swallowed audibly, taking long deep breaths as I instructed. Gradually, Jade’s body began to relax and I could feel her loosening around me.

“That’s it,” I coaxed, pressing a soft kiss to the base of her neck. Slowly, inch by inch, I eased further into her until I was fully sheathed.

The tension in her body was replaced with a shiver of pleasure that vibrated through me when Jade moaned softly. A spike of satisfaction shot through me at the sound; satisfaction mixed with raw, primal desire.

“Fuck...” I groaned out, shutting my eyes tight against the onslaught of sensations. It required every ounce of my control not to start moving immediately.

But she took it out of my hands, because she started to press her ass against me and I

let out a low groan. “Jade... fuck, Jade,” I gritted out, my hands on her hips. I pulled myself nearly all the way out before plunging back into her, setting a slow rhythm that had us both gasping and moaning.

I groaned, the movement sending another wave of desire coursing through me. Jade’s breath hitched as I eased back out of her, then pushed in again slowly. Each movement was slow and deliberate, designed to make her feel every inch of me.

“Dante,” she whimpered. I could hear the plea in her voice, its desperation only fueling my own.

“Do you like that?” I asked huskily, my hand reaching around to stroke her clit in rhythm with my thrusts.

“Yes,” she gasped out, her voice trembling with the force of her pleasure. “Yes...yes...”

Her repeating affirmations were like a balm to my tortured self-control. They spurred me on, making me lose myself in the heat and the tightness that was Jade. My strokes became less calculated and more primal, driven by need and pure lust.

But I wanted her to come again.

I wanted to feel her squirt on my hand again, I wanted her to soak the sheets under us.

So I started to move my thumb back and forth faster on her throbbing bud, trying to bring her to another climax while I continued to fuck her slow. Jade’s breaths came out in short gasps now, her moans becoming louder and more frantic with every thrust. I fucked her ass harder now, my fingers moving slowly over her clit, in a motion that had her trembling beneath me, gasping with each sweet little pulse of pleasure. I could feel how close she was, her body tight and trembling.

“That’s it, Jade,” I murmured into her ear, my words raspy as the animalistic urge to claim her fully washed over me. “Come for me. I want to feel you.”

Her body tightened around me, trembling as her knees gave out and she collapsed onto the bed. I followed her down, burying my face in her hair as she let out a guttural cry of release. Her body convulsed around my cock and my hand, fluid gushing over my fingers and soaking the sheets beneath us. Her tight channel gripped me so hard that I barely had time to pull out before I was spilling over her ass and lower back in thick, hot spurts.

“Fuck,” I growled into her ear as the last waves of my climax rolled through me. My heart pounded in my chest as I fought to draw breath, while Jade whimpered softly beneath me, her body still twitching with aftershocks of her own orgasm.

I slapped her pussy softly, quickly—just hard enough to make her squirm.

“You like that?” I murmured, my lips brushing against her ear as she shivered under my touch.

Jade responded with a barely audible gasp, her body instinctively arching back into me.

With a satisfied growl, I reached for a nearby cloth and gently cleaned the mess from our bodies. The scent of sweat and sex filled the room, mingling with the faint traces of her perfume.

“See?” she asked. “I knew it would be better if you stayed.”

And suddenly, everything felt like it was about to break.

Again.

Chapter Sixteen: Jade

Sunlight warmed my face, pulling me from sleep. I stretched, feeling the soft sheets and the weight of Dante's arm around my waist. He lay beside me, his chiseled features relaxed in slumber. I watched him for a moment, remembering the intensity of last night, the way he had kissed me as if it were the last time. My chest tightened with a mix of joy and fear.

I leaned in and kissed his cheek. "I'll be right back," I whispered.

Dante mumbled something incoherent, shifting slightly but not waking. I slipped out of bed, the cold floor a sharp contrast to the warmth of the blankets.

In the bathroom, I examined myself in the mirror. My hair was a tangled mess, my skin flushed. I traced a finger over my lips, still swollen from his kisses, and sighed. Turning on the shower, I let the steam fill the room and stepped under the hot water, washing away the remnants of our passion.

Panic surged through me as my eyes scanned the empty bedroom. "Dante?" I called out, my voice echoing off the walls. No response. My mind filled with a thousand grim scenarios, and I rushed to the kitchen, then the living room — but he was nowhere to be found. I sank onto the couch, my heart pounding against my ribcage.

I dressed quickly, pulling on a tank top and shorts. My hand rested briefly on my stomach, a silent promise to protect the small life growing inside me. The absence of Dante's confident smirk and comforting presence made the room feel cavernous and empty.

Anger started to replace my anxiety. Had he really just taken what he wanted and left? I glanced at the clock; it was still early. Too early for him to be handling any family business, I reasoned.

I walked back to the bedroom and sat, then stood, then paced. My hands went to my belly, and I rubbed it out of habit, out of worry. What was I going to do if he just disappeared? If he left me here alone to—well, no. Maybe that was just what I wanted.

The sound of the door unlocking froze me in place. I turned to see Dante walk in, a paper bag in one hand and a tray of coffee in the other. He paused, taking in my expression, and a small, almost imperceptible frown tugged at his lips.

“Thought you’d be happy to see breakfast,” he said, closing the door with his foot.

I didn’t move. “You left.”

“I went to the deli. It’s a block away but everyone had the same idea.” He walked over and set the food on the small dining table near the kitchenette. “Didn’t think you’d wake up so soon.”

Relief washed over me, mixed with the lingering heat of my earlier anger. I walked to him slowly, unsure how to balance the emotions swirling inside me.

He took out two croissants and a container of fruit, then handed me a coffee. “It’s decaf,” he said, almost apologetically.

I took it, my fingers brushing his. “Thanks.”

We stood there in an awkward silence, the kind that comes after a near-miss of something explosive. I sipped the coffee, letting the warm steam soothe me.

“I didn’t mean to worry you,” he said finally.

I looked up at him, at those dark eyes that held so many secrets. “I thought—“

“I know what you thought.” He interrupted, but not harshly. “I’m not that guy, Jade.”

The tension in my shoulders eased a little. “You’re a lot of guys, Dante. Sometimes it’s hard to keep track.”

He almost smiled at that, a corner of his mouth twitching upward. “Eat. It’s going to get cold.”

I sat down and took a croissant, peeling away the flaky layers. He remained standing, watching me, and I wondered if he could see the thoughts running through my head as clearly as I could see his.

“Dante,” I started, but he cut me off again.

“We’ll talk after,” he said, sitting down across from me. “I promise.”

I nodded, biting into the croissant. It was warm and buttery, and for a moment, it made everything feel almost normal.

“Thanks, Dante. Really,” I said, my voice softer than I’d intended. The warmth from the croissant seeped into my hands, and I could almost believe we were just a normal couple having breakfast.

He studied me, his eyes searching. “Jade, there’s something we need to talk about.”

My heart sank. Of course there was. “Can it wait?”

His jaw tightened, but he nodded. “Eat first.”

I took a bite, the buttery flakes melting in my mouth. He didn’t move, didn’t touch his own food. The silence grew heavier, more oppressive.

“Dante, if this is about—“

“Just eat,” he said, cutting me off. “You need your strength.”

I finished the croissant, every bite a forced effort. He waited until I was done before speaking again.

“I’m sorry for last night,” he said. “For everything.”

I looked away, out the window at the snow-covered streets. “You mean for taking me to your place, for holding me against my will, for making me choose between—“

“Jade,” he interrupted, his tone pleading now. “I’m trying to protect you.”

I turned back to him. “Protect me from what, Dante? From you?”

He flinched, a small but noticeable reaction. “From the life I lead. From the enemies I have. From the choices you’ll have to make.”

The seriousness in his voice cut through my anger, leaving a raw, exposed wound. “What choices?”

He leaned in, his eyes locking onto mine. “The choice to stay. The choice to go. The choice to keep our child safe, no matter what.”

Our child. The words hung in the air, a fragile thing that could break at any moment.

“I never wanted this,” I said, my voice cracking. “I never wanted to be part of your world.”

“I know,” he said. “And I wish...look, you were right about everything. I should’ve been more upfront with you. But I was so blinded by what I wanted.”

“By the keycard?”

“Sure, that was part of it. But no. I was talking about you, Jade. This has always been about you. And now I’m so...fuck, I’m so sorry I ever got you into this world. But now we’re here and there’s no turning back. And I wish there was, but there isn’t. We don’t have that luxury and that scares the shit out of me. I know it must scare the shit out of you too and I’m sorry.”

He was right, and I had no idea what else to say, so I kept drinking my decaf coffee instead.

He sighed. “We have a lot to talk about.”

I watched him, silent. The smell of coffee and fresh pastries filled the small kitchen, a cruel contrast to the tension that had settled in. I took a deep breath.

“I’ll hear you out,” I said. “But I need to tell you something first.”

He paused, looking at me with an intensity that made my stomach twist. I picked up the croissant, examining it like it was a lab specimen, then took a slow, deliberate bite. The sweetness did nothing to calm me, and the moment dragged far longer than it should have.

I was stalling. I was terrified.

Dante waited, his eyes never leaving mine.

I took a deep breath, trying to summon the courage. “I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know how to reach you.”

Dante’s eyes searched mine. “Tell me what?”

“It’s the...I found out the sex, Dante,” I said. “I know what we’re going to have.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to have a little boy, Dante.”

I wasn’t sure how to read the expression on his face. His eyes widened, and for a second, I thought he might be angry.

Instead, his gaze found my eyes.

And then he smiled.

Chapter Seventeen: Dante

It took me a few long seconds to figure out what she said.

I already knew we were going to have a baby—obviously—but the fact that we now knew he was going to be a little boy made this so much more real and scary.

The winter sun peeked through the sheer curtains of Jade’s dining room, casting a soft glow over the half-eaten croissants and empty coffee mugs. I sat back in the creaky wooden chair, my legs stretched out, still clad in the pajamas I’d borrowed from her drawer—ones with little anchors that seemed to mock my current state of drifting uncertainty.

“Hey.” Jade’s voice pulled me back, her hand gentle on mine. “You went quiet all of a sudden.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, rubbing a thumb over the dark wood of the table, a stark reminder of the distance between my world and this quaint Harbor Cove apartment. The news hung between us like a fog; we were having a son. A little boy. It was supposed to be a moment of pure joy, yet I felt robbed—robbed of the chance to hear it firsthand, to be there beside her when she found out.

“Talk to me, Dante,” she urged softly, her eyes—the color of the stormy sea—searching my face for signs of the tempest within me.

I managed a small smile, one that didn’t quite reach my eyes. “Just trying to wrap my head around it. A boy, huh?” The words felt clumsy, foreign on my tongue.

She leaned forward, her tank top stretching slightly across her chest, and the shirt she wore unbuttoned at the top billowed as she moved. “Yeah, a boy,” she said, her voice a mixture of wonder and worry. “Are you...disappointed? I know you wanted a girl.”

“No, I said a girl might be nice. But I’m not.”

“You seem a little disappointed.”

I almost scoffed. “No. No, it’s not that. It’s just—“ I hesitated, glimpsing the flicker of fear in her gaze and hating myself for putting it there. “It’s just a lot to process, you know? Becoming a dad to a mini version of me.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” There was a teasing lilt to her voice now, an attempt to lighten the mood. “You’re not all that bad.”

I found her gaze. “I always knew you were brilliant. The fact that you’re incredibly kind too always seems to throw me for a loop.”

“You really aren’t all that bad,” she said softly.

“Depends on who you ask,” I replied, letting out a chuckle that felt good, real. “But honestly, Jade, I’m just pissed at myself for not being there. For missing out on things already.”

Her hand squeezed mine, her touch reassuring despite the chill seeping in from the early morning air. “We’ll have other moments, Dante. Plenty of them.”

“Together?” I asked.

She didn’t answer me. “I wanted to tell you. I hope you aren’t angry with me.”

“How could I be angry with you? I’m angry at myself. I can’t believe everything’s gotten so complicated.”

“Complicated doesn’t begin to cover it,” Jade said, her lips curving into a wry smile. But the smile didn’t quite chase away the concern in her eyes, the silent questions about our future lingering in the space between us.

“True,” I admitted, my own worries clawing their way up my throat. “But hey, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that nothing worth having comes easy.”

“Spoken like a true Moretti.” Her laughter held a hint of sadness, a melody that resonated deep within me.

“Can’t escape who I am,” I murmured, my resolve hardening. “But I can damn well make sure it doesn’t define our kid.”

“Or me,” Jade added quietly, pulling back her hand to tuck a stray wave behind her ear.

“Especially you,” I affirmed, my voice firm with a promise I intended to keep. No matter what it took.

The morning light spilled across the tiny dining table, casting her face in a soft glow that belied the tension between us.

“Jade,” I started, my voice low, searching for the right words without letting too much slip. “How did you even know it’s a boy? With everything going on...”

She glanced up from her own half-eaten pastry, decaf coffee cup cradled in her hands. “Prenatal appointments,” she explained, a clinical edge to her tone that always surfaced when she spoke of her work or anything remotely scientific. “I’ve been

going whenever I can sneak out. They did a genetic test and, you know, an ultrasound.”

“Of course.” My chair scraped against the floor as I leaned in closer. “And I wasn’t there,” I muttered, more to myself than to her. It was a bitter pill to swallow, the knowledge that she had tried to escape me, and understandably so.

“Would you have wanted to be?” Her question was a soft challenge, eyes locking with mine.

“Every damn appointment,” I confessed, the truth of it hitting me square in the chest. The desire to be involved was like a punch to the gut, an ache I hadn’t let myself feel until this moment.

“Even though I tried to leave you?” She didn’t blink, her question hanging heavy in the space between us.

“Especially then,” I said, my voice firm despite the uncertainty clawing at me. “I would’ve found a way, Jade. For you. For him.”

She nodded slowly, setting down her coffee with a quiet clink against the saucer. “Okay,” she whispered, the weight of our conversation settling over us like the early winter chill creeping through the windowpane. “But...”

“You should have told me you were going to the city. I would’ve taken you to the hospital myself.”

“Look, Dante,” she started, her voice barely above the hum of the refrigerator, “I know you want to help, but do you really think I can just go back to the city when...when everything is so complicated there?”

“I assume the clinic here isn’t spectacular if you aren’t going to it.”

“Harbor Cove is safe,” she continued, her fingers tracing the rim of her decaf coffee mug, “but it’s not just about location. It’s everything. You know why I’m here, away from the city’s... madness.”

“Jade,” I interrupted gently, feeling the weight of fatherhood tightening my chest. “I’ll support you both financially. This kid will have everything he needs, I swear it.”

“I don’t need your money.”

“Of course you do,” I said. “I’m not going to be some deadbeat dad who doesn’t give a damn. I’m in this, all the way. Harbor Cove or not, our son is going to grow up knowing his father didn’t just stand by.”

Jade pushed her plate away, the half-eaten croissant leaving flakes of pastry scattered like confetti on the white porcelain. The morning light filtering through the window illuminated her determined face as she met my gaze head-on.

“I don’t need your money, Dante,” she said, her voice steady with resolve. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time, and I can take care of our son too.”

“Jade,” I started, but she held up a hand, silencing me.

“Listen to me,” she continued, her eyes alight with that fiery independence I’d always admired. “This is not about pride or ego. It’s about making sure that my—our child grows up knowing the value of hard work, not just the weight of inherited wealth.”

I leaned back in my chair, the worn wood creaking under my weight. “You think I want him to be some spoiled brat?” I asked, frustration creeping into my voice. “I’m talking about security, stability. He shouldn’t have to want for anything.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly as if the burden of the world had chosen that moment to rest upon them. “But at what cost, Dante? Your life...it comes with strings attached, dangerous ones. Harbor Cove may be a haven now, but what about later?”

“Is staying here what you really want?” I pressed, searching her face for clues.

“I don’t know if I have a choice,” she murmured, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the grain of the wooden table.

At her words, a weight settled over me, thick as the fog that rolled in off the bay. I buried my head in my hands, my mind racing with the implications of what she wasn’t saying. Harbor Cove was more than just a scenic escape—it was a line drawn in the sand, a barrier against the life I led. And I was beginning to realize that maybe it wasn’t just the city she was trying to escape from.

I forked the last crumb of croissant into my mouth, feeling the buttery flakes dissolve on my tongue. The morning light filtered through the gauzy curtains of Jade’s dining room, casting a soft glow on her face. She looked ethereal, almost too pure for the world I came from—a world that could stain even the brightest souls.

“Right,” I said, clearing my throat, trying to shift the focus. “That’s what we need to talk about.” I watched her, noting the way her fingers wrapped around the mug of decaf coffee, a shield against whatever I might say next.

She waited for me.

“Jade, have you ever heard about something called RICO?”

Chapter Eighteen: Jade

I had heard about RICO. I didn't know what it stood for, exactly...all I knew was that it wasn't good.

The chill of the early morning winter air seeped into the Harbor Cove apartment, but Dante seemed oblivious to it as he stood up abruptly. He jammed his hands into his pajama pockets, a clear signal that his mind churned with far more troubling thoughts than the cold could impose. "Jade," he started, voice low and urgent, "there's a lot I need to tell you."

Without waiting for a response, he began pacing back and forth, his every step a silent drumbeat of worry.

I watched him, my sleep-tousled hair likely a wild contrast to my sudden spike in alertness. His normally composed demeanor was frayed at the edges, replaced by a tension that didn't suit him. "Dante, what is it?" I asked, my curiosity piqued despite the unease clenching my stomach. "You just mentioned something about RICO. What is it?"

His pacing halted, and for a moment he simply stared out the window where dawn painted the sky in pale streaks of color. It was a rare glimpse into the vulnerability he so expertly concealed, a vulnerability that seemed to be growing the longer he stayed silent.

Dante halted mid-stride, the muscles in his jaw working as he turned to face me. The early light cast half his face in shadow, making his expression all the more

inscrutable. “Jade,” he began, the weight of his words hovering between us, “the RICO case—it’s not just an investigation; it’s a noose.”

“RICO?” I echoed, folding my arms across my chest. “You mean the law they use to take down organized crime?”

He nodded once, sharply, the lines around his eyes deepening. “Exactly. And the Carusos...they’re pushing for it, hard. They’ve got a vendetta against my family that goes way back, and now...” Dante’s voice trailed off, and he looked away, his gaze finding some distant point of concern.

“Tell me what RICO actually means, Dante. I need to know. And then tell me what the Carusos have to do with it.”

Dante’s gaze hardened as he turned to face me, the intensity in his dark eyes revealing a struggle between his instinct to shield me and his newfound openness. With a deep sigh, he sank into the armchair across from me, his tall figure seeming suddenly weary.

“RICO stands for the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act,” he began, his voice taking on a chillingly calm cadence. “It gives the government power to bring charges against an entire organization based on crimes committed by any member of that organization.”

“Okay. Now tell me about the Carusos and their vendetta,” I said, stepping closer, trying to read his guarded eyes.

Dante raked a hand through his hair, then let out a long breath. “It’s blood for blood, an endless cycle. My great-grandfather took something from them—a shipment, a territory, respect—it doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is the legacy of hatred it fostered. The Carusos won’t rest until the Morettis are destroyed, or vice versa.”

“But the Carusos don’t have anything to do with the FBI, right? Like it would be against their best interest to help you with the law.”

Dante laughed, a hollow sound that echoed in the quiet room. “Assisting the law? No. The Carusos wouldn’t stoop so low. But they have no problem capitalizing on our misfortune. If the RICO case against the Morettis goes through, then the Carusos will have free rein over our territory.”

“Wouldn’t the police clean it up?”

“I mean, they’d try,” Dante said. “But the Carusos know how to play the game. They’ve been at it just as long, if not longer than we have. They have people in their pockets, and they’re not afraid to play dirty. And if I’m locked up, Jade, who’s going to defend you? Who’s going to defend our baby?”

“Are you saying... I’m a target now?” My voice was steady, too steady for the chaos brewing within.

“Jade, listen—“ Dante began, but I raised a hand to stop him.

“Give it to me straight. What does this mean for us—for me?” I demanded.

He hesitated, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “It means danger, the kind that doesn’t knock before it enters your life.”

I felt his words in my bones, a cold dread that didn’t need the chill of early winter to manifest. As the analytical gears in my brain churned, I struggled with the gravity of our entanglement. I was no stranger to complex equations or intricate research, but nothing could’ve prepared me for the calculus of the criminal underworld.

“Tell me something,” I said, crossing my arms, trying to armor myself against the

vulnerability seeping into every pore. “Tell me about them—the Carusos.”

Dante took a step towards me, his presence both comforting and terrifying in its intensity. “There was an incident,” he started, his voice dropping as if the memory itself weighed down his words. “Two years ago, we had intel on a shipment coming in—“

“Intel?” I interrupted, aghast. “You mean you were spying on them?”

“Of course. It’s how this world works.” His eyes darkened. “We intercepted a container at the docks—one that was supposed to be filled with machine parts. Instead, it was Caruso guns, enough firepower to start a small war.”

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath.

“Enzo wanted to send a message: Don’t mess with Moretti territory. We torched the whole shipment, let it light up the sky like a bonfire.” Dante’s hands clenched into fists, the memory igniting a fire in his eyes. “That night, the Carusos hit back. They came after one of our places—a club downtown. It turned into a bloodbath.”

“Did anyone...?” I couldn’t finish the sentence, the question too morbid to voice.

“Three of our guys didn’t make it out.”

“I’m so sorry. Friends of yours?”

He shook his head. “No, just kids who were in over their heads.”

“Is that what happened? When you came back to the penthouse that night and your clothes were all bloody? You said your brother was hurt.”

“My brother isn’t some kid, but he doesn’t deserve any of this.”

Dante stopped pacing and faced me, his dark eyes a testament to the night’s torments. “It’s not just Marco. It’s you, Jade. And our kid.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I can’t let my world touch either of you.”

“Why are you telling me all this now?” I asked, my voice steady despite the storm raging in my mind. “After everything, why?”

He stopped mid-pace, turned toward me, and I could see the weight of unspoken truths in his dark eyes. “Jade,” he began, the timbre of his voice betraying an undercurrent of urgency, “I can’t keep lying to you—about the RICO case, about the Carusos... You need to know the dangers we face.”

“Is it because of...us?” My heart hammered. “I mean, I assume you were breaking the law long before you got me pregnant, so why is the FBI interested all of a sudden?”

“It’s not sudden,” Dante replied, stilling. “It comes after I made mistakes. Marco getting shot. You getting pregnant. Me getting shot. But no, I’m thinking...things like paper trails. The money needed to legitimize the business. The Moretti-owned clinics popping up everywhere. There’s a chance they found out about the drug routes plan between clinics, but they’d have to have spoken to a Caruso for that, and I don’t see that happening.”

I glared at him, mouth agape. “The drug routes?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t pretend to be naïve. You’re not stupid,” he said. “You probably knew what I did from the beginning.”

“I didn’t,” I defended, my voice rising with indignation. “I may be a scientist, Dante, but I’m not privy to the inner workings of your world. I didn’t know about your

plans, your...your drug routes.”

His gaze softened as he moved towards me. “Jade, I’ve always tried to keep you out of this, even if it meant lying about certain things. But with the RICO case threatening us and the Carusos circling like sharks... I can’t afford to keep you in the dark anymore.”

“But why now?” The questions tumbled out in a rush. “Why tell me all this when it’s already so messed up?”

“Because no matter what, you’re in this with me,” he said, taking my hands firmly in his. “Because we created a life together. And I need you to understand that every decision I’ve made and will make is to protect you... and our child.” His words hung heavy in the air between us.

His words seeped into the cracks of my resolve, and I felt the dam holding back my emotions begin to crumble. Fear mingled with the fierce protectiveness I felt for our unborn child, leaving my thoughts adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

“God, Dante,” I breathed out, my composure splintering as I grappled with the enormity of the revelation. “This is so much bigger than us.” My analytical mind raced, desperately trying to piece together a future from the chaos he’d laid bare.

Dante reached out, his fingers tracing the line of my jaw with a gentleness that belied the strength in his touch. “I know, Jade. And I’m sorry for pulling you into my world, but I couldn’t stay away from you. Not then, not now. And now...fuck, now I don’t know. Do you want me to get away from you? We can only talk about our baby if you want. We can just talk about our son if that would make you happier, and...”

“I don’t know,” I said. He looked into my eyes, as if he was searching for a different answer, but I couldn’t give him one. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

He looked so hurt for a second. But then he just nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. I can work with that.”

Chapter Nineteen: Dante

I watched Jade from the corner of my eye as she sat at the dining room table, her slender fingers tracing the grain of the wood in a rhythm that seemed to echo the steady beat of uncertainty. The Harbor Cove apartment was quiet. I didn't know what she was doing and I didn't want to know.

I couldn't stop pacing, each step a silent plea for her to see past the revelations of my past.

"Jade," I started, stopping mid-stride, "I laid it all out for you. My skeletons aren't just in the closet; they're sitting at the dinner table with us."

She looked up, her face a study in contrasts—those intelligent eyes reflecting both the sharp edge of her analytical mind and the softness of emotions she couldn't hide. "Dante, knowing everything...it changes things. I can't just flip a switch and pretend it's not a big deal."

"Of course, it's a big deal. But look. I didn't lie to you. I just didn't tell you everything. It's probably a stupid defense, but I only wanted to protect you."

I rubbed the back of my neck, feeling the weight of her gaze. This was the woman who could dissect me down to my very core without so much as blinking—an ability that both thrilled and terrified me.

"Look, I get it," I said, my voice rougher than I'd intended. "You need space to figure this out. And maybe there's no solution that includes me anymore."

Her lips parted slightly, but she remained silent, letting the unspoken words hang heavy between us. I knew what I had to do, even if every fiber of my being screamed against it. But I'd be damned if I made this any harder on her than it already was.

"Jade," I whispered, my resolve cracking like thin ice underfoot, "no matter where we end up after this, know that you've changed me—in ways I didn't think were possible."

And then I closed the door to the living room behind me, because I couldn't stand to look at her, to hear her silence.

Because it broke my fucking heart.

"Damn it," I muttered under my breath, my hands curling into fists. The walls of the bedroom closed in on me, every corner a reminder of her, of us. But if she couldn't be sure about what we had, then I had no business lingering like some ghost of a happier past.

My fingers grazed the worn leather of the duffel bag, the one I'd kept ready for quick escapes. The one I'd brought all the way here in case we both had to quickly leave Harbor Cove together, which now felt like it had been a very stupid idea.

That's all my life had been—escapes from the cops, from rivals, from reality. Only this time, I was running from the possibility of rejection.

"Stop." Her voice, firm yet laced with something that sounded like pain, halted my movements.

I turned to find her there, her arms reaching out and wrapping around me from behind. My heart skipped, or maybe it stopped; either way, it reacted in ways I thought I'd long since mastered control over.

“Jade?” Confusion mixed with a flicker of hope that I immediately tried to squash. I couldn’t afford hope.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her breath warm against my skin. “Thank you for telling me the truth. For trusting me with your past.”

“And Dante,” she continued, her grip tightening, “I miss you. God, how I miss you.”

My chest tightened, and for a moment, I allowed myself the luxury of just feeling her presence, pushing aside the storm of my thoughts. This wasn’t a solution, but for a second, it was enough.

Her arms were still locked around my waist, her body pressed against my back, igniting every nerve ending with a fire I couldn’t contain. With a ragged breath, I turned within her embrace, my hands finding the soft curves of her hips. Pulling her close, the distance between us vanished in an instant as my lips crashed onto hers.

It was reckless, this kiss. It was a plunge into depths unknown, a leap towards a horizon that might never dawn. My mouth moved against hers with a hunger sharpened by the threat of loss. Her taste was the promise of a life I’d dared to dream, but never quite believed I could have.

“Jade,” I said, my voice low and steady despite the storm raging inside me. “I don’t give a damn about the uncertainty right now.” I paused, letting the weight of my admission hang between us before continuing, “All I care about is you—in this moment—feeling pleasure, being close to you.”

She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes searching mine for the truth behind my words. She found it there, naked and unashamed—the raw need to claim her as mine, if only temporarily.

I followed the impulse that pulled me towards her like gravity. “You don’t have to decide anything about us,” I murmured, my hands finding the small of her back, pulling her even tighter against me. “That doesn’t change how much I want you. How much I want to make you come.”

The words hung heavy in the quiet of the room, every syllable a testament to my longing. A question lingered in the air, charged and waiting for her to breathe life into it with a single word.

“Jade,” I broke the silence, my heart hammering against my chest like it wanted to break free. “Do you want me to?” The question was out there, naked in the stillness of the room.

Her eyes held mine, those dark pools reflecting a storm of emotions that matched the chaos inside me. And then, she whispered the word that unraveled all restraint.

“Yes.”

The single syllable ignited something primal within me. I pulled her closer, and our lips met in a collision of need and hunger that knew no caution, no hesitation. There was just skin, breath, and the pulse of desire that coursed through us both.

I kissed her again, this time, my hands wrapped around her waist and my body pressing into her. I knew she could feel how hard I was for her, and my groan echoed in her mouth as her own fingers dug into my back, pulling me closer.

“Dante,” she gasped against my lips. Her voice hitched as I trailed kisses down her neck to where her pulse danced beneath her skin.

“All I need is you, Jade,” I murmured, every word punctuated by a kiss, a caress, a nip. A promise. Her hands tangled in my hair, tugging lightly at the strands and

sending pleasure humming through my veins.

“Dante,” she whispered, her voice heavy with anticipation and need. “I need you... now.”

That was all it took for any semblance of restraint to crumble. Need, raw and potent, coursed through my veins. I bent down to kiss her again, my fingers tracing a path down her side to send shivers coursing through her body.

I bunched up her tank top in my hands and slid it off her, then my mouth dropped to her exposed skin, crisscrossing her stomach with kisses as my fingers slid to the seam of her shorts. I undid them with a practiced ease, pulling the fabric down until it pooled at her feet, leaving her lying there on the bed in nothing but her underwear.

“God, you’re so fucking beautiful,” I said.

The words slipped out, a rough whisper torn from the depth of my soul. I ran my fingers lightly over her trembling body, my mouth slowly moving down so I could suck on her nipples, gently, reverently, the taste of her skin sweet and intoxicating on my tongue. She arched into me with a soft gasp, her fingers threading through my hair, her nails scraping against my scalp as I lavished attention on her breasts.

She whimpered, her fingers tightening in my hair and her back arching off the bed as she sought more of my touch. Her breath hitched every time I grazed my teeth over her sensitive flesh, reducing her to a trembling mess under my hands and mouth.

My fingers traced the elastic of her underwear, my touch feather-light, just enough to make her squirm underneath me. With excruciating slowness, I slid them down her legs, exposing her completely to my gaze. The sight of her, bare and beautiful and mine, had me swallowing down a groan.

I leaned over her, taking in the sight of her flushed skin and heavy-lidded eyes. “You’re absolutely fucking breathtaking,” I murmured. I cupped her face with one hand, tipping it up so I could capture her mouth once more in a searing kiss.

And then, without breaking our kiss, I slid a hand down her body, tracing the curve of her hip before slipping between her thighs. She gasped into my mouth as my fingers found her wet and wanting. “Dante,” she breathed, her voice heavy with need.

I pulled away from our kiss, my eyes locked on hers as my fingers gently explored her. Her gaze was hazy with desire, her lips parted and panting. “Close your eyes,” I commanded softly, my voice fraught with barely controlled lust.

She followed my directive without question, her eyelashes fluttering shut. With an almost reverential touch, I drew circles on her clit, the motion causing a shiver to wrack through her body. I watched as her mouth opened in a silent moan, the sight sending white-hot desire coursing through my veins.

I pressed my fingers into her pussy. “God, you’re so fucking wet.”

Her body arched against my touch, her hands fisting the sheets beneath her. “Dante,” she gasped, her voice strained with unspoken pleas. Her fingers tangled into my hair as she tried to pull me up, but I resisted, keeping my attention focused where she needed it most.

A soft whimper left her lips, and the sound of it was like a siren’s call, drawing me deeper into the labyrinth of her pleasure. My fingers moved rhythmically within her, coaxing a symphony of moans from her parted lips as I sought out that sweet spot that would have her unraveling beneath me.

“Dante...please...” she begged through clenched teeth, her hips bucking against my hand in a desperate plea for relief.

I shifted my hand just enough to press against that sensitive bundle of nerves at her core. Every gasp and moan she made drove me further, fueled my desire to see her come apart under my touch.

“I’ve been dreaming about this,” I said. “I’ve been dreaming about making you come.”

Without breaking eye contact, I sank two fingers inside of her, savoring her sharp intake of breath and the way she arched up to meet my touch. Her hands fumbled blindly towards me, catching hold of my arm just as I began to move.

My touch was slow, deliberate. With every thrust I mapped her out, felt the way she tightened around me, experienced the tremors that rocked through her as pleasure crept closer. And through it all, I watched her. Watched as her brow furrowed in concentration, as she bit down on her lower lip to muffle a moan, as her hands gripped me tighter.

“Dante,” she whimpered, the desperation clear in her voice. “I need you.”

I smiled at her, a low chuckle rumbling from my chest. “I told you, darling. My only goal right now is to make you come.”

She blushed, but she didn’t look away from me. Instead, her grip on my arm tightened even more as she spread her legs wider, giving me even better access to her.

Her eyes were closed tightly, her lips parted slightly to let out soft whimpers and moans every time I moved inside of her. Her skin was flushed pink from arousal, and she was so wet for me that every thrust of my fingers made a lewd sound that echoed through the room.

“Dante,” she gasped again, this time louder and more desperate. I smiled again, a

wicked grin spreading across my face as I watched her squirm underneath me, pushing against my hand in a silent plea for me to move faster.

And when I did, she cried out, a sweet sound that had me groaning in response. I added a third finger inside of her, stretching her around me as I picked up the pace.

At the same time, my tongue found her clit and began to circle it delicately at first, then with more insistence. Each flick and swirl sent her spiraling closer to the edge.

“God...Dante,” she panted out, her voice choppy and desperate. I glanced up at her through my lashes. The sight of her trembling beneath me, of her biting down on her lower lip in an attempt to control the sounds she couldn’t keep quiet, was nothing short of addictive.

“That’s it, Jade,” I murmured against her skin, my words vibrating against her overheated flesh. “Let go for me...I want to feel you come undone.”

Her response came in the form of a needy whimper as she twisted a hand into my hair, holding me closer. Her hips writhed restlessly against my mouth as tension coiled tight within her, straining for release.

I swiped my tongue firmly over her sensitive nub just as I curled my fingers inside of her, hitting that spot deep within that had her gasping.

“Can you squirt for me, bella?”

She let out a choked sob at my words, her body shivering under my touch as if she were on the verge of shattering. “Dante... I can’t...” She trailed off, her voice trembling under the weight of her pleasure.

“Yes, you can,” I urged her, sliding my fingers deeper and curling them just right. “I

want to see you, Jade. I want to see how good I make you feel.”

Her response was a strangled moan as she bucked against me, her hands scrabbling at the sheets beneath her. Her body trembled, a fine sheen of sweat coating her skin as she writhed in pleasure.

“F-fuck,” she gasped, her fingers digging into the sheet as she squirmed beneath me.

I swirled my tongue around her again and again, keeping my rhythm steady and unyielding even as she writhed beneath me. “Come for me, beautiful,” I growled against her, the vibrations sending another jolt of pleasure coursing through her.

“Dante,” she cried out, and that was all the warning I got before she unraveled completely beneath me. The taste of her arousal, sweet and heady, filled my mouth as a rush of wetness soaked my hand and chin.

Her body convulsed with each wave of pleasure, her tight walls contracting around my fingers. Her cries echoed around the room, growing louder with each spasm until she was shaking uncontrollably in my arms. Her eyes were shut tight, her chest heaving as she gasped for air.

“Dante,” she panted, her cry a sweet symphony of relief and ecstasy that drove me to my own climax. The feel of her pulsating around me, the sight of her surrendering completely beneath me, it was overwhelming.

With a choked groan, I followed her over the edge. Pleasure ripped through me in blinding waves, my hips bucking into hers instinctively as my release took hold. I buried my face in her neck, my teeth grazing her skin as I rode out the exquisite torment.

Every nerve ending was ablaze, a flurry of sensation that left me breathless. Time

seemed to slow down as we lay there entangled in one another, our bodies slick with sweat and spent desire.

As my heartbeat began to normalize, Jade's soft caresses drew me back from the haze of pleasure clouding my senses. Her gaze met mine and I found myself helplessly lost in them once again.

"Dante..." she whispered, her voice hoarse from our heated exchange. Her fingers traced idle patterns on my chest as if trying to memorize everything about this moment.

I grunted in response, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear before pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. She exhaled a deep breath, her body molding perfectly against mine as the tension seeped out of her.

I rolled off her and stared at the ceiling as we both caught our breaths. "I love you, Jade."

She looked at me for a second.

"You don't have to say anything. I'm going to give you time to think," I said, suddenly feeling like a fool for offering up that information in the first place. "I should go home."

As I started to rise from the bed, Jade clutched my arm, stopping me in my tracks. Her gaze was earnest as she spoke, "Don't... Don't go yet."

I stared at her hand on my arm, then lifted my gaze to meet hers. A powerful tide of emotion welled up within me. Fear, hope, and desperation battled within me; a maelstrom that Jade's presence both stilled and amplified.

“I...” She bit her lip, hesitating. “I need some time to process everything. But...but I don’t want you to leave.”

It wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear. But for now, it was good enough.

It had to be.

Chapter Twenty: Jade

He stayed.

He raided my fridge and he made us lunch after he chose to stay.

I'd been making a concerted effort to cook more—now that I wasn't working in the lab, it was easier to dedicate time to it—so he easily found ingredients to work with.

I forked a piece of the grilled sea bass, watching the flaky layers part under the tines—Dante's culinary skills always surprised me.

But as we ate, he addressed the issue hanging over us.

"You should stay here in Harbor Cove," he said, his voice low, almost blending with the distant hum of the boats docking outside. "Keep your head down, Jade."

"Head down?" I scoffed, but my bravado faltered under the weight of his gaze. "And what about you?"

He reached across the small table that was cluttered with our lunch spread—a stark reminder of the normalcy we both craved. His fingers brushed mine, sending a jolt of warmth despite the winter chill seeping through the apartment windows. "I love you," Dante murmured, and it wasn't just the words but the way he said them, like a confession made at gunpoint.

"I know," I managed to reply, feeling the knot in my throat tighten. It was the truth,

stripped of any pretense.

His hand retracted, and he leaned back in his chair, the shadows of the room accentuating the hardness in his jawline. “I probably won’t be back for a while. Detective Rodriguez has me on a tight leash; I’m not supposed to leave the city.”

“Everything’s such a mess.” My voice broke, betraying the chaos swirling inside me. “I miss you.”

The admission hung between us, as raw and exposed as an open wound. We continued to eat, the silence stretching out, filled only by the clink of cutlery and the muffled sound of waves against the cove.

The silence was a living thing, broken only by the clink of our forks against the plates. I toyed with the remnants of my salad, unable to ignore the gnawing feeling in my stomach that had nothing to do with hunger.

“Jade,” Dante said, his voice low and careful. “Is there anything else you miss?”

My chest tightened, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. I blinked them away, but one betrayed me, sliding down my cheek. “The people at the diner, the inn... they’ve been so kind.” I paused, my voice a mere thread of sound. “But I was on the cusp of a breakthrough with my research, Dante. It feels like I’ve left a piece of myself behind.”

He reached out again, this time cupping my face in his hand, thumb brushing away the tear. “I’m so sorry I left you in a place of despair.” Regret laced his words, pulling at the fragile threads of composure I held onto. “It’ll never happen again. You need to have a phone—something secure. I’ll ship one to you.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, taking a moment to steady my breath before picking up

my fork again. But the food tasted like cardboard now.

Dante checked his watch and then stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. “I shouldn’t even be here.” His voice was rough, like it pained him to say it.

I followed him to my feet, my heart thumping against my ribs as we headed for the door. Our footsteps echoed in the empty hallway, an ominous drumbeat that seemed to herald the end of something. Or the beginning.

We exited the apartment, and the crisp sea air hit me, carrying the scent of brine and freedom. A freedom that felt more like a prison without Dante by my side.

“Let’s get you to the car,” he said, his hand finding the small of my back, guiding me toward the black sedan waiting ominously outside the harbor cove apartment. The sun glinted off its polished surface, an illusion of peace in a day that was anything but tranquil.

The world outside the Harbor Cove apartment had always felt like a sanctuary, until it wasn’t. As Dante and I approached the car, my senses, usually dulled by the serenity of the sea breeze, snapped to attention at the sharp crack of shattering glass. My head whipped around, scanning for the source, just in time to see silhouettes—men in masks—materializing from the edges of our vision.

“Get down!” Dante’s command came in a fierce whisper, his hand firm on my shoulder as he shoved me towards the ground, an instinctive move that folded space into a blur of motion.

The thud of my body hitting the pavement was lost in the chaos of footsteps and grunts. I could barely make out Dante’s shape as he positioned himself between me and the attackers, his presence a shield against the unknown threat that dared to intrude upon our fleeting moment of peace.

“Stay behind me!” he growled, his voice a low vibration under the clatter of closing danger. I could feel the urgency pulsing off him in waves, even as my mind struggled to process the swift transition from calm to combat.

I pressed my palms against the cool concrete, the rough texture grounding me while Dante’s silhouette danced violently with those of our assailants. The glint of metal flashed in the sunlight, weapons brandished with lethal intent, and a new kind of fear gripped me—one that came with the possibility of losing more than just my freedom or research.

Pavement bit into my palms, icy against the adrenaline-warmth of my skin. Dante was a blur of motion, dodging and weaving with a precision that belied the chaos unfurling around us. I watched—fascinated despite the terror—as he countered each attack, his body a weapon honed by years in the shadows of his family’s dark empire.

“Jade, now!” His command cut through the haze of fear.

His hand clamped around mine, calloused and unyielding. With a yank that sent my heart into my throat, he hauled me to my feet. There was no room for hesitation; Dante’s grip on my hand was an anchor in the storm, a lifeline pulling me towards the promise of safety—the car.

“Jade, get in now!” Dante’s voice was a sharp command that cut through the chaos.

I lurched toward the open car door, my hands shaking so violently I could barely grasp the handle. The leather seat felt alien against the pandemonium of my racing heart as I threw myself inside. My fingers stumbled over the seatbelt, the simple action maddeningly complex as fear slicked my palms.

“Come on, Jade,” I muttered under my breath, willing my trembling hands to work. With a click, the seatbelt locked into place, a small victory amidst the encroaching

peril.

Dante slammed the door shut, the sound merging with my own ragged breaths. His gaze was a sweep of the area, quick and efficient, before locking onto mine with an intensity that almost made me forget the peril we were in.

“Jade, if anything happens—“ he started.

“Nothing’s going to happen,” I cut him off, more for my own sake than his. My voice was a whisper of defiance against the fear.

A nod was his only reply as he twisted the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life, a growl that seemed to rise above the chaos unfolding outside. Dante’s hands gripped the steering wheel, every muscle coiled like a spring, ready to unleash the full force of his will upon the gas pedal.

The tires screeched, a harsh cry against the cold pavement, and for a moment, the world outside blurred into streaks of color and light.

“Hang on,” Dante said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a grim half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes. I could see his jaw working, the subtle clench that betrayed his tension.

I clutched the seat, my mind reeling. With every turn, it felt like we were threading the needle between fate and fortune, Dante’s driving nothing short of a desperate ballet. It was reckless; it was necessary. And it was so very Dante—unyielding, audacious, and terrifyingly competent.

The rearview mirror framed the terror in snapshots – headlights bearing down on us, the glare harsh against the winter gloom. My fingers were vices around the leather of the passenger seat, the material flexing beneath my grip. Dante’s silhouette was a

study in control, every shift and turn an answer to the chaos in our wake.

“Keep your head down,” he ordered, the timbre of his voice a stark command amidst the mayhem. I complied without thought, ducking as another vehicle swung into view, its intent as clear as the cold bite of the air that had rushed in earlier.

My breaths stuttered out in rapid succession, each one catching slightly as if my lungs were struggling to keep pace with the pulsing fear that gripped me. But despite the terror, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the relentless pursuit mirrored behind us.

“Damn it,” Dante muttered, his focus never wavering even as the car lurched forward, urging more speed from the engine. I could feel the raw power of the vehicle, a beast unleashed by Dante’s hands, thrumming through the floor beneath my feet.

The chassis groaned as Dante’s foot slammed down on the accelerator, the engine’s roar a gritty soundtrack to our escape. We whipped around a corner, tires screeching in protest, the city blurring past us in a dizzying whirl of grey concrete and frost-tipped buildings.

“Damn it!” I gasped, bracing myself against the dashboard. Each swerve felt like a dance move I hadn’t learned, my body thrown this way and that. But Dante was fluid, an extension of the machine he commanded with such ferocious expertise.

“Jade, just keep your head down!” His voice was sharp, cutting through the chaos.

I obeyed without thought, shrinking lower into my seat as we plunged down an alley so narrow I could almost touch the walls reaching out to us like cold fingers.

“We need to get to the highway,” Dante said, his voice a gravelly murmur over the engine’s growl. His gaze flickered to the rear-view mirror, and for a moment, I saw something there—a spark of worry before his features hardened once more into that

mask of steely determination.

A siren wailed in the distance, growing louder with each heart-stopping second. Red and blue lights strobed through the alleyway, casting horrific shadows that danced like specters in Dante's wake.

I shot him a panicked look. "The police—"

Dante just grunted, throwing the car into another violent turn that slammed me against my door. "Their problem, not ours."

Buildings flashed by in a dizzying blur as we rocketed towards the outskirts of Harbor Cove. The quaint seaside town had transformed into a surreal nightmare, its serene landscape now a terrifying maze of close calls and near misses.

"I've got this, Jade," Dante said, his voice carrying a semblance of calm that seemed incongruous with our wild flight. I nodded, swallowing hard against the knot in my throat. The facades of the city buildings fell away, replaced by the darkness of the underpass as we hurtled toward it.

"Brace yourself," Dante warned, his grip tightening on the wheel as he swerved to avoid an oncoming car. The impact was inevitable—a metallic shriek filled the air as our car careened off the concrete divider and back onto our lane.

I gasped, my body jolting from the shock. My heart pounded mercilessly in my chest, threatening to burst from its cage. But Dante's voice was a grounding presence amidst the chaos—a touchstone clinging me back to reality.

"We're okay," he said, his tone short but assured as if reaffirming it more for himself than me. In that moment, I found myself drawn to his strength—a beacon in a storm I didn't quite understand.

“Where are they?” I asked. “Are they still following us?”

Dante’s answer was a curt shake of his head as he cast a glance at the rearview mirror. “We’ve lost them, for now,” he said. His voice carried traces of relief, but there was an underlying edge—a primal wariness that told me our ordeal was far from over.

The lights of New York City loomed ahead, a glittering jungle of steel and glass cutting through the winter gloom. The skyline was a paradox—a symbol of civilization and yet a reminder of the darkness that lurked beneath its surface.

“We need to disappear,” Dante muttered, more to himself than me. “Blend in.”

“So what are we doing?”

He thought about it for a second. “Fuck it. I’m taking you home.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Dante

He didn't say where home was.

The city's heartbeat throbbed through the car's floor as Dante navigated the congested streets of Manhattan. I watched the buildings slide past, their windows reflecting back a mosaic of the early afternoon sun and shadow.

I noticed he wasn't going to his place. He was going to mine.

I looked at him, sighing. "Hey, I don't think we should go to my apartment," I said. "I'm pretty sure the landlord leased it out to someone else at this point."

"Yeah, about your lease," Dante started, his voice cutting through the muted sounds of traffic seeping into the cabin. "I hope you're not thinking someone else has moved into your place."

My fingers paused mid-twirl in a lock of my dark hair. "I mean, it's been months, Dante. My landlord's not the type to let an apartment in NYC sit empty." I glanced at him sideways, trying to read his expression.

He kept his eyes on the road, but the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "No need to worry about that. I've been taking care of the lease."

"You've...what?" The words tumbled out before I could catch them.

"Paid it. All this time." His tone was matter-of-fact, as if discussing the weather

rather than dropping a bombshell.

“Why would you do that?” The question came out sharper than I intended, laced with disbelief.

“Two reasons.” He merged into another lane, his movements precise and controlled. “First, I wanted you to have a place to return to, if you ever decided to come back.”

“And the second?”

“Selfish, really.” He finally turned to look at me, dark eyes locking onto mine. “There was always a chance I’d see you again. If you showed up there.”

His admission hovered in the air between us, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken threads tethering us together despite our tangled history. It was care masked as strategy, concern cloaked in self-interest, and it left my thoughts spinning like leaves caught in the relentless New York wind.

“I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable,” he said. “But you’re right. Your landlord wasn’t going to just let your apartment sit there.”

I bit back the instinct to argue and shifted in my seat, the leather creaking under me. “But you’re not that sorry for stalking me? That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Clearly,” Dante said, his gaze still fixed on the congested streets ahead, “it worked out.” His voice was a low rumble, the kind of sound that had a way of settling deep in my stomach.

“Stalking is a crime, you know.” Despite the severity of the topic, my words came out more amused than accusatory.

He laughed, his hand on my knee. “Are you going to turn me in, Jade?”

“No, I think you’ve got enough legal troubles as it is,” I retorted, the ghost of a smirk lingering on my lips. My eyes dropped to his hand on my knee, the warmth from his touch seeping through the fabric of my jeans.

“Speaking of which...” He started, reclaiming his hand and bringing both back onto the steering wheel. “I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

My heart hitched in my chest. The silence that followed his words hung heavy in the air like a premonition, a signal flare warning me of incoming danger.

“Your job at BioHQ,” Dante finally broke the silence, “is safe...as long as I have a stake in it.”

“Thanks?” I said, unsure of whether to feel grateful or not.

“Look,” Dante continued, his voice softening a notch, “I’m not about to stand in the way of your ambition. Not now, not ever.”

“Good.” I turned to face him fully, meeting his dark eyes with determination etched into every line of my face. “Because I’m not giving it up. Not for you, not for anyone.”

“Wouldn’t dream of asking you to.” He nodded once, sharply, as if sealing an unspoken pact between us.

The sudden rush of relief was quickly followed by confusion. “Wait, the RICO case... won’t it force BioHQ to shut down?”

His lips thinned into a line, an unmistakable sign that he was thinking. He turned

back to the road, his gaze flitting between the buildings as he considered his response.

“No,” he said after a few beats of silence. “There are... legal loopholes.”

I crossed my arms. “Such as?”

He glanced at me, his eyes unreadable. “Does it matter?”

I sighed, pressing my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “You always do this, Dante. Twisting words, keeping things just vague enough—“

“I’m giving it all back,” he interrupted, holding his hand up to stall any further protest from me.

I blinked at him, taken aback. “What?”

“Your job, your apartment,” he listed off on his fingers. “Your freedom.”

“Tell me,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “Tell me what you’re going to do.”

Dante let out a breath, his eyes fixed on the road. He glanced at me, a faint smile tracing his lips. “Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, holding my gaze. “I’m giving you your life back, Jade.”

“Cute. I meant for the case. How are you keeping the police and the FBI off BioHQ’s back? The RICO case against the Moretti family—it’s big news. And it won’t look good for BioHQ if they reinstate someone with...connections to it.”

Dante glanced at me, a faint grin playing on his lips. “Jade, I have a team of the best lawyers money can buy. They’re working on it, digging through the laws to find any

avenue we can exploit.”

“But you are the connection,” I countered, my voice bare with frustration.

The streetlights cast a glow over his face, accentuating the intense look in his eyes. His jaw tightened and he was quiet for a moment before he responded. “That’s where it gets tricky.”

“Tricky? Dante, this is my life you’re playing with,” I snapped, my tone colder than I intended.

“Yes,” he said. “And our child’s life. So I want to give you all my stake in the company.”

I blinked, stunned into silence. The weight of his words hung in the air between us, heavy and potent as the blare of car horns from the traffic outside. “Give me... what?”

“Everything,” Dante said simply, his gaze never leaving the road ahead. “My shares in BioHQ. It’s the cleanest way to sever my connection with the company.”

“But... that’s your company...” I protested weakly, grappling with the enormity of his decision.

“Well,” he corrected with a small smile, “it was my company.”

“But...” I paused, trying to make sense of his declaration. “Why?”

His gaze flicked to me, a softness touching his dark eyes. “A secure future for you and our baby,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

I swallowed hard, the implications of his words weighing heavily on me. Despite the

tension between us, despite our tangled past and the chaos swirling around us, Dante was offering an olive branch—a chance for stability, a lifeline in these stormy waters.

“Okay. Let’s say I take you up on this. Are you going to use BioHQ branded clinics for other...activities?”

He looked at me for a second. “That’s none of your concern.”

“Dante,” I started, my tone firm and unyielding. “If I’m to take your stake in the business, it becomes very much my concern.”

He sighed, running a hand through his dark locks. “Jade, the less you know about what may or may not have happened in the past, the better. The less you know about what happens in the future, the better. Let’s hope you never get called to testify, but if you do, you should probably know as little as possible.”

I frowned, annoyed at his deflection. “How can you expect me to accept such a proposal when you keep holding back information?”

Dante looked at me, his gaze softening. “I’m trying to protect you,” he explained, “and our child by ensuring that you always have plausible deniability.”

“Really?”

He nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. “That way, no one can ever accuse you of being involved in anything unsavory.”

A knot tightened in my stomach. “So what, I just turn a blind eye and hope for the best?”

“No,” Dante answered quickly, grasping my hand gently, “You run the company as

you see fit, as ethically and brilliantly as I know only you can.”

“I’m not doing this.”

“Jade, cut it out. BioHQ operations are all above board. The revenue per year is set to exceed the GDP of some countries. There’s no need to dip into illegal activities.”

“But it doesn’t yet, right? That’s why we needed funding. That’s why we needed the Morettis in the first place.”

“The funding was necessary for the growth,” Dante argued, his voice steady and firm. “We required resources for development, research, patents...BioHQ would never be on the path it is today without that initial investment.”

“This is an insane idea,” I said.

“Yeah, well, it’s this or marriage,” he replied. “So what do you say, Jade? Will you be the CEO of BioHQ or Mrs. Moretti?”

“Those can’t be my only choices.”

He tutted. “If you want your child to be safe, I’m afraid they are.”

The weight of Dante’s ultimatum settled heavily in my stomach, the pulsating rhythm of the city outside echoing my racing heart. I clutched at the edge of the seat, a mixture of fear, anger, and confusion clouding my thoughts.

“I don’t even know how to respond to that,” I muttered, turning away from his intense gaze.

“Take your time,” Dante said, his voice holding an unexpected gentleness. “I’m not

rushing you. But you should know...no one touches wives. It's...different. We have a code, and I know this might be hard to believe, but we follow it."

He pulled into a parking spot in front of my building and turned off the engine, leaving us in a tense silence. The city lights shone around us, painting a surreal tableau of night shadows against the dashboard.

"But you'd still be involved in the... family business," I managed to choke out.

"I'd do my best to distance myself from it," Dante responded, his eyes meeting mine in the neon glow. "For you and our child."

"You told me you'd leave this life behind."

"And I meant every word," he replied. "But I told you to give me time. I need to protect you before I can make that move. I need to protect you and our son. You understand that, right?"

I swallowed hard, my gaze dropping to the leather wheel in his hands. The road outside was slick with recent rain, drops painting the pavement with a garish sheen of neon light reflecting off city billboards and store signs. I glanced up at the building we were parked in front of - my old apartment complex - its lights warm and inviting.

"Do you still have the key?" Dante asked suddenly, breaking the silence that hung between us.

Startled, I nodded, retrieving the lanyard from my purse. The little metal object felt unnaturally heavy in my palm.

"Go up," he suggested softly. "Take a look around. See if you can imagine yourself there again."

“And what about you?”

“I’ll wait, Jade,” he said. “I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

Chapter Twenty-Two: Jade

I was back at work.

And I loved it.

The lab at BioHQ was alive with the hum of machinery and the subtle clink of glassware as I made my way to my station. The crisp edges of my lab coat felt like a familiar embrace after all my time away, wrapped in the chaos Dante had ushered into my life.

“Looks who’s back,” Ellie quipped from across the bench, her ponytail bobbing as she piped a violet substance into a petri dish. “The prodigal scientist returns.”

I’d arrived early, and we had greeted each other, but we had been surrounded by people. We hadn’t really had time to talk. The door to our lab was open and I was sure our colleagues could overhear us, so it made sense that Ellie was holding back.

But I still felt bad that she couldn’t say what she actually meant.

I couldn’t help but crack a smile. “And here I thought you’d barely notice I was gone.”

“Please, Jade,” Ellie said, rolling her eyes while her hands continued their methodical dance. “The place has been a disaster without your obsessive color-coding system.”

“Obsessive? It’s called efficient,” I shot back, slipping on a pair of gloves. “But I

appreciate you holding down the fort.” I could feel the weight of my absence hanging between us—unspoken but heavy.

“Always,” she replied, and there was something reassuring about the steadfastness in her voice. Ellie was my rock in this fluid world of variables and hypotheses.

“Thanks for giving me space,” I said, a little more quietly this time. “After...you know, everything with Dante.” My heart thudded just saying his name, even if it was only in passing.

“Of course,” Ellie responded, her gaze softening as she looked up from her work. “You needed time to sort through...whatever that is. But I’m glad you’re back, Jade. This place isn’t the same without you.”

“Nor is the research,” I said, feeling grounded once more amidst beakers and data sheets. Ellie and I were a team, our bond forged in countless hours of shared discoveries and setbacks. “Let’s get back to it, shall we?”

“Let’s,” Ellie agreed with a nod, her ponytail bobbing in solidarity.

I moved toward my workstation, the familiar hum of machines and the sterile scent of the lab wrapping around me like a comforting embrace. This was where I belonged, among pipettes and petri dishes, the thrill of possibility always at our fingertips.

“Hey, Jade?” Ellie called out, pausing her work for a moment.

“Yeah?” I glanced up, meeting her brown eyes, which held a glint of something like mischief.

“Remember that time we stayed up all night analyzing the gene expression profiles? You were so caffeinated you started explaining statistical significance to the janitor.”

I laughed, the sound echoing slightly in the spacious lab of BioHQ. “How could I forget? He seemed genuinely interested...or maybe he was just too polite to walk away.”

“Probably the latter.” Ellie chuckled, shaking her head. “But that’s what I love about working with you. No matter how intense it gets, you find a way to make it fun.”

“Likewise.” My heart swelled with affection for my friend. “We’ve had some crazy times in this lab, haven’t we?”

“Definitely,” she agreed, her smile infectious. “And there’s more to come. Let’s make some breakthroughs today, okay?”

“Absolutely.” I nodded, my determination reigniting. We settled into the rhythm of a workday, and I knew we still needed to talk, but for now, this felt good.

It felt right and familiar all at once.

The hum of centrifuges blended with the low murmur of data analysis software running in the background. I snapped on a fresh pair of gloves and joined Ellie at the cell culture hood. “Ready to see if our axonal projections have embraced the tripling model?” I asked.

“More than ready,” Ellie replied, her fingers deftly preparing the slides. “If we’ve managed to replicate the triple helix without compromising the integrity of the neurite outgrowth, we’ll be on the brink of a breakthrough.”

“Imagine the implications for regenerative medicine,” I mused, peering into the microscope. The delicate dance of genetic modification always left me in awe. “Repairing spinal cord injuries, reversing neural degeneration...”

“Exactly,” she said, eyes intent on the screen displaying our latest gene sequencing results. “But it’s this damn vector integration efficiency that’s been giving us grief. If we can’t stabilize it...”

“Then we’ll keep pushing until we do,” I asserted. “We’re not the type to back down from a challenge.”

Ellie glanced at me, a smirk playing at her lips. “Remember when Dr. Kline said we were too ambitious trying to tackle the axonal tripling? Said it was like reaching for the stars.”

“I’m glad Dr. White replaced him,” I said.

“Yeah, same. Jade, we’ve gone through more iterations of this project than I’ve had hot dinners,” Ellie said, flipping through pages of dense data. “But here we are, still tweaking, still testing...”

“Because that’s what it takes,” I finished for her. “And one of these days, we’re going to nail it. All those nights poring over genomic databases and protein folding simulations will pay off.”

“Until then, it’s back to the drawing board.”

But we didn’t talk about anything other than the work, and while there was a lot to discuss, we obviously had to sort...what had happened between us out. I felt terrible that I’d just left in the middle of the night when she had offered to help me, and she had been the one to warn me about Dante from the beginning.

“Ellie,” I began, my voice slicing through the chill, “I’m sorry. Can we talk—”

She paused, her fingers hovering mid-air before they resumed their dance across the

keys. “No, Jade. Just...preoccupied, I guess.”

“Because if it’s about when I left—“

“Let’s not,” she cut in, her gaze fixed on the monitor. A frown creased her forehead, as impenetrable as the data she scrutinized.

I bit back a sigh, turning to recalibrate the spectrometer. The precision required for the task usually soothed me, but today it was just another source of frustration. Despite the layers of protective gear separating us, I could feel the distance between Ellie and me more acutely than ever. It was like trying to bridge a gap with a frayed thread.

“Hey,” I tried again after a stretch of strained quiet, “how about coffee later? My treat.” I forced a casualness into my tone I didn’t quite feel.

Ellie glanced up, the surprise evident in the slight raise of her eyebrows. “Coffee?”

“Yeah,” I persisted, pushing past the tightness in my chest. “There’s a new place that opened up by the lab—heard their espresso is top-notch. We could use a break, don’t you think?”

She hesitated, weighing my words, then offered a nod that held more resignation than warmth. “Sure, Jade. Coffee sounds good.”

“Great.” The relief was genuine, even if the smile I mustered felt brittle. “It’s a date.”

A few hours later, we wrapped up our tasks with mechanical efficiency, the energy in the room shifting from tense to tentative. As we shed our lab coats, the weight of unspoken apologies hung heavy in the air.

Exiting BioHQ, the blast of winter chilled my skin, but the prospect of mending fences with Ellie warmed something within me. I tucked my hands into my coat pockets, turned my face against the biting wind, and led the way towards the promise of caffeine and conversation.

The clink of porcelain mugs on the wooden tabletop punctuated the silence that had settled between us. The steam from our coffees curled up, disappearing into the crisp air of the cozy cafe.

“Ellie,” I began, my voice a little more than a murmur as I wrapped my fingers around the warmth of my cup. “I’m sorry. For everything. For not being there when you needed me.” My words tumbled out, rushed and sincere.

She bit her lip, a gesture I knew meant she was wrestling with her thoughts. Finally, she looked up from her own coffee, her brown eyes clouded. “Jade, I... I’ve felt lost. You ghosting me, it hurt more than I expected.”

My heart sank. The distance between us had been my doing, fear and uncertainty driving me to pull away from one of the few anchors I had in this storm of life. Ellie’s friendship was a lifeline, and I had nearly severed it with my silence.

“Ellie, I never meant to...” I started, but she lifted a hand, stopping me mid-apology.

“Look, I know that things were complicated. But you could have talked to me. Like how you talked to me at the clinic.”

“I didn’t want to put you in a position like that again.”

“So you ran?” she asked. “You didn’t even tell me that you were going to run.”

“Well, yeah...”

She picked her head up to look at me, and for the first time, I noticed that there were tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Jade. Truly.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for.”

Ellie’s eyes were brimming with tears, spilling over and tracing silent paths down her cheeks. “Yes, there is,” she said. “Jade, there’s something I need to tell you. And I’m going to ask you to sit here and wait for me to finish what I need to say before you react. Just...give me five minutes, okay?”

I nodded, the throat at the pit of my stomach tightening. “Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, okay.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: Dante

The door to Enzo's study clicked shut behind me, sealing off the brisk chill of the early evening. Marco, perched on one of the chairs, a leg dangling carelessly over the armrest, was the first to catch my eye. He offered a half-hearted smirk, but I barely registered it. My thoughts were a whirlwind, all centering around Jade—her smile, her strength, the child she carried that was half mine.

The fact that she hadn't given me an answer.

The fact that she hadn't reached out to me.

"Sit down, Dante," Enzo's voice sliced through my preoccupation like a knife through silk. It wasn't a request; it was an order. The old man sat behind his desk, his face set in that familiar stern mask that spelled out business—and not the kind we declared on our taxes.

I didn't sit. Not yet. Instead, I studied him for a moment, trying to read the lines etched into his weathered face. Maybe I was looking for a hint of softness, some fatherly concern that mirrored my own fears for the future. But if it was there, it was buried deep beneath years of ruthlessness and command.

"Fine," I muttered and finally took a seat across from him, feeling the leather of the chair grip my suit pants. Marco quit his fidgeting, sensing the shift in the room's atmosphere. We were about to dive into deep waters, and nobody wanted to be the one who couldn't swim.

“I called you here to talk about the RICO case. The FBI and the NYPD are circling us like vultures. What are we doing about it?”

I couldn't sit still. The words “RICO case” fell from Enzo's lips, and I was on my feet again, pacing the room like a caged animal. My father's study suddenly felt too small, the walls inching closer with every sentence he spoke about wiretaps, laundered money, and potential sentences.

“An FBI agent paid us a visit.” Enzo's voice cut through the thick tension in the air. “Either of you want to tell me why?”

My brother Marco shifted uneasily in his seat. I stopped mid-stride, my heart hammering against my chest—not for myself, but for Jade. What if they'd been watching her too?

I didn't tell him about Detective Rodriguez. There was no need for him to know.

“Nothing's come my way, Dad,” I said, my voice steady despite the storm inside. “Been too caught up with...” I trailed off, not wanting to bring Jade into this—into anything that could touch the Moretti name.

“Marco?” Enzo's gaze was fixed on my younger brother, who looked like he might bolt from the room any second.

“No, no visits,” Marco replied, his voice a notch too high. “I've been...out of the loop.”

“Out of the loop.” Enzo repeated the phrase slowly, letting it hang in the air before dismissing it with a wave of his hand. “We can't afford ignorance—not now.”

I leaned against the mahogany bookshelf, trying to calm the storm of thoughts

churning through my mind. Outside, the early evening light was fading, casting shadows across the leather-bound volumes that lined Enzo's study. My father remained seated behind his desk, a fortress of authority in an ever-shifting landscape.

"Legal fronts," I said, focusing on the matter at hand, "are tight. Our casinos and clubs are clean." I needed him to understand where my efforts had been—where they had to be, for Jade and our child.

"Good." Enzo nodded, his dark eyes sharp as obsidian. "And Marco?" Enzo's gaze shifted, sliding toward my brother with the subtlety of a knife's edge.

Marco looked like a deer caught in headlights, his usually slick composure slipping away under our father's scrutiny. "Uh, well," he stuttered, the words tumbling out awkwardly, "I thought the plan was to keep a low profile, you know? With the heat on us."

"Low profile doesn't mean stop," Enzo shot back, his voice a quiet rumble of thunder. "Money flows, even when the streets go quiet."

"Understood, Dad," Marco finally managed, his usual bravado reduced to a mere whisper in the grandeur of Enzo's study.

Enzo nodded, seemingly satisfied, but I knew better than to think this was over. Making money was one thing; protecting what was mine was another. I straightened, ready to brace against the coming storm. For Jade, for our future, I'd face down anything—even the empire that bore my name.

The chair groaned under my shifting weight as I broke the silence. "I'm thinking of transferring my share of stocks to Jade at BioHQ," I said, tossing a bomb into the conversation that could either clear the path or detonate everything we'd built.

Enzo's eyebrow arched, a silent question mark etched on his face. "You think that's wise?" he asked, his voice threading through the air like a warning.

"Whether I give her the shares or not, our child will be a Moretti," I countered, leaning forward, my elbows digging into my knees. "It's a solid move. Jade is sharp—she'll handle it."

"BioHQ isn't a toy for your mistress," Enzo replied, his tone sharpening. "It's an empire we're building."

"Jade is not my mistress," I said. "She's my future wife."

"Does she know that?" My dad asked.

The air in Enzo's study clung to my skin, thick with the must of old books and the sharp tang of skepticism. I stood my ground, eyes fixed on the man who'd ruled our empire with an iron fist, now raising the barriers to my escape plan.

"Let me be clear, Dante," Enzo began, each syllable a calculated drop into the stillness between us. "Your sentimentality could crack the foundations we've bled for. You're not seeing the whole board."

"Seeing it? I'm living it." My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails biting into palms. "It's not just sentiment. It's strategy. With Jade, we bring BioHQ closer. We secure a future for—"

"Or we invite scrutiny we can't afford," he cut in, his voice cool as the steel of his gaze. "You stake too much on this...emotional gamble."

Frustration knotted in my chest, tight and suffocating. But beneath it, the ember of resolve burned hotter, searing my resolve into something unbreakable. This was

about more than money or power. This was about Jade, our child, and the life I yearned to offer them—one far from the blood-stained legacy of the Moretti name.

“Jade isn’t a liability,” I shot back, my voice low but firm. “She’s brilliant. If anyone can navigate this, she can.”

“Brilliance doesn’t shield you from a bullet, son.”

“Well, it could shield my child, so...”

“Don’t rush into this. Let me do my due diligence before you transfer anything over to her,” he said. “Marco, start collecting payments again. You’re both dismissed. And go see your mother, will you? Both of you have been shot and you haven’t spent more than an evening with her. How do you think she’s dealing with this?”

With that, Enzo leaned back in his chair, signaling the end of the meeting. The conversation swirled in my mind, a storm of possibilities and challenges. I knew my father would take every step necessary to investigate Jade before letting her anywhere near the Moretti empire, and Marco would be back under pressure trying to balance loyalty and law breaking.

Standing up from the chair, I nodded at my father, “Understood,” and turned towards Marco. His face had lost some of its usual color, looking like he wanted to disappear into the ground. We both knew our mother was another battlefield we hadn’t yet won; our recent wounds were a constant reminder of the world we were born into—a world we couldn’t escape without consequences.

But our mother at least knew what she had been getting into.

Did Jade?

Chapter Twenty-Four: Jade

I didn't like seeing Ellie like this.

I didn't think I had ever seen her cry...and she wasn't stopping. This was disturbing.

Ellie's hand shook as she lifted the cup to her lips, a futile attempt to disguise the tears that betrayed her composure. We sat in the coffee shop, the early evening winter sky darkening outside, the bustle of the city a muted soundtrack to our private drama.

"Jade," she started, voice cracking as another tear escaped, tracing a path down her cheek. "I swear, I never meant for any of this to happen."

The sight was jarring—Ellie, the rock-solid scientist with a quip for every crisis, unraveling before me. Her usually precise and jovial banter was absent, replaced by the raw edge of vulnerability. The Ellie I knew, who navigated the complexities of BioHQ with unwavering logic, seemed like a distant memory.

I reached across the table, my hand hovering in hesitation, unsure of how to comfort her without knowing the cause of her distress. The warmth of the coffee shop did little to thaw the chill that had settled between us, the scent of roasted beans and the soft murmur of conversations only emphasizing the silence that loomed.

"Talk to me," I urged, keeping my tone even, fighting the storm of emotions already brewing within.

The clatter of coffee cups and the low hum of conversations became a distant blur as I

focused on Ellie. Her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, the corners of her mouth twitching in a failed attempt at composure. My heart thudded in response to her obvious pain.

“Ellie, what’s going on?” The question came out sharper than I intended, my concern breaching the walls of patience.

She bit her lip, hesitating, before the dam broke. “Jade, it’s about the Morettis.” Her words stumbled out between shallow breaths. “It’s what I need to apologize to you about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Enzo Moretti? As in...” I trailed off, unable to mask my disbelief. My thoughts raced—connections forming, theories crafting, yet nothing made sense. Why would Ellie be involved with the likes of him?

“Listen,” she urged, her gaze imploring me to hear her out. “He asked me to do something, something I’m not proud of.”

“What did he ask you to do, Ellie?” My voice was low, demanding, every muscle in my body tensed for an answer I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear.

“Keep tabs on you, Jade.” Her voice quivered, a tremor of guilt flashing in her brown eyes. “For Dante. Because he...he has taken an interest in you.”

A cold laugh escaped my lips, incredulous. “You accepted a job to spy on me? For a crime lord?”

“He offered BioHQ funding, enough to secure our research for years.” Ellie’s plea hung heavy between us, her hands now clasped tightly in her lap. “It was a lot of

money, Jade. I thought...I thought it would help us.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “I promise you I wasn’t going to get up and walk away, so talk me through this.”

“It started the day of the gala,” she said, looking away from me. “I got home late and got a phone call to my landline, which was weird, because no one uses that. Anyway, I picked up, thinking it was some emergency. And it was this guy, and he said that he wanted to talk about funding BioHQ. Big seed money.”

I took a sip of my cooling coffee, waiting for her to finish.

“His voice had this...urgency, like every word was laced with silent commands,” Ellie said, eyes darting to meet mine before skittering away. “He didn’t introduce himself at first, just dove straight into what he wanted.”

I leaned forward, my heart pounding against the walls of my chest. “And when you asked who he was?”

Ellie’s lips parted, then pressed together as if sealing away the gravity of the name. “He said it didn’t matter.” Her voice cracked, but she pushed on. “Like his identity was just a trivial detail compared to what he was offering—commanding.”

“Did you question him further?” My words were tight, clipped with the strain of keeping my emotions in check.

“Of course, I did,” Ellie whispered, folding in on herself. “I asked why he hadn’t contacted Dr. White directly, why me?”

“And?” The single word hung between us, dense with demand.

“He said the donation depended on my involvement. That it was non-negotiable.” Ellie’s eyes met mine again, and this time they held a plea for understanding. “Jade, the amount he offered—it could fund our research for years. Keep us all secure.”

Silence enveloped us, save for the soft hum of conversation and the occasional clink of porcelain. It was a cruel symphony, one that underscored the depth of Ellie’s decision—the weight of her secret pact with Enzo Moretti.

“Specifically you,” I murmured, the truth hitting me hard.

“Well, that became clear later,” she said. “After I realized who it was.”

“Right.”

Ellie’s voice quivered like a leaf caught in the wind. “It was Enzo Moretti on the phone,” she continued, words tumbling out as if they burned her tongue. “I looked him up immediately—rumors are swirling about his family’s...ventures, but nothing concrete.”

“Right. The rumors you warned me about.”

“Nothing that convinced me they’re criminals,” Ellie said, pushing her coffee away. She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to barely above a whisper. “And he had a job for me.”

“Job? What kind of job does a man like that offer you?” I prodded, my hands clenched under the table.

“To keep an eye on you,” Ellie said, and it felt like the floor fell away beneath me. “Jade Bentley. Because, apparently, his son Dante had taken an interest...well, you know the rest. You two were never supposed to get together, you were never

supposed to hook up. You were definitely not supposed to get pregnant.”

I blinked, struggling to process her words. The aroma of coffee and the gentle murmur of conversation around us suddenly seemed distant. Ellie was watching me closely, her eyes searching mine for a reaction.

“And Enzo already knew Dante had taken an interest in me?” My voice rose despite my efforts to control it. I saw a couple at the next table glance our way before returning to their own world of lattes and laptops.

“Exactly.” Ellie’s fingers fiddled with the hem of her lab coat, a telltale sign of her anxiety. “He was adamant about it, Jade. It’s unnerving, I know.”

“You think?”

“So I agreed,” she said. “I thought it would be easy. I thought I could warn you off Dante, but you weren’t listening, so...and Enzo, well, he offered a sum significant enough to ensure our research could continue without fear of budget cuts. You know how desperate we were for funding at the time. The acquisition came through so quickly, like, you can’t think it was fully above board.”

“Don’t do that. I’m pissed off at Dante, but you’re not off the hook. You agreed to spy with me for money?”

“Well, after the unsettling phone call, it felt like hitting two birds with one stone. I’d get the funding and I’d look after you all at once.”

“Right. You did this because you’re a good friend.”

“Jade, please understand...” Her hand reached out towards mine, but I pulled away, leaving her fingers grasping at empty air.

“Understand what? That you sold me out?” The harshness of my own words was a slap in the face to the camaraderie we had shared.

“Sold you out? No, Jade, it’s not like that.” Ellie’s voice was strained, frayed at the edges like a rope close to snapping. It was clear she was grappling with the magnitude of her choice. “I did this to protect us. To protect our work.”

I sat rigid, my fingers curled into fists beneath the table. Each muscle in my body was coiled tight, a spring wound up to its breaking point as I processed Ellie’s words. The betrayal stung sharper than any physical pain could.

“Jade, I’m so sorry,” Ellie whispered across the small expanse that now felt like miles. Her brown eyes were brimming with regret, her hands trembled slightly as she clutched her coffee cup like a lifeline. “It wasn’t an easy choice, but—“

“Easy?” My voice came out more venomous than I intended, my anger boiling over. “What part of this is easy, Ellie? You’re monitoring me for a crime lord!”

“You’re having a baby with his son! You can’t be that angry at me for that.”

“At least when I slept with Dante, I knew what I was getting into,” I scoffed.

Ellie’s expression fell, a flash of hurt momentarily washing away the sheen of guilt in her eyes. And for a moment, I regretted my harsh words, the biting tone that had managed to slice through the tension between us. But the sting of betrayal was still fresh, a raw wound that refused to be ignored.

“You don’t understand, Jade. It wasn’t about spying on you,” Ellie suddenly spoke up, her eyes filled with a fiery determination that I hadn’t seen since our university debate competitions. “I thought I could protect you. Protect you from becoming collateral in whatever dangerous game the Morettis are playing.”

“Wait. Did Enzo buy you all that shit that you had at your apartment? He was paying you too, right? Not just funding the lab, but paying you personally.”

“Yes, but...well, he’s Enzo Moretti. How could I refuse?”

“I see,” my dry response ricocheted off the walls, echoing back at us. A bitter laugh escaped me and Ellie winced as though I’d struck her. “Unbelievable.”

“But Jade, it...” Ellie began, but I waved her off.

“No, save it.” I said firmly, standing abruptly and shoving the chair back. It scrapped harshly against the floor and several heads turned our way. Ignoring the curious glances, I grabbed my coat from the back of the chair.

“Where are you going?” Ellie asked, but I hardly heard her.

“I can share my location with you and you can send it to Dante’s dad. How does that sound?”

Before Ellie could muster a reply, I was already at the door, the cold wind hitting my face like a splash of icy water. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, my mind swirled with thoughts and emotions. The city buzzed around me, oblivious to my turmoil.

“Jade!” Ellie called out behind me, but I quickened my pace, thrusting my hands into the pockets of my coat and blending with the teeming crowd. The trust we had once shared felt like shards of shattered glass underfoot — sharp, piercing, impossible to piece back together.

As I disappeared into the pulsating rhythm of New York City, a single thought echoed through my mind: Enzo Moretti had bought a spy in our midst, and that spy was my closest friend.

What else didn't I know?

Chapter Twenty-Five: Jade

I didn't want to go home.

I found myself in Dante's lobby...wishing I had gone home.

But I stood there, the lobby of Dante's penthouse swallowing me in its opulence. The early evening light filtered through the high windows, but the glow did nothing to ease the chill wrapped around my heart. I was pregnant, and the father...well, he was why I was here, caught in a web I never saw coming.

My hands rested on my stomach. I thought about Ellie, my confidant turned Judas, sharing my secrets with Enzo Moretti like they were cheap currency. Betrayal stung sharper than the winter air outside.

"Evening, Dr. Bentley," the doorman said, tipping his cap. His familiar, polite nod couldn't mask the surprise in his eyes, seeing me stand there lost in thought.

"Evening," I managed, my voice a ghost of itself.

His gaze lingered a moment too long, and that's when the weight of my discovery about Ellie hit full force. Maybe I should turn back, leave before Dante could arrive and wrap me up in his world again. But my feet felt glued to the marble floor; escape wasn't as simple as willing it.

Clearly.

The marble beneath my heels felt as cold as the realization gnawing at me; I had nowhere else to go. Then, he was there. Dante Moretti stepped in from the biting chill of the early evening, the closing door a soft click in the vast lobby.

“Jade,” he said, his voice a low thrum that always seemed to vibrate right through me. He paused just inside, his coat dusted with the beginnings of frost, dark hair slightly disheveled from the winter wind. There was no mistaking the immediate shift in his expression—from the commanding mafia don to the man who watched me with eyes that didn’t miss a thing.

“Hey,” I replied, trying to sound casual, but my voice betrayed me with its shaky delivery.

Dante closed the distance between us in a few measured strides, his presence as impactful as always. “What’s wrong?” he asked, concern etching lines around those intense eyes that now studied me with a softness reserved for our private moments.

I shrugged, an attempt to deflect his scrutiny. “It’s nothing.”

“Jade.” His hand reached out, resting lightly on my arm, a silent offer of support I hadn’t realized I craved. “Talk to me.”

His touch sparked something raw within me, and I had to remind myself to breathe. The warmth of his hand seeped through the fabric of my blouse, grounding me despite the chaos in my head. In that moment, I wished I could tell him everything. But words were dangerous things—especially when truths could cost you everything...and when the doorman could easily overhear us.

The chill from the marble floors of the lobby seeped through my soles, but it was nothing compared to the ice in my veins. I glanced at my reflection in the polished surface of the elevator doors—a pale ghost of myself—and the weight of everything

bore down on me.

“Jade?” Dante’s voice cut through the fog in my head. “What can I do?”

Before I could form a single coherent thought, the dam inside me cracked. Tears welled up, and with them came an avalanche of despair and betrayal. My knees buckled, and everything inside me shattered into sharp, jagged pieces.

Dante caught me as I fell, his arms encircling me in a hold that was both a fortress and a cradle. For a brief, mad moment, I allowed myself to lean into the strength of his embrace, his warmth a stark opposite to the cold dread that had taken root in my heart.

“Please,” I managed to choke out between sobs, clinging to him like he was the only solid thing in a world gone mad. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Shh,” he murmured, his breath warm against my ear. Fingers gentle yet firm stroked my back, soothing the tremors that racked my body. “I’m here, Jade. Tell me how I can help you.” His words were simple, direct, but they carried the weight of an oath.

Looking up into his eyes, I saw not the feared mob boss, but the man—Dante—who’d shown me unexpected kindnesses even as we navigated this impossible situation. And for one reckless heartbeat, I believed he might just be my salvation.

But the moment Dante asked how he could help, a labyrinth of emotions tightened around my chest. My lips parted, but words failed me. The truth was, I didn’t have a clue what I needed.

“Everything’s just so messed up,” I confessed, my voice barely louder than the hum of New York City outside the lobby’s glass doors. “I don’t even know where to

start.”

Dante’s gaze searched mine, his expression etched with concern. “Let’s not worry about all that right now,” he said firmly, his voice a low rumble that seemed to resonate through the chaos of my thoughts. “Come upstairs. We’ll drown out the world with the worst reality TV you can find and stuff our faces with whatever junk food you’re craving.”

His suggestion should’ve been laughable, trivial even, considering the gravity of everything else. And yet, there was an earnestness in his eyes, a steadfast resolve to pull me out of this spiral, if only for a night.

I stepped back from Dante’s chest, the warmth of his embrace still lingering like an afterimage against my skin. My eyes flicked upward, catching the low light that gilded the edges of his dark hair, turning it into a soft halo of disarray.

“Okay,” I said, letting a small, incredulous laugh bubble up from somewhere deep inside. The corner of my mouth quirked upward, a reluctant smile acknowledging the absurdity of finding solace in such a simple plan. “Let’s do it. Junk food and reality TV.”

“Perfect,” Dante replied, the trace of a smile tugging at his lips as if he’d scored a small victory against the gravity of our world.

And right then, everything felt like it was going to be okay.

I settled into the plush cushions of Dante’s couch, a plate of chicken wings balanced precariously on my lap. The TV flickered with the over-saturated blues and greens of some tropical island—a stark contrast to the snowy cityscape outside his penthouse

windows. I took a bite, letting the spice linger on my tongue as I tried to shake off the remnants of my fight with Ellie.

“Look at this guy,” Dante said, gesturing at the screen. “He’s gonna get voted out today for sure.”

I laughed, “Can’t say I’ll feel sorry for him. He’s been stirring up trouble since day one.”

Dante’s deep chuckle echoed in the room, a warm sound that brought an unexpected comfort. He switched his gaze from the TV to me, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Is this how you relax?” I asked him, nudging his side with my elbow. I was trying to lighten the mood before we delved into the heavy conversation that was surely coming.

He shrugged nonchalantly before stealing a quick glance at me. “In your company? Definitely.”

“Oh, shit, I think you were right,” I said. “He’s getting voted out.”

“I’m psychic.”

I smirked at his assertion, shaking my head as the island’s host read out the doomed contestant’s name. The man’s face dropped into a shocked grimace, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. On any other day, this would be just a mindless distraction. Today, it felt like a lifeline.

Laughter faded as the last credits rolled across the TV screen, the room now filled with the subtle hum of the city that never sleeps. The playful energy from our banter

still lingered in the air, a welcomed reprieve from the day's earlier discord. I leaned back into the couch, my fingers lightly coated with the remnants of spicy sauce, and sighed contentedly.

"Jade," Dante said, his voice suddenly serious, cutting through the lighthearted atmosphere like a swift change in weather. "Are you ready to talk about it?"

His question hung between us, charged with an anticipation that made my heart skip its steady rhythm. Everything around us seemed to fall silent, waiting for me to breach the walls I'd so carefully built. His dark eyes held mine, gentle yet probing, silently urging me to open up.

I nodded slowly, setting down the half-eaten wing onto a plate. It felt like stepping off a cliff, not knowing if there was something to catch me at the bottom. My voice, usually so sure and steady, wavered slightly as I spoke.

"Ellie has been spying on me...for Enzo," I confessed, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. The vulnerability I felt was unfamiliar, unwelcome. It gnawed at the edges of my calm demeanor, exposing the raw concern beneath.

"Wait. Enzo, as in, my dad?"

I nodded.

"Everything I thought we had, every moment with her, it feels tainted now." I reached for a napkin, wiping away the vestiges of spice from my hand, wishing I could do the same with the sting of betrayal. "I don't understand how she could do this to me, Dante. To us."

The silence in Dante's penthouse swallowed my admission, heavy with the weight of betrayal. I watched him closely, half-expecting the brooding intensity that often

accompanied our discussions of the darker facets of our lives. Instead, his reaction came like a soft exhale, a breeze rather than the storm I had braced for.

“Enzo,” he said simply, his voice low but devoid of the edge I anticipated. There was no shift in his posture, no clenching of fists or jaw. His demeanor remained as calm as the quiet evening around us, his dark eyes still fixed on mine with an understanding that caught me off guard. “How long?”

“Since the start, I think,” I murmured, feeling a strange sense of comfort in his acceptance of the harsh reality.

Dante nodded slowly, the corners of his lips turning down in a frown—not of anger, but of contemplation. “Betrayal is like a shadow here, Jade. It lurks in every corner, under every whispered promise.”

I pulled my legs up onto the couch, wrapping my arms around them. “Why though? Why is it so common in our...your world?” The question slipped out, fueled by a mix of curiosity and the ache of fresh wounds.

“Power,” Dante responded without hesitation, his gaze shifting to the skyline visible through the expansive windows. “In this life, trust is currency, and everyone’s trying to be rich. People will do anything for a piece of that power, even if it means turning on their own.”

“Is that all we are then? Just pieces on a board to you people?” I couldn’t help the bitterness that seeped into my tone.

“Jade,” he turned back to me, his expression softening. “Not to me. You’re not just another piece on the board. You never were. You never have been and you never will be.”

“I...”

Dante’s fingers—which were, weirdly, immaculately clean—touched mine. “Jade,” he said, and I could hear the weight of unspoken vows in his voice. “I need you to understand something.” His gaze locked with mine, as steady and unwavering as the man himself. “There’s no betrayal in my heart when it comes to you or our child. You both are my future, my priority. And I’ll protect that with everything I am.”

I studied Dante’s face, searching for any hint of deception. But all I found was the raw honesty of a man who had seen too much, yet still dared to hope. “I believe you,” I replied, the words tumbling out with a certainty that surprised even me. It wasn’t just his assurance that convinced me; it was the shared experiences, the vulnerability we’d glimpsed in each other.

Dante’s thumb traced the line of my jaw, a silent question lingering in the space between us. The heat from his touch seemed to travel directly to my core, and I leaned into him instinctively, seeking the warmth that only he could provide.

“Kiss me,” I whispered, no longer able to resist the pull of desire that Dante ignited within me.

He smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

Chapter Twenty-Six: Dante

The penthouse was silent except for the sound of our uneven breaths. Jade sat before me, her eyes red-rimmed, her dark waves a mess around her face. “Kiss me,” she had said.

I reached for her without hesitation, pulling her close. My lips met hers, and I couldn’t help but notice the unexpected taste of fried chicken lingering on them. A chuckle escaped me at the absurdity, but it was swallowed by the depth of Jade’s kiss. She leaned into me, her hands gripping the fabric of my shirt as if anchoring herself in the storm of emotions she was weathering. And just like that, the laughter died, replaced by a hunger that was all too serious.

“Jade,” I murmured against her lips, but she silenced any further words with another demanding kiss, deepening the connection between us until nothing else existed.

Jade’s breath hitched as our mouths melded together, her fingers threading through my hair, tugging me closer. The taste of fried chicken was a distant memory now, replaced by the intoxicating flavor of her lipstick and the faintest hint of her own natural essence.

“Jade,” I groaned, the sound rumbling from deep within my chest as desire coiled tightly around my spine.

Her response was not in words but in action, her tongue tracing the seam of my lips with an eager urgency that belied the composure she wielded like armor. There was a rawness in this kiss, a feral need that resonated with the part of me accustomed to

taking what I wanted. But with Jade, it was different.

With Jade, everything was different.

The penthouse seemed to shrink around us, the air charged with an energy that buzzed beneath my skin. Our breaths mingled, quick and ragged, as the kiss intensified, transcending the boundaries of mere physical pleasure.

“Jade,” I tried again, my voice hoarse, but she cut me off with a deeper kiss, her body pressing insistently against mine. Her hands roamed over my shoulders, down my chest, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

She pulled back just enough to look into my eyes, her gaze fierce, almost defiant. “I’m going to ride you,” she declared, her voice a whisper that nonetheless echoed with resolve.

“Jade, you don’t need to do anything,” I said, even as every fiber of my being screamed for her to follow through on her claim. In this moment, with her standing before me, there was nothing more I craved than to lose myself in her.

I was still reeling from the heated exchange, the gap between our lips pulsing with an untamed energy, when Jade’s voice cut through the thick air of the penthouse. “I’m done doing things just because I need to do them,” she said, her breaths coming fast and determined. “Tonight, I’m going to fuck you hard.”

Her words hit me like a freight train, lust and surprise colliding in a heady rush. I’d seen many sides of Jade—the scientist, the survivor, the enigma—but this fervent declaration peeled back yet another layer, revealing a raw, primal aspect of her I hadn’t known existed.

Without further argument, I reclined into the plush cushions of the couch, my body

language surrendering to her command. The world outside the towering glass walls of my penthouse might as well have ceased to exist; all that mattered now was the woman who stood before me, ready to claim control in a way that only someone like her could—a blend of precision and passion.

“Let me help you with these,” I offered, my fingers hooking under the waistband of her leggings, which seemed far too confining for the scene that was about to unfold. She lifted one leg, then the other, allowing me to peel the garment down her thighs, past her knees, until they were nothing more than a discarded whisper on the floor.

I looked up, taking in the sight of Jade standing in front of me, her body a symphony of curves and shadows in the low light of the penthouse. My heart pounded in my chest, anticipation humming through my veins like an electric charge. Without a word, she guided herself onto my lap, her lips finding mine once again in a kiss that was as soft as it was intense.

She reached down to undo my buttons, her fingers deft and sure, her eyes never leaving mine. Her touch sent jolts of electricity through my body, each one building on the last until I was nothing more than a bundle of pure, desperate want.

“Jade,” I murmured into the crook of her neck, my hands finding purchase on the curves of her hips as she pushed me back onto the couch.

She didn’t reply with words. Instead, she guided me into her, her body shuddering as she took me in.

I threw my head back. “Fuck,” I said.

Her body enveloped mine, her warm depth swallowing me whole. I gasped against her lips as she started to move, each movement of our bodies stirring a slow-building fire in the pit of my belly.

I wanted her to move, but she paused, her eyes searching mine. “This is what you want?” she asked in a voice that was breathless but firm.

“Yes,” I choked out, my gaze never wavering from hers, my hands on her waist. “God, yes.”

Jade’s eyes glinted in the dim light of the penthouse, holding my gaze as she began to move. Slowly, at first, easing herself into a rhythm that made me dig my fingers into her hips, already desperate for more.

I watched, enraptured, as Jade bit her lip, her dark waves falling around her face as she moved up and down, riding me with a fervor that was as intoxicating as it was unexpected. She was a vision, raw and beautiful in her boldness—a hint of the wildness that lurked beneath her composed exterior.

“Dante,” she gasped out my name. The sound of it on her lips sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my core.

“Fuck, Jade.” I groaned through gritted teeth, overwhelmed by the sensation of her body moving against mine. Her climax was building; I could see it in the way her eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks, in the pink flush spreading across her chest.

“Harder,” she commanded breathlessly, digging her nails into the muscles of my chest. My response was immediate and instinctive; I thrust up into her with all the force I could muster.

She gasped, a high, keening sound that echoed through the penthouse, cutting through the heavy silence. I gripped her hips as she rode me harder and she gasped, a high, keening sound that echoed through the penthouse, cutting through the heavy silence. I gripped her hips as she rode me harder and faster, her body bouncing in my lap, her gasps and moans filling the air. Her head fell back in ecstasy, her eyes closed as

she lost herself in the overwhelming pleasure.

“Dante,” she moaned, her voice shaky yet demanding. Her pussy tightened around me, her nails digging into my shoulders as her climax washed over her.

Her body shook with the intensity of her orgasm, her hot insides pulsing and contracting around me. I watched as she writhed above me, my name a whisper on her lips. Her body was a marvel, every inch of her exposed to my gaze.

From the swell of her breasts to the slight curve of her belly that hinted at the life growing within her, she was beautiful in the purest and most raw sense.

My own climax roared through me a moment later, a tempest unleashed after being held back for too long. Jade’s eyes snapped open as she felt me shudder beneath her, my grip tightening on her hips as I buried myself deeper inside of her. She whispered my name again, this time softer, quivering with the aftershocks of our mutual climax.

We stayed like that for a while, tangled together on the floor of my penthouse. My heart hammered against my chest as I tried to regain control of my senses. I could feel Jade’s quickened heartbeat against mine, matching rhythm with my own.

I kissed her forehead. “Let’s go to bed,” I said.

“I’m not tired.”

I laughed. “You seem tired.”

“I’m not sleepy,” she corrected, a playful smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

I laughed again. “Okay,” I said. “Like I said, let’s go to bed. I’m pretty sure I can take care of that.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Dante

I took her to bed, placing her softly on the mattress and easing myself beside her. Jade's eyes followed me with a curious, excited gleam, her breaths still coming in shuddering gasps. I brushed errant curls from her flushed face, watching as she shifted closer to me, her body curling against mine like a perfect puzzle piece.

"Where did that come from?" I traced lazy circles on her bare shoulder, my eyes never leaving her face.

Jade giggled lowly, pulling the sheet closer to her chest as she propped herself up on one elbow. "Desperation makes you do strange things," she admitted, a distant look clouding her usually bright eyes.

"Hey. You can always fuck me," I said. "You don't even have to ask."

She furrowed her brow. "I'm going to ask."

"I'd expect nothing less," I responded, my fingers continuing their soft journey across her skin. "Doesn't mean I won't say yes every time."

A soft laugh escaped her lips as she traced a finger down my bare chest. "I suppose that's reassuring to hear," she murmured, her gaze flickering up to meet mine in the dim light of the bedroom.

"Like I expect you'll say yes if I say I'm desperate to go down on your right now."

Her eyes widened at my words, her lips parting slightly in surprise. For a brief moment, she was silent, as if weighing my offer. Then, with a mischievous glint in her eyes, she moved away from me, lying back against the sheets while pulling me along with her.

“Prove it,” she challenged, her voice steady despite the blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Wait. Take your top off first.”

“Only if you take your shirt off too,” she countered, her voice a tantalizing mix of mischief and encouragement.

With a smirk playing on my lips, I took hold of the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head before tossing it to the side. Jade’s eyes were instantly on me, her gaze raking across my exposed chest. The intensity of her stare sent a jolt of desire coursing through me, but I remained patient, savoring the anticipation etched across her face.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I moved quickly, kissing down her neck, her chest, until I was nestled between her thighs. I pressed my lips against her, relishing in the sharp intake of breath she let out.

Matching my actions, Jade sat upright, crossing her arms before tugging her shirt over her head. Her dark waves tumbled down around her shoulders as she shook her hair out, offering me an unimpeded view of her bare chest. My breath hitched in my throat at the sight. Even in the dim light of the penthouse suite, she was stunningly beautiful.

“Well then,” I murmured, my voice thick with desire. “Let’s proceed.”

Without further ado, I leaned in, pressing my lips to the curve of her neck. Her body arched into mine as I trailed kisses down her collarbone and toward her breasts. She gasped as my mouth found one nipple while my hand massaged the other, a moan escaping her lips as I flicked my tongue against the sensitive peak.

I took my time, memorizing the taste of her, the way she bucked and writhed beneath me, the sweet, sinful sounds she made as my mouth moved lower. Her belly was warm under my lips.

I paused there for a moment, pressing a soft kiss to her skin before continuing on my path. Jade's breath hitched as I moved lower still, my lips brushing the inside of her thigh.

"Dante," she breathed, her fingers threading through my hair in anticipation. My hands found their place on her thighs, keeping her open to me in the most intimate way possible.

Slowly, achingly slow, I pressed my lips to her center. Jade let out a low groan that reverberated through the silent room and down to the very core of me.

I could taste myself in her, a rich and intoxicating flavor that only spurred me on. I ran my tongue over her swollen folds, dipping into her warmth. Her hands clenched in my hair while she rolled her hips, pressing herself further onto my mouth.

"Fuck, Dante," she whimpered, urging me on. I obliged, using my fingers to part her as I lapped at her center. Her cries grew louder, resonating through the room. I could feel her muscles tightening under me as her body arched off the bed.

I continued to lavish attention onto her, relishing every whimper and gasp that escaped her lips. I traced circles around her clit with my tongue before sucking it into my mouth. She let out a high-pitched cry at that, one that nearly undid me then and

there.

I pressed a finger into her pussy and felt her clench around me. Jade threw her head back, her body trembling as she cried out my name. Her hands fisted in my hair, pulling me closer to her core as she rode out the waves of ecstasy.

I added another finger, stretching her as I moved in a rhythm designed to elicit the most pleasure. She was dripping wet and I reveled in the knowledge that I was the one making her unravel like this.

My fingers curled, finding her g-spot as my tongue continued to circle her clit. “Dante,” she whimpered, her voice a broken whisper as she writhed beneath me, bucking against my mouth and hand. I increased my pace, the need to bring her over the edge becoming all-consuming. My name fell from her lips like a prayer, her voice rising in pitch as she approached her climax.

I added another finger, curling them to strike that sweet spot inside her as I sucked and licked at her clit. Her cries become high-pitched whimpers, breaking into a long moan that echoed throughout the room. I felt her inner muscles clench around my fingers as she came, her body convulsing beneath me in waves of pleasure.

Her thighs trembled around my head and I didn’t stop until she gently pushed me away, unable to handle the intensity of sensations. With one last lingering kiss on her inner thigh, I moved to lie beside Jade again, pulling her trembling body into my arms.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Jade,” I said.

Her post-orgasmic haze broke, and she flashed me a sated, lopsided grin. “Are you now?” she challenged, her voice husky and laden with satisfaction.

Without waiting for further invitation, I moved over her, my body blanketing hers as I settled into the cradle of her hips. Jade's hands found my shoulders, nails scraping lightly down my back as I lined myself up against her entrance.

"Yes," I breathed out in response, meeting her gaze. Her eyes were heavy-lidded but filled with trust and anticipation. The sight stoked the fire within me even further.

Slowly, I pushed into her welcoming heat, biting back a groan at the tight clench of her around me. Jade gasped beneath me, tossing her head back against the pillow as she adjusted to the intrusion. The sight of her underneath me, flushed and ready for me was intoxicating.

"Fuck, you're so wet."

Jade gasped beneath me, tossing her head back against the pillow as she adjusted to the intrusion. The sight of her underneath me, flushed and ready for me was intoxicating.

Her fingers dug into my shoulders as I started to move, each thrust met with a sigh or a mewl from Jade's lips. She lifted her hips to meet mine in rhythm, allowing me to go deeper each time. The room was filled with the sounds of our mingling breaths and low moans.

I kept my thrusts slow at first, wanting to draw out this moment, to savor it. Her legs wrapped around me tightly, her nails digging into my back as she gasped and moaned beneath me.

"Harder, Dante." Jade's voice was a low purr in the darkness, her lips brushing against my ear as she whispered her demand.

I increased my rhythm then, my movements becoming rougher at her urging. She

responded with a keen of pleasure that sent a jolt of desire through me.

“That’s it...yes,” Jade breathed, her hands moving to grip my hair as her body writhed under mine. “Harder.”

I obliged, thrusting into her with a renewed vigor. Her body was a perfect fit for mine, accommodating me with a delicious tightness that had me gritting my teeth in pure pleasure. A low growl rumbled in my throat, matching the rhythmic chorus of Jade’s cries and moans.

The room began to spin. The heady scent of our sex, the heat of our bodies, the intoxicating sound of Jade’s pleasure; it was all-consuming. I barely registered the sweat trickling down my chest, irrelevant against the ecstasy coursing through each nerve ending.

“Fuck...Dante...” Jade whimpered beneath me. Her body moved with mine, lost in our shared rhythm, every sharp intake of breath or soft sigh magnifying the deep connection between us.

The intensity was unbearable; every thrust sent a new wave of pleasure crashing over us. I could feel Jade tighten around me, her body rippling with the oncoming orgasm. She reached one hand between us, her fingers finding her clit and adding to the overwhelming sensations.

“Come for me, Jade,” I urged against her ear, my voice strained with restraint. She responded with an uncontrolled whimper before succumbing to the powerful climax shaking her whole existence.

Her inner walls clenched around me so tightly I could barely pull out before sinking back in. With each spasm, I felt myself edge closer to my own release. “Dante,” she whimpered again, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Shhh,” I soothed, my lips finding hers. She tasted sweet and wild, a combination that intoxicated me. My thrusts turned more erratic, Jade’s body wrapped around mine like a second skin, so tight and perfect that it pushed me over the edge.

With a final thrust, I found my release, my vision blurring at the edges as pleasure washed over me. My groan of satisfaction mingled with her soft sighs, echoing off the high ceilings of our room.

My heart pounded in my chest as I pulled out of her slowly. Jade whimpered at the loss of contact but didn’t protest when I pulled her into my arms, both of us spent and satiated.

I buried my nose in her hair, her scent filling my lungs and calming my racing heart. Her fingers traced lazy patterns on my chest, sending pleasant shivers through me even after our intense session.

“I love you,” I murmured against her ear, earning a soft giggle from her.

She turned to look at me, her eyes wide. “Dante, I—”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything.”

“No, Dante,” she said softly. “I love you too.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Jade

Dante was there.

Right next to me.

I could smell him.

I blinked open my eyes to the first hints of dawn stretching lazily into Dante's penthouse bedroom. The early morning light was a quiet intruder, softening the edges of his formidable figure lying next to me. I shifted under the sheets, turning to face him, my heart thrumming with the need to unravel the knot of options he'd tethered to my conscience.

I'd tossed and turned all night, thinking about the options he had given me.

"Dante," I began, the weight of sleep still clinging to my voice, "we need to talk about what you proposed." My words hung in the air, as delicate and dangerous as the frost patterns on the windowpane.

He stirred, his dark eyes finding mine in the dim room. There was a readiness in his gaze that set him apart from the men I'd known, a silent strength that both reassured and unnerved me.

"Of course, Jade," he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to resonate through the mattress. His willingness was there, an unspoken promise in the way he propped himself up on one elbow, giving me his full attention. "I'm listening."

I traced the line of Dante's jaw with a hesitant finger, feeling the roughness of his stubble against my skin. The reality of our situation loomed over us like the city's skyline outside the window—imposing and inescapable.

“Why is it that I have only two choices?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. “Either take stock of BioHQ or...marry you?”

“Jade,” he replied, turning his head slightly to kiss the tip of my finger, an unexpectedly tender gesture from a man of his stature. “It's simple. You're not linked to the Moretti operations. I told you. If you take the stock, BioHQ stays clean, untouchable by the RICO case.”

He lay beside me, his chest rising and falling with the steady breath of sleep still clinging to him. I watched him for a moment, knowing the peace would soon be shattered by the weight of our conversation.

“Jade?” he murmured, his voice heavy with the remnants of dreams as he sensed my gaze upon him.

I propped myself up on one elbow, mirroring his earlier posture. “Dante, I'm a scientist, not some corporate suit.” My words were a whisper, but they carried the gravity of my identity, my life's work.

He opened his eyes fully now, regarding me with a look that suggested he saw more than just the woman before him. “I know,” he said quietly. “That's exactly why you're the perfect candidate to lead BioHQ.”

My heart raced at the thought, a mixture of fear and ambition battling within me. “But the prosecutors, they'll think it's suspicious. I've never been an executive, Dante. How can I suddenly become one without raising questions?”

A soft chuckle escaped him, and he reached out to brush a strand of hair from my face. “You underestimate the element of surprise, Jade. Your expertise is your armor.”

His touch was gentle, yet it held the promise of iron beneath the velvet of his skin—a reminder of who he was, who we both were. The options he presented weren’t just about protection or power; they were a crossroads, each path leading to a future fraught with uncertainty. And in the dim morning light, with Dante’s hand warm against my cheek, I knew that no matter what choice I made, there was no turning back.

“Okay,” I started. “Let’s say I entertain this idea of being BioHQ’s new head honcho. I’ve never even been on their board. Won’t that send up red flags everywhere?”

Dante’s dark hair was tousled from sleep, eyes sharp as ever. A faint smirk played on his lips.

“Jade, it’s precisely because you’re not your typical executive that makes you ideal. You’re unblemished by corporate politics. Unexpected.” He sat up, the sheets pooling at his waist, revealing the sculpted chest that spoke of both discipline and danger. “It’s less attention-grabbing. People love an underdog, a fresh face rising to the challenge—especially one with your credentials.”

I frowned, picking at a loose thread on the duvet. His logic was sound, but it felt like stepping into a minefield blindfolded. “And what about us?” I asked, voice steady despite the uncertainty within. “Why does marriage have to be part of the equation?”

He reached for my hand, encasing it in his own—a gesture both protective and possessive. “Protection,” he said simply, as if that one word encompassed all the complexities of our situation. “A united front is harder to break. And...there are other benefits to consider.”

My pulse quickened, a mix of fear and something more dangerous—desire maybe, or the thrill of the risk. Dante Moretti wasn't just offering a way out; he was offering a way in—into a life that was as seductive as it was perilous.

“Okay, so,” I began, my voice steady in the stillness, “you say it’s for protection.”

“Exactly.” The word rolled off his tongue with a confidence that seemed to fill every corner of his penthouse bedroom. “As my wife, you wouldn’t be forced to testify against me. It’s a legal safeguard, Jade.”

I sat up, pulling a pillow into my lap—a barrier against the weight of his words. My mind raced, analyzing the angles like variables in an equation, but the human element—the sheer unpredictability of it all—made this anything but scientific. “Dante, even if what you’re saying is true, it’s...it’s a lot to process.”

He nodded, the lines of his face softening as he propped himself on one elbow, watching me. “Take your time,” he said. “I know it’s not a decision to make lightly. Let me ask you this. What do you want to do right now?”

“I want to just go back to work,” I said. “I mean, what we’re doing is so important. I don’t want to stop working on the experiment just because...because I don’t want to see Ellie.”

“I never took down the lab I made for you here in my spare room,” he said. “I know it’s not the same as BioHQ’s state-of-the-art facilities, but you could continue your work here, undisturbed.” His eyes held a softness in them, a kind of understanding that I hadn’t expected from him.

I chewed on my lower lip, considering his offer. An in-home lab here, away from the prying eyes of Ellie and BioHQ... It was an intriguing proposition. “But I can’t just take an indefinite leave from BioHQ,” I argued.

Dante chuckled lightly and shook his head as he sat up, using one strong arm to brace himself against the headboard. “Jade,” he said softly, “you seem to forget who you’re talking to. I hold the majority shares in BioHQ. Technically, I’m your boss’s boss.”

“I can’t...How do I know you won’t just keep me captive again?” I asked.

Dante’s brows furrowed, his gaze darkening. “I’m not asking you to trust me blindly, Jade,” he said, his voice a low rumble that echoed in the vast room. “I know I’ve given you reasons to doubt. But what I’m offering now... it’s a choice. Not a prison.”

A tension curled in my stomach, twisting like a knot of apprehension and desire. Securing BioHQ or marrying Dante Moretti - two options that held so much weight and uncertainty. And yet, when I looked at him, the warm morning light casting shadows over his chiseled features, I felt an unfamiliar pull towards this man who was both dangerous and tender.

“I need to think.” My words were barely audible, lost amidst the sheets and the heavy silence that followed.

“There’s another option. Have you considered taking an early maternity leave?”

I turned, my bare feet touching the cold marble floor as I faced him. “Maternity leave?” My eyebrows lifted in surprise. It wasn’t a solution I had expected from Dante Moretti—my captor, protector, and now, potential husband.

He sat up, the sheets slipping to reveal the hard planes of his chest, a testament to the life he led. “Yes. I can make it happen. It’s within my power.”

“Returning...it feels complicated,” I admitted, wrapping my arms around myself as if they could ward off the chill of doubt. “Ellie has been my ally, or, well, I thought she was, but with everything that’s happened...”

“New beginnings can be... liberating.” His tone was soft, a rare vulnerability flickering in his eyes.

“Perhaps,” I murmured, more to myself than to Dante. The decision loomed over me, another piece in the complex puzzle of my life with Dante Moretti. A puzzle where each piece seemed to shift and change just as I was about to place it.

“Taking an early maternity leave will give you time,” he said. “Time to decide what you want to do.”

“And time for you to plan how you’re getting out, right?”

His expression sobered for a second. “Yeah,” he said. “Time for that too.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Jade

I was pacing the penthouse kitchen when the realization hit me like a cold splash—Christmas was just around the corner and with it, my family. The last time I had seen them felt like a lifetime ago, not merely the few weeks that had slipped by since the tumultuous events that had upended my world. Since I had run back into Dante's arms.

I hadn't gone back to work. I couldn't face Ellie.

But my decision hadn't been made: I had been working a little, here and there. The lab in Dante's house was good, but I mostly did consultations and analyzed data remotely for BioHQ. Dante had been surprisingly accommodating, delivering samples to me that I needed for my work. The first couple of times, I had to stifle a laugh at the sight of the Mafia kingpin playing delivery boy.

In the early morning quiet, the sprawling city below seemed almost peaceful, a stark contrast to the whirlwind of emotions churning inside me. Excitement mingled with anxiety as I thought of their impending visit. It wasn't just any Christmas; this year held the weight of introductions and unspoken hopes. My fingers brushed against the swell of my belly, a secret reminder of what was at stake.

"Jade," Dante's voice cut through the silence, his presence grounding me. "It's going to be okay."

I stilled, turning to face him, the man who'd become the unexpected anchor in my life. His dark hair was tousled from sleep, and there was a softness in his gaze

reserved only for moments like these—private, vulnerable, real.

“Look at you, Mr. Optimist,” I quipped, a half-hearted attempt to ease the knot in my gut. “What happened to brooding and mysterious?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “For you, I can be anything.”

And just like that, with those simple words, the penthouse felt warmer, less imposing—a refuge from the chaos outside its walls. But even as we stood there, a silent promise passing between us, I couldn’t help wondering how my family would fit into this picture we were desperately trying to paint. Would they see what I saw in Dante? Could they understand the love that had taken root in the darkest of places?

“Let’s tackle one thing at a time,” Dante said, reading my thoughts. “Starting with breakfast.”

“Right,” I breathed out, focusing on the immediate task. “Because feeding the Bentley clan is no small feat. We should probably stock up on coffee now to avoid a crisis.”

“Your parents are big coffee drinkers?”

“You have no idea,” I chuckled in response, picturing the horrified look on my father’s face when he once discovered we were out of coffee one cold Christmas morning. “It’s practically a Bentley survival trait.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dante said, a note of amusement in his voice. He crossed the room and gently wrapped his arms around me from behind, pressing a kiss against my hair. “But you need to eat first. Let’s make breakfast.”

I heard my phone vibrate. “Your father’s calling,” Dante noted from his spot at the

kitchen counter, holding out my phone with a casual gesture.

“Thanks.” I took it, flicking my thumb over the screen and bringing it to my ear. “Hi, Dad.”

“Jade! Good morning, sweetheart. Did I wake you?”

“No, no, we’ve been up for a while.” A smile found its way onto my lips as I walked back towards Dante, who returned to his task of crafting an omelet with a chef’s precision.

“Who’s we?”

I swallowed. “Uh, we have a lot to talk about.”

“Okay,” my father’s voice came through, concern edging his tone. “Is everything alright, Jade?”

“Yes, Dad, everything’s fine actually—“ better than fine in fact. I met Dante’s questioning gaze across the counter, feeling a warmth spread within me as he subtly shifted closer.

“I’m just with someone,” I added nonchalantly, trying to sound casual but knowing full well that no family conversation ever was.

“Someone special?” The amusement in my father’s voice was unmistakable. It wasn’t often that our strict scientist daughter got mixed up in social matters.

“You could say that.” The words slipped out before I could stop them and Dante paused, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. Obviously, they had to meet him—they would see I was pregnant and wonder what that was about. “But anyway. Tell me

about your plans. Where's Mom?"

"She's in the shower. She told me to call you before I forgot. So listen, I have some news. Emily and Tom are coming to New York with us for Christmas. The whole family will be together!"

"Really?" My voice pitched up a notch, a tangle of excitement and nerves knotting in my stomach. "That's amazing, Dad. I can't wait to see everyone."

"Your mother is already planning the dinner menu," he chuckled, the sound warm and familiar. "And how are things with you? Work going okay?"

I rubbed my temple. "Let's catch up when you're here," I said. I hung up the phone and stared at Dante, who was sipping his coffee and looking at me with a question in his eyes.

"That sounds like it went okay."

"My siblings are coming too. Which might mean their partners are coming and...I think we need to talk about Christmas."

"Jade, it's early and I'm not awake enough to figure out what you mean before the coffee kicks in. What's on your mind?"

"Family," I said, biting my lip. "You know they're coming to town. It's important to me that you're there when they arrive."

He ran a hand through his tousled hair, considering. "I've never been one for family gatherings, tesoro. You know how complicated my own ties are."

"But they're not just my family anymore," I insisted softly. "They're yours too, now."

They'll want to meet the man who's..." My voice trailed off, the reality of our intertwined lives settling between us.

Dante sighed, the sheets rustling as he shifted to face me fully. "Alright. For you, Jade, I'll do it. I can't promise it will go smoothly, but I won't leave you to handle it alone."

"Thank you." Relief washed over me, and I reached out to squeeze his hand. "It means everything to me. That means...I mean, is it okay if they come here?"

"Yes? You live here? What kind of question is that?"

I smiled, went over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

As the morning unfolded, my excitement grew. I draped garlands of evergreen and holly across the mantle, the fragrance mingling with the scent of fresh pine from the tree I had decorated the night before. The twinkling lights cast a warm, inviting glow over the room, and I couldn't help but imagine my family's faces as they stepped into this winter wonderland.

"Looks like Santa's workshop in here," Dante remarked as he emerged from the bedroom, now fully dressed. His casual attire did nothing to diminish the air of authority he carried with him, the very essence of a man not to be trifled with.

"Only the best for my family," I said, tying the final bow. "I want their first Christmas here to be memorable."

"Memorable," Dante echoed, a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips. "Don't you think the fact that you're pregnant will be memorable enough?"

I waved him off. "Are you ready to meet them?" I asked, pausing to look up at him.

Dante leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “Let’s just say I’m curious to see the kind of people who raised a woman as extraordinary as you.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I teased, standing to plant a swift kiss on his cheek. “Especially with my family.”

“Then let’s hope I’m as charming as you think I am,” he said, his smirk fading into something more genuine. “For your sake.”

“Trust me,” I murmured, glancing around the festive penthouse. “This is going to be a Christmas none of us will ever forget.”

It was only a few days later. We were ready—at least I thought we were ready—but I was still worried, thinking about how they were going to react when they saw my belly.

My parents didn’t know Dante, they didn’t know I was pregnant.

My siblings definitely didn’t know I was pregnant. And, well, my mother had gotten that phone call from me asking for help...and that was probably all the information she had, so she had every reason to be skeptical of Dante himself.

And Dante...he looked good, but I could tell he was nervous.

“Just remember to breathe,” I told him, smoothing out the lines of his charcoal-grey sweater.

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, a hint of laughter in his voice to dim the veil of tension. But the echo of unease was still there, mirrored in my own restlessness.

The chime of the doorbell cut through the hushed silence of Dante's penthouse, slicing the moment with a sharpness that mirrored my jumbled nerves. I drew in a breath, smoothed down my sweater, and let them in.

After a short elevator ride, there they were—my family, wrapped in winter coats, their faces flushed with cold and beaming smiles.

“Jade!” Emily lunged forward, her hug nearly sending us both to the floor. My dad held back, his eyes sweeping over the threshold into Dante's world with an appraiser's caution. Tom stood by, a skeptical arch to his brow as he took in the opulence around him.

“Come on, come on, you must be freezing,” I ushered them inside, stealing a glance at Dante standing across the room, a statue of composure.

“Mom, Dad, Em, Tom—this is Dante,” I said, gesturing toward him. My voice was steady, betraying none of the frantic beat drumming in my chest.

“Dr. and Mrs. Bentley, Emily, Tom,” Dante nodded, his deep voice rolling smoothly through the space between us.

“Please, call me Richard.” Dad extended a hand, his grip firm as he assessed Dante, the protective father etched into every line on his face.

“Emily,” my sister chirped, stepping up with bright-eyed curiosity that ignored the unspoken rules of cautious introduction.

“And Tom,” my brother added coolly, his handshake with Dante more perfunctory than welcoming, as if measuring the man before him against an invisible scale.

“Please, make yourselves comfortable,” Dante motioned toward the living room,

where the morning light spilled over the velvet cushions and glistened off the glass ornaments that adorned the Christmas tree.

“Quite the place you’ve got here,” Tom remarked, his tone edged with a skepticism that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Jade has made it feel like home,” Dante replied, his gaze briefly meeting mine with an unspoken reassurance. “I hope you’ll find it welcoming.”

“Thank you, Dante.” Mom’s voice was warm, defusing the subtle tension as she admired the decorations I had meticulously placed. “You’ve both done a wonderful job.”

“Would anyone like coffee? Breakfast?” I offered, eager to slip into the familiar role of hostess. They hadn’t clocked the pregnancy belly yet—or if they had, they were polite enough not to mention it—and I was grateful for that.

“Sounds wonderful, dear,” Mom accepted with an appreciative smile, herding Emily toward the couch.

“Black for me,” Richard chimed in, still watching Dante closely.

“Same here,” Tom added, finally pulling off his coat and revealing a guarded curiosity beneath his initial reserve.

Dante moved to assist me, our domesticity momentarily overshadowing the darker threads woven into our lives. The scent of brewing coffee mingled with the piney freshness of the tree, crafting a semblance of normalcy amid the intricate dance of first impressions.

My sister joined me in the kitchen as Dante brought out the coffees.

“Okay,” she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Is tall, dark and handsome in there the reason you’ve been so hard to get a hold of lately?”

“Yes,” I admitted, keeping my eyes focused on the mugs in front of me. “Dante is...part of the reason.” The silence that followed was heavy, pregnant with a myriad of questions that Emily had yet to voice.

“Jade,” she began cautiously, finally breaking the silence. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I sighed and turned to face her. Her eyes were wide and filled with worry, mirroring my own. “I’m pregnant, Em,” I confessed softly.

Her eyes widened. “With his baby?”

“No, I invited you guys to meet him because he had nothing to do with this.”

My sarcasm seemed to cut through some of the tension as Emily let out a half-hearted chuckle, her hand coming to rest on my arm in a comforting touch. “I just... How did all this happen? And when were you planning on telling us?”

“I didn’t know how to,” I admitted. “That’s why everyone is here now... to meet him and... to see this.” I gestured towards my belly and watched as she paled.

“Mom and Dad are going to flip,” she said finally, her voice barely perceptible over the soft hiss of brewing coffee. I nodded, a lump forming in my throat.

I just hoped she meant it in a good way.

Chapter Thirty: Dante

The Bentleys...weren't what I expected.

Richard towered over me, his stature imposing yet softened by the silver streaks running through his well-kept hair. He offered a firm handshake that spoke volumes of his character—strong, assured, but not without warmth.

“Good to see you, Dante,” Richard said with a nod. “Thank you for having us.”

“Of course,” I responded, stepping aside to let them into the lion's den.

Kristin floated in behind her husband, her presence like a gentle wave washing over the room. Her eyes, a calm harbor, met mine with genuine kindness. “It's a beautiful home you have,” she commented, her voice laced with sincerity.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bentley. I hope you'll find it comfortable.”

As pleasantries gave way to the casual hum of conversation, Emily walked in from the kitchen.

Without Jade.

Emily wasn't Jade, but I could clearly see the resemblance in their ice blue eyes and the color of her hair. Her smile was infectious, brightening the space as if the sun itself had walked in. She was followed closely by Tom, his demeanor relaxed, an easygoing counterpoint to Emily's vibrancy. His skeptical gaze lingered on me just a

beat too long, sizing me up like one of his audience members back in Nashville.

“Emily, Tom, good to see you both,” I greeted them, offering a handshake to Tom and a polite nod to Emily.

“Likewise, Dante,” Tom replied.

After we were done with introductions, we moved to the living room.

Laughter flirted with the clink of fine china and the soft murmur of jazz from the corner record player, casting a warm spell over my penthouse’s living room. I leaned against the mantle, nursing a tumbler of whiskey as Richard Bentley approached, his gaze sweeping appreciatively over the carefully curated art on the walls.

“Your collection is remarkable, Dante,” Richard said, gesturing to an abstract painting rich with dark, brooding colors. “Feels like there’s a story behind each piece.”

“Thanks, Richard.” I tilted my head, considering the canvas. “Art’s always been a refuge for me.”

Kristin Bentley, elegant as ever, joined our little circle, her eyes reflecting the soft light of dawn spilling through floor-to-ceiling windows. “And what about your own story, Dante? You mentioned you grew up in Little Italy?”

“Yeah, not that fun from here,” I replied, a wistful smile dancing briefly on my lips. “My childhood was steeped in tradition—family dinners, Sunday mass, and the kind of loyalty that runs deeper than blood.”

Jade was talking to her siblings, undoubtedly letting her parents size me up. It wasn’t too bad. I was a little nervous, but I thought I was doing well. They seemed to like me

enough.

But then, amid the camaraderie, a sharp buzz cut through the conviviality. My hand tightened imperceptibly around my glass. The doorman. I could ignore it, let the moment linger undisturbed. But family—family was not so easily dismissed. I excused myself with a curt nod and strode toward the intercom.

And no one tried to buzz into my apartment unless they were family.

“Mr. Moretti?” came the doorman’s voice, a hint of urgency threading his words. “Your brother, Marco, is here.”

I hesitated, every instinct honed by years of leadership in the Moretti crime syndicate screaming to keep control of the situation. Marco was a tempest—charismatic but unpredictable, and his presence would shatter the fragile peace of this gathering.

“Let him up,” I said finally, pushing down the knot of tension in my gut. Returning to my guests, I plastered on a smile that didn’t quite reach my eyes. The warmth of the room had dimmed ever so slightly, the anticipation of Marco’s arrival hanging like a thick curtain, waiting to be drawn.

The smile faltered just slightly as I caught Jade’s questioning glance.

“Family matters,” I said by way of explanation, and her eyes softened with understanding—too much understanding.

When Marco burst into the room, the shift was immediate. The air seemed to get denser, the edges of the morning light sharpening like knives against the walls. He was a storm in human form, his energy clashing with the serene scene before him.

“Good morning! I didn’t know you had guests.” Marco announced with a grin that

could disarm or terrify, depending on who you were. He was all charm, dressed in jeans that cost more than some people's rent and a leather jacket that did nothing to hide the coiled strength beneath.

"Marco," I greeted, keeping my tone level. His eyes, so much like mine yet filled with an untamed spark, flicked towards me. There was something there—a question, a challenge. I ignored it for now.

"Who's this?" Tom asked, tipping his head towards my brother. The skepticism in his tone was barely hidden, but Marco just laughed it off.

"Marco Moretti, at your service." He gave an exaggerated bow, and I could almost hear the room holding its breath.

"Kristin, Richard, this is my brother," I said, the words tasting like ash. A necessary introduction, though every fiber of me rebelled at pulling Marco into this orbit.

"Charmed," Marco said, offering Kristin a hand that she took tentatively. I watched, my guard up, waiting for the slip—the moment Marco would reveal the razor edge beneath his veneer.

"Quite the family resemblance," Richard observed, his voice smooth as aged whiskey. But even he couldn't mask the flicker of unease that crossed his features.

"Thanks," Marco replied, his grin not reaching his eyes. "We try our best."

"Marco has quite the knack for making an entrance," I found myself saying, attempting to keep the mood light despite the silent alarm bells ringing in my head.

"Ah, well, you know how it is; can't let my big brother have all the fun," Marco quipped back with a wink.

He turned then, the playfulness melting away as he addressed me directly, his tone dropping a few degrees. “Dante, we need to talk. Dad sent me—he wants us at the house. Today.”

“Is something wrong?” The question escaped me before I could stop it, though I knew better than to expect an easy answer.

“Family business,” Marco said with a shrug that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You know how it is. He’s expecting us in Little Italy as soon as possible.”

I nodded, the weight of our father’s summons settling over me like a winter chill. Whatever Enzo Moretti wanted, it wouldn’t be trivial—and it wouldn’t wait.

Kristin Bentley’s face lit up with genuine pleasure as she clapped her hands together, the delicate pearls at her wrist catching the light.

“Oh, a family gathering! How wonderful!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. “I definitely want to spend more time with my daughter’s new family.”

The atmosphere was thick with the mingled scents of fresh coffee and warm pastries from the kitchen, an undercurrent of tension from Marco’s words moments ago now seemingly washed away by Kristin’s enthusiasm. I could feel the corners of my mouth twitching upward, a rare smile threatening to break through my usually composed facade.

Marco leaned back against the plush sofa, his gaze sweeping the room like he owned it—which, given our family’s influence in this city, wasn’t too far from the truth. He caught my eye, mischief glinting in his own, and then turned to Kristin with a grin.

“Yeah, you must be so excited to be grandparents,” he said, his voice carrying a hint of something I couldn’t quite place.

My reaction was instinctual—a brother’s reflex honed over years of dealing with Marco’s impulsive outbursts. My fist connected lightly with his arm, a silent reprimand. “Watch it, Marco,” I muttered, though the damage was already done.

“They didn’t know?” Marco said, sounding genuinely contrite.

“You’re such an asshole.”

Kristin blinked. “Wait. What?”

Everyone’s attention shifted to Jade, whose cheeks had taken on a rosy hue that matched the bloom of the winter dawn. She clasped her hands in front of her, the gesture both protective and proud as she met the collective gaze of our small assembly.

“Yeah,” Jade said, her gaze cast downwards. “Yeah, so. Surprise. I’m pregnant.”

Chapter Thirty-One: Jade

The room swelled with a chorus of congratulations that felt too loud in the early morning light, the air thick with my family's joy. My parents hugged me, their smiles wide and genuine. My siblings, equally ecstatic, were already debating baby names and nursery themes.

"Can you believe it? A little one!" My mother's eyes brimmed with tears that mirrored the condensation on the windows, the winter chill pressing against the warmth of our gathering.

I tried to match their excitement, but my heart raced for another reason. The news of my pregnancy had transcended personal joy—it was a beacon of change in a life tangled with complexities I was still untangling.

As laughter bubbled around me, I caught sight of Marco across the room, his animated hand gestures punctuating a conversation with Dante. I could almost hear the mischief in his voice without needing to be close. Dante, looking every bit the authoritative figure he was, seemed less amused, tension lining his posture.

"Okay, we'll go," Dante said, rubbing the bridge of his nose—a gesture I'd come to recognize as his shield against irritation.

Annoyance pricked at me. Whatever Marco had proposed, I knew it would add another layer to the already intricate web of our lives. I watched Dante's gaze flick to me briefly, an unspoken message that whatever was unfolding would involve me, whether I liked it or not.

“Jade, dear, you’re miles away,” my father said, his warm hand squeezing my shoulder.

“Sorry, just a lot to process. I was going to tell you, but I guess Marco beat me to it,” I admitted, offering a smile that felt more like a grimace. I turned back to my family, trying to anchor myself in the moment, but my thoughts remained with Dante and the inevitable complications that followed him like a shadow.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Let’s go meet Dante’s parents,” my dad said.

Dante stiffened even more at that.

“Jade, you’re coming too, right?” Kristin’s voice sliced through the hum of conversation, her eyes bright with the thrill of the unknown. She was leaning into the circle where Marco and Dante stood, exuding the kind of excitement that only the uninitiated could feel about meeting mob royalty.

“Of course,” Marco chimed in. “You’ve gotta meet the old man at some point.”

I bit back a retort, knowing full well that ‘the old man’ was Enzo Moretti, a name that conjured images of shadowy deals and ruthless authority. The thought soured in my stomach; I couldn’t shake the awareness that behind Enzo’s tailored suits and polished shoes lurked a legacy written in blood.

“Great,” Kristin beamed, oblivious to the undercurrents swirling just beneath the surface. “I can’t wait to see where you guys grew up!”

Her enthusiasm was contagious, yet it lay on me like an ill-fitting garment. The anticipation in her voice tugged at me, but not in the way she intended. It felt like standing at the edge of a precipice, toes curling over the cold, hard lip of reality.

“Jade?” Her gaze flickered towards me, and I forced a smile that didn’t quite reach my eyes.

“Meeting Enzo is...it’s a big deal,” I said, hoping my voice didn’t betray the tremor of fear that threaded through my words. “He’s not what you’d expect.”

“Come on,” she nudged, a playful grin dancing on her lips. “How scary can your boyfriend’s dad be?”

The laugh that escaped me was hollow, a sound that seemed to drift away on the wind. If only she knew. The weight of Enzo’s reputation pressed down on me, the tales of his ruthlessness whispered like ghost stories among those in the know. “Right. You’re right.”

“And punctuality,” Marco helpfully added. I wanted to strangle him.

“Then we better not keep him waiting,” she decided with newfound resolve.

“Indeed,” I agreed, my mind already racing ahead.

My family started to leave, crowd around Marco, walk toward the elevator. I stayed where I was, hugging myself, hoping anything could make this...stop.

Dante took the opportunity to come over to me. His presence was like a shield against the chill, even before his warm hand found its way to my arm.

“Jade,” he said, his voice carrying the weight of reassurance. “You have my word, I’ll stand by you today.”

I looked up into his eyes, dark pools where I often found an unexpected tenderness. This morning, they held a promise, one that seemed to reach beyond the cold exterior

of his mafia heir facade.

“Your father... Enzo Moretti,” I started, the words tumbling out with more hesitation than I intended. “He’s not just another man I can charm with statistics and research findings from BioHQ.”

“Jade,” he interrupted, his thumb brushing against my arm in a gesture that might have been meant to soothe. “Yes, my father is a formidable man. But you, you’re not just any woman. You’re carrying our child, and that makes you family now.”

His logic was sound, but it skirted around the edges of my fear. Still, there was a pull in his gaze, an earnestness that made me want to believe that everything would be alright.

“Alright,” I conceded with a reluctant exhale. “But punctuality? That we can manage.” It was an attempt at lightening the mood, a small grin tugging at the corner of my mouth despite the knots in my stomach.

Dante’s lips quirked up in response, a silent chuckle in the lines around his eyes. “We’ll be on time,” he assured, giving my arm a gentle squeeze before letting go.

The car’s engine hummed a low, steady rhythm as we slipped through the streets of New York. Dante’s hands were calm and sure on the wheel, his eyes fixed ahead with a resolve that seemed to slice through the early morning fog.

My family insisted on riding the subway, because they always thought it was a novelty, and Marco had gone with them to show them the way.

In the meantime, Dante was driving us toward Little Italy, to his childhood home.

I sat beside him, my fingers unconsciously tracing the leather seam of my seat, each

stitch a reminder of the world I was about to enter—a world where life hung on the edge of a blade.

“Jade,” Dante said, his voice breaking through my spiraling thoughts. “You’re quiet. Talk to me.”

I glanced over at him, taking in the sharp jawline softened by the morning light. “Just thinking about what I’m walking into,” I admitted, my words more of a sigh than I intended. The scent of his cologne wrapped around me, familiar yet fraught with the unknown.

“Enzo can be...intense,” he acknowledged, his gaze never leaving the road. “But he respects strength. You’ve got that in spades.”

“Strength,” I repeated, allowing a wry smile. “Right now, it feels like I’m barely hanging onto sanity.”

“Hey.” He reached out, his fingers brushing against mine, grounding. “We’ll handle this together.”

I sighed. “He’s been spying on me, Dante. He was spying on me from the beginning. How am I supposed to feel about that?”

“Relieved,” Dante replied. “If he didn’t want you around, he would have already tried to kill you.”

“Jesus.”

“Hey, look. Enzo Moretti is no saint, but he values family above all else. That’s our trump card,” he insisted.

“Family,” I echoed, the word lingering on my tongue like a new flavor, sweet yet unnervingly complex. My heart thrummed against my ribs, not from fear alone but from the realization that, despite everything, some part of me craved acceptance into this dangerous, tightly-knit circle.

“Exactly,” Dante said, glancing at me with a confidence I desperately wanted to share. “And we’re almost there.”

I didn’t expect opulence in Little Italy.

I’d been wrong.

As the car turned onto a private road, the enormity of the Moretti home came into view—their fortress, their stronghold. I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of the day pressing down on me. This wasn’t just a meeting; it was a crossing of thresholds, the beginning of an alliance sealed by blood and bound by the life growing inside me.

“Ready?” Dante’s question was gentle, almost tentative.

“Let’s do this,” I responded, the scientist in me clinging to logic, to the belief that even in a world run by shadows, the truth still held power.

“Good,” he said, parking the car. We stepped out, the chill of the winter morning wrapping around us, a stark contrast to the warmth that had built up inside the vehicle.

With each step toward the towering front doors, my mind raced, flipping through scenarios, outcomes, strategies. But beneath it all lay a simple truth: I was about to meet Enzo Moretti, and nothing would ever be quite the same again.

“Here we are,” Dante murmured, his voice low and steady. He parked the car with

precision, and for a moment, all was silent but for the ticking of the engine cooling.

I stepped out into the crisp winter air, my breath forming clouds that vanished as quickly as they appeared. Dante was by my side in an instant, his presence both reassuring and unnerving in its intensity.

“Stay close,” he said, and I caught a flicker of something in his tone—was it concern?

“Wouldn’t dream of anything else,” I shot back, trying to mask my nerves with humor. I glanced over to see Marco, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else, his hands deep in his pockets as he scanned the house’s facade.

“Welcome,” he said.

“Through here,” Dante instructed, leading us toward a set of towering double doors at the end of the hall. Every step echoed, amplifying the tension that thrummed through my veins.

“Remember, just follow my lead,” Dante said, shooting a warning glance at Marco, who responded with a barely perceptible nod.

“Lead the way,” I replied, my voice more even than I felt.

With a decisive push, Dante opened the doors, and we entered the lion’s den. The room beyond was sprawling, the furniture rich and dark, with heavy drapes pulled back to reveal the winter sky’s early morning light. Flames danced in the fireplace, yet they did little to warm the chill that had settled in the space—or in me.

I inhaled the scent of old money and whispered secrets as we ventured deeper into the Moretti den. The air felt thick with history, every polished surface and gilded frame a testament to the power wielded within these walls. I couldn’t help but feel like an

intruder—my rational mind at odds with my thudding heart.

“Hey,” Dante said, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Don’t worry. My parents are going to love you.”

I laughed. “Do you think they’ll love my mom and dad too?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “I hope so.”

Chapter Thirty-Two: Dante

Whatever this had turned into...I didn't like it. It felt like one of my father's plans, and I didn't appreciate it, but at this point, I couldn't just turn around and leave with Jade.

No, we had fallen into my father's trap—and I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I scanned the dining room, its opulence muted by the buzz of impending introductions. Enzo stood, a pillar of tailored suits and unspoken power, as Tom and Emily Bentley crossed the threshold.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bentley, so good of you to join us," Enzo's voice rumbled, a velvet hammer in the quiet room. His handshake with Tom was firm, a brief clamp that said he could crush bone if it pleased him. To Emily, a gentle nod, his smile never reaching those dark, calculating eyes. "Please, think of our home as your own."

"Thank you, Mr. Moretti," Tom replied, his voice betraying a note of awe despite himself. Enzo had that effect – he drew you into his orbit and let you float there, only just above the gravity of his authority.

"Enzo, please," my father corrected with a wry chuckle, guiding them further into the room. A subtle dance of dominance and hospitality played out before us – Enzo leading, the Bentleys following.

As they exchanged pleasantries, my attention shifted to my mother, who had been

waiting patiently for her moment. She moved forward with the grace of calm seas, her presence a soothing counterpoint to Dad's silent storm. Jade, who had been standing slightly behind me, stiffened as Mom approached.

"Jade, darling," Mom cooed, opening her arms wide. Her embrace was like the sun breaking through clouds, a natural force of love and acceptance. "I can't tell you how delighted I am to finally meet Dante's special someone."

"Mrs. Moretti, I'm overwhelmed." Jade's voice held a tremor, whether from cold or nerves, I couldn't tell. She returned the hug, a tentative bird nesting in the safety of my mother's warmth.

"Call me Maria, dear," my mother insisted, pulling back just enough to hold Jade's hands in hers. "Any friend of Dante's is family to us."

And there it was – the simple magic my mother wielded, turning strangers into kin with nothing but her heart laid bare in her palms. The tension eased from Jade's shoulders, a visible melting that only Mom could inspire.

"Please, everyone, have a seat," Mom gestured toward the table, its surface gleaming under the midday light streaming through the high windows. As we settled into the chairs, the promise of conversation hung ripe in the air, ready to be plucked.

I watched, admiring how my mother could weave camaraderie as easily as breathing. Yet beneath the surface, my mind churned with thoughts of Jade and the precarious dance we found ourselves in. I had to keep my cool.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" I offered, stepping next to Jade and slipping into the polite mask I wore so well. "The winter sun doesn't always grace us with its presence."

"Sure is," Tom drawled, eyeing me with an amiable but sharp gaze. "Not a cloud in

sight. Makes for a nice change from the gloom.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, noting Jade’s subtle shift in posture, the sunlight spilling across her face. She was here, in my sphere, and yet every second felt like threading a needle with trembling hands.

“Hope you all brought your appetites,” I said, steering the conversation toward safer waters. “The chefs have outdone themselves.”

“Starving,” Emily chimed in, her eyes lighting up. “Everything smells amazing.”

“Let’s hope it tastes as good as it smells,” I quipped, earning a round of chuckles as we all settled back, the momentary flicker of anxiety doused beneath the chatter of impending feasts and shared stories.

The hum of conversation melded with the clinking of fine china as we gathered around the heavily laden table. The midday winter sun filtered through the tall windows, casting a soft glow over the Moretti dining room where my family and Jade’s parents now sat. I positioned myself strategically next to Jade, trying my best to protect her.

“Your home is exquisite,” said Tom, his voice carrying an easygoing warmth that filled the space between us.

“Thank you,” I replied, watching Jade carefully as she nodded in agreement, her analytical eyes taking in every detail. “It’s been in the family for generations.”

“Must be nice, having all this history around you,” Emily mused, lifting her wine glass to catch the light.

“History is a double-edged sword,” I said, the words slipping out more somberly than

intended. I caught Jade's flicker of a frown and wondered if she heard the echo of burdens past.

"Speaking of history," Enzo interjected with that commanding tone that had shaped much of my own life, "I trust we will soon be celebrating the addition of a new chapter. A wedding, perhaps?" His eyes landed on me, a knowing glint in them that belied the casualness of his words.

The air in my lungs felt suddenly heavy, as if the grandeur of the room was pressing down on me. I shot a glance at Jade, searching for any sign of distress. Her calm facade remained intact, yet I could almost hear the cogs turning behind those intelligent eyes.

"Ah, well—," I began, but the sound of my father clearing his throat cut the sentence short.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said hastily, the words tumbling out as I reached for a distraction. "We have plenty to celebrate today, like this wonderful meal and delightful company." My smile was tight, but I hoped it masked the sprinting pulse in my veins.

"Call me old-fashioned, but normally, getting a woman pregnant is getting ahead of yourself," Enzo said, his eyes boring into mine. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing. We're happy to pay for the wedding, of course."

I stumbled for words, the tension in the room suddenly tangible. "I—That's very generous of you, Mr. Moretti," Jade managed to say, her eyes wide but steady. Her hand slipped under the table to gently squeeze mine, a wordless promise of support.

"Please, call me Enzo," my father insisted, his amicable smile seemingly oblivious to the awkwardness he'd created. "And it's no trouble at all - we're family now."

The last comment hung heavy in the air, its implications lingering as everyone fell into a quiet contemplation. Jade's hand in mine felt electric, the current of her anxiety radiating through her grip.

"We—," Jade began, but stopped short, as if the words were clogged in her throat. She took a deep breath, her eyes flickering briefly in my direction before she turned to face Enzo with renewed resolve. "We're still figuring things out," she said finally, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hand.

"A wedding takes a while to plan, so you can have one after you give birth to my grandson," Enzo said pointedly. "That way, you won't have to worry about being exhausted during the day, finding a wedding gown to hide your body or, of course, drinking. Wedding days are meant to be fun."

The words hung in the air like the low growl of thunder before a storm, quiet but ominous. I felt Jade stiffen next to me, her hand gripping mine tighter beneath the table. I could see the wheels turning in her head as she weighed her response. She had always been one for measured reactions, for finding the right words at the right time.

"Dad," I cut in, my tone steady despite the tension knotting my stomach. "Your generosity is appreciated, truly. But let's not rush into anything. We're still navigating this...new situation."

He waved me off, his smile never faltering. "We won't be rushing. How long will it take to book a venue? To plan everything?"

"Given the circumstance, perhaps we should discuss this at a later date," Jade ventured, her voice equal parts calm and firm. I had to admire her resilience in the face of Enzo's overbearing presence.

"We have plenty of time," she continued, offering Enzo a placating smile that didn't

quite reach her eyes. “Right now, let’s just enjoy the meal. Have a good conversation, get to know each other better. We don’t want to be overwhelmed by planning a wedding before we’ve properly toasted to our first meeting.”

A murmur of agreement passed through the table. Enzo fixed Jade with a scrutinizing gaze, his icy eyes searching her face for any indication of deceit. After a tense moment, he nodded and reclined in his chair.

“Very well,” he conceded grudgingly. The edge in his voice didn’t escape anyone’s notice. “But let’s not forget what we’re celebrating here—a grandchild for me, and life anew for all of us.”

My heart pounded in my chest at his words—so heavy with expectation while teetering on a precipice of uncertainty. I could feel Jade’s unease as if it were my own, her hand still clasped tightly around mine under the table.

“Indeed,” Jade agreed, her measured tone a lifeline amidst the sudden swell of tension. “There’s much to be thankful for in the moment.”

“Here’s to the moment,” Tom chimed in, raising his glass with a cheer that seemed to chase away the shadows creeping at the edges of our gathering.

“To the moment,” we echoed, a chorus of glasses meeting in the center of the table, the sparkle of crystal momentarily blinding us to the unspoken questions and unwritten futures.

But when I met Jade’s gaze, I could see how afraid she was.

And that scared the shit out of me.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:18 pm

I sank into the plush leather of Dante's couch, my mind still reeling from the evening's events. We hadn't had any time to talk, and now that we did...I had no idea where to start.

Luckily, Dante seemed to have some idea.

"I'm sorry about my father," he said, his voice a low rumble that resonated through the quiet room. "He can be...difficult. I don't want you to think I'm anything like him."

Well, that was an understatement. But looking into Dante's earnest eyes, I saw none of the cold tyranny that his father wielded like a weapon. "I know you're not," I assured him, finding truth in the gentle concern etched across his face.

"Are your parents okay with the hotel?" he asked, shifting closer so our knees brushed.

I pulled out my phone, showing him the message from my sister. "They've checked in. They're safe." He nodded, his expression unreadable as he processed the information.

The silence stretched between us, filled with unspoken questions and the weight of decisions yet made. "I still don't know what to do, Dante," I finally admitted as I tucked a strand of dark hair behind my ear. The BioHQ stocks were tempting—a token of security in the unstable world I'd stumbled into. And if it hadn't been for Dante's dad, well, I might have been more inclined to marry him. "I need more time to think."

He nodded, his gaze steady on mine, and I could see the wheels turning behind those intense, dark eyes. “Take all the time you need, Jade. Whether it’s the stocks or...marrying me,” he paused, his voice barely concealing the hope that lingered there. “I’ll be here, and I’ll support whatever decision you make.” His hand found mine, strength and warmth enveloping my fingers.

“Thank you,” I whispered, grateful for the space he offered in the eye of a storm that was both of our lives. It was a rare calm, a momentary respite from the chaos that seemed to chase us relentlessly. “Dante, tell me you’re scared too.”

He pulled me close, his arms a fortress against the uncertainty. “Terrified,” he admitted, and in that instant, his voice cracked the strongman facade, revealing the vulnerable soul beneath. “I’ve seen too much, lost too much. And now, with you and...” His gaze drifted downward, resting on my barely-there bump, the future we never planned for.

“Jade,” Dante continued, his voice heavy with a gravity that sent shivers through me, not from fear but from the weight of his words. “If something happens to me—if we’re married—you and our son will inherit everything. It’s not just about love; it’s about protection.”

“Stop.” My hand pressed against his lips, stilling the cascade of worries. “Nothing is going to happen to you.” The conviction in my voice surprised even me, a defiance against a fate I refused to accept.

“You don’t know that,” he said, his voice low, almost a growl of protest. It was a reality check I didn’t want, a reminder that the world outside this room was cruel and unpredictable.

A tear escaped, tracing a path down my cheek—a silent rebel against the composure I fought to maintain. Probably a symptom of my pregnancy.

I hated it.

Dante's hands found mine, his grasp both gentle and insistent, as if he could transfer his strength through our intertwined fingers.

"Jade," he breathed, dropping to his knees before me, his presence grounding. "I love you. More than power, more than tradition. I need to know you'll be taken care of. Both of you."

His lips brushed the skin above my knee, sending a shockwave through my body, jarring loose another tear, then another. The fabric of my constraints fell away as he eased my pants off, peeling back the layers of fear and uncertainty along with them.

"Let me take care of you now," he murmured against my skin, his breath hot on my thigh. There was no space for pretenses or pride—only raw need and the man who knelt before me.

The floodgates of desire burst open, a torrent of emotion and longing that I had been keeping at bay for so long. His touch ignited a spark within me, setting my nerves ablaze. I let out a soft gasp as his hands worked their magic, tracing patterns of desire on my skin, each touch sending an electric shockwave through me.

He pressed his lips against the inside of my leg. "Fuck, you always smell so good," he said. "You're already so wet for me."

His words caused a sweet, delicious ache to spread through me, pooling between my thighs, and I struggled to catch my breath. Desire clouded my senses as he gently parted my legs, his gaze intense. He looked up at me then, his eyes dark and filled with a raw need that mirrored my own.

"Dante," I moaned, my body arching towards him instinctively. His fingers found the wet heat of me, sending shivers coursing through my body. The room filled with the

heady scent of our arousal, intoxicating in its intensity.

He moved my underwear aside and lapped at my clit with a fervor that made me gasp. His tongue was warm and insistent, coaxing me toward a precipice I was only too willing to tumble over. The world beyond our intimate bubble faded into obscurity, replaced by the primal rhythm of our bodies syncing in time with each other.

I clung to him, my fingers sinking into his dark hair as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through me. He didn't let up, his mouth continuing its sweet assault even as my body convulsed around him. "Dante," I cried out, my voice echoing off the marble walls of the penthouse.

"You taste so fucking good," he murmured, his voice muffled against my skin. At that moment, the world outside—the Carusos, the Morettis, the impending marriage proposal—ceased to exist. It was just Dante and me.

My breath hitched as he slid two fingers inside me, curving them to hit that spot inside that made my vision blur. His movements were slow, measured, each thrust calculated to drive me closer to the edge.

He granted me no respite as his tongue returned to my clit, his fingers never ceasing their delicious torment. The familiar coil of pleasure tightened in my stomach. Pleasure washed over me in waves and I cried out his name again and again as he brought me to an intense climax.

He sucked on my clit again and another wave of pleasure washed over me, making my body convulse under his touch. He slowly withdrew his fingers, placing a gentle kiss on my still trembling thigh before rising to his feet.

"Can you squirt for me, beautiful?"

His dark eyes met mine, a glimmer of mischief dancing within their depths. I nodded, my body still humming from the climax he had drawn from me.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmured, his fingers finding my wetness once again. This time he moved differently—two fingers deep within me, his thumb circling my clit.

I gasped at the sensation, my body already sensitized from the previous orgasm. It was different this time—more intense, more urgent. The pressure inside me grew with each of his deliberate movements.

“God, Dante,” I groaned, my body trembling under his touch. He continued his relentless pace, each stroke of his fingers pushing me closer to the edge. His other hand slipped beneath me, pressing against the small of my back to support my squirming body.

His eyes locked onto mine as he worked me closer to the brink, his gaze burning with intensity. “Let go, Jade,” he urged, his voice gruff and laced with a desire that set my blood aflame.

I did. With a cry that echoed off the marble walls, I came apart under his expert touch, my body convulsing around his fingers in a rush of warmth and release. Dante rode out the waves of my climax until I was left panting and sated on the sofa.

He pulled away from me then, standing to rid himself of his own clothing with a speed borne of desperation. The sight of him stripped bare sent another wave of heat coursing through me.

He edged my body down, until my head rested against the plush armrest of the couch. He planted a soft kiss on my forehead before sliding back down.

Sinking between my legs, he settled against me, the hard length of him pressing insistently against my still-sensitive flesh. His body shuddered, a sigh escaping from

between his gritted teeth as he slowly entered me. The exquisite stretch of him filled me completely, each inch of him igniting a fresh wave of desire.

“Dante,” I whispered, my hands gripping at the muscled expanse of his back. He pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth before capturing my lips in a searing kiss, his tongue mirroring the erotic rhythm of our bodies.

His thrusts were slow and measured, a sweet torture that had me writhing beneath him. The coiled tension within him was palpable as he strained for control—his always-present need to protect warring with his primal instincts.

I locked my legs around his waist, pulling him closer until there was no space left between us. Our breath melded together in the heated air of the penthouse, every gasp and moan echoing off the walls.

“I need you to fuck me hard,” I said.

Somewhere, a phone vibrated. It didn’t matter.

His response was immediate, a growl of desire that sent shivers down my spine. His hands gripped my hips, fingers digging into my skin as he increased his pace. The room filled with the sounds of our bodies colliding, each thrust echoing my own desperate need.

The pleasure built like a crescendo, each note more intense than the last as Dante drove me relentlessly towards the edge. I clung to him, my fingers sinking into his muscles as I rode the wave of ecstasy.

“Fuck,” I said.

“God, you’re so tight,” he said, his voice strained with pleasure. He thrust harder, quicker, each movement causing me to gasp. Our bodies moved together in a

symphony of desire, reaching the crescendo that promised sweet release. “Do you want me to choke you?”

I could only nod, breathless, as the room tilted on its axis. I had never experienced this level of intensity with Dante—or anyone else for that matter—and it left me reeling.

His hand slid around my throat, applying just enough pressure to send another jolt of pleasure coursing through me. There was a primal thrill in that moment—being so utterly vulnerable and yet so completely cherished by the man I was growing to love.

“Dante,” I gasped, my voice strained with desire. A whimper escaped my lips as he pushed deeper, his grip tightening ever so slightly around my neck. The world contracted, narrowing down to Dante and the pleasure he elicited in me.

My vision blurred at the edges as the tension coiled tighter within me, the pleasure escalating until it was almost unbearable. I clung to him, my nails scratching against his sweat slicked back as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through me.

“I’m close,” he warned, his breath hitching as he struggled to maintain control. But I didn’t want him to hold back—not now. I needed him—needed to feel him lose himself in me just as I had in him.

My legs tightened around him and he gasped, his rhythm faltering slightly. My body was already on the precipice, teetering on the edge of sweet oblivion.

“Don’t stop,” I urged him, my voice barely a whisper. Dante responded with a guttural groan, his movements growing more relentless.

Suddenly, the world shattered around me. My climax hit me with the force of a freight train, my body convulsing around him as pleasure ripped through me in wave after wave. Dante followed me over the edge, his body tensing as he buried himself to

the hilt one final time.

Exhaustion seeped into my bones as we lay tangled together on the penthouse sofa, our bodies slick with sweat and sated from our lovemaking. For a moment, we were just Jade and Dante - not the mafia boss and the scientist, not pawns in a game of power and deceit - just two people who found solace in each other's arms.

Then his phone rang again. Dante sighed. "Hold on, I think I have to take this."

Leaning over, Dante swiped his phone from the coffee table in a swift motion. His eyes skimmed the caller ID before meeting mine. "Marco," he said, his voice a low rumble that echoed in the stillness of the penthouse.

He hit the speaker button and Marco's frantic voice filled the room, "Dante! The Carusos – they just hit one of our clubs. Sal... Sal's been injured."

The words hung heavy in the air, casting an ominous shadow over the bubble of intimacy we'd created. Dante stiffened beside me, his muscles tensing as he processed Marco's words.

"How bad?" He demanded, his voice an ice-cold whisper.

"He's in hospital, man," Marco responded shakily. "He's alive but unconscious."

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose. "Which hospital?"

"I don't know," Marco replied. "But I'm pretty sure when he wakes up, he's going to be swarmed by feds."

Dante let out a groan, his hand raking through his already tousled hair. The shadows under his eyes seemed to deepen, the harsh realities of his life settling heavily on his shoulders once more. The pleasure of moments ago was quickly replaced with the

bitter taste of reality. I watched in silence as Dante's composure slipped, giving way to a raw vulnerability that made my heart ache.

Marco's voice broke through the tense silence again, "Dante...we need to respond. It's an insult, a challenge."

"Not now Marco," Dante bit out, struggling to keep his anger in check. His grip on his phone tightened and for a moment I was afraid he would shatter it.

"Dante—"

"Not now!" Dante roared before abruptly ending the call. He bowed his head, a hand coming up to squeeze the bridge of his nose as if trying to ward off an impending headache.

"Hey," I cooed gently, placing a tentative hand on his arm. His muscles were coiled tight under my touch but he didn't move away. "It's going to be okay."

"It's not," he said, shaking his head. "It's not okay."

"So what—"

He held up a hand to silence me and I fell quiet, waiting for him to gather his thoughts. He stared blankly ahead for a moment before turning to look at me, the intensity of his gaze causing my heart to flutter in my chest.

"You asked earlier if I was serious about escaping," he said quietly, almost as if he was afraid to break the fragile silence that had settled in the room. "Are you?"

"Of course," I said without hesitation. The declaration hung in the air between us like an unseen promise—a vow of solidarity against the daunting odds we faced.

A grim smile tugged at Dante's lips as he pulled me closer, his arms encircling me in a protective embrace. "Then pack your things, Jade. We're leaving."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean, Jade...is that we have to run."